



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

Beginnings

THERE IS SOMETHING of a consensus among numerous leading Left intellectuals that the period since the late 1970s has been one of Left defeat and demoralization. This is variously connected to, and signalled by, the expansion of neoliberal policy, financialization and consumerism, the weakening of organized labour and the capitulation of social democratic parties, and the discrediting, then dismantling, of the world of 'really existing socialism'.

Less well remarked upon is a subsequent turn or shift, dating perhaps from the mid- to late- 1990s, when a whole host of signs seem to suggest that, at the very least, the experience of defeat is beginning to be overcome. These include major battles against neoliberal restructuring, the East Asian financial crisis of 1997, the victories of Left populist forces in Latin America, and the arrival of the alternative globalization movement. We can detect another wave of such signs since the troubles of 2007, with Occupy, elements of the Arab Spring, and the emergence of further Left forces, most notably in Spain and Greece.

In the intellectual world, this turn is announced in the re-appearance of concerns with inequality, class, and social justice, in the extraordinary popularity of thinkers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Doreen Massey, Thomas Piketty, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown and so on, and in the emergence of a cohort of students who combine a thirst for critical theory and a passion for substantive analysis and social transformation.

Signs of a resurgent Left, while faint at times, are now appearing in Aotearoa. Not in the parliamentary sphere, which continues to drift ever rightwards, blown by the winds of market fundamentalism. It is, rather, within the radical fringes of community and union organising, as seen, for instance, with Auckland Action Against Poverty, some components of the mobilisation against the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership), Unite, FIRST Union and its migrant worker arm, UNEMIG (Union Network of Migrants). Some of the deepest thinking about constitutional transformation has emerged in the flax-roots work of Matike Mai; many Māori are questioning their own runanga authorities and challenging the power of the Iwi Leaders Forum; and tangata whenua continue to take a strong lead in a number of struggles around land and resources, including campaigns against oil drilling. An intellectual shift can also be discerned, as witnessed by recent well-attended public events bringing together activists and academics, the provocative Bridget Williams Texts series, and the foundation of Economic and Social Research Aotearoa – a think tank whose kaupapa includes ‘developing an intellectual armoury for the radical left’.

We view this journal as a contribution to this moment of Left reformulation and rearticulation, one focused on the critical assessment of the contemporary conjuncture and on the tasks of the Left. *Counterfutures* announces, in its title, the widely used slogan of alternative globalization, ‘another world is possible’. This utopian signification connotes a desire for a better way of being, and combines, at once, a critical, analytical, and diagnostic optic *and* an imaginative, future-oriented project.

In these pages, we will seek to bring to a wider audience the voices of Left intellectuals, whether academics, activists or

simply those who stop to think and write about contemporary society. These voices will come from a range of disciplinary fields, social movements and organisations, with the aim of combining substantive analyses and mappings of the issues that face those on the Left today. We hope to provide a place for voices seeking a new, better society. These pages should be approached as a collective experiment in political thinking and organisation. Without circumscribing the content of these shared tasks, we offer the following eleven theses as crucial starting points shared by the editorial collective:

- We need to reinvigorate politics and reactivate the idea of equality.
- We need to explore political and democratic alternatives beyond the limits of the parliamentary system.
- We need to question the blind adherence to economic growth, competition, profit-making and self-interest, at the expense of what we hold in common.
- We need to recognise how social life and the environment are intertwined, and the porous boundary between society and nature.
- We need to articulate a politics of collective hope and inclusiveness, which energises the belief that the enormous polarisations of ownership, control and status that mark our lives are not necessary and can be overcome.
- We must explore alternative vehicles for political involvement and expression, informed by history and new ways of organising.
- We need to affirm the transformative power of ideas beyond the everyday noise of conservative and liberal platitudes.
- We need to celebrate our shared capacity for intellectual autonomy and freedom, and confront the threats to those freedoms posed by the ubiquity of the market-based logic in public life.
- We hope to reinvigorate public debate through creative and experimental interventions, and enable conversations and connections with progressive media and journalists.
- We need to critically assess the local and global significance of the progressive social movements and mobilisations that have emerged worldwide, and analyse

the reactive political movements that have emerged as a counter force.

- And, as always, we must rethink the world, to imagine change, and to act against those discourses that foreclose the possibility of political alternatives.

* * *

In following a broad set of academic conventions – referencing, peer reviewing, editorial intervention, book reviews, themed issues – we hope to draw together Left activists and intellectuals and provide a forum for information, debate and exchange, and for the expansion and transformation of ideas.

Despite our use of academic conventions, we seek to break from the disciplinary specialism, and movement and group sectarianism, that keep these voices apart, and which privilege academic perspectives above all others. We hope to publish contributions that are of high literary quality and accessibility, that theorise with purpose, that are useable and enable us to cognitively map our moment. And while our focus is Antipodean by location, we hope for connections to an emerging global Left.

A viable project for realising any counterfuture requires profound structural change. This involves an ongoing engagement with the economic dimension of social life. It also leads to a fundamental questioning of what it is to be human. Persistent gender dichotomies (resting upon essentialist notions of sex and human nature), and the power relations these uphold, need to be continuously challenged. Historically, both here and internationally, the Left has often failed to successfully connect across, and coordinate between, different fronts of struggle. Might we now be able to do better?

Much rests upon the development and consolidation of vigorous social movements. The ideological parameters of the extraparliamentary Left have, currently, next to no overlap with the conceptual space of parliamentary politics and, by extension, with much of ‘public opinion’. To acknowledge such is not to reject engagement with this domain. It does, however, highlight the gaps that Left ideas have to cross before they can take root more broadly in society. The Left has a huge task lying ahead if meaningful and

enduring social change is to be initiated in these times of crisis. To argue for the development of vital social movements is to argue for the importance of finding the means to sustain action. A Left culture capable of enduring and deepening requires a new collective sense of time, one that is not bound to election cycles and media projections.

* * *

In this, our first issue, we have sought wide-ranging contributions along major axes of culture, economics, and politics. We invited responses to the topic of ‘connections’. While it is true that the globe is vastly interconnected, this state of interconnection coexists with profound barriers and disconnects between rich and poor, debtor and creditor, ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ nations, and distances between those of differing ethnic, class, gender, and sexual identities. The emblem of ‘connection’ remains a potent one for the reimagining and reoccupying of the Commons. Where does the Left stand in this cusp between new forms of connection and enduring patterns of disconnection? Are different Left fractions disconnected from one another to such a degree as to render the act of recreating the Commons impossible? What now is the relationship between the Left and ‘the people’, or with other classes or constituencies that it might hope to engage? Where is the Left now positioned relative to the horizon of institutional politics, here in Aotearoa and in the wider world?

Dougal McNeill’s ‘Rediscovering Utopia’ opens our inaugural issue, his call to formulate utopian demands echoing the title of the journal. A strong history of independent Left publication predates the arrival of *Counterfutures*, as elaborated in Toby Boraman’s article. To reach for the future requires a firm footing in the past. It also requires a strong hold on the present. Patrick Ongley’s ‘Class in New Zealand’ provides such purchase by drawing attention to class dynamics in Aotearoa and asking where they may lead. Structural changes within capitalism are inextricably tied to those of class. Building upon themes found in Ongley’s article, Sam Oldham’s ‘Intersections, Old and New’ explores how union organisations intersect with the cooperative movement, and asks how, in the long run, such connections may lead towards deep economic change. It is here, he argues, that some

answers to the urgent problems posed by climate crises may be found. Connections: past, present, possible futures. Where we've been, where we are now, where we might go together.

The importance of such connections (and the tensions that come with them) can be seen in Sue Bradford's intervention in this issue, 'Fractured Fightback', which offers a concrete case study of Auckland Action Against Poverty's struggles to combat the housing crisis. Here we see the fractious nature of coalitions between social movements, and the tenuous nature of our current links with one another. While it is important to acknowledge that difference and group autonomy are important attributes of the social movement sphere, Bradford calls for us to develop a common ground, to develop a long term strategic capacity, and to find ways of developing enduring connections.

Alongside the articles noted above, this first issue of *Counterfutures* includes an interview with the Australian-based political theorist Simon Tormey, which traces the intersections of contemporary Left thought and action. We also have a number of book reviews – engaging with texts from both Aotearoa and international publishers.

In future issues, we hope for a range of contributions in the form of articles, reviews and review articles, commentaries and polemics addressing the question of Left futures.

* * *

Our tasks are interpretative and transformative. They are part of an attempt – one that is broader than us, we hope – to break with our times of 'post-politics' and to thread ourselves together as part of an alternate civilizational project, a new field of vision and interpretation, and a matrix of alternative Left practices and institutions. This is an ambitious set of tasks. It begins with the reimagination of what is and what could and should be.

The Editorial Board, 2016

If you like what you have read, please
subscribe or donate.



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa