The Changing Configurations of Inequality in Post-industrial Society: Volunteering as a Case Study[1]

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The following paper brings together an empirical and theoretical investigation of humanitarian volunteer work and the post-industrial political condition. As a study of volunteers who work in inner-urban Melbourne, Australia, providing food, clothing, referrals and support on a 'food bus' for homeless youth, it addresses the basic question of what motivates and sustains their commitment. In doing so, the paper also investigates the interrelationship between humanitarian volunteer work and the processes of structural adjustment that have redefined the responsibilities of the state with regard to issues like poverty and homelessness.

The primary aim of the paper is not to chart the historical relationship between volunteering and the welfare state *per se*, but to consider, more generally, the significance of humanitarian volunteer work in the contemporary social world. In *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (1999), French sociologist Luc Boltanski points out that an increasing number of Non-Governmental Organizations have begun to fill in for lacking essential services in many poorer parts of the world. In the process, he observes, they have incited intense debate around the purpose and efficacy of their actions. He suggests that this is because the emergence of a "nascent humanitarian movement" since the 1970s plays on two tensions in contemporary Western societies. The first is between communitarianism and abstract universalism and the second lies at the heart of our "culture of authenticity," wherein humanitarianism seems the ideal means to cultivate a moral self through absorption in one's own pity at the spectacle of an other's suffering.

Boltanski goes on to unearth the foundations of humanitarian ideology and to explore contemporary humanitarian action without, he writes, "falling into either a smug celebration of the return to kindness or an easy denunciation of the perverse spectator" (xiv). Following Boltanski's

cue, this paper seeks to challenge both romantic celebrations of volunteering as well as cynical charges that volunteers are essentially self-satisfied "do-gooders." It also confronts the proposition advanced by political analysts of "social decapitalisation," taken up recently by governments in Australia and elsewhere, that voluntary associations strengthen collaborative engagement in political life.

The volunteers whose narrative accounts make up the body of the case study are represented here as they describe themselves, as everyday people trying to assist a particularly socially and economically marginalised population. At the same time, the interview material below reveals their obvious powerlessness to alleviate the kinds of problems, like homelessness and drug addiction, that working on the food bus exposes them to. Most also hold out very little hope that these problems can or will be redressed by governments or community welfare organizations in the conceivable future. Those who took part in the study continued to work toward their stated aim to help street kids while at the same time they claimed that nothing they do makes a visible difference in this regard.

The question then, that underlies this paper on both a practical and theoretical level, is what motivates and sustains a commitment of this kind? I pose this question in a particular social context, a context that volunteers themselves characterise by increasing social suffering and growing uncertainty that anything can be done to change it. The following attempts to make sense of volunteers' enduring commitment to the food bus by analysing the terms in which poverty is framed in post-industrial welfare states. It also considers whether volunteer work can be explained according to the prevalent logic that it strengthens one's sense of place and purpose in "the community."

Ultimately, this paper explores the possibility that humanitarian volunteer work is, instead, a response to increasingly polarised social and economic inequality. I propose that volunteering takes on a particular meaning in the post-industrial social world as a medium through which people can witness and make sense of lived experiences far removed from their own. The following argues that volunteers continue to work on the food bus, despite its shortcomings, primarily because it allows them to encounter those who share the same city, but few of the same opportunities and luxuries. I conclude that in the context of restructured welfare states like Australia, humanitarian volunteer work marks a par-

ticular and increasing response to the disjunction between the pleasures of freedom and the risks of poverty.

The study

During the group interview to become a volunteer on the food bus, we were all asked to divide into pairs and resolve a hypothetical moral dilemma: The world is about to end, but luckily a distant planet at our disposal can sustain human life; the problem is that only a limited number of people can be transported there in time. Given a list of briefly described characters who ranged from a nineteen year old heroin user, to a doctor in her mid-forties, to a twenty-five year old aeroplane mechanic, we tried to choose those who would best establish human civilisation anew. Eager to come up with the right answer, we busied ourselves plotting procreation, health care, spaceship maintenance and as many other essentials for the survival of the species as we could negotiate, only to learn that the object of the exercise was to demonstrate that no human life is worth more than another and that each of the characters should be considered a suitable representative of humanity. The point was to draw attention to the fact that no one had elected "the junkie." To dismiss a person's potential and worth on the basis of her heroin use was somewhat problematic for a group of people hoping to go out and help street kids.

It is also ironic since it is precisely the question of what sets a "junkie" apart that volunteers seek to address in their own way. Throughout the course their interviews, they consistently cited the discrepancy between their lot in life and others' untold suffering as the primary reason why they volunteer. They describe being moved into action by questions like "why do my children have a happy home while others' do not?" and "why should I be so depressed when I could get out there and help others much worse off than me?" In fact, having a duty to make amends for their relative good fortune was one unwritten axiom all the volunteers I interviewed shared. Given that they also had all been working on the food bus for a significant period of time— one year in a few cases, two to five in others, and as many as ten years in another case— there must be something about the experience of volunteering on the bus that brings them closer to satisfying this sense of duty.

This discussion is based on in-depth interviews with ten men and women who I worked with as a volunteer in on the food bus, an outreach

program for street kids in Melbourne. Open Family Australia, a national, non-profit organization, initiated the program as part of their long-standing mandate to "improve the well-being and self worth of alienated and excluded Australian street children, through unconditional support, wherever and whenever possible, with the view to reconnecting them to the community" (Open Family Australia, 1999). When Open Family decided to stop running its bus program in 1998, a small group of volunteers campaigned to take it over. The food bus is now entirely volunteer-run, operating only under the auspices of Open Family. It stays afloat with funding from a local private hospital and donations from the Melbourne City Food Bank.

When volunteers commit to making regular outings on the bus, they commit to becoming a recognisable and dependable presence on the street. The design of the program is premised on the idea that street kids will eventually come to know individual volunteers and, ideally, develop meaningful relationships with them. Volunteers set out with the belief that through these relationships, they can supply some of the emotional and material resources that street kids need to change their lives. The expectation is that by becoming a trusted figure in street kids' lives, volunteers might help restore them to "normal" life.

Yet, volunteers' accounts of their work chart a significant departure from what most set out to accomplish: namely bettering the lives of street kids by offering them non-judgemental assistance in the form of friendship, food, clothing and referrals. This is an ideal that most volunteers uphold. By their accounts, however, the majority of people who attend the bus are those whom volunteers affectionately call "oldies"—older men and women who might be classified as "dispossessed," but who are not in a "high risk" category as defined by the bus program. More significantly, most volunteers claimed that whatever it takes to make a tangible difference to either "streeties" *or* oldies is beyond their reach.

For example, Anne, one of the most experienced volunteers I interviewed, had been working in the bus program for five years. She signed on expecting that she might be able to help street kids in some way and in the hope that "if we go there then we can catch them and we can change it." She wanted to do something for street kids given the fact that her own three children grew up in a relatively secure, middle class environment.

> I suppose I wanted to find out about street kids and why they were out there. And having children of my own... and knowing there were all these kids out there who are really disadvantaged and thinking, "well why is this so?" And "maybe there's something I can do to help these kids."

Early on, however, she found the experience did not live up to these expectations, and has since become cynical about the possibility that any volunteer on the bus program can actually "do something [to] change somebody's life." She now cautions, "If you're hanging out for that, you'll be waiting a long time." She recalled a recent occasion when she and another volunteer tried to approach a twelve-year old boy and his older sister, to no avail; "They were happy to take food, but literally did not want to talk." After countless experiences like this, she has become matter-of-fact about her ability to "do something." As she explains in reference to the twelve-year old street kid,

> ...All the motherly instincts came out [laughs] and I thought, "oh, the kid really needs to be looked after, he's so young." But I think I've got to the stage now where I thought, [sigh] "I really have done all I can do, I literally can't do any more..."

For other volunteers the hope to "save" street kids is similarly confounded by their practical experiences working on the bus. John started volunteering on the food bus because he enjoyed his previous work in a training program for unemployed youth. He appreciates that the program provides an opportunity for oldies to "meet other people like themselves" and it fills their "bellies for a night." But, he explains, "I just feel that they're keeping the target group away from the bus." He also recalled numerous occasions when he's tried to help people access more systematic help, but was unable to because of chronic shortages in Melbourne.

> The way the bus is I don't think I make a difference at all, actually. But I think, when I got into it I thought I had the potential to make maybe a little difference, but the reality is that I actually don't... and that's partly because a lot of people don't care, they're just there to mingle with each other and eat food. And when I do get some one who genuinely needs help, they might see that I genuinely care about them and want to help them, but the services let me down and them down more to the point and I can't help them so off they go.

He describes the frequency of experiences like this as very upsetting.

> If you've really tried to get some one a roof over their head for a night, you can't do it... it's a terrible feeling... you feel terrible and you say "I'm sorry" and give them a blanket if you've got one, and off they go out on the street and that's, that's terrible.

John goes on to explain that he has "actually made a difference" to street kids only a few times, but then, not knowing where they ended up still worried him. He testifies that even if more street kids approached the bus, and even if they could be placed in beds at night, he would still feel powerless to make a real difference:

> I would probably feel like... a little bit yeah... a bit of difference. But the other thing is too, with the heroin addicts, the feeling I always get when I'm dealing with heroin addicts is that it's a lost cause... like I just feel like, "ah god..." you know, "this person's sort of..." Well I certainly don't feel like I can make a difference to them. I don't have the skills and the knowledge... or else I feel I make a minuscule difference to them.

Issues like accommodation shortages and the number of oldies who use the food bus are not the biggest problem for John. The biggest problem

is being unable to address the underlying problems that yield young people's homelessness and heroin addiction in the first place.

Most volunteers are similarly affected by beholding the facts of life on the street. Some keep diaries of their experiences on the food bus and several said they are unable to sleep when they come home from their fortnightly shift. Discussing the various disturbing events and situations that volunteers had witnessed over the years took up a significant portion of the interviews. For Dana, who initially doubted whether she would be able "to stomach" volunteering on the food bus, it is the "absolutely reprehensible and dreadful situation" of homelessness and the hopelessness that it implies that upsets her most. As she describes,

> But if you're living under a bridge or in the bush somewhere, how on earth can you ever have hope? You might as well go on taking the drugs and hope that one day you do overdose. You might not have the guts to do it right then and there. Because, really you know, it's the most pitiful thing... I just can't... can't imagine that pain...

Dana recalls one night in particular when a young woman came onto the bus "blasted off her brains" with her five young children:

> She'd obviously been shooting up and the kids were running amok and I thought, "I don't understand what's going on here." And once they would have moved in and taken the children from mum... I'm not sure if that's the answer, that's not what I'm saying, but for her to be sitting there and us serving her up toasted sandwiches, you know, I can't comprehend it. I can't reason it out. Whether or not it's an answer I'm looking for that doesn't exist, I don't know. Maybe this is where the non-judgemental thing comes into it, where you don't make an assessment... But five children, one would be enough, but five children running around, and one just a babe in arms. And then where were they living?

The stories above illustrate more than the limits of the food bus; they also convey volunteers' anxieties about whether they are doing the right

thing for oldies and street kids. Volunteers struggle to understand how they ought to feel in situations when confronted with the limits of non-judgemental support and "toasted sandwiches," situations where questions like where people actually sleep at night become more pressing. As Nell, a kindergarten teacher in her mid-forties, elaborates when she explains why it makes her uncomfortable when friends congratulate her for doing "such a good thing:"

> I'm not doing it for a "good thing," because it's a sad thing really... They don't understand that at times, there's things that I've seen that I won't tell anyone... just the terrible abuse that some one you know has been through or whatever, you just feel so, so down. And you give some kids a blanket at the end of the night, knowing that they're going to sleep down at the Yarra river and you know, it's bloody freezing cold or they'll probably get harassed or bashed up... We're driving back to, you know, a comfortable bed and place and good food... I mean it sounds blasé when we talk about it now, but when you're out there and it's cold and you give them a blanket and you see them walking off and you think "shit..." I mean, that is hard. But we can't do any better. We're giving a blanket.

Like many other volunteers, although she ultimately concludes that the program "*does* serve a purpose," Nell can only do so by referring to specific circumstances and small, but, tangible offerings.

These confounded hopes and expectations stand at significant odds with popular perceptions of volunteering. In Australia, it is common practice for volunteer organizations to play up the personal rewards of volunteering to recruit new and to retain old volunteers (Baldock, 1998). Although comprehensive studies in the United States have begun to ask why self-interest is the most common logic currently drawn on to make sense of volunteer work (Eliasoph, 1998; Wuthnow, 1991), most academic research focuses on what volunteers "get out of" the experience. For example, empirical studies into AIDS-related causes conclude that people are more likely to volunteer when "collective identification" in their volunteer organization is high (Simon, Sturmer and Stevens, 2000) or when they perceive the recipients of their assistance as "extended

selves" in some way (Kayal, 1993). As Snyder and Otomo (1992: 230) argue,

> The good (and perhaps romantic) intentions related to humanitarian concern may not be strong enough to sustain volunteers who are faced with the tough realities of their activity .

Studies of volunteers in charitable organizations similarly conclude that when volunteers draw on explicit moral sentiments to describe the meaning and function of their work, they "co-construct" these values in order to define "for themselves" a sense of "moral personhood" and belonging to a "moral community" (Allahyari, 2000; Paolucci, 1995). The general consensus is that voluntary commitments reflect the "shrinking circle of concern" (Eliasoph, 1998) around oneself and one's community that characterises contemporary social and political life in general.

American political analyst Robert Putnam (1995) and the authors of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985) argue that volunteering is critical to maintaining the foundational democratic principle of civil engagement. They are concerned by Americans' level of direct engagement in politics falling steadily and sharply since the 1970s, which Putnam suggests corresponds to an as-profound decline in membership in civic and fraternal organizations.

Governments and politicians have also begun to make a case for the civic virtues of volunteering. The United Nations' International Year of the Volunteer occasioned a number of initiatives, grants and reports to chart ways for existing groups and organizations to recruit more people to their causes based on the principle that "volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society" (Universal Declaration on Volunteering, 2001). Governments now take an active interest in promoting and overseeing the voluntary welfare sector in particular. Studies by Brown, Kenny, Turner and Prince (2000) in Australia and Ullman (1998) in France suggest that a great deal of faith is invested in volunteer welfare organizations to remedy the "crisis of the state" to provide social welfare. Brown, Kenny, Turner and Prince suggest that in Australia, the voluntary welfare sector currently plays such a fundamental role in the

management and administration of social services that notions of charity have become almost obsolete.

The case at hand certainly complicates either notion, that volunteering is self-interested or that it can revive the post-crisis welfare state. If and when volunteers do explain their sense of purpose in self-interested terms, it appears to be a way of reconciling themselves to what they cannot accomplish. For example, Roberto, a student in his mid-twenties, insists that he volunteers for his own benefit and "no one else's" to set himself apart from volunteers he claims come out of their enclaves of privilege "to serve their duty to the community once a month." Notably, Roberto also sets himself apart from other volunteers by disclosing that his own personal experience with heroin makes it easier for him to "break the barrier" with street kids. Even though he believes that he has something to offer street kids, Roberto still finds it necessary to repeatedly claim that he cannot "change anything" by working on the bus:

> I don't think I have any sort of great ability or belief that I'm going to change anything personally. I think for me, it's just very interesting to find out more for myself and get a better understanding of what's happening in the world, so to speak.

Exposure to the realities of poverty and homelessness makes believing in one's "great ability" to change things the only thing worse than claiming to know what being homeless or poor is like.

Because they regularly confront situations where what they have to offer appears hopelessly inadequate, volunteers' relative privilege becomes more pronounced by working on the food bus. The experience also raises more questions about volunteers' usefulness to others than it answers. Many assume personal responsibility for the fact that the bus program does not "do enough" and argue, "we've got to find a better way." Many have also given a great deal of thought to what might more effectively "catch" street kids and "save" them. But the question remains, how do we make sense of the fact that volunteers have chosen to address their concern for street kids through the bus program when they themselves disclaim their work as a kind of temporary stop-gap measure for much more profound problems? In order to answer this question, we need to look more closely at the social context of volunteers' work. In particular, we need to explore how the causes and conse-

quences of problems like homelessness are configured in the contemporary social and political imagination and whose responsibility they have become.

The unmaking of welfare and the end of the social

In *Work, consumerism, and the new poor*, Zygmunt Bauman (1998) argues that the role of the welfare state in industrial society, to cultivate a well-educated, robust and self-confident labour force and keep the supply of surplus labour in "constant readiness," has been made redundant with the ascent of post-industrial capitalism. He defines the welfare state as the product of "a historically occasioned encounter between the interests of capital and the moral sentiments of society at large" Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 78). The development of an economic order that has less and less use for surplus labour has summoned what he calls the "abrupt emergence" of consensus against the principle of "collective responsibility for individual misfortune." For Bauman this has had two major consequences: The ascendancy of consumer society and the impoverishment of politics. As he explains, the waning benefits that the contented majority receive from the restructured welfare state diminish the imperative to actively engage in political life. Consumer desires, then, become the main conduit of social mobilisation and integration and the "royal road to conflict resolution and order maintenance," creating ever new needs to "clamour for" Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 53).

Yet, the principal subject of *Work, consumerism and the new poor* is the changing role of the poor members of the citizenry. Since the 1970s, official discourses on the poor have ceased to focus on the question of "unemployability," and have increasingly set upon an "alien" and "hostile" group of people "who are beyond classes and outside hierarchy, with neither chance nor need of readmission": The underclass. According to Bauman's study, the underclass encompasses a heterogeneous group of "juvenile delinquents, school drop-outs, drug addicts, welfare mothers, looters, arsonists, violent criminals, unmarried mothers, pimps, pushers, and panhandlers" (1998: 66). Bauman argues that because poverty is no longer the subject matter of social policy "there is but a tenous and easily crossed line dividing the recipients of welfare from drug-pushers, robbers and murderers" (1998: 77). Furthermore, he remarks,

> The abnormality of the underclass phenomenon 'normalizes' the issue of poverty... It is precisely because the underclass is such a big and urgent problem that the bulk of people living in poverty are not a great issue that needs to be urgently tackled. Against the backdrop of the uniformly ugly and repulsive landscape of the underclass, the 'merely' poor shine as temporarily unlucky but essentially decent people who - unlike the underclassers - will make all the right choices and eventually find their way back into the accepted boundaries of society. (1998: 71)

Bauman's analysis is ratified in the Australian context by criminologist Robert White (1996). White argues that in Australia, one of the most rapidly restructured welfare states in the world, increasing numbers of people are not simply peripheral to the labour market, but entirely excluded from it. They, in turn, experience increasing levels of social and economic marginalisation, which White defines as the "complex process of stigmatisation and social regulation" that the experience of poverty, unemployment and depending on "handouts" involves (1996: 117). He characterises the decline of the Australian welfare state by a widened gap between rich and poor, higher unemployment, and specific social policies like adopting remedial rather than preventative social and economic measures, cutting and limiting access to social support services, and offering less benefits and allowances to the unemployed. In addition, governments have tightened the coercive aspects of welfare provision like work, income, assets, lifestyle and attitude tests to establish one's eligibility for welfare support and the level one "deserves." White (1996: 129) explains that,

> For those who play by the established rules of the game the reward is a meagre sum with which to achieve a modicum of physical survival. However, for those who persistently find it difficult to succeed within the terms of the policy agenda, those who for example, find that more training does not necessarily guarantee greater employability, who refuse to accept the notion that welfare resources exist principally as a privilege rather than a right, or who exhibit high degrees of alienation, resentment, loss of faith in themselves

> or the system, the status of being part of the underclass is an increasing reality in Australia.

These analysts illustrate how welfare policy now addresses poverty as a question of individual liability and responsibility. The ensuing underclass phenomenon is therefore both a condition of chronic structural inequality and a condition in which the poor struggle with the burden of reformation, the assumption that poverty is surmountable by anyone determined enough. As Bauman (1998) suggests, in societies that value freedom of choice above all, societies where consumption is the measure of successful living, having diminished options to consume appears to be simply "choosing" another life instead. He writes, "if being poor once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it is defined primarily as the plight of a flawed consumer" (1998: 1).

But how so-called "successful consumers," or the contented majority, can come to terms with the idea that one might choose to be poor, unemployed or homeless is another question altogether. Drawing on his previous work on "strangers" (1997, 17-34; 1995) Bauman highlights that these kinds of anxieties are another by-product of consumer society. In an era of unprecedented freedom to determine one's own life-founding identity—principally through the endless circuits of consumption—the underclass represent the fear that this freedom may be lost. Bauman suggests that the way we deal with these anxieties is primarily to exclude the underclass, to relegate them to "no go areas"— which he points out are "no go out" areas for those who live there (1995, 13). The poor have thus been cast out of the social world that "the rest of us" share at the same time as they have been expelled "from the universe of moral obligation" (1997, 35-45).

Moreover, Bauman (1998: 70) argues, poverty is now primarily the jurisdiction of penology and criminal law,

> In a society of free consumers, curbing one's freedom is impermissible; but so is, many would say, not curtailing the freedom of people who use their freedom to abridge other people's freedoms, by accosting, pestering, threatening, fun-spoiling, burdening consciences and otherwise making people's lives nasty.

In other words, "nastiness" is a condition that agents of social control guard against on behalf of those with the freedom to consume. They, in turn, chose to avoid "nastiness" by moving into their own selective "no come in areas."

Governmentality theorist, Nikolas Rose (2000) offers a different perspective on social control and the new poor. Like Bauman, he contends that neo-liberal governments' "bewildering variety of developments in regimes of social control"— from increasingly severe "three strikes and you're out" mandatory sentencing to "therapeutic rehabilitation"—can best be described as "constant scrutiny of the rights of individuals to access certain kinds of flows of consumption goods; recurrent switch points to be passed in order to access the benefits of liberty" (2000: 326). Unlike Bauman, however, Rose focuses on these "recurrent switch points," strategies and techniques of social control even more pervasive and panoptical than the prison-industrial complex. For him, the outcome of welfare reform is not exclusion. Rather, its primary aim is what he calls "responsibilisation: to reconstruct self-reliance in those who are excluded" (2000: 334). He writes, "it is through moral reformation, through ethical reconstitution, that the excluded citizen is to be re-attached to a virtuous community" (2000: 335).

In his earlier work (1996, 1993), Rose points out that issues like poverty, homelessness, and drug use have become the dominion of the community, the family, and the inner-lives of individuals. In the transformation of the modern welfare state, the subjects of government have changed. Rather than citizens, whose social responsibilities are understood in terms of a system of obligations to 'society' regulated by the state, contemporary social subjects are now to be active in *their own* government. Their responsibilities are understood in terms of allegiance to one's "networks of personal concern and investment" (1996: 336). Rose asks us to consider, for example, the contemporary salience of the vocabulary of "community." The advent of community care, community workers, community safety, or the notions of "risk communities" and "ethnic communities" indicates a profound transformation in ways of thinking and acting that used to be expressed in a social language. There has even been talk recently of a global, "democratic community." As Rose explains, "it seems we are seeing the emergence of a range of ratio-

nalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities," even, he argues, "where the allegiances presupposed do not immediately appear to exist" (1996: 330-331).

Rose's thesis seems to aptly describe contemporary approaches to governing certain problematised forms of behaviour as "community problems" and problems of the "ethical individual." His work helps explain the latest official answer to curbing illicit drug use and heroin-related mortality in Australia, the heightened public awareness of which has put significant pressure on the principal drug policy-making body in Australia— the Ministerial Council Drug Strategy. Early in 2001 they launched a $27.5 million advertising and information campaign to promote "the community," namely families, as "our strongest defence against the drug problem." The campaign featured blitz advertising on prime-time television over a period of two months, where one series of dramatic 'drug abuse' imagery, culminating with an adolescent boy being zipped into a body bag, was followed by a separate ad, in which sympathetic white, middle-class parental figures informed viewers "that every home in Australia" would receive an instruction booklet on how to talk to children about drugs.

On one hand, the campaign made a very palpable case for the Federal Government's willingness to tackle Australia's illicit "drug problem," promoting its commitment to being "Tough on Drugs." On the other hand, it made clear that the onus is on individuals and families. The Prime Minister's opening declaration in the information booklet reads, "I believe the best drug prevention program in the world is a responsible parent sitting down with their children and talking with them about drugs" (Commonwealth Government, 1). Such a campaign adheres to the Federal Government's consistent refusal to "send the wrong message" with regards to implementing drug policies, namely by rejecting proposals for safe-injecting rooms and heroin-prescription trials. The right message in the post-social order does indeed seem to be for the family and communities to assume responsibility to manage unruly and unsightly problems like drug use.

The ethic and rationale of working on the bus program seems to conform to the systems of social control that Rose describes as ever-more constitutive of subjectivity. Volunteers might be understood as *governed*

through the kinds of initiatives outlined above, through their sense of community morality and responsibility to help street kids. They might also be seen to be *governing* street kids' lack thereof, particularly in their efforts to restore street kids to "the community" by way of guidance and support. What Rose and others (Cruikshank, 1996; Baidstow, 1994/95; Cruikshank, 1993) bring to light is that governments and experts in post-industrial states attribute poverty to the order of the Self rather than to the social order. From the sociologist's perspective, however, governmentality theory leaves little room to explore the contradictions and incongruities such a profound transformation produces. It also offers little in the way to demonstrate how strategies and technologies of social control operate at an everyday level.

Likewise, Bauman's analysis of the anxieties that the underclass generate raises further questions about how everyday, "successful consumers" respond to the existence of so many people who do not and cannot "live the dream." Volunteers talk at length about where street kids come from and why they live the lives they do. A recurrent theme throughout the interviews is the great divide between the privileges that volunteers enjoy and street kids' lack of basics like food and shelter. Volunteers describe being bewildered by the fact that some people have so few opportunities to improve their lot in life. In fact, it troubles them a great deal.

Bauman suggests that the anxieties that the underclass generate are two-fold: They are "strangers" to be feared, and, at the same time, their very existence challenges the supremacy of consumer society. The creation of an underclass not only merges the condition of being poor with criminal intent. It also relegates a large group of people to the status of being essentially dispensable. Bauman convincingly argues that the main tactic deployed to deal with this problematic class of citizens is exclusion. Volunteers' impulse to do the opposite—to come into contact with "strangers"—seems then worthy of more in-depth investigation. It is to this task that we now turn.

Respect and reparation: Volunteers mediated intents and purposes

When volunteers talk about what the bus program does accomplish they do so in relation to the personal and emotional repercussions of the problems—such as mental illness, drug addiction, family breakdown, parental drug use, neglect, and physical or sexual abuse—that they associate

with street kids and "oldies." Alera, who says that the food bus does not even "come close" to its objective to help street kids, affirms that the program is ultimately worthwhile because of the positive impact "just listening" and "just caring" might have. As she elaborates in relation to a friendship she's formed with one of the food bus' regulars,

> I do think that by going out there, me being a nurse... and sitting down with Neil for the whole night, because you know, you get your friends, and just chatting to him about things and him knowing that I accept him for who he is and I don't judge him or I don't say, "you should do this or you should do that." I just listen to him and talk to him and try and make it known that he's not worthless, he's a human being and he's no less of a person than anyone else walking down the street. I hope he knows that, and if he does then I think any one would get something out of that. I think being respected by any one is worthwhile.

Similarly Eddie, who maintains that what volunteers can do for streeties and oldies is finite, offers this example of the program's value:

> It provides a meeting place for these people, somewhere to gather around. And it provides company for lonely people. Heaps of lonely people in Melbourne.... And it's great if you can provide... if you can talk to these people... A couple of years ago, we had a guy in his mid-thirties— he only came out at night because he was badly scarred— and one of the pretty volunteer girls sat down and talked to him for, you know, twenty minutes or something. Made his night, because some one actually came and had a yak to him... So it does serve a purpose.

It is plausible that volunteers reconcile themselves to these interpretations of what the bus program accomplishes in *order to* feel fulfilled and confident in the work they do. The prospects of providing food and clothes and friendship are certainly much better than saving lives. Yet, one of the most common themes in volunteers' narratives is how streeties and oldies are sequestered to deal with their needs, worries, fears and

insecurities ostensibly alone, with very little formal or informal support. As Anne surmises after five years as a volunteer,

> I get the feeling with the kids, whatever background they've had, nobody loves them... I just presume they're there because home's an awful place.

John also believes that a general lack of love and attachment sets young people on the path where he finds them.

> I mean, I've never had heroin, I wouldn't know, but I imagine what would drive someone to heroin is that you're just so unhappy, you just... you know, everything's wrong in your life and you're having such a shit time and you feel there's very few people... that really need you in the world or love you and you think 'there's an escape:' Someone offers heroin to you and it's bloody fantastic... That must be what happens, I'd imagine.

Volunteers describe the loneliness and isolation that oldies face in similar terms. Joseph, a volunteer in his mid-sixties, has become well acquainted with many older men who he says have "lost all their confidence." He recounts a story of one man in particular, who has lived in a boarding house since he lost his job, left his pregnant wife and their three children, and had the first of several "breakdowns" nine years ago.

> I asked him, "Are you in touch with your wife?" He says, "She phoned me a few weeks ago." "Is she with anyone else?" "No," he says. The eldest [child] is 22, the youngest is nine. "Why don't you go back? They want you, your children." He says, "When I get my confidence back and I know I can support them." And that's the... 90% of the people on the streets will tell me that: "I want to get my confidence back." Now, I don't know if they've or he's ever been on drugs or what... if heroin does that to a person, I just don't know.

Most volunteers believe that accommodation shortages, limited rehabilitation facilities, the closure of mental health institutions, and the fact that governments are not spending enough money on "these people" make the odds facing street kids and oldies insurmountable. In the case of street kids, it is particularly hard to imagine them finding a place to live or a job without more support. Alera suggests that "growing up in a home that's totally destructive" might be "too much to undo."

> I mean, I know they have a choice, but that's just so far ahead of them. I'd just admire someone so much if they came from that sort of background, were on the streets, were using heroin, and got off it and went and did a degree or went and got a stable job... I just think that would be superhuman.

Anne goes further to place the problems she sees in a context of unpredictable society-wide upheaval.

> I suppose we're going through a great period of industrial change at the moment, a bit like the industrial revolution, where I think the whole world's turned upside down and you've got unemployment and things changing: there are no jobs for unskilled people, which puts pressure on poor families... I think it puts enormous pressure on them financially if they're unemployed— low self-esteem and that could be a problem for the children in that family, and I think that's a— because of the times we're living in at the moment, with all those unskilled jobs disappearing, I don't know what the answer is there either... I don't know how it will all sort out. I don't know, I can't see ahead to see how it will sort out, but I just feel it's a time of social change and we're all rocked by it.

At a time when children, particularly the children of unemployed parents, are increasingly likely to stumble over the obstacles of inexorable social change, expecting "real" change seems as futile as trying to predict the future.

Given their sensitivity to the apparent hopelessness of the oldies' and street kids' situations, volunteers estimate the merit of their work in the currency of respect. They value the way the bus program occasions simple, but meaningful opportunities for streeties and oldies to be treated as "normal." They also appreciate that it sets up "a mobile community centre" for people who might not have homes, a community, family, or strong friendship ties to mix together and to share jokes, ideas and opinions. As Anne explains,

> We're there from the bus, you've got the oldies, who are perhaps living in a room somewhere, you've got the kids on the street. But they all come here and everybody mixes together... and they talk about what they want to, they put their point of view forward, they have something to eat, they might have a hug, they might have a laugh and then everybody goes back... to what they were doing before.

Volunteers consider giving streeties and oldies food and clothes and creating a time and space for them to enjoy themselves worthwhile primarily because it gives them "something they wouldn't have otherwise." They value the few opportunities they have had to form on-going relationships with oldies and street kids even more. As Billy describes her effort to help an "oldie" she has become close to:

> We probably take it for granted that we can talk to our mum and dad, go and visit them on weekends— they perhaps don't. Coming there and having a cup of coffee, talking to us, it's probably the highlight of their week, some of the time... You know, they come and tell you things like their father died or their mother died... I'm thinking of one person in particular, whose father's been very sick and he lost his mother at Christmas... And I make a point of, a couple of weeks down the track [asking], "how's your dad going?"... And you know my daughter filled in for me a couple of weeks later and I said to her, "now just ask Greg how his dad is." And when I went back a fortnight later, he was so thrilled... It was just that little bit of personal whatever.

Anne also feels as though she made a difference to someone by offering him emotional support,

> This particular young boy who I got close to, his mother was an alcoholic and he'd been abused and drugged up and... He would say, "look, I know alcoholism is a disease, I know she can't help what she does, I know she can't help how she is," but underneath it there was this quiet, "but I just wish she'd love me." You know, you could just tell this kid was totally unloved and he desperately wanted... 'Cause I'd say, "well, give me hug then" and he'd go all sort of gooey and then he'd give me the biggest hug ever... And he'd say, "oh all right then," but he'd give me the biggest hug ever. He just loved it. He just wanted to be hugged and loved and nobody— that's how it appeared to me— nobody had ever just loved him.

While Anne cannot stop someone's mother from drinking and she cannot find him a loving home, she can respond to his immediate muted loneliness. Correspondingly, being a supportive figure for streeties and oldies is vital to her sense of purpose on the food bus.

Listening to volunteers talk about the causes and effects of homelessness, poverty and drug use, one hears distinct echoes of the social world that Bauman and Rose describe. The world, according to volunteers, is a place where poverty is not an external condition of unemployability, but an internalised condition of lacking confidence, being unloved or having "nothing to lose." In this world, volunteers' small efforts to repair the damage that "dysfunctional families" or generally "feeling shit" has done are important, even if they cannot effectively "save" anyone.

Attending to the subjective causes and consequences of poverty, homelessness and drug use could further be construed as an effort to "responsibilise," or what Rose (1996: 347) calls "working with the abjected by virtue of their lack of competence for responsible, ethical self-management". Yet, few volunteers took the personal causes of problems like drug addiction and homelessness to mean that, therefore, they are the fault of the individual. For example, Alera attributes heroin use to the individual experience of depression,

> A lot of people on heroin have an underlying mental illness and they're just self-medicating because they're not from a society that says, "go see a psychologist or a doctor"... and I think they don't really acknowledge their feelings and their emotions. They just think, "well, I'm feeling like shit" and "I'll take this" and "it makes me feel better." So it's like a trap and it just keeps happening.

But she also goes on to explain,

> I think there's steps in life— I don't want to sound like some sort of textbook— but for someone to be on the streets, there has to be a cause for that... so heroin's not really the problem I'm talking about... I just think, you know, unemployment, high expectations.... I think you sort of are looked down on more if you're from the lower class and you have a lot more expectations to do something with your life. And even though society's wrong in putting those expectations on people and saying "this is what success is," it sort of, still happens.

In other cases, when I asked volunteers why they think people live on the streets, they protested their ignorance in order to protect the privacy of the people they've met. Billy maintains, "I don't know, I've often wondered, I mean just out of curiosity, because again... I don't judge them, so I don't really care." Later she reasserts, "we shouldn't judge... we don't know what sets them... makes them turn to drugs or whatever." Some volunteers considered talking about the oldies' and street kids' personal problems fault-finding, which was at odds with their aim to be non-judgmental.

In these ways, volunteers did not give purpose to their work by drawing on the rhetoric of reformation—that they could and should correct oldies' and street kids' "problem behaviour." Rather, they spoke more fluently about volunteering in terms of reparation—that the work helps them better understand who street kids are, where they come from, and what they need. To illustrate the merits of the bus program they told sto-

ries about the small, but tangible gestures of respect, support and friendship that they have extended to street kids and "oldies." To illustrate what sustains their own commitment to the bus program, volunteers talked primarily about the value of simply coming into contact with street kids and "oldies," people who would otherwise remain a mystery to them.

For example, Pia, an ex-corporate controller in her late-forties says that until she started working on the food bus she lived in "a very conservative, narrow-minded world, where the things that the majority of society perceived as wrong, were wrong." She explains that when "you get a house and a mortgage" not much else concerns you.

> Up until then I had no knowledge of any of this, couldn't care less. And when I started working as a volunteer, I just became very, very interested in the behaviour. Because of having to acknowledge how so many people perceive their behaviour as very right even though the majority of society is looking at it as out of control.

Becoming more curious about "behaviour" on the food bus prompted Pia to quit her job and study psychology full time.

Likewise, Dana explains that at first, volunteering "absolutely blew her mind apart" because "there's a lot of us out there who haven't got any idea what's happening in our community." She says that she did not expect to be able to handle such a "heavy scene." Volunteering has not taught her how to "handle" the street scene, but rather that "you can't make a hard and fast rule about anything."

> As they say, you know, we can't be judgemental, can't be threatening in any way... I used to be really hard-nosed about injecting rooms— I was black and white about it: "Take these needles away from them, throw them into rehab, this is what's going to happen" and, you know, "slap them around the ears a bit" and "you'll do it, this is what's going to happen and you'll end up in jail with the murderers... otherwise you get on with it!" Of course it's not like that, it's nothing like that... You have a very different perspective when you're not involved in it.

Volunteers value the "very different perspective" that working on the food bus offers them. Some stand up for street kids to friends, co-workers and family members based on their experiences working on the bus program. Alera described how the other nurses that she works with treat heroin addicts like "animals who don't realise what they are doing." She is attentive to the very human anguish that having to steal or pawn goods in order to buy heroin creates, explaining, "you hate doing and it tears you apart, but you do it anyway." Anne similarly describes how the "reasonably important," wealthy men and women that her husband works with often make comments like, "you make your own luck in life." She says that they have got no idea,

> ...that these people are— that they live these lives, they don't know where they're sleeping, where they're eating and they have to grab the moment as it comes to sleep or to eat or whatever, and you can't fit them back into a normal, everyday life and this is why.

For some volunteers, bearing witness to systemic marginalisation renders the idea that you make your own luck in life an outright fallacy. For most, working on the bus program means coming to respect the subjective impact of social marginalisation. Attending to the inner, emotional lives of streeties and oldies only feels like an accomplishment because lacking love, support and respect is a crucial aspect of being on the street according to volunteers. Their basic aim to befriend streeties and oldies is something they do *because* to be poor and homeless in the post-social order is to be evermore disregarded and stigmatised. What volunteers bring to light when they stress the importance of asking after someone's particular concerns, giving them a hug, or simply remembering their name, is an aspect of being a member of the underclass that Rose precludes, but for Bauman (1998: 91) is crucial:

> In the book-balancing of a consumer society, the poor are unequivocally a liability, and by no stretch of the imagination can they be recorded on the side of present or future

> assets. And so for the first time in recorded history the poor are now purely and simply a nuisance.

Bauman (1995: 15) also argues that the post-industrial social order intensifies freedom "among the joyfully and willingly seduced, while tapering it almost beyond existence among the deprived and panoptically regulated". Yet, strangers still do live among us, at least when the fortified walls of prisons and "no-go" areas do not hide them altogether. Working on the food bus does not allow volunteers to resolve the anxieties that street kids generate by restoring them to "normal life." It does allow them, however, to venture into no-go areas previously unknown to them, to venture into previously impossible social encounters, to better understand experiences so seemingly disconnected from their own. Without their volunteer work, the relationships between volunteers and street kids or oldies would be unlikely indeed.

As Anne illustrates, as she tries to explain why she continues to volunteer despite her frustrations with the bus program,

> I knew I'd find it hard, I think. I knew I'd find it hard to talk to the kids, 'cause I feel, rightly or wrongly, I feel that they look at me and think, "well, what would this middle-class bitch... [know]... about our sort of life?"

But now, she says,

> I've gotten to know quite a lot of the oldies and youngies and I get along quite well with them. And I... I, my feelings changed in that I don't really believe that there's anything that I can do that's going to change the way their lives are.

In this sense, abandoning the dream of "changing the ways their lives are" is not only par for the course. It also seems to be the first step that volunteers take to defend the different kind of meaning that their work takes on.

Conclusion

In the post-industrial political imagination it does seem as though the material reality of poverty has evaporated into thin air, or rather, dissipated into the inner-recesses of the Self. But poverty is also necessary. It haunts us with the spectre of social dislocation so that we guard our goods from the inevitable "bads" that freedom reaps. The current social, cultural and political order has clearly moved from redistributing work to redistributing unemployment (Beck 1997). Neo-liberal political rationality continues to advance the notion that minimising welfare "handouts" maximises the possibilities of self-advancement and responsible citizenship. As the Australian Federal Minister for Workplace Relations, Tony Abbott so succinctly puts it:

> Now it's the responsibility of governments to put policies in place, which over time will allow people to improve their situation, policies in place that will allow people to earn more and to keep more of what they earn. And that's what government is trying to do. But we can't abolish poverty, because poverty is in part a function of individual behaviour. We can't stop people drinking. We can't stop people gambling. We can't stop people having substance problems. We can't stop people from making mistakes that cause them to be less well-off than they might otherwise be. We cannot remove risk from society without removing freedom, and that's the last thing any government should do (in Gordon and Gray, 2001).

For the Federal Government, the risk of poverty is a fundamental measure of the pleasures of freedom. But to defend against the uncertainties of neo-liberalism— about its legitimacy and the price we must pay for its greater freedoms— poverty must be the fault of the defective individual.

Considering volunteers' work in this context, I have highlighted the way they confront the profound contradictions of living with those whose deficit of freedom subsidises the privileges that "the rest of us" enjoy. That volunteers claim their work has very little power to change oldies' or street kids' lives except to treat them with respect is a very particular approach to issues like homelessness and drug use. This claim

only makes sense in a world where people are increasingly considered responsible for their own misfortune and left to fend for themselves, a world in which the poor are denied "the right 'to claim damages' by presenting themselves as victims of societal malfunction" (Bauman, 1998: 70).

Arguably, however, the argument that poverty is surmountable by anyone with enough confidence, like "the rest of us." is neither fully conclusive nor entirely convincing. Volunteers struggle with the consequences of delegating once-were social problems to imaginary communities, broken families and disempowered individuals every night they work on the food bus. The idea that the problems streeties and oldies face can and should be remedied by the individual, the family or voluntary emissaries from so-called "moral communities" seems unlikely to volunteers. In this sense, doing the work of "community responsibilisation" seriously undermines its coherence.

Rather, the fact that some live with little support and few options is the primary reason why volunteers see a role for themselves and for society's collective responsibility in proving public support for oldies and street kids' private needs. Ultimately, despite the shortcomings of the bus program, volunteers structure their commitment according to what they have learned about oldies and street kids' lives in a world "turned upside down." Their work is grounded in the perception that people endure particularly damaging, emotional effects of social marginalisation and dispossession. For the most part, volunteers described the people they've met through the bus program as poor, having "nothing to lose," and no valued role to play in contemporary consumer society. The personal dimensions of being a member of "the underclass" also informed volunteers' ideals for what could actually change lives. They believe that street kids and oldies should be entitled to loving, supportive friendships and families and have access to "other options" like housing, education and employment, all of which are essential to achieving a minimum standard of living and quality of life.

In the meantime, in the quest for answers to questions that the post-social order raises —questions like, "why do my children have a loving home and other do not?"—volunteers chose to come into closer contact with oldies and street kids. In this way, they try to resolve some of the anxiety that living with "strangers" generates, not by closing their eyes and ears to it, but to be in its presence. Their accounts of working on the

food bus sound remarkably like Iris Marion Young's (1990) democratic ideal of "city life," wherein people witness and appreciate different social experiences that they do not share, nor fully understand.

In the post-industrial social order, humanitarian volunteer work cannot be reduced to either a subtle mechanism of social control or a means of easing one's overworked conscience. In an era when the anxieties and disjunctions of consumer society are increasingly channelled into communitarian solutions, volunteers expand the social world that they inhabit to include the lives and experiences of marginalised "others." In an era when governments actively expel the poor from the universe of moral obligation, and more importantly, from the domain of a shared humanity, volunteers advance an ethic and logic of 'non-judgement', that the people they meet on the street are worthy of consideration and respect. In this sense, humanitarian volunteer work has become one of the few interfaces between disparate social experiences. Given the very arbitrariness of who is left standing in the contemporary social order, perhaps volunteers' commitment to the food bus is also a way of holding out the hope that some one would do the same for them if they fell into oldies or street kids' place.

Notes

1. This paper presents some of the central findings of research carried out during the course of my Master of Arts at the Ashworth Centre for Social Theory at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

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The Possibility of Pleasure: Foucault's Philosophy of the Subject and the Logic of an Appeal to Aesthetics

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Some of the most common complaints against Foucault's work are that he does not provide a philosophy of the subject and that (or, and so) he provides neither any normative grounds upon which to judge regimes of power nor alternative themes or ideals to the domination that he diagnoses. However, I argue that it is precisely because of Foucault's philosophy of the subject that he cannot suggest prescriptive action against the domination that he diagnoses.[1] Because of Foucault's philosophy of the subject he must allow for a greater human autonomy than what would allow him to prescribe action against the domination that he diagnoses. Further, and following this, I argue that Foucault's philosophy of the subject makes aesthetics the most logical place for him to look for experiences of freedom while respecting human autonomy without having to appeal to normative rhetoric or the logic of any particular discourse or form of subjection.[2]

Foucault's analysis of autonomous fields of discourse and his analysis of modern subjects constituted along the axis of a truth, an ethic and power are mutually re-enforcing to his philosophy of the subject. I will show how this comes about through a consideration of the analytics of finitude.

The Subject of Knowledge

Foucault's analysis of the analytic of finitude can be found in *The Order of Things* (1973). Foucault argues that it is along the lines of the analytic of finitude that modern subjects[3] are constituted. I argue that his adherence to the analytic of finitude as the framework for modern thought and the constitution of modern subjects enables Foucault to develop a philosophy of modern subjects as constituted along the axis of power, ethics and truth. According to Foucault, modern subjects develop with twenti-