



## Contact Email for August 2017

I was impressed by an article in the Journal of Sociology (Vol.53 No. 1 March 2017) by Val Colic-Peisker from RMIT, under the title of "Ideology and Utopia: Historic crisis of economic rationalism and the role of public sociology". Despite the fact that I have problems with the term "public sociology", she raises the issue of the danger that dominant theories have on society, which I have been on about for some while. She acknowledges its place in neoliberalism, but suggests it has wider implications than that. She suggests that the power of economic rationalism stems from the belief that numbers have more authority than words. "In practice, economic rationality assuming that money is a calculus of the utility maximiser seeking profit through optimizing the cost-benefit ratio". She concludes that "Countering the totalitarian tendency of economic rationality is difficult in the context of the crisis of Western democracy. Many have argued that democracy 'peaked' in the late 1960 and since then simultaneously with and partly due to globalization, market fundamentalism, and the increase inequality. At this point in history it seems hard to envisage a social force or movement that would be able to seriously challenge economic rationality from within the system."

I have been on about the dangers of dominant theories for some while now; I raised the issue at last year's conference, and in other bits that I wrote. Where you have a dominant theory you have a closed mind. It can be anything. That neoliberalism is the only way forward for Australia, or that graphite is not what pencils are made with because they are called lead pencils. People will defend their dominant theory because they have invested so much emotion into their belief.

I have also been critical of economists and accountants because of the public works they have damaged by refusing to fund what a designer stresses is essential. One example is the construction of the harbour at Coffs Harbour. The original survey by the Royal Navy on the feasibility of making a harbour, and the second assessment made by an expert brought by the government from Britain in the 1930's, both had their professional designs, (which were much the same) altered by public servants in Sydney, on the grounds of cost. Both reports emphasised that if their plans were not followed, the harbour would silt up. What do you know? The harbour silts up and there is a continuous cost on the local people to have it dredged. But for the original money people in Sydney, they had cut costs, and if it silted up, it wasn't on their budget.

The equivalent of increasing profits, for governments, is to cut costs but it is still part of economic rationalism. However, there is also a sting in the tail with her statement that economic rationalism stems from the belief that numbers have more authority than words. Sociologists also put great faith in numbers, rather than words. 'Questionnaires usually produce their result from numbers, often generated by their choice of words rather than those of the people who complete their survey. Many years ago now, I published a survey approach that actually allowed people to work through the questions in their own way, and then tell the people doing the survey things they could never have discovered, because the usual way was to write a survey to prove a particular point rather than discover what people really think and do.

The dominance of economics in political ideology is not the solution to world affairs but the danger. Neoliberalism believes that giving money to the rich will eventually provide miniscule effects to filter down to those who are not so rich. Back in the 70's when similar arguments were going on, I remember Lois Bryson (sometime President of SAANZ) telling the politicians that if they wanted the economy to grow, they should increase the wages of the poor, because they would spend it. The rich would only invest it.