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Country report

Directions to enlarge our worlds? Social and cultural geography in New Zealand

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For a relatively small country, New Zealand is striking for its successive migrations and complex cultural politics. Following earlier arrivals of Maori, Abel Tasman ‘discovered’ the country in 1642, a fact commemorated by prominent poet Allen Curnow (1974), who in 1942 wrote, ‘Simply by sailing in a new direction/You could enlarge the world’. These words are emblematic of other geographical journeys (Kearns and Nichol 2004), for in the twenty-first century, the lines suggest the expanding and globalized subjectivities of New Zealanders, as well as the increasingly fluid boundaries of scholarship in social and cultural geography. Indeed, ours is a physically isolated country, yet one that is intimately connected to wider (predominantly western) worlds and ideas. For instance, debates concerning globalization have been vigorous here, and have spawned influential commentary (e.g. Larner and Le Heron 2002a, 2002b). Likewise core themes and approaches in social and cultural geography noted in Anglo-American traditions resonate (though varyingly) within the research and teaching in this country (Panelli 2004). Geography is taught in six universities although few scholars focus on socio-cultural concerns. The fact that the community of academic geographers is small and that there are no formalized study groups has meant that the boundaries of professional interest are arguably more fluid than in the United Kingdom and North America. One result is that some colleagues who might not regard themselves as socio-cultural geographers per se intermittently make incisive contributions to the field (e.g. Britton, Le Heron and Pawson 1992; Le Heron and Pawson 1996; Roche 1997; Pawson 1992). Another is the fact that regular overseas visitors have provided stimulating collaborations and commentaries in social and cultural topics (e.g. Alun Joseph, Jo Little and Paul Cloke, to mention a few).

This report cannot attempt an exhaustive account of all social and cultural geographies, including those generated by scholars who have spent passing or long-term periods in...
New Zealand. Instead we have concentrated on studies that have focused on New Zealand and have favoured citing widely available material available in preference to the ‘grey literature’ and theses that international readers would find harder to locate. We have also confined our focus to roughly the last decade. Within these parameters, the following report is arranged in six sections. Two initial sections consider New Zealand work echoing two ‘traditional’ emphases of social geography: population movement, and matters of service provision and inequality. Third, we review developments in rural geography, then consider the theme of embodiment. The fifth section examines connections to the land and indigenous worldviews. We close with comments on the distinctiveness of New Zealand contributions to socio-cultural geography.

**Population movement and urban change**

The process (and subsequent implications) of people moving between places is a traditional socio-geographic focus and has been examined in New Zealand through engagement with deeper themes such as transnationalism (e.g. Ho 2002; Spoonley, Bedford and Macpherson 2003) and belonging (Bedford 2002). This complements earlier analyses contrasting Maori and European populations and cultures (Pawson 1992). Also, in the last decade, and like other Commonwealth nations along the Pacific Rim, New Zealand has experienced considerable in-migration from Asian groups. In examining this trend, an alignment with the concerns of the Metropolis Project has internationalized research on the politicization of immigration (Bedford 2003; Bedford, Bedford, Ho and Lidgard 2002). A secondary, and developing, theme is the migration patterns of New Zealanders moving to, and returning from, overseas locations (Lidgard and Gilson 2002). Beyond focusing on movement per se, Conradson and Latham (2005a, 2005b) thicken the theoretical mix, conceptualizing the role of friendship and everyday practice in the maintenance of identity among ‘Kwis’ based in London.

Notwithstanding the dominance of the rural sector in its economy and iconography, New Zealand is an urbanized nation with over 70 per cent of the population based in cities. But paradoxically, urban studies is under-developed, and unsurprisingly focused on Auckland (population 1.1 million), the country’s only metropolitan city. The bulk of recent studies have focused on population change and urban outcomes, given that the vast majority of people arriving into New Zealand to stay or study have settled in Auckland. In an agenda-sketching paper, Murphy, Friesen and Kearns (1999) suggest that Auckland be examined in terms of the links between property processes, population change and consumption landscapes. A number of case studies have followed. First, traces of international concern for cultural iconography and surveillance can be found (e.g. Kearns and Collins 2000) as well as themes such as social cohesion which have prominence in critical public health as well as geography (Witten et al. 2003). Second, Collins (2004) examines the experience of Korean students in central Auckland. Connecting with ideas of embodiment (described below), he argues that their very presence as ‘foreign bodies’ is adding to the transformation of downtown Auckland (c.f. Friesen, Murphy and Kearns 2005 on suburban impacts of the Indian diaspora). Third, extending links between population, social cohesion and public health, Lawrence and Kearns (2005) examine the degree to which there is a ‘fit’ between the health needs of refugees (from predominantly African, Asian
and Middle Eastern countries) and the services provided by a new health clinic in the Auckland suburb of Mt Roskill. Their conclusion is salutary: that population change can move faster than the funding and philosophies of health services. These results resonate with long-held critical traditions in social geography.

Services and social inequalities

Social geography’s critical mantra of ‘who gets what where’ continues to be applied in New Zealand, although, interestingly, some of the most searching applications of late have come from outside the recognized geographic community. Field, Witten, Robinson and Pledger (2004), for instance, develop a Community Resource Accessibility Index to map the relative endowment of neighbourhoods in terms of aggregated amenities and Crampton et al. (2000) construct an index and atlas of deprivation. Geographers have been more active in conducting sector-specific examinations of interventions and their outcomes, such as Barnett, Coyle and Kearns (2000) and Cheer, Kearns and Murphy (2002) who respectively analyse the users of targeted health care and the impacts of rental payments on the purchasing practices of state housing tenants. There is an over-representation of Maori and Pacific peoples within the cohorts of both targeted health care beneficiaries and state house tenants. Specific examinations of the welfare of these groups have focused on health-related behaviours such as smoking and household crowding (Barnett, Moon and Kearns 2004; Milne and Kearns 1999). A sustained inquiry into the outcomes of New Zealand’s housing reforms (e.g. the fate of social rented housing) has been undertaken by Murphy (e.g. 2003a, 2003b).

The effects of the ‘qualitative turn’ have strongly influenced socio-geographic inquiry, especially in health and education. Mental health care has been a particular emphasis. Building on contributions by New Zealand geographers in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Gleeson, Hay and Law 1998; Hall 1988; Law and Gleeson 1998), Kearns and Joseph have blended insights into the process of restructuring and the philosophy of deinstitutionalization focusing on a closing institution in the rural Waikato region (Joseph and Kearns 1996, 1999). Adding attentiveness to the language of policy, Gleeson and Kearns (2001) demonstrate the pervasiveness of the binary constructs and the moral codings applied to ‘hospital’ and ‘community’. In another strand of work, Gesler’s (1992) notion of ‘therapeutic landscape’ has been deployed to help interpret institutional settings ranging from children’s health camps to a private psychiatric hospital (Kearns and Collins 2003; Moon, Joseph and Kearns 2005).

Concern for geographical inequalities has extended to children and their families. The closure of schools, for instance, has been observed in poorer, racialized communities leading to concerns for their impacts on social cohesion (Witten, McCleanor and Kearns 2003). Children themselves are differentially prone to injury on their way to and from school and the gradient of vulnerability is arguably accentuated by the propensity for health-promoting initiatives like walking school buses developing within middle class suburbs (Collins and Kearns 2005; Kearns and Collins 2003). Law’s (1999) investigation of gender and transport links also warrants mention. While the experiences of older citizens have been examined (Joseph and
Chalmers 1995, 1996; Mansvelt 1997a, 1997b), the geography of aging remains less developed in New Zealand than elsewhere.

The impact of health services within the urban landscape has been a developing theme linking the traditional socio-geographic concern for location with cultural-geographic interest in appearance, symbolism and power. Beginning with the emergence of private accident and medical clinics in Auckland and continuing into specific hospital settings, Kearns and Barnett (1997, 1999; Kearns, Barnett and Newman 2003) have emphasized the interpretation as well as explanation of new sites of consumption practices.

**Rural geographies**

In contrast to urban studies, rural geographies of New Zealand society and culture reflect both key themes in Anglo-American geography and the specific ‘place matters’ that characterize rural areas in this country. Thus, attention to broader geographies of social difference and inequalities, and the cultural construction and negotiation of space, place and landscape resonate within New Zealand studies, but place-specific nuances also highlight Maori-/Tautauvi (i.e. newcomer) particularities, heartlands and rohe (tribal areas) (e.g. Cant and Goodall 2002; Hay 1998; Smith 2004).

Important contexts and implications for rural New Zealand have been noted in economic geographies of rural industries and macro-economic processes (e.g. Conradson and Pawson 1997; Wilson 1994). But most social and cultural geographies have highlighted the population groups, cultural understandings and everyday practices that are mutually constituted with rural places and landscapes. These foci can be seen in two clusters of work: studies focusing on the uneven experiences of difference and rural life; and research attempting to integrate social and cultural analyses.

First, rural studies have reflected Anglo-American traditions concerned with social difference. For instance, studies of gender have shown the traditionally conservative gender relations frequently portrayed between men and women in home, community and industry circles (Liepins 1998; Little, Panelli and Kraack 2005; Longhurst and Wilson 1999). These analyses have also indicated that unequally gendered work practices and power relations will differently affect women’s and men’s social, economic and/or political opportunities, as well as their health and well-being (Kraack and Panelli 2004; Liepins 2000b; Panelli and Gallagher 2003; Panelli, Little and Kraack 2004; Teather 1996).

Other studies of social difference have highlighted questions of ethnicity and other cultural/power relations in specific places (e.g. Kearns 1997; Johnsen 2004; Smith 2004). In this vein, Hay (1998) has highlighted the cultural significance of land–people relations to Irakehu people of Banks Peninsula (in contrast to Pakeha settlers), while Scott, Park and Cocklin (2000) and Scott and Kearns (2000) have shown the contrasting cultural values and social significance of ‘community’ and ‘home’ for Pakeha and Maori in the Northland region. Considerations of class and sexuality have been less common (though see Little 2003 and Scott, Park and Cocklin 2000), but social and cultural analyses focusing on age have increased. Joseph and Chalmers (1995, 1998) have identified how wider demographic, economic and service restructuring processes have differential impacts on older people’s lives and experience of rural places. Others have shown that young people will understand rural places and societies as complex and unequally structured spaces of
control and opportunity (McCormack 2002; Panelli, Nairn and McCormack 2002; Smith et al. 2002).

Beyond geographies focusing on specific differences, considerable effort has been spent on integrating analyses showing intersecting social differences and cultural contrasts within and across households, communities, catchments and national landscapes. For instance, Wilson (1994) and Johnsen (2003) published farm household studies showing the complexity of social and economic struggles intersecting with the cultural significance of land and attachment to place. In contrast, studies of individual places (communities and catchments) and issues (e.g. health, recreation, tourism) illustrate the diverse social practices and cultural values that create spatial and temporal dynamics with wider social, political and economic processes (Cloke and Perkins 1998; Collins and Kearns 1999; Kearns and Joseph 1997; Liepins 2000a; Mansvelt 1999; Panelli, Kraack and Little 2005). At even broader scales, some scholars have analysed how cultural meanings and social relations texture the construction and understanding of whole industries, regions or landscapes (Berg and Kearns 1996; Kearns and Berg 2002; Johnsen 1999; Joseph, Lidgard and Bedford 2001; Law 1997; Morin, Longhurst and Johnston 2001). At even broader scales, some scholars have analysed how cultural meanings and social relations texture the construction and understanding of whole industries, regions or landscapes (Berg and Kearns 1996; Kearns and Berg 2002; Johnsen 1999; Joseph, Lidgard and Bedford 2001; Law 1997; Morin, Longhurst and Johnston 2001). While integrated projects are difficult to conduct, researchers have also critically reviewed their methodological choices while pursuing complex investigations of rural concerns (Kearns 1997; Kindon 2003; McClean, Berg and Roche 1997; Parkes and Panelli 2001; Smith et al. 2002) and these reflections have intersected with standard interests in feminist, participatory and action geographies, as well as culturally specific opportunities for research collaborations between Maori and the predominantly Pakeha geographers.

Overall, cultural understandings of rural heartlands based on agrarian, environmental, and/or Maori frameworks have shaped the record and imaginings (see Le Heron 2004) of rural New Zealand geographies. However, with increased economic and political changes and associated demographic trends, scholars are highlighting the unequal landscapes that are resulting—whether they be the result of service contraction, specific social inequalities, or polarization around tourism. These works will support the further growth in both critical social geographies and rematerialized cultural geographies.

**Embodiment**

Stemming from the substantial commitment to critical geographies, and especially feminist perspectives at Waikato University, a further distinctive field of social and cultural geography in New Zealand involves theorization and analyses of the body. Again this New Zealand work resonates with international debates surrounding gender and sexuality, identity and subjectivity, and performativity and politics but also seeks to extend these fields. Early examples can be traced back to Lynda Johnston’s (1996, 1998; Johnston and Valentine 1995) analyses of gender, sexuality and identity at home and in gymnasiums. These studies effectively challenged thinking about bodies and the spaces they use, in both material and discursive forms. Analyses such as these intersected with Robyn Longhurst’s (2001) developing theorization of bodies and boundaries and the two scholars collaborated to record the interplay between place/ment and em/body/iment both in empirical studies and in
the work of the Waikato geography department (Longhurst and Johnston 1998, 2005). These efforts have produced an important record of contrasting types of bodies (e.g. built bodies, pregnant bodies, fat bodies) and place–body relations where certain sites, such as gymnasiums, shopping centres or public streets, can contain bodily possibilities or be used as politicized spaces of change (e.g. Johnston 1998; Longhurst 1999, 2000, 2005). In the latter case, Johnston (1997, 1998, 2002) has shown how both gymnasiums and gay pride marches can provide important material and discursive spaces for resistance and/or disruption of dominant norms and borders surrounding gender and sexuality.

Moreover, this work has supported other analyses such as Nairn’s (1999, 2003) critique of geographers’ bodies and teaching; and Law’s (1997, 1999; Cooper, Law, Malthus and Wood 2000) analyses of bodies constructed into or out of public space. It has also led to international contributions on the way in which bodies challenge social and cultural geographers to more carefully consider the politics of surveillance and management of bodies; and the wider notions of boundaries and borderlines (Johnston 1997, 2002; Longhurst 1999, 2001). In these ways, embodied geographies provide fruitful directions for the more established urban and rural geographies discussed earlier, as well as specific Maori geographies, especially if greater attention to cultural embodiment and contexts is to be interrogated (e.g. August 2005; Collins 2004).

The challenge of Maori geographies

Alongside work reflecting international traditions in geography, place-specific and culture-specific issues challenge social and cultural geographies. This trend can be traced to Stokes’ (1987) critique of ‘Pakeha geography of Maoris’ and her call for ‘Maori geography’ (rather than geography of Maori people). Behind this apparent word play lay a profound *wero* (challenge): to engage with Maori aspirations and concerns, using appropriate methodologies, rather than simply the enumeration and description that carries the spectre of colonial sensibility. Response has been slow, reflecting both the under-representation of Maori in professional geography and sensitivities surrounding the definition and conduct of Maori geographies (Gale 1996; Stokes 1987; Teariki 1992). But examples, when they occur, can unsettle perspectives and provide new insights (e.g. August 2005; Smith 2004). A recent paper by Ailsa Smith (2004), for instance, questioned whether there is a distinctively Maori sense of place. From one perspective (a Maori one), this could be seen as a question not worth asking, so replete is te reo (Maori language) with palpable links between people and place. But Smith, working across the borderlands of Maori and Pakeha worldviews, amasses evidence that there is an *a priori* Maori sense of place akin to the western worldview. What is significant is not only the constructs she identifies and the way they deeply implicate land, sea and sky. Nor does the study’s significance simply reside in its conveying of ideas that are generations older than western scholarship. Rather, the most arresting aspect of her work is the articulation of an argument without referencing anything but her own thesis (and in decidedly more lyrical terms than the writing of western geographers). While much New Zealand socio-cultural work has invoked, and extended, theory Smith’s is an example of the way some contributions have implicitly signalled its limits and shown the value of carefully nuanced readings of place-specific cultures and social meanings.
Conclusion

Existing social and cultural geographies of this country draw on the efforts of those who have developed long-term research streams as well as other temporary, but influential, colleagues who contribute in different ways at different times. There is evidence of a maturing of socio-cultural geography embedded in New Zealand universities illustrated in recent publication of texts which incorporate local examples (e.g. Gesler and Kearns 2002; Mansvelt 2004; Panelli 2004) and arguably challenge the observation that there is a hegemonic Anglo-American sensibility in the discipline that easily dismisses New Zealand examples as exceptional or trivial (Berg and Kearns 1998).

Returning to our migration and maritime themes, New Zealand social/cultural geographies draw primarily on past, western, disciplinary ‘navigation systems’ (such as orientations around social needs, services, categories or difference and cultural politics and struggles over identity and place). Yet they also reflect the recurring specificities of a particular place (e.g. successive migrations and social consequences, experiences of a small nation in a globalized world, and insights and challenges from diverse Maori contexts). These types of insights encourage different ‘sailing directions’ that, paraphrasing Curnow (1974), can enlarge our scholarly worlds.

Turning first to some international traditions, this report has shown that constant themes of Anglo-American social and cultural geography resonate in New Zealand research. In particular, the preceding sections have demonstrated that New Zealand social and cultural geographies have been strongly infused by critical perspectives (as scholars have given attention to unequal social relations based on class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality). A variety of theoretical and philosophical differences shape the contrasting scholarship generated by these critical geographers but, as noted in recent French and Spanish reports, feminist approaches have been especially important for invigorating social and cultural analyses. In the New Zealand case, these approaches have stimulated and supported critical gendered and sexualized readings of both urban and rural spaces, and the cultural meanings, embodiments and performances that occur there.

Finally, those ‘directions’ from New Zealand social and cultural geography that may enlarge our professional worlds and geographic practice are at least threefold:

- The constancy of population movement results in a fertile social world where geographers (and their students) can regularly consider, and perhaps in the future integrate, existing foci on demographic change, socio-spatial implications, and politico-cultural tensions.
- The mantra that ‘place matters’ continues to hold currency for a small country in a highly globalized world. Our experiences in this particular location and socio-cultural configuration ‘at the end of the earth’ are particular. While historical geographies of New Zealand’s experience in being globally located are yet to be completed, existing work points to the further possible ways local social and cultural geographies can reflect nuances and divergences from broader processes of restructuring, consumption, migration, and identity formation.
- Maori culture and knowledge provide contrasting traditions and future aspirations that as yet are under-developed. A critique of
New Zealand geography may well show challenging and institutionalized reasons for the slow response to Stokes’ (1987) call for Maori geographies to be developed. However, the possibilities of Maori geographies may yet provide rich new kaupapa (themes, purpose) of great significance within and beyond New Zealand. These possibilities include new insights into indigenous culture–nature intersections and a reconceptualization of self/society–place/space relations. All geography can benefit if such potential is supported in culturally appropriate and well-resourced ways.

**Note**

1 In this review, we refer to the nation by way of only its official name (New Zealand) rather than Aotearoa/New Zealand. The latter double naming of the country is used among some segments of the population and has been used by some geographers to reflect the politics and history of Maori and British colonial struggles and constructions of a national state. However, for some Maori (especially Ngai Tahu tribal members), the term Aotearoa defines a distinct geographic area and not all of the country. Thus, in this paper the country is simply referred to by its common name, New Zealand, to acknowledge these different understandings of Aotearoa, and to record the ongoing ethnic dominance of Pakeha in many sectors of national identity.

**References**


