In accordance with the guidelines for the Faculty of Arts Summer Session Research Scholarship, this document contains a report elaborating on the research undertaken during the period of the scholarship. This report elucidates the conceptual theory underpinning the notions of hegemony, citizenship, sovereignty and subalternity, extrapolating from this body of theory the critical concepts that will provide the foundation elements of my Honours thesis. I have also documented further avenues of inquiry, to be undertaken throughout my Honours year, which I believe will theoretically enhance my thesis. The report totals 2522 words, accompanied by a 473 word bibliography.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to Ms Kylie Smith and Dr Richard Howson for their patience, encouragement and guidance throughout this scholarship period. Theirs has been an immeasurable contribution that has propelled me into the labyrinth of sociological theory and on a quest for understanding.
Hegemony, Subalternity and Sovereignty: a critical analysis of Indigenous policy

The Federal government’s ‘intervention’ in remote indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in 2007 prompted polarized responses within Australian society, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Accusations of civil rights breaches and a return to paternalism faced off against outspoken support and claims of ‘necessary measures’ for these extreme actions, implemented to address social, educational and moral ‘issues’ that had been allegedly fermenting for decades, leading to severe disadvantage within the targeted communities. The ‘intervention’ was touted as a necessary means to address and alleviate that disadvantage.

The contested nature of this policy decision motivated me to question why some Indigenous leaders advocated this action whilst others vehemently opposed it, and why the Howard government initiated such radical measures at that point in its term in office after more than a decade of ambivalence. The determined implementation of this policy led me to speculate on the underlying agenda of the government, whilst the relative ease with which the government was able to legislate and activate this policy has also led me to speculate on the potential for widespread government erosion of Australian citizenship rights.

Whilst the concept of citizenship has existed since antiquity, in its modern incarnation it has come to “signify a certain equality with regard to the rights and duties of membership in the community” (Shachar 2000: 66). As Shachar notes, it “represents
the right to have rights” (Shachar 2000:66). A devolution of the conception of Australian citizenship has occurred in recent decades, with the government now offering no pledges to the inalienable rights that were once associated with citizenship. Instead, we are only assured of our membership in the Australian community, with “the values we share and our common future” (Department of Immigration and Citizenship), entailing the unspecified “reciprocal rights and obligations uniting all Australians” (Preamble: Australian Citizenship Act 2007). Our absolute rights as Australian citizens remain decidedly undisclosed and capricious. As Larissa Behrendt has observed, “the recognition and protection of rights..is vulnerable to the whims of the legislature and..influenced by the ebb and flow of the tide of public opinion” (Behrendt 2005:252).

This minimization of the provisions of citizenship rights disseminates a clear message from the government to the electorate: that Australian society now operates with a minimalist concept of government obligation to citizens; that we are striving to become a homogenous society, with ‘common values’, and that a litany of responsibilities present as a pre-requisite to fulfill the requirements of citizenry. This ideological shift in the simple rights of citizenship stands as a reflection of the overall ideological shift in policy over recent decades, documented as a shift from the ‘welfare’ state to ‘post welfare’ (Jamrozik 2005:9), or neo-liberal, state. Within the parameters of neo-liberalism, with its market-oriented, individualistic, minimalist-government philosophy (Jamrozik 2005: 10), is the location of the two-tiered society (Jamrozik 2005:xiv) - comprised by those who operate within the parameters of the normative, and those who cannot or do not.
In seeking to understand this ever-widening division within Australian society, and to interpret recent legislative changes that have enabled such incursions into the rights of Australian citizens, such as the ‘intervention’, I have utilized this summer research scholarship to investigate the conceptual foundations of social and political theory as it pertains to the notions of citizenship, subalternity and sovereignty within the context of civil society. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony presents as the theoretical foundation of my research, establishing the framework upon which the other conceptual elements of citizenship, sovereignty and subalternity are constructed.

From a broad body of literature deconstructing and analyzing the philosophies of Antonio Gramsci, I have consulted a range of academic analyses specifically concentrating upon his theory of hegemony, articulated throughout the ‘Prison Notebooks’, which seeks to elucidate the “complexity of the networks through which power is exercised and sustained in society” (Buttigieg 1981:6). Focusing primarily on this notion, Gramsci addresses the means and mechanisms of power that operate within society, giving rise to the predominance of one sector of the population, and its ideologies, over and above all others. The concept of hegemony exposes the “concealed nexuses of power and privilege” within society (Buttigieg 1995:16, citing Gramsci 3:49), providing a clear explanation of how this fundamental group is able to manifest its power base, promote its own ideologies and privilege its members. Gramsci articulates this consolidation of power as one that becomes embedded or “naturalized” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992:28, cited Pozo 2007:67), reinforced by the mechanisms and structures of everyday life, “the formidable complex of trenches
and fortifications of the ruling class”. (Buttigieg 1995: 26, citing Gramsci 3:49). This “material structure of ideology” (Buttigieg 1995:26) is exercised through the media, the education and health systems, social groups, public facilities, social and religious groups, even architecture and street names (Fontana 2006 33:2), in tandem with the political vehicles of legislation and oratory, long recognized as the medium through which the most “eminent” members of society sought to “sway the whole” (Hobbes 1655: 119). These expressions of a society articulate and promote the worldview of the fundamental group, serving to reinforce the normative values, or “hegemonic principles” (Howson 2006:23), of society (Fontana 2006:53; Buttigieg 1995:6; Green 2000:7). By promoting the normative values of the fundamental group through these mechanisms, and by maintaining the façade of negotiability through their apparent fluidity, hegemony is achieved through acquiescence. The consent of the subaltern is thus negotiated through those everyday mechanisms and structures that operate within civil society to promulgate the hegemonic principles (Howson 2006:23) of the dominant group. When successful these fundamental values become accepted as the values of the society as a whole, with those groups operating outside of this normative relegated to the periphery, thus becoming the subaltern - “fragmented, subordinated and excluded from power” (Buttigieg 1995: 30).

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, very briefly summarized in this paper, contributes on an elementary level, to my understanding of the machinations of power and the potential for manipulation of this power within even the most ‘open’ society. It provides the foundational theory upon which I intend to construct my Honours thesis.
Building upon hegemony, yet contingent upon its operation, the notion of subalternity is situated. The ‘subaltern’ identifies those who refuse the prevailing ideology of the dominant social group, representing those members of society who are marginalized as the ‘other’ within the dominant discourse (Green 2000:16) and are subject to subordination within society. The creation of these peripheral groups, operating outside the normative parameters of society, is an intrinsic element of hegemony in operation. The conceptual notion of subalternity, articulated in Gramsci’s work, allows for an understanding of the construction of Indigenous peoples as the subaltern within the Australian context. Gramsci observed how “the interpretations and representations of the subaltern may be misinformed or ideologically influenced” (Gramsci 1971:55, cited Green 2000:14), with “subaltern groups ..always subject to the activity of the ruling groups (Gramsci, cited Green 2000:20). In the Australian context the ‘history wars’, and the public diminishment of Australian Aboriginal history by then-Prime Minister, John Howard, as a ‘black armband view’ provides a practical application of Gramsci’s concept. The maintenance of this ideological position, this division of society based upon the subjective ‘truth’ of historical account, which resulted in the marginalization of Indigenous Australians, is the incarnation of a ‘war of position’ (Green 2000:21; Howson 2006:20; Fontana 2006:58), an ideological struggle between the dominant and subaltern group. The manipulation of such “apparatuses” (Green 2000:7) of hegemony, such as ‘history’ and ‘education’, enables the promotion of the worldview of the dominant group and the submerging of the subaltern narrative. Spivak (cited in Green 2000:16) observed that this practice of “embedding…representations of the subaltern..as the Other..within the dominant discourse”, renders the subaltern group silent.
Where the utilization of the mechanisms of civil society fails to adequately subordinate the subalterm group, the “coercive apparatuses of political society” (Green 2000:7)– the legislative and judicial systems, the police and military – operate to ensure compliance. Thus, an understanding of the creation and maintenance of subalternity within hegemony gives value to an assessment of the ‘intervention’ as a coercive’(Green 2000:7) measure, enabling the sustained operation of the prevailing hegemony. Gramsci described law as “basically a coercive instrument to direct civil society, “to create a social conformism which is useful to the ruling group’s line of development” (Gramsci 1971:195, cited Green 2000:7). With this in mind, further exploration into the concept of subalternity will enable an interpretation of the construction and promotion of Indigenous Australians as subaltern, and facilitate an understanding of the factors that underpinned the ‘intervention’ in remote Indigenous communities. It will also elucidate the cultural identity dynamics in operation that sanctioned the government’s incursion upon the natural rights of the Indigenous citizens targeted by the ‘intervention’.

Within the context of Australian post-colonial debates the issue of Indigenous sovereignty has been hailed by some as a solution to the social divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Dodson 2003: 31). This has been a notion that the Australian government has ardently refused to legitimize, its absolute rejection of this concept reflected in its refusal to ratify either the International Labor Organization’s Convention No: 169 (1989) or the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).
Theoretical readings around the concept of sovereignty, with particular regard to its application in contemporary society, are mutable and subject to interpretation. The post-Westphalian concept of sovereignty reflected the supreme authority of a monarch within a territory (Lenzerini 2006:11), with classic philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes espousing the absolute power of the sovereign in all matters military, legislative, and judicial (Hobbes 1655:114). The more contemporary view is of “a territorial independence subject to no legal constraints except those imposed by international law” (Lenzerini 2006:11). Lenzerini notes that the contemporary concept of ‘Indigenous sovereignty’ is associated with ‘self-government’, although this would remain subject to the control of the territorial state, “which may constantly limit or condition pursuant to its own relevant constitutional or legislative rules, the effective exercise of such prerogatives” (Lenzerini 2006:14). Indigenous sovereignty is also often equated with the resumption of Aboriginal title over ancestral ‘country’ - land that was under the stewardship of Indigenous tribes prior to colonization. As Lenzerini explains, this claim to title is contingent upon the retention of ‘ownership’ by Indigenous peoples even under the process of colonization – implying that the colonizers only ever held the “imperium - the right to govern” but not the “dominium – ownership right”(Lenzerini 2006:14). These are negotiable concepts, open to interpretation, yet ultimately remain under the auspices of the state. The state retains the power to “expressly extinguish (title) by statute or by voluntary sale or cession” (Lenzerini 2006:14). The 1998 amendments to the Australian Native Title Act (1993), wherein native title could be extinguished in the event of a conflict of interest with existing pastoral leases, is firm evidence of the fragility of Indigenous claims to land and the state’s ability to abrogate legislated recognition of their rights if the
prevailing public response is negative. The position of the state regarding Aboriginal title essentially becomes a reflection of public opinion, an articulation of the momentum of the ‘collective will’.

‘Public opinion’ operates as an instrument of hegemony, utilized to achieve consensus, in line with Gramsci’s notion that “public opinion is the point of contact between civil society and political society” (Gramsci, cited Bates 1975:363; Buttigieg 1995:45), the conduit through which ideology is negotiated and hegemony maintained. As Gramsci noted, when the state “wants to initiate an unpopular action, (it) preventatively creates the adequate public opinion, that is, it organizes and concentrates certain elements of civil society” (Bates 1975:363). Public opinion, thus, is manipulated to achieve the desired outcomes of the dominant group.

With the concept of sovereignty so capricious, I question its essential representation for Indigenous people. Does it represent territory? Does it represent independent self-government? Or does it possess an entirely particularized connotation, wherein the individual has the right to choose his, or her, own path of existence, determined by personal ideology? Michael Dodson refers to the “desecration”(Dodson 2003:31) of Indigenous peoples’ “sovereign right to control our lives, to live according to our own laws and determine our futures” (Dodson 2003:31). Within the realms of the prevailing hegemony, are any of these alternatives possible? As Simone Weil observed, “political sovereignty is nothing without economic sovereignty” (Weil 1951:70), therefore the question remains: can we reconcile Indigenous appeals for sovereignty within the parameters of the existing neo-liberal hegemony? Only
through critically analyzing notions of sovereignty and hegemony can any understanding of the potential, and assessment of the viability, of these concepts be attained.

In summary, the readings undertaken throughout the summer research scholarship have clarified the fundamental operation of hegemony in maintaining and sustaining a balance of power within society that privileges a select group, and sub-ordinates all others. Through this delicately negotiated equilibrium, attained utilizing the apparatuses of civil society, the inherent values of the fundamental group are prescribed as the natural values of society, thus branding those who deviate from these values as abnormal or ‘subaltern’. The resulting divisions within society create a forum for judgment, with a “pathologizing” (Smith 2007:173) of the subaltern, reinforced through the mechanisms of hegemony, thus perpetuating its operation. Whilst events such as the ‘intervention’ in the Northern Territory reflect this process and operate to reiterate the legitimacy of the hegemonic principles (Howson 2006:23), articulated through Gramsci’s theory, my exploration through the body of theoretical literature has raised further issues I’d like to pursue through my Honours thesis. Gramsci recognized the operation of a “collective subjectivity” within hegemony (Gramsci, cited Kalyras 2000: 355) and noted the homogeneity evident within democracy (Kalyras 2000: 344), whilst Larissa Behrendt observed that legal acknowledgement of the rights of minorities would result in a “lack (of) legitimacy” (Behrendt 2005:252), with “the recognition and protection of the rights of the disadvantaged and culturally distinct as being in direct competition with (the) position”(Behrendt 2005:252) of the fundamental group. These assertions need to be
ontologically explored in order to understand the imposition of conformity and homogeneity implied by the objectives of the intervention. An exploration of the concept of subjectivity will provide a theoretical platform from which to analyze the implications of these statements within the Australian context. Similarly, a deeper exploration into notions of sovereignty will provide a stronger conceptual tool for analysis of Indigenous sovereignty ideals. In seeking to further expand my theoretical foundations, I believe the conceptual depth of my thesis will be greatly enhanced.

Under the guidance of Dr Richard Howson and Ms Kylie Smith I intend to pursue a line of inquiry into my Honours thesis that explores the hegemony in operation within Australia in order to understand its underlying ideological agenda, evidenced by shifts in policy objectives. My research will concentrate specifically on the implications for the concepts of citizenship, subalternity and sovereignty, utilizing the ‘intervention’ as a representative case study. I also intend to investigate the relevance of the timing of the ‘intervention’, and the significance of this event, in terms of the attrition of Australian citizenship rights. Particular consideration will be given to increasing international acknowledgement of Indigenous rights, with its potential impact upon the prevailing hegemony and the resultant direction of Australian social policy.
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