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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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Table of Contents

Chapter One

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Politics-making: The GE Resistance Movement of Aotearoa New Zealand | 1 |
| 1.1 GE: Terminology, Significance, Resistance | 3 |
| 1.2 Resistance Through Time: Revolutions, Social Movements, Networks | 11 |
| 1.3 Political Resistance and GE | 15 |
| 1.4 Chapter Outline | 23 |

Chapter Two

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------|----|
| Theorising GE Resistance in Aotearoa New Zealand | 27 |
| 2.1 Politics as Structure | 31 |
| 2.2 Politics as Culture | 37 |
| 2.3 Enter Globalisation | 43 |
| 2.4 The Way Forward | 49 |
| 2.5 Summary and Conclusion | 57 |

Chapter Three

| | |
|------------------------------------------|----|
| Researching GE Resistance: a Methodology | 59 |
| 3.1 Data | 60 |
| 3.2 The Analytical Tools | 72 |
| 3.3 Conclusion | 84 |

Chapter Four

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| A Networked Movement: Multiplicity is its Power. The Big Song Sheet | 85 |
| 4.1 What's in a Name? | 86 |
| 4.2 GE Resistance: a Movement Snapshot | 90 |
| 4.3 Movement Structural Dynamics | 98 |
| 4.4 Tactical Repertoires | 104 |
| 4.5 Unity and Diversity | 108 |
| 4.6 Actors Speak on Organisation and Relationships | 110 |
| 4.7 Conclusion | 124 |

Chapter Five

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Collective Identity: Value Politics. The Same Tune | 129 |
| 5.1 Us and Them | 131 |
| 5.2 Collective Action Frames | 138 |
| 5.3 Master Frames | 154 |
| 5.4 Conclusion | 167 |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter Six | |
| GE Resistance Politics-making: Fluid and Negotiable | 171 |
| 6.1 Methodological and Theoretical Conclusions | 173 |
| 6.2 Structure, Organisation and Networks | 174 |
| 6.3 Culture and Collective identity | 178 |
| 6.4 Future Research | 181 |
| 6.5 Research Limitations | 183 |
| 6.6 Reflections and Futures | 185 |
| | |
| References | 189 |
| | |
| Appendix A | 213 |
| Appendix B | 216 |

List of Figures

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 1. Basic social network structures | 75 |
| Figure 2. Directed nominations of most important movement alliances and relationships (MDS layout) | 92 |
| Figure 3. Individual affiliations with GE resistance organisations (2-mode, MDS layout) | 94 |
| Figure 4. Four central movement group's networks (2-mode, MDS layout) | 96 |
| Figure 5. Four peripheral movement group's networks (2-mode, MDS layout) | 97 |
| Figure 6. Movement individuals and groups 1996 to December 1999 (2-mode, MDS layout) | 99 |
| Figure 7. Movement individuals and groups December 1999 to October 2003 (2-mode, MDS layout) | 100 |
| Figure 8. Movement individuals and groups October 2003 to 2005 (2-mode, MDS layout) | 100 |
| Figure 9. Networks of three 'lawful process' movement activities (2-mode, MDS layout) | 105 |
| Figure 10. Networks of three 'direct-radical' movement activities (2-mode, MDS layout) | 106 |
| Figure 11. Tactical repertoire continuum (2-mode). | 107 |