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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature: Market Fictions

By Jennifer Lawn, Lexington Books, 2016

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Jenny Lawn's book is an answer to a prayer. In a field long dominated by frank idealisms, and currently re-inventing itself in the retro-fitted complacency of yesteryear by way of the new 'surface reading', *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature* maps literature's social concerns – and its social context – with admirable political seriousness and scrupulously critical aesthetic awareness. Eschewing nar-

ratives of literary ‘history’ in favour of a thematic approach in which literature is brought into conversation with, and read as both evidence from and guide to, historical change, this study traces the marks left by neoliberalism – ‘culturally affirmative but socially corrosive’, in Lawn’s resonant phrase – on local literary production.¹ ‘Almost all literary criticism of New Zealand fiction over the last thirty years has revolved around the ethics, politics, and formal implications of identity categories’, Lawn writes,² and her own work suggests ways in which these idealist frames have obscured and forced under-readings of crucial social and critical terms and patterns: class, the social novel, inequality, social formation. *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition* approaches these hitherto occluded aspects of the ‘social pattern’ by way of a series of careful close readings of contemporary literary novels, all grouped in loose thematic and conceptual categories. Acknowledging the force and justice of a generation of literary criticism prompted by the New Social Movements of the 1970s (and the challenge of newly assertive Māori demands for justice above all), Lawn nevertheless has ‘parted company with the more usual metanarrative of decolonisation, with its emphasis on the recovery and revalorization of marginalised voices and the simultaneous critique of settler mythologies that had attempted to install a singular national consciousness’ in order to produce a study sensitive to the interactions of the cultural and the economic in the age of neoliberalism.³ Hers is a study concerned with literature’s synchronic qualities – although this does not prevent a nicely-worked diachronic account of the rise and fall of settler literary nationalist criticism being threaded through the chapters – and takes clusters of novels as symptomatic of, and themselves responses to, particular dilemmas or shifts in the

1 Jenny Lawn, *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature*, Lanham 2016, p. 221.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

neoliberal era. *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition* advocates a 'bivalent reading practice, reintroducing critical neglected categories that help to foreground the equally important, contemporaneous erosion of concepts such as public good, social formation, political culture and class consciousness'.⁴ Lawn's encounters with particular literary works can be stirring in their combination of patient textual explication and wider socio-political riffing (the pages on Alice Tawhai and Eleanor Catton stand out for me as particular examples of critical prowess and energy) and, if occasionally the slide is from analysis to summary, the *bulk* of the works brought into the project – some scores of novels and short stories – has a cumulatively convincing effect.

Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition has many virtues, and will no doubt be the focus for useful debates in literary studies and beyond. It deserves a wide readership, with provocative analyses and synoptic social accounting offering insights for both specialists in criticism and the general reader. Its account has more than a local interest: as Lawn points out, the very speed and extremity of the neoliberal shock therapy begun by the Fourth Labour Government made 'the New Zealand experiment' a model for policy makers and political strategists across the advanced capitalist countries.⁵ Lawn's materialist commitments to an historicised literary criticism attentive to both the formal texture and complexity of the individual literary object *and* its moment of creation and reception is salutary, and the political vigour and creative care with which she pursues her case

4 Ibid., p. 224.

5 There are disadvantages to the book's international publication, however, and Lawn seems occasionally unsure of her audience. Passages given over to summarising the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi – essential, no doubt, for an audience ignorant of most things to do with New Zealand – sometimes clog what could have been more thorough elaborations of Lawn's own argument. And to what end? The implied reader unaware of the Treaty settlements process seems unlikely then to seek out a book on New Zealand fiction. A New Zealand copy editor would also, one hopes, have run her red pen through Lawn's comment on the 1951 watersiders' 'strike' (91).

a rebuke to these more unbuttoned and critically slack days. Her work is a landmark in the history of materialist criticism in the New Zealand social formation, and contributes to a tradition so vulnerable it has, at times, seen its very survival threatened. For these reasons I celebrate this publication, and recommend it to all *Counterfutures* readers. I have given the rest of the review over to some critical and dissenting observations in order to take up the challenge of Lawn's text, and to respond to those challenges in the spirit it invites.

Materialist Criticism?

Lawn draws on the work of Nancy Fraser to divide the 'materialist left' from the 'progressive left', and the story she tells is familiar.⁶ The 'materialist' left is committed to social redistribution; supports the social democratic welfare state; sees class as the axis along which social injustices divide; and demands such reforms as a living wage and progressive taxation. The 'progressive' left prioritizes the 'politics of recognition'; sees identity and identity formation as central strategic questions; emerges out of and extends the tasks of the New Social Movements; and stresses education and consciousness as at the heart of political transformation. The two lefts have, in the era of neoliberalism, decoupled, the demands of one clashing with the needs of the other. Negotiations around identity and ownership under neoliberalism take place in the wreckage between the two.

This story is entrenched enough, to be sure, but does not, on my reading, fit the evidence of local experience, to say nothing of struggles elsewhere. Women's liberation, the organisations of

⁶ This distinction, crucial to the book's logic and organisation, is relegated to a footnote (p. 34) and, indeed, across the work as a whole the reader is forced to do a work of rummaging in notes in order to reconstruct Lawn's methodology and political assumptions. All these could have been more clearly stated.

Māori land rights' struggle, Homosexual law reform: all of these emerged out of, and stayed in dialogue, however tense, with, the trade union and leftist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Redistribution and recognition were – and are – dialectically related and inseparable. *Broadsheet*, the journal of women's liberation, analysed Rogernomics' effects on working women; the Māori Organisation on Human Rights, through the visionary leadership of Tama Poata, grew from connections in the Wellington Drivers' Union.⁷ Lawn acknowledges the possibility of spillovers in *theory*, but nowhere in her own narrative does she show cognizance of the real seepages between redistribution and recognition in political and organisational practice. This leads, most damagingly, to her reversing cause and effect in her account of the relations between 'materialist' and 'progressive' leftists and neoliberal change. The experience of *defeat* may well have fractured and split the coalitions of the 1970s and 1980s, but the causal order here is crucial: most feminist and Māori dissenting organisations campaigned against the very order of which *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition* places them as in some sense the beneficiaries and assumed inheritors. Too often in this book comments on the 'spirit' or 'needs' of the neoliberal project – a ghostly ideological mission with agency of its own – replace accounts of the actual class struggle of this particular social formation. To write, as Lawn does, of 'the confluence of interests between decolonizing movements and the turn toward the competitive market form'⁸ is to desiccate the contested, changing, inwardly riven and shifting history of those movements themselves.

A similar imprecision hinders Lawn's methodological approach. That her study is not Marxist is no criticism in itself, but what is it? What is the 'materialist' left? The term seems to

7 See Cybèle Locke, *Workers in the Margins*, Wellington 2012; and Brian Roper, *The Fire Last Time*, Marxist Interventions, 3 2011.

8 Lawn, *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature*, p. 3.

be generously capacious but, in practice, this is a disabling kind of theoretical bagginess. Lawn writes of Marxism as if historical materialism aligns more or less snugly in the ‘redistribution’ line of Fraser’s balance sheet, and sets itself the task of reading class against the demands of racial and sexual justice. But there has been a great renaissance in Marxist scholarship in the last decade, inspired, in part, by the Global Financial Crisis (2008 -) and its aftermath, devoted to exploring the *dynamics* of racialized violence under capitalism, and between women’s oppression and capital accumulation. Historical materialism concerns itself, in other words, with *dialectical* connections between race, gender and class society, thus fundamentally scrambling Fraser’s schema.⁹ Lawn makes use of none of this work, drawing instead on the solitary, and contrarian, figure of Walter Benn Michaels to stand in for a whole tradition. More worryingly, this imprecision is used in Lawn’s main narrative to associate two quite disparate – and indeed antagonistic – traditions. The ‘materialist’ left draws, in Lawn’s scheme, on Marxist analysis but advances social democratic politics. But the two traditions have been, inside the workers’ movement and the academy, hostile and competing analytic and organisational options, and it is from within the Marxist tradition – as much as, if not more than, the culture and society critique Lawn draws from Chapman, Holcroft and others – that the most substantial leftist criticisms of actually existing New Zealand social democracy have been developed.¹⁰ Much

9 See, amongst many others, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago 2015; Sara R. Farris ed., *Returns of Marxism*, Leiden 2014; James Penney, *After Queer Theory*, London 2013; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, Chicago 2013; Tithi Bhattacharya, *Capital’s laboring bodies and bodies of labor under capital*, ELN 53/1 2015; Hannah Dee, *The Red in the Rainbow*, London 2010. This is to say nothing of the lively controversies around intersectionality, social reproduction theory and economic crisis still underway. The activist-scholarly traditions of classical Marxism bear little relation to the reductionism Lawn gestures at in her work.

10 See David Bedggood, *Rich and Poor in New Zealand*, Sydney 1980 and Brian Roper, *Prosperity for All?*, Melbourne 2005. The Red Papers on New Zealand (1976 – 1980) first attempted this in the middle of Muldoonism.

like Timothy Brennan's work on the U.S. situation, Lawn lashes these two traditions together by fiat.¹¹ The results are politically and theoretically underdeveloped.

What has any of this to do with novels? For one thing, the terms of Lawn's analytical and historical frames remain frustratingly slippery. References to 'immaterial labour'¹² and the 'knowledge economy'¹³ appear without much in the way of preparatory argument, but are then made to carry the weight of some of the book's most substantial and important discussions – as on creativity and creative capital most especially – while elsewhere stimulating theoretical-critical discussions slip to banal political conclusions. How writers vote seems much the least interesting way of measuring their political engagement,¹⁴ while Lawn's conclusion to an otherwise illuminating discussion of a Damien Wilkins novel, that 'Lange's gracious decline is accompanied by Luke's recovery suggests to me some commentary on the necessity to reconcile the decline of the materialist left, while sustaining hope in human kindness' is at risk of replacing analysis with pieties.¹⁵ The place of the Labour Party, its function and social role, remains carefully under-studied across these chapters.

Te ao Māori

The strength and weakness of Lawn's approach is exemplified in her treatment of Māori writers. It is encouraging to read a Pākehā critic approaching Māori texts for their insights into the

11 See Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position*, New York 2004.

12 Lawn, *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature*, p. 169.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

social pattern and wider cultural-economic change, and Lawn avoids the neglect or critical isolation promoted, however well-meaning critics' intentions, by some forms of biculturalism. Pākehā and Māori worlds and imaginations, in *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition*, interact and co-habit in shared spaces, however uneasily or unhappily. There is much to learn from Lawn's readings.

But her division of leftist claims into 'materialist' and 'progressive' leads her to under-read the diversity and divisions in Māori intellectual life. Māori, hapū and iwi are treated as monolithic intellectual blocs, with Lawn claiming that a 'number of iwi support the Trans-Pacific Partnership',¹⁶ for instance. Māori are thus in strange ways de-classed, with Lawn asserting that 'the same forces of diversity and fragmentation that socialist observers regard as undermining collective social action and the liberal public sphere, have also fostered a form of cultural capital that hapū and iwi have been able to exploit for real economic gain'.¹⁷ This is an astonishing remark to make about the era of the mass closures in the meat industry and the decimation of trade unionism in forestry, and a glance at the unemployment statistics of the 1990s ought to have complicated such a crude distinction between Māori cultural capital and Māori working-class life. Evan Poata-Smith's work is referenced in passing by Lawn, but she does not consider his rich and sophisticated analysis of the differing class outcomes for Māori through the Treaty settlement process.¹⁸ The Pākehā world is reduced to an undifferentiated classless mass, and Lawn writes, for example, of 'the Pākehā-dominated news media, with its profit-driven cycles of

16 Ibid., p. 140.

17 Ibid., p. 6.

18 See Evan Poata-Smith, *Māori: Enduring and Emerging Inequalities*, in Max Rashbrooke (ed.), *Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis*, Wellington 2013.

moral panic’;¹⁹ one struggles to imagine this dominance being felt by Pākehā equally in Cannons Creek and Khandallah.

This approach leads Lawn to bury the Māori left as thoroughly as any neoliberal or culturalist account might. She writes that ‘the materialist critique of culture as nothing more (or less) than a particularly appealing form of soft capital has achieved relatively little penetration in the strong tradition of Māori cultural nationalism’.²⁰ But this is to efface the dynamic contribution of Marxism to Māori nationalist struggle, and of Māori nationalism to Marxism: what of Hone Tuwhare, Ralph Hotere, Tame Iti, all engaged in life-long dialogue with Communism? Tama Poata and Wellington Communism? The Ratana movement’s long association with Labour? Donna Awatere-Huata’s explosive connections, for that matter, with New Left circles? This part of the story Lawn tells is reductive, and leads her at times into simple error. Her claim that, by 2009, ‘the extent to which Māori had come to see their opportunities in terms of market-based economics became evident in the outcome of the general election, which showed a marked departure from Māori voters’ long-standing loyalty to the center-left Labour party’ does not bear scrutiny.²¹ Even leaving Labour’s status to one side, this ignores the eruption of nationalist populism via New Zealand First in 1996, and ignores the sophisticated ways in which Māori-roll voters have developed expressions of their double consciousness, consistently voting Labour majorities in the party vote but opting for the Māori Party with their electorate vote. Lawn’s materialism is not so far from the road of the postcolonial idealists she claims to have parted company with at the start of her journey.

19 Lawn, *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature*, p. 155.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

These are serious criticisms of a serious book, and ought to indicate the kind of good thinking and intellectual excitement *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition* can generate. Jenny Lawn has done us all a service setting out such a rich and productive argument. Her critical ambitions are salutary, and represent a sustained attempt at accounting for cultural development in the social formation as part of a wider social and economic process of change. Her individual readings are never less than stimulating, and her critical coordinates – intellectually agile, politically alive and creatively supple – capture live problems. It is a long time now since a work of literary criticism has issued such a strategic and wide-ranging challenge to political analysis. It is our job now to respond in kind.²²

22 <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA1505/S00600/james-shaw-speech-to-2015-green-agm.htm>.

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