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Making Resistance Politics: the Opposition to Genetic
Engineering in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

The politics making of genetic engineering resistance in Aotearoa New Zealand involves a complex interplay between a diverse core of movement network actors and a broad, mediated collective identity. The movement's organisational structure and cultural meanings comprise both diversity and cohesion, which enhance each other, making for successful politics making. This thesis demonstrates how these seemingly contradictory movement features were able to coexist. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 18 key activists, this research investigated how the movement was structurally and culturally organised. Previous social movement analyses have tended to separate structure from culture, resulting in one-sided interpretations that have not adequately addressed the role both elements play in making politics. To overcome this shortcoming, this thesis developed a complementary approach to methodology and analysis that drew on social network analysis to investigate organisational structure, and framing to explore meaning-making and the achievement of collective identity. The network structure of the movement is decentralised, non-hierarchical, flexible and complex. This has enabled both diversity (seen in movement sub-groups, strategic and tactical disparities), and coordination (seen in the significant overlap of relational ties and the convergence of actors in mass mobilisations), to exist at the same time. The same kinds of characteristics are evident when looking to framing and movement collective identity. Activists relayed a broad range of oppositions to genetic engineering, but at the same time their concerns were shared at an elementary level, and were posed as challenging common understandings of Aotearoa New Zealand. The movement was therefore deeply engaged with and embedded in the wider cultural context of this country. The characteristics of flexibility and embeddedness displayed in this movement are a powerful combination for movement mobilisation and endurance. Until there is a commercial release of a genetically engineered crop in this country, the potential for future mobilisation remains.

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