

# Poverty in the 'age of affluence': A governmental approach

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Discipline of Politics  
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February, 2010

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## Abstract

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This thesis addresses the growing tendency to treat poverty in Australia as an individualised problem. Analysis is situated in relation to the restructuring of welfare in western liberal states in the post-war period, highlighting the way that the welfare state 'crisis' appears to correspond with a new 'consensus' on poverty as individualised. Examining the way that poverty is formulated in recent welfare policy and governmental texts it is shown that this positioning of poverty comes increasingly to be premised upon the idea that a state of 'affluence' has been achieved. Importantly this trend in understanding poverty as an individualised problem is argued to occur across the ideological spectrum. It is demonstrated that, through reference to a 'paradigm of affluence', contemporary representative authors from both the right and the left constitute poverty today as 'residual' and thus as primarily individualised and behavioural.

Applying tools of analysis from post-structuralism and governmentality studies it is argued that both poverty and affluence constitute historic 'events' – interventions in the way social life is thought and organised – and not simply demographic phenomena. Therefore, in contrast to existing writing on affluence, within which affluence is seen to have replaced poverty as an evolutionary stage of development, the argument advanced in this thesis is that the relevance of poverty and affluence to particular rationalities of government is not premised upon their level of incidence. Instead it is argued that both poverty and affluence have functioned as 'problematics' of government – sites through which the project of government is made meaningful. In this way an emergent *governmentality* of affluence is posited.

In its premise of a governmental rationality of affluence the thesis provides a framework for analysing the on-going restructuring of the Australian welfare state, and liberal states more broadly. Treating conceptions of poverty and of affluence not simply as 'natural' phenomena, but as interpretative events and motifs of government, the thesis also provides a counter-point through which to resist individualised conceptions of poverty and the punitive policies to which they often lead.

## Declaration

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This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Acknowledgements

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This thesis has benefited above all from the insight, care, and diligence provided by Professor Carol Bacchi, who as my primary supervisor has shown unwavering faith in my ability to complete this project. Even when there were continuous interruptions and progress was repeatedly delayed by recurring 'forces beyond the students control', Carol never gave the impression of having any expectation but that it would ultimately be completed. This confidence may well be one of the key reasons why the project *has* been completed.

Associate Professor Peter Mayer, as co-supervisor of the thesis, has been a source of encouragement throughout. I thank him for his willingness to listen and to exchange ideas, for his unfailing warmth and for his all too apparent commitment both to academic endeavour and to promoting social justice.

Thanks and acknowledgment are also owed to Dr Vicki Spencer, who served as temporary supervisor in the early stages, for her support of the thesis in its initial development, and for her provocative comments in our discussions.

The wonderful Anne Wilson proofread the thesis and I owe her thanks for her thoughtful editorial suggestions and for her kind words of encouragement in the final stages of the project.

Special thanks are owed to Professor Carol Johnson and Associate Professor Paul Corcoran who, in their capacities as postgraduate coordinators for the Department, have been sources of constant support and encouragement. I would like, in particular, to thank Paul and Carol, as well as Associate Professor Chris Beasley and Dr Clement Macintyre, for their unfailing intellectual generosity, their eagerness to engage with postgraduate students and to constructively challenge arguments presented at Postgraduate Seminars. Your work improves ours.

Greta Larsen, Christine McElhinney, and Mel Pearson, as the human face(s) of the Department, are owed considerable thanks for their patience, their support and for their always good advice when negotiating for particular physical requirements necessary for completing the thesis.

Finally thanks are due to Chris Beasley, Nadia Postiglione, Jonathon Louth, Hayley Stevenson and Ben Revi, for long chats in narrow corridors. These opportune corridor meetings, and the long and meandering (thus, sometimes guilt-inducing,) conversations that they facilitated, have been a key source of comfort and motivation during periods of difficulty throughout the project. I will always value them.