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THE POLITICS OF NOSTALGIA:
THE PETTY-BOURGEOISIE AND THE EXTREME RIGHT IN NEW ZEALAND

A thesis presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy at
Massey University

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1986

ABSTRACT

From the early 1970s, extreme right-wing groups began to proliferate in New Zealand and to contribute to public debate. These groups represent one response to the growing politicisation of racial and gender issues, a discontent at the trends in modern capitalism and a nostalgia for the unity and certainty that is seen as epitomising the immediate post-war period. Poulantzas identifies these groups as primarily petty-bourgeois in origin and this class link constitutes a central focus of this thesis.

It is argued that the old or traditional petty-bourgeoisie are a declining class fraction who exhibit reactionary tendencies. Their form of petty-commodity production, both rural and urban, is threatened by the development of the corporate economy, exemplified by the interventionist state and the growing size and centralisation of monopoly capital. The resulting decrease in petty-bourgeois positions produces a crisis of confidence as the reproduction of small-scale production is no longer guaranteed. The marginal position of the old petty-bourgeoisie is further confirmed by the absence of political influence. They feel unable to halt the growing 'moral decadence' of recent decades because they lack the political power of capital or labour, or that of expanding class fractions such as the new petty-bourgeoisie. Radical right-wing groups are an expression of these class concerns.

The old petty-bourgeoisie have not always identified with reactionary political organisations. Their support was an important factor in the election of the Labour Government in 1935. But during the 1930s, they articulated an ideology that perceived speculative capital, and Jews, as an important cause in financial decline. This world-view was reproduced intact into the 1970s. At this point, a general economic recession emphasised the problems faced by petty-commodity production and the contribution of the old petty-bourgeoisie to moral debates on 'race', gender and peace issues was increasingly superseded by post-war generations and movements. Also, the

traditional party of this fraction, Social Credit, experienced a change in leadership in 1972 that marked a rejection of 1930s arguments. Extreme right-wing groups were established to articulate petty-bourgeois concerns and to counter weak representational links with conservative political parties.

The ideology and political style of these groups is described in detail. Case studies of the League of Rights, the Country Party and Tax Reduction Integrity Movement/Zenith Applied Philosophy are provided, along with profiles of key activists. The class base of these organisations is confirmed by the contrast with working class neo-fascism and forms of conservatism such as the New Zealand Party. An international comparison involving the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada identifies the specific tendencies of the New Zealand situation.

The final section discusses the prognosis for extreme right-wing groups in a situation of crisis. The analysis centres on three questions: (1) in order to widen its constituency, are alliances with other classes or fractions possible; (2) is mass fascism a possibility; (3) are the old petty-bourgeoisie a significant or authentic social force. The thesis concludes that extreme right-wing groups are an expression of petty-bourgeois revolt and they constitute one of the most important examples of reactionary politics with an impact on contemporary social relations and debates.

PREFACE

Some brief preparatory comments need to be made before proceeding to the body of the text. The first concerns the generation of a data base. Throughout the thesis, there are extensive references to secondary sources such as newspaper items or articles. It may not be immediately obvious that a considerable amount of the data came from primary sources, especially contact with members of the extreme right, interviews with them and attendance at meetings. Material from these sources has been woven into the analysis and the origin is often not identified or clear. Secondly, although this thesis addresses the question of the class bases of extremism in New Zealand, class is taken as read. There is no intention of exploring class in its own right. That was beyond the scope of this project. And finally, my personal attitude towards the subject matter, right-wing extremism, may be gauged indirectly from the analysis but it is very seldom explicit. The extreme right represents a tradition that diverges in its values and beliefs from social democratic culture, and from the liberal values of sociology. The opposed positions of sociologist and extreme right has often meant that the latter have been caricatured in sociology. By that I mean that the complexity and commitment of extreme right-wing politics has been inaccurately portrayed. The aim here was to convey something of the intricacies and richness of this tradition, and to acknowledge the integrity of the people involved. This integrity is acknowledged by simply being accurate and not misrepresenting individuals or events. But 'tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner' is not my attitude. I reject totally the validity of extreme right-wing interpellations and believe them to constitute an impediment to the practice of a liberal democratic system. Equally, however, I do not share the 'bleak pessimism' (Bottomore, 1984: 37) that characterised the Frankfurt School on this same subject, and if sociology can add anything it is to create positive options through competent analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with any undertaking of this size, others have made a major contribution and it would simply have not been possible without their support. There are four people to whom I owe a particular debt. Graeme Fraser and Chris Wilkes have supervised the thesis, and have done so willingly and extremely competently in spite of other substantial commitments. It has been a long and at times difficult project, and I am grateful for their collegial encouragement. Jill Cheer has been involved in typing the material. Her skill and reaction to aspects of the thesis have been very valuable. And Jennifer Crowley has lived with this project as much as I have, and has been a motivator and a companion in a way that no-one else could have. To these people, and to my parents, I am deeply grateful.

There are others who have provided help, advice and information, and have actually made the collection of data possible. To the following, my thanks: Michael Banton; Paul Barcham; Stan Barrett; Karren Beanland; British Council; Harvey Buchman; Graeme Coleman; Michael Danby and Australia/Israel Publications, Melbourne; Josh Easby; Ken Gott; HART; Wally Hirsh and the New Zealand Jewish Council; Humanities and Social Sciences Research Fund, Massey University; Chris Husbands; Jerry Gable and Searchlight, London; Dr Jacob Gewirtz and the Board of Deputies of British Jews, London; Paul Gordon and the Runnymede Trust, London; Mike Hannah; Glenys Jennings; Francesca Klug; Derrick Knight; Michael Law; Isi Leibler; Rod Lingard; Ernest Markham; Lesley Max; Bob Miles; Michael May and the Institute for Jewish Affairs, London; David McLoughlin; David Pearson; Penny Poutu; Race Relations Conciliator's Office staff; Bert Roth; Gill Seidel; Pat Shannon; Paul Smith; Tainui Stephens; Stephen Stratford; Toby Truell; Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies, Melbourne; Wiener Library, London; Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies, Los Angeles; Vernon Wright.

I also have to acknowledge that help was provided by the subjects of this study, members of New Zealand's extreme right.

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