

Members of the core crew of Kōtare Research and Education for Social Change in Aotearoa have attended each of the five conferences in the Social Movements, Resistance, and Social Change series. We have always been excited by the possibilities these conferences have offered for engendering deeper connections and new opportunities for group formation and action across different sectors in the left-activist and academic worlds. We offered three workshops in the conference, seeing this as an opportunity both to contribute usefully to the overall goal of ‘activating collectivity’ and as a way of demonstrating a small sample of Kōtare’s pedagogical methods. In this article, we have taken up the invitation from the conference organisers to contribute a few reflections on our overall experience of the fifth SMRSC conference.

Reflections from Kōtare

CATHERINE DELAHUNTY, TIM HOWARD & SUE BRADFORD

Since the late 1990s, Kōtare Research and Education for Social Change in Aotearoa has been providing workshops at our residential educational centre at Hoteo North, near Wellsford, on a kaupapa of 'education for liberation'. With a vision of a future that includes economic, social, and ecological justice in Aotearoa grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, we use tools of structural analysis, participatory adult education, and creativity to support and inspire those working for change at grassroots in community and union rōpu.

Various members of our core crew have attended each of the five conferences in the Social Movements, Resistance, and Social Change (SMRSC) series since the first gathering at Massey University, Palmerston North, in 2014. We have always been excited by the possibilities these conferences have offered for engendering deeper connections and new opportunities for group formation and action across different sectors in the left-activist and academic worlds. When the pānui for the 2020 conference came out we decided to offer three workshops, seeing this as an opportunity both to contribute usefully to the overall goal of 'activating collectivity' and as a way of demonstrating a small sample of Kōtare's pedagogical methods. Catherine Delahunty

facilitated a session using ‘The Wave’, an insightful tool to analyse change, know your enemy, and shift power.¹ Tim Howard introduced the ‘Ten Chairs’, an exercise which actively dissects classism and colonialism.² Sue Bradford facilitated a participatory process looking at the ‘Joys and challenges of building new groups from scratch’. The three of us were delighted by the enthusiasm of those who took part, and look forward to seeing some participants again, perhaps up at Kōtare as well as at other hui and gatherings. In this article, we have taken up the invitation from the conference organisers to contribute a few reflections on our overall experience of the fifth SMRSC conference. We offer this in three sections, each under our own name.

Catherine Delahunty

I have attended many left-wing conferences, starting with ‘Peace, Power and Politics’ in 1969 when I was 15-years old, but the fifth SMRSC conference in 2020 was the best experience I have had at such an event. The hospitality and atmosphere were the opposite of the formal, patriarchal, and obscure memories of the left conferences of my past. It was a warm and inviting physical space where cake and flowers adorned a wide variety of creative approaches to political issues and social change. That is what happens when a group led by tangata-whenua and Pasifika women takes charge.

It was not only the colourful physical space, the craft, and the food that charmed me, but the care that was taken to welcome guests and presenters. Such care comes from a deep understanding that good relationships are not a means but an end in themselves. This context created an atmosphere where debates about radical social change could be expressed in fresh and accessible ways. The moments that have remained with me include the workshop on Mauna Kea, the Karlo Mila poem for young women, and

1 See: <https://ako.ac.nz/assets/Knowledge-centre/good-practice-publications/GOOD-PRACTICE-PUBLICATION-the-wave-a-teaching-tool-for-minimising-resistance.pdf>

2 See: <https://www.awea.org.nz/sites/awea.org.nz/files/Justice%20activities/Ten%20Chairs%20in%20Aotearoa%20NZ.pdf>

some very positive and practical workshops on organising for change.

It was inspiring to see the intergenerational dialogue between Pua Case from the Mauna Kea campaign talking via Zoom with her cousin Emalani Case about passing on the fire to keep defending the islands of Hawai'i from corporate exploitation. It was moving to sit in a room full of women and hear Karlo Mila read her poem about rape, a moment of deeply sad recognition but also solidarity.

I was privileged to have been invited to take part in a panel about climate and activism with some inspirational Indigenous women, and it was my first experience as a panellist where the preparation built us into a group and forged new relationships before we even started. Taking care, looking after relationships, and valuing the different voices make for stronger collective experiences.

At Kōtare we work hard to create similar environments and relationships but it's not so easy to sustain at a four-day event with hundreds of people. The conference leadership made it look easy, but I know it was their cultural strength and attention to process that sustained us all.

It was a pleasure to offer a workshop at this conference. The participants in the one I facilitated were wonderfully alert and willing to experiment. The role-play 'The Wave', with its focus on Tiriti-based constitutional change, worked well because people embraced the different roles and demonstrated great creativity. It is so satisfying for a tutor when participants actively embrace radical new ways of using an analysis tool and take the issue to a new and insightful place. People who do not know each other can create new relationships and expand each other's political perspectives if the atmosphere is encouraging. This conference was all about encouragement, respect, and radical change. I left feeling energised and hopeful, not only about this gathering but also about how much better this country will be when these leaders and their great collective practice are at the centre of our politics.

Tim Howard

I'm writing eight months on from this stunning conference, and a few current events focus my reflections. Long-sought moves—like the Māori Health Authority, more Māori wards in local government, He Puapua—have reportedly raised hopes of Māori leadership being acknowledged, of small but important steps taken towards the rangatiratanga future envisioned by Matike Mai Aotearoa. The SS4C Auckland organisation (student climate strikers) have disbanded, accepting their collective racism. They ask that no Pākehā-led initiative fill this gap, and they await Māori and Pasifika leadership in future climate-action movements. The Polynesian Panthers and others celebrate their 50th anniversary, as the long-term impact of the Dawn Raids is identified and finally acknowledged. At a 'hui' in Ōtautahi on counterterrorism, Juliet Moses of the New Zealand Jewish Council provocatively references Arab and Palestinian (allegedly) 'terrorist' organisations, while invisibilising Israeli state terrorism. Islamic and other participants walk out. Aziz Choudry, a leading scholar-activist, comrade, and friend, passes away in Johannesburg.

As a Pākehā activist, I hear the challenges to Pākehā-initiated and -centred activism, no matter the face-value worthiness of the cause. I also note the collective impact (though there are exceptions) of Pākehā effectively advancing colonialism and capitalism, white supremacy and racism, patriarchy, ableism, and heterosexism. So, what is to be done?

With the above in mind, I look back to the courageous November 2020 conference with hope. Not for specifically answering the questions raised for Pākehā, but as a dynamic and organic demonstration of what another way might look like. While this gathering was many things, I think of it particularly as being a natural demonstration of Māori- and Pasifika-wāhine leadership. I am struck by how the centring of such leadership can invite engagement from others. In the case of the fifth SMRSC conference, this engagement stemmed from the dynamic activation of aroha and power and was able to grow in the space so generously provided.

Other dynamics were part of that, in front and out back (go, the two

years of organising; go, the *whare kai!*), but that leadership is what stands out for me about this conference when set against the backdrop of recent decades of activism.

Progressive conferences, even the best of them, face various risks: Euro-favouring processes; tokenistic insertions; capture by academic-speak; unhealthy competitiveness. I think this conference exemplified something different. It was centred in a *tino-rangatiratanga* context, and it took care to highlight perspectives from Māori and Pasifika majority world experience, LGBTQI+ voices, and more. It moved beyond wordiness into creative expressions, both subtle and spectacular, and fostered genuine intergenerational dialogue. There was a very evident spirit of generosity from conference designers and facilitators—*‘aroha mai, aroha atu’*—that invited graciousness between participants in the workshops of which I was part. It also provided space (speaking for myself only) for rebuilding some damaged relationships.

A few highlights stand out for me as I look back on the conference. The shining dialogue between Pua Case in Hawai‘i and Pania Newton, facilitated by Emalani Case, was a moving encounter between frontline Indigenous women activists that we were privileged to listen in on. The Constitutional Transformation panel with Makere Mutu and Veronica Tawhai, facilitated by Tayla Cook and Safari Hynes, highlighted the importance of intergenerational dialogue. There was an outpouring of creativity in so many modes and places, giving richness to the circulating ideas: I found Brodie Fraser’s photo exploration of LGBTQI+ homelessness evocative, and I enjoyed the Theatrical Experiment on the final day. The final discussion on Pākehā/settler responsibility revealed the depths of understanding which come from experience. The broad range of topics covered (water, trauma, renters’ power, and prison abolition immediately come to mind) revealed some of the expansive scope of the left today.

The hosts quoted Ani Mikaere as saying, ‘the process of reversing the violence and traumatic events of the past two hundred years will take time. . . . The question is: what steps will we take, here and now, to create a platform upon which our children and grandchildren can build?’ The fifth

SMRSC conference was a good step towards building that platform. The forms of leadership shown in the conference indicate one of the aspects needed for our movements, our organising, and our political parties to move forward. Kia mau, kia u, ki tenei kaupapa!

Sue Bradford

First, I'd like to tautoko Catherine's and Tim's comments about the conference, about its many shining moments, and about the radical shift in content, quality, and culture achieved by the youthful and predominantly Māori and Pasifika leadership group. In the first year of Covid-19, it also felt like a remarkable combination of hard work and good fortune that allowed the conference to go ahead at all. By November 2020, many of us were heartily sick of Zoom. The challenge from Veronica Tawhai to 'find your people' as part of taking on settler colonialism was far more easily taken up, I'm sure, amidst the flowers and kai of this gathering than on yet another Zoom call or Facebook thread. At the same time, good on the organisers for building in an online component, opening it up to many who would not otherwise have been able to participate.

There is no question 2020 marked a breakthrough moment in the SMRSC series. Yet there is one question I continue to grapple with when it comes to these gatherings: are there ways in which we could perhaps engage with each other more closely as a component of the conference?

Even in the comparatively liberatory mode of the most recent event, the majority of sessions were run from the front of a room, from where speakers, artists, researchers, performers, and panels were offering a wonderful range of stimulating contributions. These sessions are an integral component of such events, but I do wonder whether there could be another strand or option in which people could come together in limited numbers to collectively explore some of the key questions of the day.

A number of questions (and there are infinitely more possibilities) come to mind when thinking about how a conference like SMSRSC might be held. How might Tangata Tiriti respond to the challenges of Matike

Mai and other wero from Māori and Pasifika friends at a time when te ao Māori has great forward momentum and it feels like we're not keeping up? How do community and union activists organise creatively and effectively when a 'friendly' Labour/Green government is in power? Are there ways in which we might more effectively build community-based rōpu that are autonomous and not subject to the colonisation and capture which affect so much of the community sector? Are there new opportunities, building on older lessons and experiences, around how academic–activist alliances might be developed at this time? How might we more effectively take action on the housing crisis, sectorally and geographically?

I do not offer the above questions in a bid to set a future agenda but simply as an example of how some conference time might be used to explore a selection of current activist and organising issues in a different mode from front-of-room presentation, large lecture theatres, or the quick-fire format of three presenters per academic hour. The sessions Kōtare ran at the conference were a step in this direction but were not aimed at achieving what I'm talking about here. I'm also aware that there may have been programmed sessions geared to this kind of process that I missed due to the usual overload of options.

The one session I attended where such engagement was attempted was the Pākehātanga session presented by Tauīwi mō Matike Mai. While I appreciated the organisers' efforts and good intentions, the sheer number of people attending, the lecture theatre format, and the lack of preparation for small group breakouts led to a rather disintegrated outcome.

There are many different ways that small-group formats can be made to work within a larger setting, but at heart what is required are the following: facilitators experienced in participatory processes; the will to keep numbers to a fairly low limit, for example 15 or 20; questions which are of genuine interest to a range of participants who might like to engage in this way; and an expectation by those doing the facilitation that they are not there to provide a lot of content themselves, but to work with people in the room to maximise individual contributions and collective analysis.

I offer these thoughts around engagement not in a bid to detract from

the ground-breaking achievements of last year's organising group, but simply as a matter for consideration. The 2020 crew took the SMRSC series forward into new territory, with huge thanks to all involved, and best wishes to those courageous folks who pick up the challenge of organising the next gathering.