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IMAGES AND VISIONS OF SOCIETY IN THE SELECTED FICTION OF THREE NEW ZEALAND WRITERS

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

Shelagh Frances Cox
1981
But man is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world.

Karl Marx:
'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'
1843.
Images and visions of New Zealand society, as they appear in
selected works of fiction by John A. Lee, Frank Sargeson and Robin Hyde,
are the prime concern of the thesis. The fiction selected for analysis
broadly encompasses the decade 1930 to 1940.

The dominant image is of New Zealand as the respectable society.
However, Lee, Sargeson and Hyde emotionally reject the bourgeois-
puritan world they portray in their fiction; all three writers seek
alternative societies in which the human qualities they see as denied
in bourgeois-puritan life can find expression. The world of the
dispossessed, a world seen particularly clearly in the light of the
depression of the Depression, plays a large part in the fictional
images cast by each writer; sometimes it is depicted as a world
separated from the respectable society, sometimes it is depicted as a
world inevitably locked into the dominant and respectable way of life.
However, none of the three writers can find an imaginative resting-place
in the world of the dispossessed as an alternative way of life.

Furthermore, the writers cannot extend their images of society
as they experience it into a Utopian vision of an ideal society which
is attainable within the existing social structure. The failure to
create a practicable alternative persists in spite of a powerful
interest, shared by all three writers, in the social world as they feel
it ought to be as well as in the social world as it is.

In their quest for alternatives, two of the three writers create
visions of potential societies, that is of societies seen as lying
beyond the boundaries of the existing social structure. These are not
realisable Utopias, as they would be if they were practicable
alternatives; instead, they are wish-fulfilment Utopias. In other
words they are compensatory in that they embody values repressed in
orthodox society.

The analytical approach adopted in the thesis consistently views
both images and visions of the writers' imagined worlds as either direct or indirect portrayals of the New Zealand society to which the writers belong and which, in the end, shapes their fictional creations. Ultimately, it is argued, the writers' Utopias, like their images of existing society, lack the imaginative and social strength to stand on their own.
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