

INDIGENOUS ECONOMIC FUTURES ON COUNTRY

At the recent National Native Title Conference ‘Shaping the Future’ convened in Alice Springs I presented a paper based on ongoing research undertaken with Francis Markham on mapping Indigenous lands and their values.

The paper’s title ‘Values Mapping Indigenous Lands: An Exploration of Development Possibilities’ is contentious and contestable. Whose values? Whose mapping? What are Indigenous lands? And what is development?

Contentious and contestable ideas are good to open up debate. One thing is certain: in the past 40 years there has been a land titling revolution in Australia; and at a key moment, two decades after the *Native Title Act*, it is useful to pause and consider: what does this mean for the future?

In a relatively short time there has been a tumultuous shift in Australia from illegal Indigenous dispossession based on the discredited notion of *terra nullius*, to legal repossession, initially through a series of land rights and then native title laws.

Legal repossession sounds good and in many ways it is for the few who get their land back, those who to use the terminology of historian Patrick Wolfe are deemed ‘uninvaded’ according to western law and so gain land ownership recognition.

But recognition, as Nancy Fraser argues in *Scales of Justice* is only one element of justice, in this case, land justice. What about redistribution, especially of property rights, that are a core element of value; and what about representation over the land and the form of development that might occur on that land—unfortunately free prior informed consent provisions are largely limited to Commonwealth land rights law passed for the Northern Territory in 1976.

Values can be variably constituted. Even official resource atlas information indicates a diversity of possibility; the local and regional perspectives of Indigenous land owning groups are mind-bogglingly diverse, so much so that I will not consider them here.

Instead I focus on values mapping at a macroscopic continental scale using ‘official’ land ownership, resource atlas and census data some of which are undeniably more reliable than others. A key feature of this analysis is the expert deployment of a Geographic Information System (GIS) by Francis Markham. Mapping in the middle of a ‘revolution’ is risky; our mapping work is a work-in-progress that changes constantly, our maps are organic and dynamic and the base data used are not ours and are known to contain omissions and shortcomings.

Our conference suite of maps cannot be reproduced here but are readily available at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) conference website. Just one map and one table are shown here to help consider what this land titling ‘revolution’ might mean for people who have had to cope with incremental colonial dispossession as they experience legal repossession.

As the map shows, land ownership is significant; arguably the growth of Indigenous lands is one of the most dramatic in modern times anywhere in the world without warfare. This titling, as the table shows, now covers over 30 per cent of the Australian continent with land rights and exclusive and non-exclusive native title determinations made for social justice and judicial reasons. And yet we have little informed national debate about this ‘revolution’, what it might mean for traditional owners, the nation, regional geopolitics.

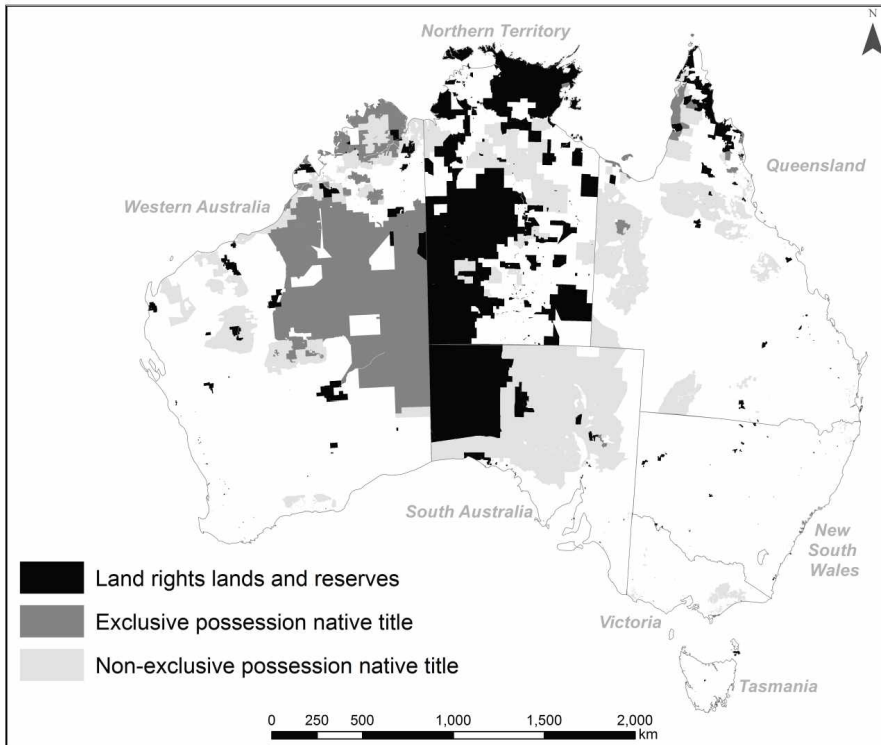
The map and table are shown here because they have a comforting empiricism or ‘reality’ about them in the hotbed of Indigenous policy where debates are increasingly polemical, political and anecdotal.

Maps of course are also highly political because they are all about territorial space and resources and access to them within borders.

Just how political the use of maps can be was clearly demonstrated on ABC television by John Howard’s Mabo Map of 1997 showing 78 per cent of Australia coloured brown, suggesting that such an area might be Indigenous-owned legally, which it might, but then suggesting that a right to veto development might be exercised over this land—something that has never been an option on native title land because current political economic considerations precluded either mineral ownership or a right of veto under the *Native Title Act 1993*.

Howard’s was what Harm De Blij has termed ‘a map of bad intent’ that has made many suspicious of maps. ‘Statistical picturing’, a term coined by David Demeritt, is seen as an instrument of state governmentality, of legibility and control. Our belief in producing maps for the National Native Title Conference is that ‘maps of good intent’ can be deployed to open up productive discussion about the transformative potentiality of legal repossession for new livelihood opportunities.

The map reproduced here shows how much land, to date, has been successfully claimed or scheduled under land rights laws (981,000 sq kms); exclusive possession native title (79 determinations, 715,000 sq kms) and non-exclusive possession (126 determinations, 682,000 sq kms) totalling 2.4 million sq kms.



Maps also show that there are 699 Indigenous Land Use Agreements covering 1.6 million sq kms and that there are 322 registered claims with outer boundaries that cover 3.2 million sq kms.

Correlated with information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, overlay maps also show that there are more than 1,000 discrete Indigenous communities on these lands and that in land rights and exclusive possession jurisdictions Indigenous people represent over 80 per cent of the population, jurisdictions that following political ecologist Arturo Escobar can be called ‘Territories of Difference’. Overall though, only an estimated 11 per cent of the total Indigenous population lives in jurisdictions of exclusive possession.

About 20 of Australia’s 400 operating mines are on such lands, with all mines providing about 5,500 jobs for Indigenous Australians in 2011. And a number of regions are highly prospective and desirable for mineral extraction. But because these jurisdictions are remote and have historically had low commercial and agricultural values today they have high environmental values: vegetation condition is relatively high, threatened species counts are relatively low, and riparian zones are relatively undisturbed.

Tenure	Estimated Indigenous Population	Estimated non-Indigenous population	% of region Indigenous	% of total Indigenous population	Area (km ²)	Area (% of Australia)
Native title (exclusive possession)	14,308	3,093	82%	2%	715,284	9%
Land rights	60,233	13,939	81%	9%	981,132	13%
Native title (non-exclusive possession)	2,617	12,438	17%	<1%	682,334	9%
Registered claims	195,915	5,866,930	3%	30%	2,998,669	39%
All of the above	273,073	5,896,401	4%	41%	5,377,420	70%
Australia	660,903	21,423,504	3%	100%	7,687,809	100%

Consequently, these exclusive possession areas make up a growing share of the National Reserve System; at the end of 2012 Indigenous Protected Areas made up 34 per cent of Australia's terrestrial conservation estate. But in terms of net primary productivity and estimated dollar land values Indigenous lands have low values; most are in remote desert and tropical Australia.

Under such circumstances, shaping futures on these lands will require forms of what I term 'hybrid' economies, what others term 'diverse', 'plural', 'livelihoods', 'human', or 'moral' economies.

Since 2001 I have tried to highlight the range of possibilities on Indigenous-owned land using the hybrid economy as a general framework for understanding economic encounter. The hybrid economy's distinguishing feature is its empirical and theoretical insistence that everything in the production, distribution and consumption realms on Indigenous land is an intermingling of the state, the free market and the customary; of capitalist and non-capitalist economies.

The hybrid economy model is fundamentally an assets-based not deficits-focused framework. In this model the inalienability of land and its restricted common property form are pluses not minuses. And so there are possibilities for diverse forms of extractive economy based not just on non-renewable resources or mining, but also on the provision of ecological services, clean air, fresh water, carbon farming.

Working on Country providing environmental services accords with the aspirations of many Indigenous land owners to either restore or maintain the cultural and environmental values of their legally repossessed lands cognisant of post-1788 threats from invasive weeds, feral animals, uncontrolled fires, pollution and land clearing.

The hybrid economy way of thinking looks to bridge the tension between requirements of proof of continuity of customs and traditions observed and practiced and physical connections to the land; and a broader settler colonial expectation that with rights in land people will quickly integrate into the mainstream economy and society and adopt western norms as reflected in crude idioms like Close the Gap. But such convergence will ironically require physical and cultural migrations that will disconnect Indigenous people from ancestral country that some have struggled for decades to legally repossess.

Fifty-five years ago in 1958 anthropologist Bill Stanner asked if the Market and the Dreaming might be incompatible. Today we see the same question being posed but under land ownership circumstances unimagined then. To invoke Stanner's question in contemporary parlance to what extent might the aspirations of many Indigenous land owners focused on kinship and ancestral country be commensurate with a dominant neoliberal trope focused on individualism, the free market and materialism?

The answer to this question raises further questions about the transformative potentiality embedded in the extraordinary land titling changes of the past 40 years that might be harnessed for diverse and relatively autonomous Indigenous futures.

This is especially pertinent at a time when there is so much uncertainty about the sustainability of late post-industrial capitalism: what alternate 'hybrid' futures might be possible on Indigenous lands for those fortunate enough to legally repossess them?

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