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The larrikin subject: hegemony and subjectivity in late nineteenth century Sydney

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**THE LARRIKIN SUBJECT:
HEGEMONY AND SUBJECTIVITY
IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY SYDNEY**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

KYLIE SMITH, BA (Hons)

SCHOOL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS
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Abstract

The problem of social disorder has figured prominently in Australian historiography and in contemporary social theorising. However, the traditional categories of historical analysis provide a limited set of tools through which to understand the complexities of human behaviour in the past. By writing a social ontology into history, it is possible to rethink how ‘ways of being’ in the world are both constructed and represented, and to reconsider the consequences of this for our understanding of both history and the present.

The way in which certain types of social disorder have been analysed in Australian history has meant that some social groups, or behavioural types, have been marginalised and excluded. This is the case with the figure of ‘the larrikin’, a common type in Australian historiography, yet represented in such a way that our understanding of them today bears little resemblance to the way in which they were understood in their own time. This discrepancy has been brought about through the tendency of some historical approaches to focus on the institutions and structures of nation building, or on the recognisably political forms of ‘organised labour’. This type of analysis can only take our understanding of human behaviour so far.

Psychoanalytic theory as developed by Freud and Lacan helps to show the way in which ‘civilised society’ relies on the repression and sublimation of ‘instinctual’ types of human behaviour, but that in so doing, a part of the human self is excluded. This exclusion occurs at both the personal and the social level, as the ‘civilised’ self, the ‘civilised society’, can only exist against what it has excluded. This psychoanalytic theory is linked with the work of Antonio Gramsci to show that what is excluded, and the process of exclusion, is related to the process of establishing hegemony, and that the resultant exclusion is the basis of subalternity.

In late nineteenth century Sydney, the term ‘larrikinism’ came to represent a particular set of behaviours which were considered problematic for the development of ‘civilised society’. An examination of the hegemonic mechanisms by which the exclusion of larrikin behaviour could occur, demonstrates that the imagination of a civilised society in late nineteenth century Sydney was centred around certain hegemonic principles which required a particular kind of human self – a disciplined worker, a desiring consumer – and suggests that larrikins resisted this process. Larrikins were made subaltern because they were a form of ‘subjectivity’, or a way of being in the world, that sought to challenge the making of a kind of human self considered necessary for industrial capitalism. In this way, larrikin behaviour can be understood as a type of ‘excess’, a frontier in the battle for hegemony around notions of youth, respectability and discipline.

This historical process did not stop in 1899 but continued into the twentieth century and beyond, and continues to have ramifications for the way in which we think notions of politics and agency, and for the ways in which subaltern groups in contemporary society continue to be marginalised and excluded.

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