



Chapter 6

Self-sufficiency and Alienation

(19 Thomas St)

After Uni finished, the Mainview house came to an end. Unlike my peers who moved in to Social Work jobs all around the state, I wanted to keep my involvement going with the worker cooperatives, continuing the work I was doing on my 4th year placement. This meant I would need a new home and a part –time job as the worker cooperatives were not yet able to provide enough income to live on. My friend Mal Mc Kenna introduced me to his friends Frank and Pauline who were looking for a third house mate. 19 Thomas St Red Hill would become home for a few years. I quickly found a job cleaning a bank building in South Brisbane paying \$45 a week.¹

The next 4 years would enable me to test out and work away at the social agenda I had been developing in my uni years. I feel proud of my activity over these years. I was trying to put my values and ideals in to practice and I had the very fortunate joy of finding other likeminded people to do this with. I felt like I was part of an important struggle. I would begin to better understand what community was really all about. We would start many different worker cooperatives, a housing trust, and support the development of the Red Hill Paddington Community Centre (now Communify). I would also become part of a broader group of community workers and academics trying to develop a Gandhian approach to community work in Australia. I really felt what I was doing was important and valuable.

Red Hill

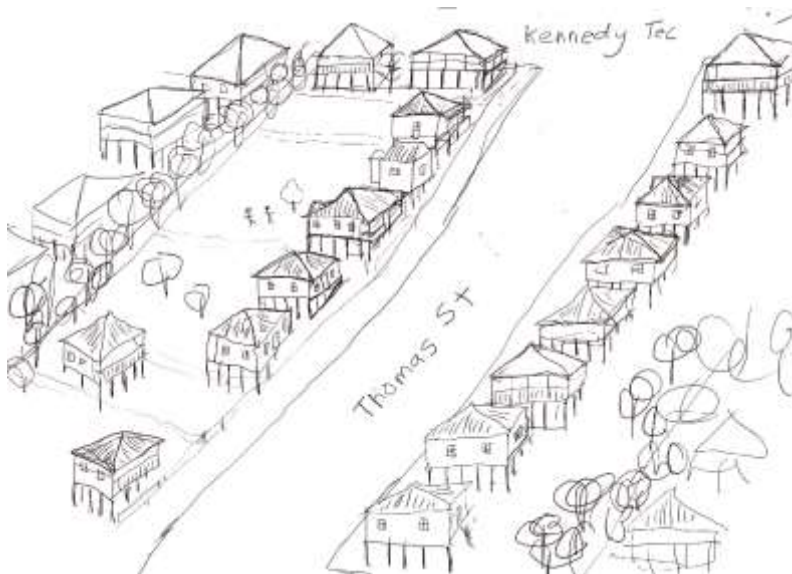
In 1980 Red hill was still mainly a working class suburb. Gentrification was in its very early stages, the verandas that had been built in to accommodate the growing families of the working class were now being taken back to their original

¹ My share of the rent was \$15 and my share of the food was \$15, leaving me with \$15 for everything else. I saved \$5 just in case. Interesting later when I got a new part time job giving me \$60 for the week I felt more secure and saved nothing





grandeur for younger professionals who were moving in to the inner city. Thomas St ran off Kennedy terrace. It was a very wide street for the area and steep, but turned sharply to the left at the bottom in to a narrow lane. At the top of the hill 2 big Queenslanders faced Kennedy Terrace in keeping with the other bigger homes on the ridge line that Kennedy Terrace followed. Most of the houses in Thomas Street were smaller worker cottages with long term rentals and a couple of student households and a few owner occupied (and better maintained houses). I loved the terrain of the area with its ups and downs and the old homes on wooden stumps. It had character as did its residents.



New housemates

Moving in with complete strangers was a new experience for me, but Frank and Pauline made me feel very welcome. They were both a couple of years older than me and it felt a bit more adult than the student household of Mainview Street. They were both kindred spirits who were openly and actively concerned about poverty and trying to create a more equal society. Frank was a social worker and so we had this immediately in common. Pauline who had worked in secretarial positions was planning to enrol in social work shortly. What was new to me was the strong radical Catholic culture that I now found myself in. Catholics in state schools were a bit of an oddity for the most part. In high school they were there often after being kicked out of the Marist Brothers for some misdemeanours. Both Pauline and Frank were members of the young Christian workers movement which was a left wing arm of the Catholic Church concerned to support trade unions and justice for workers. I would soon discover most of their friends were connected to this movement, including several ex priests. At their parties I felt somewhat unusual being the only non-Catholic, the only person to have gone to





a state school. It was a very different experience for me, it did feel like a different culture.

Frank was a wicked practical joker and had a great sense of humour. He had cerebral palsy which added a physical awkwardness to his mischievousness. On my birthday he and several of our friends burst into my bedroom with buckets of water hurling them at me as I awoke. This incident would start a water fight that would go on for months with various reprisals engineered at suitable times. It would involve many other households and would continue even when Frank had left the house. It would spread across the suburb as friends lay in wait, with a bucket of water in hand, for another friend. Michelle, my wife still has a big scar on the bottom of her foot where it was sliced open on glass in the backyard in attempting to escape a drenching.

The backyard was big, a double sized block. It was a fairly barren landscape, sloping up increasingly steeply till the back fence. Japanese sunflowers (a weedy scrub with bright yellow flowers) covered much of the back end of the yard. A large Brazilian cherry was close to the back steps and there was a lot of broken glass in the soil from years of fairly rough treatment from previous tenants. Frank had dug a big hole in the back yard to bury kitchen scraps in preparation for planting a fruit tree. I immediately felt Frank would be someone I could get along with as he swung the mattock in to the hard shaly ground.

Pauline was a country girl who was very good at keeping in touch with all her friends. She seemed to know everyone, a natural networker, inviting her friends regularly for tea. Her friends would soon become regular visitors to '19', over the next few years. The house would often fill with the smell of her homemade bread, a forerunner of things to come.

The worker co-ops

Mal and I had extended the local odd job co-op that he had supported to also develop a wood work co-op. The local Uniting Church made space available under one of its halls to set up a workshop where we built toys and furniture made from recycled packing crates. Following Sugata Dasgupta suggestion Mal and I became also interested in the idea of a cooperative that took the jobs of machines





rather than competing with other labour intensive industries. This was inspired by Gandhi's efforts to re-engage Indians in spinning their own cloth to regain their self-sufficiency, rather than relying on the new spinning mills of England. Based on these ideas we decided to start a soap making co-op. Soap is mainly produced by big multinational companies like Unilever and is done in a very capital intensive way.²

Our focus at this point was on creating work for unemployed people and we soon found a range of different people who wanted to be part of the co-ops. Kenny and Terry Reynolds would become main stays of the wood working and soap co-ops. Bernie Maloney also came on the scene and became a tremendous support for the group. He was not so much of a worker as a great promotor. He would talk to anyone and everyone and if any one expressed half an interest he would drag them along to the co-op. He would also be keen to join to promote various protests taking place. Many new members found the co-ops a safe place that was encouraging and fun. Soon the members all became good friends. Friday nights at the Caxton Hotel became a regular event.



We would sell our products at markets and then divide the money (which was never very much) with everyone who was involved. We soon discovered that as unemployed people got involved and gained a lot of confidence, they were soon being offered other jobs, jobs that paid more money. After about a year mainly working with unemployed people, we changed tack and expanded our goal to encourage people in work to give up their jobs so as to make a space for an unemployed person in the work force.³ This also made more sense for viability, the co-ops needed people with work experience, resources and knowledge. To work co-operatively is not easy, it required people with commitment.

With this new orientation we convinced John Morahan, a friend of Pauline's to move into 19 Thomas St and to join us in the co-ops. John became a great friend

² Fortunately there was still a few Australian firms involved in soap production and we visit Cambell brothers at Bowen Hills and they showed us their factory (which no longer exists) and how the soap was made. They did not seem too worried about our agenda of Australia becoming self-sufficient in soap production via little worker co-operatives like ours and they happily shared useful formulas for soap production with us.

³ This fitted with a writing from the Pope at the time on employment where he basically encouraged people to share work and to give up their work if they could for the benefit of the unemployed.





and a big support for me in these years. Marion and Andrew from across the street also got more involved and we started a Bee/honey cooperative. This also involved Alan Halliday, a social work lecturer from UQ who was interested in co-operatives and community building. Other young unemployed people would come and go but now we had a more stable group of core committed people to keep the co-ops moving along. Bernie would keep bringing along new people, sometimes homeless people from shelters which he used from time to time. Some long term relationships and friendships were made and accommodation provided to people.

We established a little soap factory under 19 Thomas St and every Friday we would collect about 50 kgs of beef fat from a local butcher and boil this up in an old laundry washing copper and then strain and add caustic soda in another copper to make soap. We would also make vegetarian soap by using coconut oil and caustic soda. We would let it to cure in a big slab for a week and then cut it in to blocks the following Friday. We were making about 300 blocks of soap a week. We would sell these for about 30c which we did door to door and through some small displays in local shops.

We would often have around 10 people involved on a Friday. The street would fill with smoke from the wood fires heating the copper and the neighbourhood dogs would gather around also from the smell of the rendering beef fat. In the 4 years I was involved there was never a single complaint from a neighbour. This showed how tolerant they were. I think they recognized we were doing something good. A young journalist Glen Milne from 4 doors down called in one Friday and gave us some good marketing advice. Other neighbours and local people would often call in to watch the production and join in the comradery.





We were modern day luddites and a bit of a curiosity in the local area, and also further afield. We would get invited to do soap making demonstrations at fairs and music festivals. At these venues we would get the chance to spread our message about working co-operatively and about supporting local production and jobs rather than capital intensive multi-national companies



The woodwork co-op wanted to avoid market type relationships and wanted to see if we could find a more community orientated way of selling our products. We had in mind more of a gifting relationship. At our first big market we decided we would not price things but rather explain our mission and then let people pay whatever they wanted for the toys. It did not matter how much or how little, we took what was offered. This created a bit of confusion for many customers and they quickly moved on. It also created anger from some who fearing they could pay too much (or maybe too little), wanted to know the price. It made for an interesting day. Quite a lot was sold or gifted. But then in a real test of our gifting orientation someone seized on our open trusting approach and ran off with our money bag. It was a reoccurring theme in our discussions between staying true to our nonviolent ideals or making more money to live on. Where to make the compromise, was an ongoing discussion and cause of tension between the idealists and those needing and wanting more income. Despite the occasional tension most enjoyed experimenting with some new approaches and the overriding comradery in the group.

We also continued the odd job co-op, doing cleaning and gardening jobs for local people. This was also a good way to supplement the less well paid work. It was also another way to get to know other local people. Interestingly, some of the older poorer pensioners would be very generous providing cake and morning tea and a bonus, while for some of the better heeled, it was much more clearly a





market exchange. I began to feel a bit exploited by the richer folk who would employ me to garden freeing them up to earn a much better hourly rate. I began to say my fee was whatever they got paid an hour. This reduced my clientele to mainly poorer people, but I know longer worried about being treated as a slave for casual hire.

As an extra community project, I also started selling bread to our immediate neighbours. Mal started doing the same. This was not a cooperative but still a part of our way to promote more local self-sufficiency, as well as supporting ourselves financially while doing the co-op work. Every Wednesday, at dawn, I would light the slow combustion stove, and make about 40 loaves of bread, as well as fruit loaves, fudge and biscuits. I would seal the kitchen up to keep the heat in, making it a long hot day generally taking about 8



hours. I enjoyed the physical demand and the process of kneading the dough. In the evening I would go door to door selling my stuff in Thomas Street and the street further down. This homemade hot bread was popular with the neighbours and I had regular houses to visit where it felt like they looked forward to me arriving with my 2 big baskets in hand. I think the immediate neighbours understood what we were trying to do, and wanted to support. They also enjoyed the added neighbourhood feel. I recently met an old customer/neighbour who very fondly remembered the bread arriving each week and the vitality of the neighbourhood.

I saw myself a part of a Gandhian nonviolent movement which hoped to build support from the local people and the wider community. Others shared similar values but for many of the others like Mal, Andrew, Marion, Alan and John there was also a strong Christian commitment. Across the river at West End there was a group of Christian Anarchists who were focused on military disarmament. They began to engage in some similar co-operative activities to us, and over the next few years we would learn from each other. This made us feel like what we were doing was having a wider impact. The two groups would often get together for a game of soccer. Keiran O'Rielly from this group would inject some anarchism



in to the game by reminding us if we all played by the rules we wouldn't need a referee.

At the local level we had some strong support. However sometimes people were supportive for the wrong reason, feeling sorry for us, assuming we were all unemployed people who would eventually get jobs. I felt this most clearly when trying to sell the soap and our story door to door. People would often not hear properly what I was telling them and just assume we were there for a donation. Occasionally someone would catch on and respond positively or argue the feasibility of our plan. Often others would not give you enough time to spell out the story handing over money to end the interaction. Despite having sold a reasonable amount of soap I would come home sometimes very demoralized, because of the sympathy many people displayed to me, making me feel like someone in need of charity, when in fact I was there on a social mission of my own choosing.

Inside the co-op, the core group began to emphasize more strongly that we were trying to build an alternative to the mainstream. It was not just temporary welfare, we were trying to create a society that was less hierarchical and where people would share resources and work when they were scarce, in comparison to the more selfish individualistic capitalist system which used inequality to create ambition and selfishness. While holding to these ideals many of us also needed to find some casual income to pay the bills. I had a cleaning job at a Bank building and then later a casual teaching job at TAFE.

Mal McKenna was key to the vitality and success of these worker coops. He was a very warm welcoming person who connected quickly with people. He was very supportive and affirming, highlighting people's strengths and letting others know about them which gave people a real boost. People who had the opposite experience in their lives would gravitate to Mal and he made friendships that continue to this day. He was very determined and dogged so while I was often ready to give up, Mal would keep going and often some success would come. He was quite an inspiration. He was fun to work with, enjoying a practical joke, teasing and informal games of cricket, touch football and soccer and the 'across suburbs' water fights. He also loved an argument and we would often end up on opposite sides of some finer tactical point about the best way for the co-ops to





proceed. Our differences were good for the group as this created more space in which other co-op members could develop their own position

Uni Honours and social work

In my first year after Uni I was still finishing off my honours thesis. So while my days would be full of co-op activity I would get up early and work on my thesis. It was good to have this academic discipline while I was engaged in the practice and my community/neighbourhood work greatly assisted in my theorizing about natural helping networks. I could see the myriad ways in which people in our street helped and supported each other, in both material and emotional ways. I could also reflect on my own efforts to be a good neighbour and the differences of what was possible as a social work student.

My first Social Work placement supervisor, Jill Wilson was on maternity leave and as a way of assisting me financially she organized for me to fill in for her by teaching in the Social Welfare Course at Kangaroo Point TAFE. This involved teaching community work which again helped me keep thinking about what I was doing, in relation to what others had written about. It also involved me teaching interview skills and interpersonal helping. This was a big stretch for me having really avoided reading in this area over 4 years. I often felt I was bluffing my way through the interpersonal helping topics, but I enjoyed the experience. It was better pay than cleaning the bank and enabled me to give up this demoralizing job. It was a good experience to realize how much better a co-operative approach to work was emotionally. Cleaners really are at the very bottom of the pecking order and a good place to experience the nature of the power asymmetries above me.

At the end of my social work course, I joined a group which Morrie OConnor was facilitating called the Human Resources group which explored the Gandhian approach both theoretically and practically. I felt I learnt more from this group about how to actually do things, than I had learnt at Uni. I also felt sort of honoured to be included, to be working and learning alongside people who had been my mentors and others who were very experienced practitioners. I felt included and valued. Sugata was linked to the group but did not come to meetings. Tony Kelly had been away working in the Northern territory, but on his return seemed to take more control of this group. Under Morrie's facilitation





it seemed a very flat egalitarian group, but with Tony it felt more hierarchical. Tony treated Sugata like a guru, where he was next in charge and then Morrie and then the rest of us. There was definitely a disciple like structure evident maybe reflecting Tony's previous career as a Jesuit priest. At times it felt like being in the army with ideas and directives coming down the line and then eagerly taken up by those who wanted connection to this group. I was nervous about the hierarchical cult like feel he engendered, but it also felt good being part of the fold. While there was an expectation of being committed and acting, it also came with benefits. My connection to this group gave me status with other young community development students and other practitioners. For a young new graduate it felt affirming to be acknowledged like this

Another difference between Morrie and Tony's style related to the explicit evaluation of other's work. Tony often mentioned someone who he said was the best community worker in Queensland. This carried several messages. One was that Tony was in a position to make such a judgement and therefore in a position to evaluate us all. It also created a competitive framework where community workers could strive to move up the evaluative ladder. I missed Morrie's more egalitarian mutual orientation in running the Human Resources group. I began to feel uncomfortable as someone others looked up to in this hierarchy and at the same time to feel not good enough in the eyes of Tony. I began to slowly withdraw from this group, but Morrie would remain a good friend and mentor

During this first year at 19 Thomas St I would get up early and work on my Honours thesis between 4 and 7. It slowly came together to form a theory of social networks. The theory showed the interaction between network structures and the relationships that made them up. I want to briefly describe some elements of the theory as it still remains an organizing model for my practice and my personal relationships.

My network theory

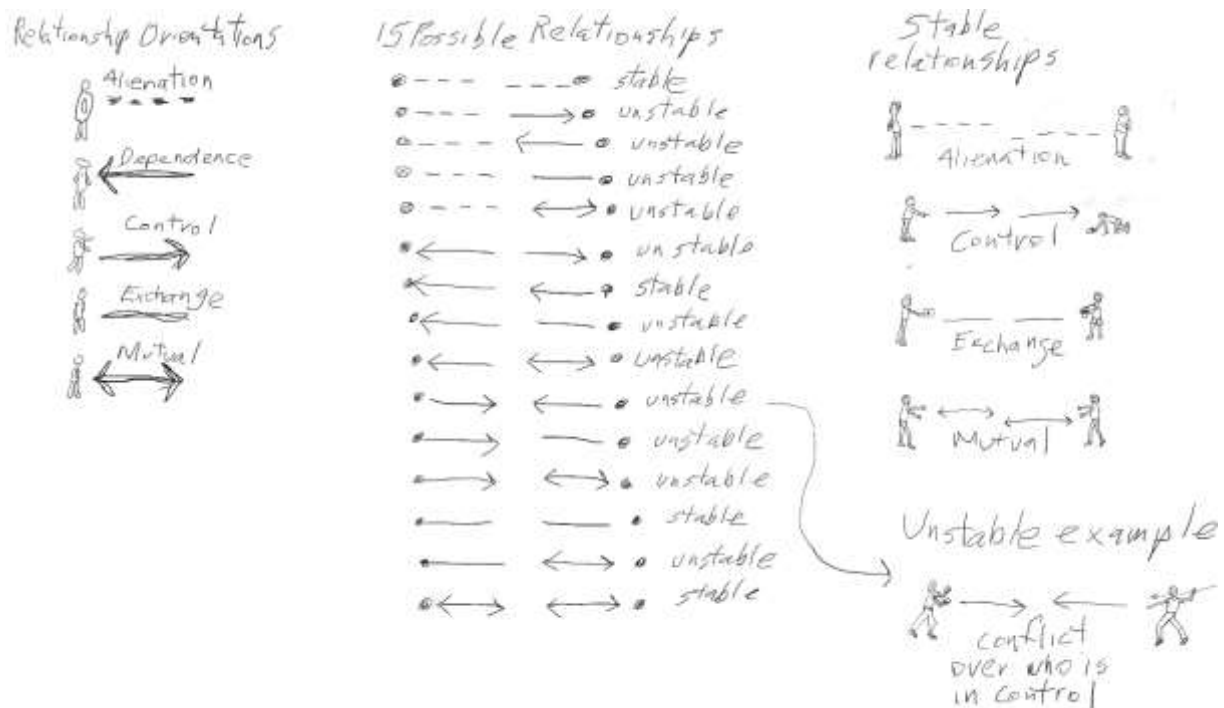
My claim is that we can describe our orientation to another person as either being alienated, dependent, controlling, exchange orientated or mutual. Each reflects a different power perception of the relationship. The other can see us in one of these 5 ways also. Pairing them up leads to 15 different possible relationships, 11 of which are unstable as there is a disagreement about the nature of power in





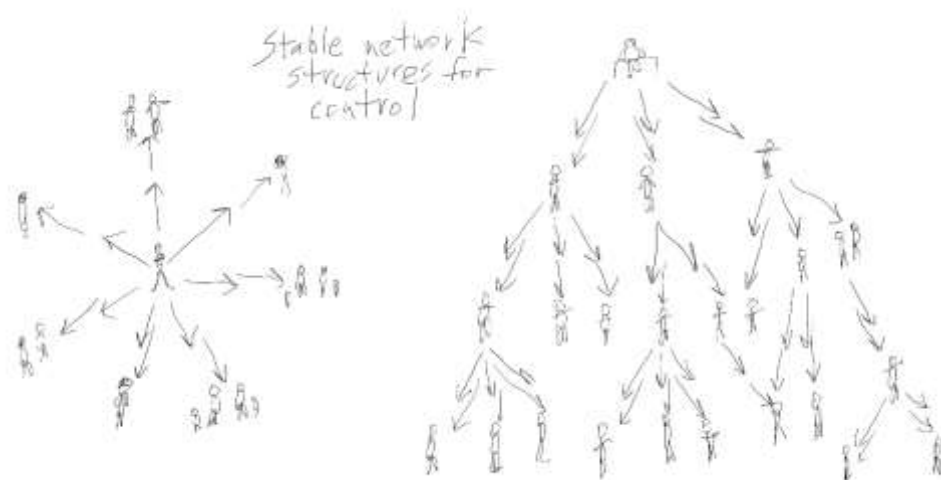
the relationship. In these unstable relationships there is tension which will act to decrease the closeness of the relationship or one person will need to change their view of the relationship. The four stable relationships are alienation, control/dependence, exchange and mutuality.

Each stable relationship also leads to and is best supported by a different type of network structure. This provides a mechanism for change. Changing relationship



orientations will create pressure for change to the network structure and changing structures will lead to change of relationship orientations

The control structure is the most obvious. Centralized networks are best for maintaining controlling relationships. The person at the centre controls all the

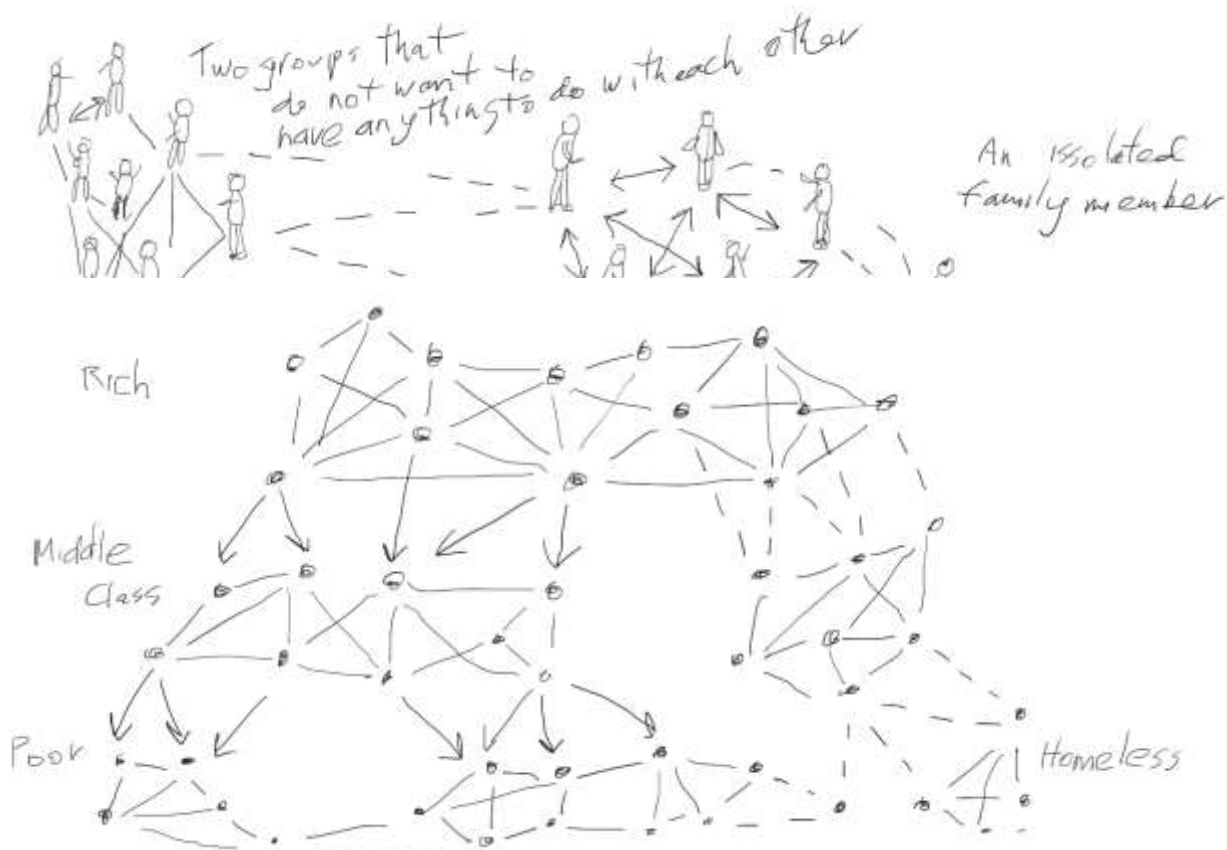




information and the others are dependent on them for resources. There is a limit to how many people one person can manage but a hierarchy extends this control by creating a chain of command. There is no limit to the potential size of the hierarchy.

Alienation relationships are very common particularly with strangers. In a family however it takes a lot of energy to ignore and avoid contact and influence as both parties have relationships with people in common, so to maintain the alienation tends to lead to withdrawal from these connecting relationships. A person can then become very isolated or they team up with others who also want to adopt an alienation relationship. Religious cults and gangs can have close relationships within the group but withdraw from outside relationships. Such relationships can also exist between large groups of people. For example a community divided by racism is one divided by alienation

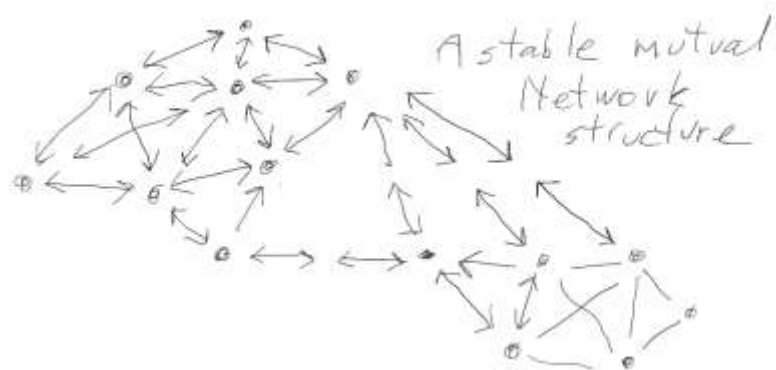
Exchange relationships require reciprocity to maintain. There is a measurement. Market exchanges with a shop keeper are an example. With friends this type of relationship will suffer and become less close if the other is not reciprocating enough. The consequence of this is that people tend to develop exchange





friendships with people of a similar resource capacity or wealth. People who have a mental illness or disability or who are very poor can find it hard to keep 'in the black' on the balance sheet of favours. So exchange relationship structures are stratified where people of similar resources can maintain close relationships but between those higher or lower they will more likely be control dependence or alienation type relationships.

Mutual relationships do not rely on measurement. A person provides without any expectation of return. Such relationship are most common in the loving environment of the family where people are willing to help each other without reciprocity. People can get sick or become disabled or poor and family will still be there to help out. It's harder to maintain mutuality with people who are not as close and it can be very demanding if you have lots of resources as they will flow away from you to those with less. It is an egalitarian building relationship. Because of these demands it helps to be in other close supportive mutual relationship with other resourceful people while building mutual relationships with less resourced people. In a way this describes exactly what the worker co-ops were doing. Mal McKenna, Marion and Andrew Elvery and John Morahan were role models for maintaining mutuality with people from all walks of life.



These clusters of mutual relationships can exist at any level of the hierarchy but are more easily maintained in a flat more egalitarian society. Now I realize how much traditional Aboriginal communities were a role model for what I was talking about back then in 1980. If only I had understood and studied more about the Culture then. It provides a clear example of a mutual society and one which maintained this political structure and shape for over 65,000 years.



Red Hill Paddington Community Centre

Following my first social work placement I remained involved with the Red Hill Paddington Community Centre. After some initial requests for funding failed, several of us decided to get on and do things without funding and a small group of enthusiastic people were involved. In my second year at Thomas Street funding was offered to the centre to employ a worker and rent a building. This had an interesting impact on the community centre supporters. Instead of doing things ourselves, all our time was now taken up with administrative things to do with the funding, finding a premise and employing workers. This administrative role was not what some of the originals wanted to do and they left or took a back seat. I learnt funding does not always help or facilitate community building.

I applied for the job as a job share arrangement with Judy Matthews and we were successful in getting the job. This enabled me to stay part time in the worker coops. It was terrific working with Judy and I think we did a lot of good things. The job also involved me doing direct support work and taking referrals from other agencies like hospital social workers to support people once they discharged. I was asked to visit regularly a young mum who had lots of problems, but the referral got mucked up and I did not actually visit till 6 weeks after she was home. I was feeling terribly guilty and expecting to find a dire situation when I arrived, but on the contrary the young mum was actually doing very well. I ended up visiting several times got to know her and was able to assist in a few different ways. Interestingly I found she began to slip in to a very dependent relationship looking for me to do things she had previously been doing all by herself. I was aware social work can create dependence and I now had a direct example. I had to work hard to keep a more mutual orientation.

A couple of young boys around 10 years of age from the nearby opportunity school would often spend their afternoons at the centre enjoying the company of Judy and I. This was useful to give their parents a break. Opportunity school at this time was for kids with intellectual disabilities. While playing with the boys the phone rang with someone seeking help with a rental issue. I began to think what I could do. I was curious to see what the boys might do with such a problem and I got a very interesting response. When I told them the problem, they initially shrugged to say they would not know what to do. I pressed them a bit more saying “if it was your family what would you do” and they quickly replied that they





would get their parents to come and see me. That was a nice thing to say, but then I asked “if you were me what would you do”. One of the boys then paused for a moment and thought about the issue then said well I suppose I would talk to the landlord to see if I could get him to change his mind, to try to show him the problem. This was as good a direct solution as I had come up with and went straight to the heart of the problem. So often the welfare system provides responses that pick up the pieces rather than focusing on challenging the creators of the problem. I realized then that the paths to solution could come from anywhere and that labels of intellectual disability or slowness don’t mean people have not got very clever capacities. This incident would have a profound impact on me. I would often think how ineffective the approaches of so called experts were and yet this young kid with learning difficulties could work out what to do (if they saw themselves in a powerful position rather than a powerless position).

The other interesting thing that happened once funding arrived was that the local up and coming politicians now all got much more interested in the community centre. The first president of the centre was Peter Beattie. The following year at the AGM the local Liberal branch stacked the meeting and took control with Santo Santoro as president. The next year the Labor party stacked the meeting and Joe St Ledger became the president. Joe would go on to be a Labor councillor for BCC, Peter the premier of QLD and Santo a state senator. The centre committee was a good place for them to practice their early political strategies and to target their rivals. Fortunately all this upheaval actually had little impact on the real work of the centre, and Judy and I continued our community development work with little direction from the committee.

I learn a lot in my 12 months as a community worker with the centre and it was good to be part of something I had helped set up but I decided there was a lot more personal congruence in doing the co-op work. I felt the label of social worker or community worker and its paid status really got in the way of doing work with unpaid volunteers of community activists. Consequently, I resigned my half of the centre position and worked full time on the cooperatives. Ironically I spent 5 years of hard study to become a social worker only to decide the best way to help people was not as a social worker.





Becoming the owner of 19

After living in Thomas St for a couple of years my father could see I was enjoying and committed to this new lifestyle. While I was busy opting out of the capitalist system, Dad was busily doing very well and getting promoted to more senior positions with bigger salaries. While he would have loved if I had done civil engineering he was very supportive and wanted to help with what I was doing.



Drawing by Cathy Bevis

For a year or more he subsidized the income of two of the woodworker's income so they could go off the dole. The dole office was never able to understand that we were trying to create our own jobs. They were meant to be fully occupied looking for work. Mal to his great credit continued to argue his case with the dole office trying to change their thinking as more and more senior people got involved in trying to resolve the case.



Painting of Back Yard by Cathy Bevis





Dad suggested loaning me money to buy the house. Our landlord lived in Sydney and seemed very happy to sell⁴. This dramatically changed things for me. I spent a lot of time at the kitchen window looking out at the backyard to work out what I could do with the backyard which was a weedy mess after decades of neglect. With the goal of self-sufficiency I began planting 40 or so fruit trees. A chook pen and chooks followed. I installed a slow combustion stove which facilitated my bread run and also gave hot water to the house. I restumped the house and dug out an area for the soap factory to store its gear. Later I would go against the trend and actually build in the veranda to create an extra bedroom so we could have 4 in the house.



I loved Thomas St. I enjoyed having such very different neighbours and I also enjoyed that there was a lot of interaction between the neighbours. There was a good neighbourhood when I arrived which made it objective of building a stronger community in my immediate neighbourhood an easier task. The 2 houses immediate below ours were owned by the Black family. Mrs Black next door, was a pensioner and widower. Her son next door to her was a metal scrap merchant and he had all his bits and pieces under both houses, around the front of the yard and often on the footpath. The tolerance of the neighbours for his very messy yard created some space for the noise and mess of the soap co-op. Mrs Black was very friendly as were most of the residents in the street. Helen and Warren, other long-time residents of the street also became good neighbours often lending a hand. Gerry Connolly (who later became a famous Joh impersonator and comedian) lived for a while two houses up and he would occasionally visit and entertain us with his quick wit.

As with many share houses there was always lots of visitors to the house, as each person had their friends over. Often people needing accommodation stayed for weeks. It was great there was often a lot of people in the house, but occasionally it would all get too much and I would hide away in my room to get a bit of solitude.

⁴ I paid \$27,500 for 19 thomas st which was on a big ¼ acre block.





My neighbours Marion and Andrew across the road approached me to see if I would be prepared to have some goats in the back yard and we soon built a goat shed and purchased 2 milking goats which would later have kids. | Marion and Andrew and Michelle and I would later also buy and share a ute between us which was terrific for bringing in mango branches that the goats loved and for collecting manure from horse stables. Even after Michelle and I moved away the goats continued and more kid goats followed. Michelle and I are still good friends with, and enjoy catching up with Marion and Andrew.



Chooks came before the goats and later we would also get a sheep. Our yard was full of fruit trees and so not suitable for a sheep. With the support of the 2 neighbours below (the Black family) and the 2 neighbours above we fenced off all of these areas and the goats and the sheep looked after the weeds and the lawn mowing. Other neighbours got involved as well, and enjoyed the menagerie that was developing in the street. While we had no complaints from the neighbours in Thomas St, a neighbour behind eventually complained to Brisbane City Council about the noise. When Kandis the goat came on heat she would let out a very loud mournful cry. The neighbour up behind us did not have visibility into the back yard and for many months she thought there was someone in our house with some sort of illness. When she found out the cries were from a goat, a Brisbane City Council officer was called straight away. The BCC were actually very good and amused at our inner city farm and explained we just needed to get a licence to keep the goats.

By accident I won a baby pig at the Samford show⁵ and Marion and Andrew agreed to house her in their yard. We called her Germaine (as she wasn't a chauvinist pig). The neighbour in 17 Thomas St managed the Uni staff club and

⁵ Attending the Samford fair with Michelle I had a go in a giant bob's competition where you had to try to roll 5 balls in to some narrow holes. The prize was a baby pig that was there in a small cage. I later found myself in the final against 2 others. After a couple of rounds it was just me and a local lady about 40 years older than me. The lady had a very large family with grandchildren and other local cheering her on. After a few rounds where we both managed 3 out of 5, I finally prevailed to a slight groan of disappointment from the crowd. I think the pig was really a joke prize and the person running the stall was very surprised when I wanted to claim the prize. Michelle and I sheepishly but with a sense of triumph carried the pig home to live initially with the goats.





he brought home all the scraps to feed her. I ended up having really little to do, she became the street's pig. The plan was to eat her eventually. She got fairly big, but a long spell of wet weather convinced Germaine that living underneath Marion and Andrews's house, was better than being in her pen. After several pen escapes it was decided it was time for her to be eaten. This was a difficult process for us city slickers.



Marion and Andrew decided to become vegetarians. While various neighbours had the confidence we could slaughter and butcher the pig ourselves it was certainly not for me and after a lot of toing and froing between some crazy plans, I took her to a butcher in the country where she came back in plastic bags. The young daughters next door had great delight telling other neighbours they were having Germaine for dinner. I had some meat but just like when I had slaughtered chooks, I found it hard to eat. This reluctance felt like a real failing, given my self-sufficiency goals.

Many people would make the connection between life in Thomas St, with the old TV show "The Good Life" which we took as a compliment.

One more person, while not a neighbour, needs a mention. Again via Bernie, another character John palmer would begin to visit the backyard. John was a permaculture devotee. He had graduated as an agricultural scientist but then adopted a nomadic lifestyle moving from place to place sharing his knowledge and gathering food and swapping food for work. Some mornings I would look out the back window and see John busy weeding or mulching. Another example for me of someone adopting a mutual relationship. He was an expert on weeds and would show what weeds we could eat instead of wasting them. Inspired by him I read the permaculture books and could see its strong connection with community work and the Gandhian approach. They all advocated self-sufficiency and small local solutions to problems using local resources.





With all the things we were doing it started to feel like we were like Robin Hood's merry band of outlaws, living on the edge of society, challenging its central core of capitalism and greed and being supported by the peasants (in this case the new inner-city yuppies and the old working class families). Bernie would call us all urban hippies. He would describe himself as a collapsed Catholic and he would also say I was going to be the first non-Catholic Pope (which I took as a compliment). It was good to socialize and work with a group of people with similar goals. While others may have been critical about our approach to change, at the time I felt like we were doing exactly the right thing. We were trying to create a different sort of society inside the existing one. A community based, democratic, more mutual society.

One of the big problems with the overall approach we had adopted was to do with simple economic viability. We were only able to make very low wages which was not so difficult for single people like myself but for those with children, the need for a bigger income was more apparent and the co-ops were not really providing that level of support. Many of us relied on other part time jobs for more income. Some relied on their partner's income, which did put pressure on relationships.

I nevertheless was very happy working in the co-ops. I felt a congruence here and I greatly valued the friendships made. I felt my ambitions were already being achieved. I felt very content and could imagine continuing on forever. However what ended my time with the co-ops was romance.

While quite fickle about relationships and fearful of commitment, my relationship with Michelle continued to strengthen despite a few rocky periods mainly due to my lack of emotional maturity and an anxiety about making a long term decision. Michelle on the other hand was very confident and clear. My mum intervened in what turned out to be very powerful. During a separation period between me and Michelle, my mum said if we got back together I should Marry Michelle. She was saying it was terribly unfair to create this uncertainty for Michelle. When I decided I wanted to get back together my Mum's advise was in my mind and I knew I would have to fully commit. I took the plunge and fortunately we agreed to marry. Michelle was doing similar work in New Farm and it seemed a good





idea to start afresh in a different locality rather than for one of us to join in with the others projects. After marrying we moved to Ropeley in the Lockyer Valley.

We continued to own 19 Thomas st for another year with John Morahan renting from us. John kept the garden going and the goats. A new local housing co-op (of which John was a key instigator) purchased 19 Thomas St from us. The co-op would later buy more homes in Thomas St further entrenching the co-operative culture in the street. John and Mal continued with the co-op activities, but slowly the woodwork and soap co-ops petered out as the need for more income lead Mal and John to establish the Edible Landscapes Nursery, which they ran together for a few years. They also played a part in supporting the setup of the Good Foods Co-operative store.

Reflections on this time

The co-ops were a very enjoyable period of my life. Lots of fun activities with good friends. I learnt a great deal during this time from very practical self-sufficiency skills to more intellectual ideas about social change.

My learning however, was also limited because of the freedom I had. As a group we worked out what we would do collaboratively. I had no one directing me, so it was possible to avoid taking on activities that could have been good learning options, but which were perhaps personally challenging. For example my shyness with pubic performance probably held me back in taking the co-op story to a bigger audience and promoting and encouraging others to do so in their own areas. The West End Christian Anarchists would do all sorts of more risky public actions and speech making. I could have joined with them to do these things, but I found lots of excuses to avoid such challenges. They also had plenty of freedom, so it is wrong to see my freedom as the problem, it really was my own fears and lack of courage, to push myself further. Nevertheless, I still felt like I was engaged in real social change. I felt very proud of my attempts and my consistency with my ideals.

Along with this congruence I also I felt a strong sense of autonomy. I could see that others working inside traditional work places like The Department of Family Services or the University had much less freedom to act. While they had more





power to influence others, they were also more constrained in what that influence could be. They had to make a lot of compromises. So in a way the supposed power they had was really an illusion, as they only had power if they obediently followed the directions from above. They had no power to act independently, so no real power. This idea led to my first published article in a Gandhian journal⁶. I felt that working from a base like the worker co-ops offered both freedom and congruence

Looking back now the thing I would most like to highlight is the notion of alienation and to extend it beyond the interpersonal alienation I have described in my network theory. Developing self-sufficiency skills like how to grow food, make bread, raise and slaughter animals, make soap, build furniture and make sandals, helped me realize how alienated I was previously from these things. For many, food comes from the fridge and soap and shoes from shops. I came to recognize that all products we consume have the labour of others enfolded in them and that this needs to be appreciated. When you recognize that the t shirt you are wearing has been the product of the toil of a very lowly paid probably very young worker in Bangladesh you start to think of it differently, and to care for it. When someone gives you something, they have made with their own hands, you tend to think of them each time you use the object. In these years I wore a colourful jumper that my mum had knitted for me. It made it special. When we are alienated from the labour enfolded in an object it is easy for us to discard and mistreat it. Karl Marx highlighted how manufacturing workers were alienated from the products they created. The Bangladeshi workers probably have little emotional input in to their t-shirts in comparison to the love that I felt wearing the jumper mum knitted for me. What I am highlighting is that we are also alienated from these workers and their products.

Having killed a chook to eat, I now view a roast chicken in a shop in a different way. I am more aware someone had to grow, kill, prepare and cook this product and I am indebted to them all. The fact that we could not kill Germaine ourselves, contracting out her demise to a butcher, strengthens my indebtedness. Working as a cleaner even for a short time I still feel a strong empathy for cleaners when I walk into a public toilet. Everything made around us has a history of human toil

⁶ 'The fallacy of power and down and out idealism' Continuum





and sweat enfolded in it. However we generally take all this for granted and remain blissfully unaware of our alienation from people whose labour created the creature comforts around us. This blindness is also a good protection from thinking about the misery that perhaps has also existed to create the products we rely on.

People will often look enviously at a luxury home in a magazine, wishing they could own it. However when you realize the stone floor has been mined by child labour in India, the fittings and furniture all made by poorly paid workers from Asian countries and the curtains made by poor Bangladeshi workers in dangerous factories, these pictures take on a new meaning. How different would our society be if we were no longer alienated from these workers and we recognized their toil for our comfort? Today people often look back on earlier times where rich people had servants and slaves, with derision. But nothing has actually changed, it is just that we don't even have a personal connection to our slaves and servants. Instead of living in the servant's quarters they are all now living in developing countries. This alienation is very hard to explain to others when our consumerist society is the very basis of our capitalist system and way of life.

In contrast, if we have an object made by a famous person, we are very keen for others to know. As a painter I know people enjoy my paintings not just for what they are but because they know the artist and it adds to the connection. This connection can also be made explicit to friends viewing the painting. So the alienation we have to things is part of our class or hierarchical structure. We maintain an alienation to products produced by those at the bottom of the hierarchy, while we explicitly recognize the connection to product created by our peers or those higher in the hierarchy than us.

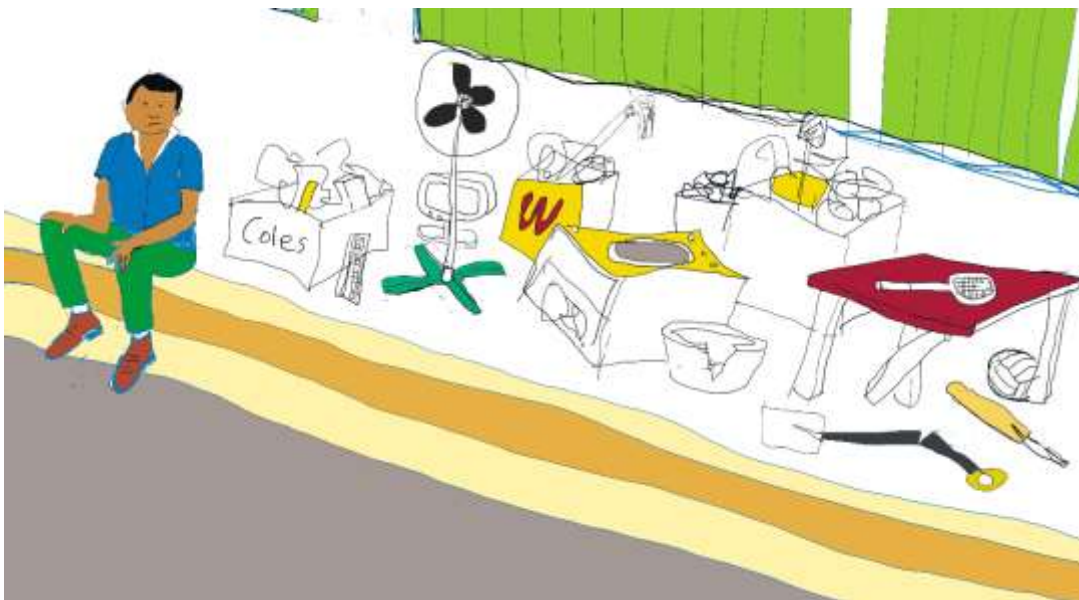
The self-sufficiency movement has helped to counter this alienation, in part by not relying on others and learning to make your own necessities. However it is possible to be an advocate and self-sufficiency practitioner without thinking about the enfolded labour of the poor. The alienation they overcome is their own alienation from things around them. These days there is a strong movement in support of farmers markets and less food miles and knowing where your food has come from. People enjoy such markets and buying from and talking directly to the farmers (although in reality they are often agents and not farmers). People





also enjoy buying objects from artisans at craft markets rather than mass produced products and they care for such objects with more affection being able to remember the actual person who made the object. These trends are encouraging, but this non-alienated consumption is very small within our overall economy.

Things do not last like they used to. There is increasing built-in obsolescence so we are encouraged to buy the latest model and keep upgrading our phones, televisions, computers, washing machines and fridges. This is very evident in the regular hard rubbish collections. Huge piles of unwanted items end up on the curb. Ikea and other chipboard furniture melts in the rain. Even old solid timber furniture that needs just a little repair is discarded to be replaced with the latest fashion. I find this graveyard of products a very sad event, particularly when you imagine the creators of these products sitting alongside their creations.



Fortunately, recyclers and scavengers troll the heaps, giving some things another chance. If only these curb side collection had occurred back in the Thomas St days the co-ops would have had an incredible source of resources for furniture making.

Looking at these sad curb heaps of rubbish (and discarded human labour), we can also think about the environment that has been altered to make these products. Forests have been clear felled to make chip board, land cleared and holes dug to



mine metal for computers and washing machines. Our consumption has an environmental impact. Particular causes like palm oil can be raised in our consciousness encouraging us to avoid certain products to avoid harm to orangutans in Borneo. However we don't like to think how our own typical Australian lifestyle and consumption is slowly destroying the planet. How many people get angry about the lack of action on climate change on an extremely hot day while they turn up their air conditioning?

We live in a globalized economy surrounded by products from all over the globe whose histories we know nothing about and whose histories are actively shielded from us. It's easier to be alienated from the people and the environments enfolded in these products. I know many people, myself included, who have terrific and sincere aspirations for a better society but they remain alienated from all of the misery that occurs as a result of their own consumer choices. If we could overcome this alienation and recognize the misery and environmental consequences in a product we would either change our consumption patterns or have to accept we are not actually that different to the capitalist overlords that we have been rallying against.

Given the extent of global capitalism it is hard work to find out the provenance of all the things you normally consume. This is why self-sufficiency is a good thing as it reduces the reliance on many products. This is why living a more simple lifestyle is also good. Looking to certifying bodies for guidance helps. Organic certification ensures less environmental damage and generally supports smaller environmentally sustainable farmers. Fair Trade products help to avoid excessive exploitation.

Karl Marx helped draw attention to the alienation of workers from the product of their labour. I wonder what our world would have been like if instead of encouraging revolution and the nationalization of factories so that the whole society owned the means of production, he had instead advocated more self-sufficiency and smaller community owned worker co-operative rather than private enterprise. Unfortunately, Marxism has been just like capitalism in failing to recognize the value of mutual relationships and instead encouraged controlling relationships as the path of change.





The Thomas St years helped me affirm an interest in nonviolent revolution rather than a Marxist orientation. Gandhi was my inspiration. This is not to dismiss the ambitions of Marxism. It is important in challenging violent approaches to change to recognize just how violent the whole capitalist endeavour has been and how much misery and poverty it has created as people climb over each other's backs to succeed and get rich and. The trickle down argument of the capitalists is clearly a falsehood. It is very understandable that people may respond to this capitalist violence in an aggressive sometimes violent way. While I think violent processes of change tend to usher in a new system dependent in an ongoing way on violence, our focus should be on the violence of the system not the protestors. However to build a peaceful nonviolent society we will need a nonviolent approach to change.

Conclusion

It was very good for me to have had these years where I felt very positive and congruent about what I was trying to achieve. We were also challenging control and hierarchy, trying to build a flatter more mutual society from within.

It was by no means perfect but I still often compare what I am currently doing back to my time in these worker co-ops. I think my values and general philosophy really coalesced here, and this has become fundamental to what I have done since.

We were also challenging alienation in our society. We tried to overcome alienation in the community by building mutual relationships between poor working class people and the more well off committed members of the co-ops. We tried to overcome alienation to the products we consumed by becoming more self-sufficient. I was also beginning to be less alienated to myself. I began to better understand my own fears and limitations and to also turn away from the ambitions encouraged by society to follow my own ideals.

How is it that we live in a world where the centralization of power and wealth has been seen as a good thing and where ruthlessness in business and increasing control and growth are seen as virtues rather than ecological mistakes and very bad uncaring personal behaviour?





VS

