



# Where is the Aboriginal working class?

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Have ‘progressive’ policies disadvantaged Aboriginal people? Has the expansion of welfare, alongside the displacement of class by race, culture and identity in contemporary progressive Aboriginal policy discourse, contributed to the arrested formation of an Aboriginal working class in many settlements?

## Introduction

Increasingly, Aboriginal disadvantage is understood through people’s racial and cultural identities and their historical relationship with colonialism, rather than through their present material relationship to production: how people sustain their lives materially, their relationship to work, production, property and income. This does not mean that race, culture, colonialism or historical injustice are unimportant. Nor does it require Aboriginal people to exchange Aboriginal identity for class identity. People possess multiple identities simultaneously. An Aboriginal person can be Aboriginal, culturally connected, a parent, a community member, a proud and patriotic Australian and a worker.

*The problem arises when racial and cultural identity displaces rather than supplements worker and class identity as the principal basis for understanding disadvantage.*

The materialist question becomes particularly important in remote and regional Australia because participation in production depends not only on willingness or capacity to work but also on access to a labour market. In many places, the geographical locations of Aboriginal populations and sufficient employment do not coincide. What happens to class formation when people remain outside the labour market for generations?

## Poverty, Proletarianisation and the Materialist Question

Too many Aborigines are incorporated into capitalist society through consumption but remain substantially disconnected from its productive relations as workers.

The Marrngu of the Pilbara offer a striking early example of Proletarianisation. Incorporated into the pastoral economy, they developed occupational skills, worker identities, and a growing consciousness of the value of their labour. Their incorporation occurred within a racially unequal and frequently exploitative economy, yet exploitation did not negate their material position as workers. Rather than rejecting productive labour, they fought bitterly to improve the terms on which they performed it. Beginning in 1946, Marrngu workers mounted what became the longest continuous strike in Australian history, lasting three years, to win better wages and conditions. Their identity as workers also provided the basis for solidarity across racial lines. The Seamen’s Union supported the Marrngu struggle and imposed a ban on shipping wool from Pilbara stations that refused their demands, using one group’s industrial power to support another. Their struggle ultimately went beyond better treatment from pastoral employers. Through mining and other enterprises, they sought greater control over their labour and pursued economic self-reliance rather than welfare dependency. Their experience demonstrates that

*Aboriginal Proletarianisation need not be understood merely as exploitation: worker identity, collective organisation and economic independence could themselves be sources of dignity and power.*



The Gurindji offer an alternative path. They, too, had been incorporated into pastoral production, most famously at Wave Hill, under conditions that generated legitimate grievances over wages, treatment, and land. The significance for the present argument lies not in the walk-off itself, but in the material circumstances that followed. People who had once participated directly in production increasingly came to depend on income redistributed from production elsewhere.

*The celebrated Wave Hill story is one of liberation and land rights. The material story that followed was one of declining productive participation and increasing welfare dependency.*

A third material position is increasingly apparent among later generations raised in Aboriginal welfare settlements. Many did not move from sustained employment into welfare dependency because sustained participation in the labour market had never become an established feature of their adult lives. In some cases, their parents had already experienced only weak or intermittent attachment to productive employment. For these generations, arrested Proletarianisation is the more useful concept: not the loss of an established working-class position, but the failure of that position to develop.

These three positions can be distinguished materially. Proletarianisation describes incorporation into productive wage labour. Deproletarianisation describes the loss or substantial weakening of an established relationship to productive labour. Arrested Proletarianisation describes something different again: the failure of sustained incorporation into wage labour to become established in subsequent generations. A population in this position does not simply occupy the lowest rung of an already formed working class. The productive relationship upon which that class position depends has itself failed to develop.

The central question is therefore not simply why some Aboriginal Australians remain disadvantaged. It is why, despite generations of policy intervention, substantial numbers have remained outside the productive relationship through which an Aboriginal working class might otherwise have developed.

## From Proletarianisation to Welfare Dependency

Where a population is sustained substantially by welfare transfers rather than by its own productive labour, it remains dependent on production while increasingly separated from participation in it.

*Economic arrangements do more than distribute income; they help structure everyday life and social relationships.*

If regular productive labour ceases to organise everyday life across generations, attitudes towards work, time, money, obligation and advancement cannot be assumed to remain unaffected. Welfare dependency must therefore be considered not only as a response to disadvantage but also as a material condition that can produce its own consequences.

Those consequences may deepen across generations. The first generation, separated from established employment, may retain skills, expectations and habits formed through prior participation in productive labour. The next may grow up with substantially less exposure to them. By the third, sustained wage labour may no longer be the ordinary organising experience of adult life.

This raises a question that contemporary Aboriginal analysis has not always adequately addressed. Are behaviours emerging under prolonged welfare dependency necessarily expressions of enduring Aboriginal culture, or might some also be adaptations to an economic environment fundamentally different from that experienced by earlier Aboriginal workers?

## From Material Conditions to Cultural Explanation

The material transformation described above cannot be separated from the behaviours and attitudes that developed within it. If generations have lived largely outside productive labour, the effects of those material conditions must be part of any explanation of how people live and behave. Contemporary Aboriginal scholarship has increasingly interpreted such behaviours through the lens of culture, identity and difference, whereas a materialist analysis requires that the material conditions themselves remain part of the explanation.

Lorraine Gibson's ethnographic study examines employment, Aboriginal identity, kinship, and belonging in Wilcannia, where mainstream employment is limited, and welfare plays a substantial economic role.<sup>1</sup> Gibson's account is considerably more sophisticated than the stereotype that Aboriginal people are simply lazy and do not want to work. More fundamentally, she challenges the very meaning of work. Activities such as caring for relatives, attending funerals, hunting, fishing, and fulfilling obligations to kin are presented as socially and culturally productive forms of work, even though they fall outside conventional paid employment. Gibson ultimately argues that life may be rich and meaningful without such employment and asks why Aboriginal people should necessarily choose it as their preferred mode of living.

Wage labour is not the only form of productive work. Aboriginal people sustained themselves through productive activity long before their incorporation into the wage economy, just as peasant populations have remained economically productive without becoming proletarian. Hunting, fishing and other subsistence activities can therefore be productive without creating a proletarian relationship. The question is whether such activities actually produce the material means necessary to sustain contemporary life. Caring for relatives or attending funerals may be socially valuable, but neither explains how food, housing, electricity, vehicles, clothing and other material goods are produced or paid for.

When those resources come largely through welfare transfers, they ultimately depend on production elsewhere in the economy. The welfare recipient remains connected to the productive economy as a consumer of redistributed income, but not necessarily as a worker or independent producer. Expanding the concept of work to include socially useful or culturally meaningful activity does not remove that material distinction.

The issue is not whether Aboriginal culture exists or whether kinship, reciprocity and cultural obligations matter. It is about causal direction.

*Behaviours observed in contemporary Aboriginal welfare settlements cannot automatically be attributed to Aboriginal culture simply because they occur among Aboriginal people.*

If similar behaviours are observed across culturally and racially diverse populations exposed to prolonged unemployment, welfare dependency and social marginalisation, then Aboriginality alone cannot adequately explain them. Some behaviours now interpreted through the language of Aboriginal culture, identity and difference may instead—or additionally—reflect adaptations to prolonged exclusion from productive labour and intergenerational welfare dependency.

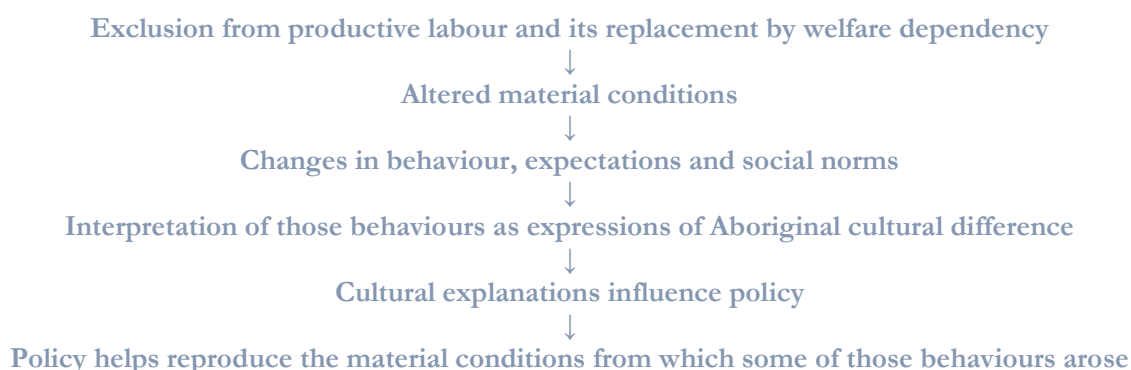
Kinship, reciprocity and Aboriginal cultural identity clearly predate the welfare state. But attitudes towards regular employment, accumulation, time, or economic advancement may not remain unaffected by decades of welfare dependency and reduced participation in productive labour.

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson L, 2010. Making a life: getting ahead, and getting a living in Aboriginal New South Wales. *Oceania*, 80(2), 143–160

Culture does not exist independently of material conditions. Cultural practices can persist through profound economic change, but they can also adapt to new material environments. Existing institutions, such as kinship and reciprocity, may remain recognisably Aboriginal even as the economic resources flowing through them and the behaviours and expectations surrounding them change substantially.

This raises the possibility of a circular process.



The danger is that political economy becomes culturalised. Conditions partly produced by prolonged exclusion from productive economic life can come to be seen as attributes of the population experiencing them. Policy then risks accommodating and reproducing those conditions in the name of respecting cultural difference, rather than asking whether the underlying material circumstances should change.

The traditional Left understood working people's circumstances through a class analysis centred on their relationship to production. By contrast, in Gibson's account, exclusion from conventional employment can be reinterpreted through culturally distinct understandings of what constitutes work and a meaningful life. What a materialist analysis identifies as separation from productive relations can consequently cease to appear as a material problem requiring transformation and instead be seen as a cultural difference requiring recognition.

## From Material Transformation to Welfare Accommodation

The shift from material to cultural explanations has consequences beyond academic interpretation. It changes what counts as a progressive policy response. If disadvantage is understood primarily in terms of racial discrimination, colonialism, cultural exclusion and unequal access to resources, then recognition, redistribution and greater public provision appear as logical remedies. Welfare alleviates material hardship, while publicly funded services address its social consequences. The progressive objective can consequently shift from changing people's relationship to production to providing more generously for those who remain outside it.

A materialist analysis instead distinguishes between redistributing the proceeds of productive activity and incorporating people into productive activity itself. Welfare can protect against poverty and increase consumption, but it does not, by itself, alter the recipient's relationship to production.

Social security during unemployment, illness, disability, or other periods of need performs the protective function of a welfare state. A different condition arises when welfare becomes a long-term substitute for participation in productive labour. The issue is no longer simply insufficient income but sustained separation from the productive relations through which working life is formed.



The consequences of that separation cannot be measured by income alone. This has long been recognised in the literature on unemployment. Marie Jahoda's work, originating in the Marienthal study of mass unemployment and later developed into her theory of latent deprivation, distinguished the manifest function of employment—income—from five latent functions: structure of time, regular activity, shared or enlarged social experience, a sense of purpose, and status and identity.<sup>2</sup> Later empirical research has broadly supported the proposition that employment provides these functions to a degree not readily reproduced outside employment.

This literature is particularly relevant because it shows that the social and psychological consequences of worklessness are not unique to Aboriginal people or Aboriginal culture. They have been observed among unemployed populations across different societies and historical contexts. Behaviours observed among a population experiencing prolonged worklessness therefore cannot be detached from that material condition and attributed to the population's characteristics.

Welfare can substantially replace employment's manifest function by providing income. It cannot necessarily replace its latent functions. A payment does not structure the waking day, require regular activity, broaden social experience, provide a sense of purpose, or confer the status and identity associated with employment. Other forms of social life can undoubtedly provide meaning, activity and social contact, but there is little basis for assuming they automatically reproduce the combination and regularity of functions supplied by employment.

This creates a dilemma for contemporary progressive policy. If prolonged exclusion from productive labour contributes to weakened routine, inactivity, boredom, diminished purpose, or weakened expectations of employment, responding primarily through additional welfare and services may alleviate immediate financial hardship while leaving the underlying material relationship to production, and its social and psychological consequences, untouched. Where increased provision makes continued separation from productive labour easier to sustain, the proposed remedy may reinforce the condition that contributes to the problem.

There is nothing inherently anti-working-class about the welfare state. Much of its development resulted from working-class organisation and political struggle. Trade unions and labour movements fought for protection against unemployment, sickness, injury and destitution in old age. Such provision did not reject the worker's relationship to production; it protected workers against the risks and interruptions associated with it. This is materially different from a system in which working-age populations remain substantially outside productive employment across generations and welfare becomes their principal means of support. The distinction is not between welfare and no welfare, but between welfare as protection around productive participation and welfare as a long-term substitute for it.

The lesson is that policies should not be deemed progressive merely because they originate on the Left. The ultra-Left can be as destructive of working-class interests as the ultra-Right when ideological commitments are insulated from their material consequences.

*A policy that speaks the language of culture, rights and recognition while helping to reproduce intergenerational exclusion from productive work does not become progressive merely because it is claimed as such.*

Nor does a materialist concern with productive work require adherence to a nineteenth-century conception of socialism. China, which continues to define itself constitutionally as a socialist state, has incorporated markets, private enterprise, and state enterprises operating in the commercial sphere into what it describes as a socialist market economy, rather than a capitalist market economy. Its economic model places considerable emphasis on labour productivity, economic

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<sup>2</sup> Jahoda M, 1981. Work, employment, and unemployment: values, theories, and approaches in social research. *American Psychologist* 36(2), 184–191



performance, and the development of productive forces, while retaining a social security system. Whatever view one takes of the Chinese model, its experience shows that contemporary socialist thought cannot treat markets, enterprise, productivity, or economic efficiency as concepts belonging exclusively to capitalism. The relevant question is how economic organisation improves the population's material capacity and independence.

The alternative is not to withdraw support in the hope that hardship will force people into employment. That would confuse abandonment with transformation. The materialist alternative is to ask how people capable of working can acquire the opportunity, capability and expectation to participate in productive life.

That brings the argument back to a concept once central to the Left but increasingly peripheral in contemporary progressive accounts of Aboriginal disadvantage: work.

### Back to Work: Restoring Material Transformation

If prolonged separation from productive labour is part of the material basis of contemporary Aboriginal disadvantage, then progressive policy cannot be limited to improving the conditions that maintain that separation. Its transformative objective must be to enable working-age people capable of employment to enter and remain in productive work.

This raises a practical problem. The presence of some paid positions within a settlement does not necessarily indicate that a functioning labour market exists on a scale sufficient to absorb its working-age population. A functioning labour market typically requires sustained demand for labour, multiple employers, a range of occupations, opportunities to move between jobs, and some capacity for workers to improve their position through experience, skill and mobility. Small and geographically isolated settlements may contain valuable productive employment without possessing these characteristics to any substantial degree.

*This makes geography part of the materialist analysis. Labour power has economic value only where there is demand for it.*

Where workers and employers are geographically separated, the problem is not simply unemployment in the conventional sense. It is a disconnection between labour and the productive relations into which that labour might otherwise enter.

The barriers, however, are not solely structural. This is where Andrew Forrest's Australian Employment Covenant got it wrong. Jobs and employer commitments are only one side of the equation. Practical experience shows that participant behaviour can be a serious, often more immediate, obstacle to getting and keeping a job. The damage caused by generations of exclusion from productive work is real and not overplayed. Finding jobs was often easier than finding people willing and able to take them, and helping them remain employed once conformity was required and workplace restrictions were imposed. Difficulties included reliability, workplace behaviour, money management, family pressures, alcohol and drugs, and the capacity to deal with adversity without walking away from employment.

None of this means that these behaviours are inherently Aboriginal. This article argues the opposite. People adapt to the conditions in which they live. Where regular employment has disappeared from everyday life across generations, the habits and capabilities needed for employment can disappear with it. In some cases, the damage is now so severe that people are, in practical terms, unemployable. That is one consequence of prolonged exclusion from work that cultural explanations can obscure. For others, entry or re-entry into work will require preparation, careful selection, supervision, and sustained transitional support that extends well beyond the conventional role of mainstream employment-service providers.



The purpose of such support, however, must be to build capability rather than create dependency. Assistance should increase the individual's capacity to manage difficulties, make responsible decisions, and accept consequences, while progressively requiring less assistance. The measure of a successful intervention should not be how much support has been provided, but whether the person has become increasingly capable of managing without it.

*Where a welfare settlement lacks sufficient productive employment, mobility provides access to labour markets elsewhere without necessarily requiring permanent relocation.*

Economic independence creates choices. Welfare dependency limits them. People who can support themselves are better placed to decide whether to return to their home settlement for shorter or longer periods, divide their lives between places, or settle permanently elsewhere. Capability building should give individuals the practical capacity to make that decision for themselves, not prescribe the outcome.

Requiring Aboriginal workers to return to country in pursuit of some externally determined cultural or social objective would undermine the very agency that economic independence is intended to foster. Equally, policy should not assume that remaining permanently in a welfare settlement is necessarily the authentic or culturally preferable choice.

*A constitutionally enshrined Aboriginal Voice would not have altered this material relationship. It offered political recognition and representation, not a pathway from welfare dependency into productive work.*

In this respect, returning work to the centre of Aboriginal policy is not a retreat from progressive politics. It recovers something contemporary progressivism has increasingly lost: the traditional Left's concern with transforming people's material relationship to production, rather than merely improving the terms on which they remain outside it.

## Conclusion: Where Is the Aboriginal Working Class?

The question *Where is the Aboriginal working class?* can be asked in two senses.

The first is material.

In parts of remote and regional Australia, successive generations of Aboriginal people have remained largely outside the productive relations through which the working class is formed. Welfare has protected people from destitution and redistributed resources to populations experiencing profound disadvantage, but redistribution is not Proletarianisation. It does not, by itself, change people's relationship to production. The contemporary label "underclass" can obscure rather than resolve this material question. Class is not simply a hierarchy of economic advantage in which the poorest occupy the lowest rung; it is constituted through relationships to production. People cannot simply be assigned to the bottom of the working-class hierarchy when the productive relationship upon which that class category depends may itself be absent. Poverty and disadvantage do not, in themselves, make a proletariat; the question remains how people stand in relation to production. In parts of remote Aboriginal Australia, this is a problem of arrested Proletarianisation. The task is not merely to return an existing working class to employment, but to complete a process of incorporation into productive working life that has itself been arrested.

The second sense is intellectual.

The Aboriginal working class has also largely disappeared from mainstream contemporary progressive thinking about Aboriginal disadvantage, particularly in discussions of remote welfare settlements. Class, labour and relations of production have increasingly given way to race, culture, identity, colonialism and recognition as the principal ways in which Aboriginal inequality is understood. Race, culture and the legacy of colonialism plainly have a place in that analysis.



The problem arises when they replace rather than complement an examination of the material conditions that help produce and sustain inequality.

This shift has practical consequences. If behaviours associated with prolonged exclusion from productive labour are interpreted primarily as expressions of cultural difference, while preserving existing social arrangements is treated as an objective of cultural policy, recognition and accommodation become logical responses. However, if welfare dependency is itself one of the material conditions shaping those behaviours, greater welfare provision may alleviate hardship while reinforcing the separation from productive labour that produced it in the first place.

This is the dilemma for contemporary progressive politics that still claims a radical inheritance. Classical materialism placed labour and production at the centre of its explanation of inequality and sought to change the economic relationships that produced it. Contemporary progressivism may depart from that tradition. But it cannot simultaneously abandon the centrality of labour and production while assuming that redistribution and cultural recognition constitute an equivalent project of material transformation.

The question is therefore not only where the Aboriginal working class has gone, but also whether the contemporary Left still regards its formation as a progressive objective.



## Milton James

Milton James began his working life at 18 with Peko Mines in Tennant Creek, Northern Territory, in 1973. Over the next three years, he worked in a variety of jobs in mines across Australia before returning to South Australia to join his parents on their newly purchased horticultural property in Waikerie, Riverland.

In 1978, he travelled to India to manage a horticultural project in a remote region of Bihar. That experience sparked an enduring interest in community development in the developing world and led him to pursue it professionally. He returned to Australia in 1980 to undertake a Diploma of Agriculture at Roseworthy Agricultural College, followed by a Diploma of Social Work at the South Australian Institute of Technology. He later completed a Bachelor of Social Work at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.

After qualifying as a social worker, James worked in Renmark in regional South Australia before moving into statutory social work in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, and later the Torres Strait and Cape York in far north Queensland.

In 2003, his work came to Noel Pearson's attention, and he was seconded to the newly established Cape York Partnerships. There, James began developing a different approach to engaging and assisting disadvantaged young people through work. His early efforts concentrated on establishing regional enterprises, but increasingly shifted towards helping young people enter mainstream employment in southern Australia.

He subsequently established his own organisation, *Boys from the Bush Projects*, and relocated to the Northern Territory, where he continued to develop and test worker mobility as an alternative to long-term welfare dependency. This practical work continued until 2014, when declining health ended the organisation's direct service work. By coincidence, this occurred just after its trials had concluded successfully, allowing the organisation to shift its focus to documenting its work and advocating worker mobility as a policy approach.

**Milton J, 2026. *Just Leave Them... Where They Belong: The Cruel Business of the Culture-Cult, Service Industry, and Welfare Dependency*. Critical Social Work Publishing House**