



# **COUNTERFUTURES**

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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

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## Pākehā as punisher—dominated conversations on dominant cultures

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**W**HEN AN AUSTRALIAN couple came to a recent conference in Christchurch they complained that all New Zealanders were ‘punishers’. This fairly unacademic generalisation of all New Zealanders was set aside—what was I going to say? A whiny, ‘*not all* New Zealanders?’—for the more pressing question: ‘what is a punisher?’

A punisher, our Australian friend explained, is a person who monopolises conversation so much that the person being spoken to feels as if they’re enduring a punishment. New Zealanders might be more familiar with the anachronism ‘buttonholing’ that means more or less the same thing, but doesn’t speak to the strong description of enduring these conversations.

At the 2016 Social Movements conference I caught up with a fellow organiser who had just endured a fifteen-minute conversation with a young man whom she couldn't extricate herself from. She had been punished.

'Yes!' she said when I described the Australians' definition, 'I was *heavily* punished by that guy. As soon as I found a small gap in the conversation and started suggesting I knew a little bit about the subject too, he would cut me off with a 'yes, but'. Then another verbal assault made short shrift of any chance at a two-way conversation'.

On *those guys*: punishers are not exclusively men, though on balance men seem to make up the majority of punishers. It is worthwhile noting that another of the organisers endured a punishment session at the hands of a woman (although he did admit that at least, in this case, the gender reversal went some way towards a balancing of the historic ledger).

Over the course of the conference the use of the phrase 'punisher' became more and more common. It was that classic experience of finally having a word to describe a situation and then seeing that situation arise again and again. Was experiencing 'punishment' some form of confirmation bias around this new term, like the fellow equipped with a hammer seeing every problem as a nail? Or was it what we initially expected: that finally we had the language to describe a common phenomenon, where before it was glossed over as a rude part of everyday life that we would simply put up with?

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Are you wondering if you are a punisher? Perhaps you are one. But it is also worth knowing that almost everyone has this paranoia when they first hear about the concept.

The paranoia one feels when first hearing of the concept of a punisher is especially acute when described in a one-on-one conversation. Did your friend bring it up as a subtle hint that you're dominating conversation? The next few minutes of that conversation may be the most polite and respectful conversation you'll have in your life. No-one wants to be that guy, that punisher.

Paranoia about being a punisher is a little like the concern among a group when one of its members brings up halitosis. Everyone takes a quiet moment, off to one side, to breathe into their palm, attempting to sniff their breath to see if it is bad or not. And when the result is nothing out of the ordinary, the group does not rest easy, but just feels as if the test may not have been an adequate measure.

Or think of how you feel when, in a moment of online procrastination, you consult a BuzzFeed checklist on the characteristics of psychopaths: confirmation bias teams up with our tendency to suggestibility to create a palpable paranoia. Self-recognition as horror and pledges to be a better person ensue.

I've come to feel that those who are most concerned about being punishers also have sufficient anxiety about their conversational approach that they avoid the extent of domination characteristic of the punisher. If you're aware of the concept and have bothered to check yourself then you're probably not the one who is the problem. But how can one be totally sure?

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While some of my experience of organising the Social Movements conference was coloured by the personal analysis and spreading of the concept of the punisher, another major theme was the intersection of Māori activism and the majority Pākehā audience. The first day began with a challenge from Dr Leonie

Pihama to the organisers to represent her concerns about the misappropriation of the Karori campus for the university's profit. Sold to the university at a peppercorn rate of \$10 in 2014, the campus was on the market again with an asking price of \$23m.<sup>1</sup> Victoria University is not paying the rent, argued Pihema, citing Waikato University as the only one in the country where ownership had been returned to iwi and payments for the use of the land are being made.

Pākehā academics were told, in a session by Tere Harrison, that it was not the job of Māori to teach Pākehā about te Tiriti. It is Pākehā's job to teach Pākehā. Her talk reminded me of the exasperation in Ranginui Walker's tone when he wrote 'the problem with educating Pākehā is that there's just so damn many of them!' The tone is one of justifiable, long-suffering indignation peppered with an enduring humour... something of a sardonic spirit without end to match the struggle without end that Walker borrowed from Rewi Maniapoto as the title of an edited collection of his writing.

In the keynote talk from Annette Sykes she repeated calls made on the first day: conferences like ours are good at assuaging the guilt of liberal Pākehā academics, but work needs to continue outside of the conference. Similar concerns were expressed in the final reflection session as participants pushed for the conference organisers to take the lead on a statement condemning the sale of the Karori campus and asking that it be returned to local iwi.

As an organiser I felt particularly ill equipped to lead this process—kitchen, organising and cleaning duties had kept most of us from attending a large number of sessions. And for those sessions that I had attended, I couldn't fully engage with

1 Laura Bootham, "Iwi wants Karori Campus Land Back," *Radio New Zealand*, 9 September, 2016, accessed 10 February, 2017 at <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/312939/iwi-wants-karori-campus-land-back>

the conversations from worry about time-keeping and other conference minutiae. Thankfully, some of the other organisers were more adept at participating in the broader spirit of what was to be done. The conference ended with the enthusiasm for an immediate response to the university, manifesting as a collective statement to the press published shortly after the conference's conclusion.

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Confiscation of Māori land by the Crown was one form of punishment for disobeying the Crown. Think of the confiscation of lands following the search for Kereopa Te Rau while he was sheltering with Tūhoe in 1866. The appropriation and denial of traditional resources continues today—think of the Foreshore and Seabed legislation. Other forms of more embodied punishment also persist. Think of the statistics around Māori being the most imprisoned peoples on earth today, or the intensity of the Operation 8 raids in locking down te Urewera compared to the relatively focussed raids in Te Aro, Wellington.

But beyond these overt punishments is the experience of being punished by an omnipresent Pākehā culture and the everyday marginalisation of Māori culture and worth. In the current climate in Aotearoa New Zealand the split between Māori and Pākehā cultures can take the form of separate state-funded television and media in te reo and on Māori themes, where Pākehā can avoid stumbling across them by watching any number of other channels. At worst that split takes the form of Pākehā demands for an end to all and any support for specifically Māori voices with the belligerent and misguided attitudes ‘well, where’s the Pākehā party?’ or ‘fine, let’s have Māori TV, but let’s also have Pākehā TV’. Other times Pākehā make the demand that any Maori form of culture is only authentic if it mirrors a pre-col-

onised form, whereas Pākehā culture is free to morph and merge with whatever global influence is on the rise.

Imagine your experience of the world if you felt constantly surrounded by conversational punishers. Feelings of being ignored, unvalued and a mere audience for the life of others becomes less a one-off than the norm.

Might the demographic and media domination of New Zealand by Pākehā culture be considered a cultural form of punishing? Where a single act of punishing as conversation domination represents an individual flaw, the concept can be extended to the systemic flaw of one culture dominating another. Might it be an experience similar to being punished by an overbearing talker that led to our speaker's exasperation about educating Pākehā?

If we think of colonisation as limited to the expropriation of material items like land and forests then we miss the colonisation of culture that marks the experience of being colonised. Not only did Pākehā take land by force and false pretence, but they also established a rule of law and a way of living that ran roughshod over Māori. There is no greater punisher than a state that makes the language in which one speaks alien or illegal.

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Expanding the concept of being punished from the individual to the cultural and systemic helps Pākehā educate other Pākehā about how colonisation is deeply cultural and psychological, in addition to the physicality of extracting resources and claiming lands. If humans were able to reflect on our own points of privilege as a matter of basic rationality, such comparisons wouldn't be needed. But people are far too complex, forgetful and irrational. Learning about the facts of colonisation and the privilege it has bought Pākehā is a start, but these learnings are all too

easy to forget. There are growing numbers of Pākehā who feel they have an understanding of colonisation, how we have and continue to benefit from it, and the legal grounds for tino rangatiratanga as a basis for mana motuhake. I count myself as one. We are just as much in need of new ways to think about colonisation as those who have never given much thought to te Tiriti. Those of us who feel that we already understand how we have benefited from colonisation probably have more need for new ways of reflecting on who we are and the land we live on. Generalising the concept of the punisher from an individual conversation to a cultural framework is most useful in this regard.

Pākehā who are sensitive to the conversational abuse of being punished might try to assess if our conversations are punishing Māori at both the conversational and cultural levels. Further to this conversational reflection, we should also refrain from an insistence that Māori who seek to right this punishment fit into Pākehā and European ways of thinking justice, equity, education, and governance. If the notion of the punisher makes us reflect on whether we're performing good communication in a one-on-one situation, then the same notion ought to help Pākehā reflect on whether we're continuing to punish Māori through unthinking monoculturalism.



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