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NEW TIMES IN NEW ZEALAND ?

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ABSTRACT

There is widespread agreement that New Zealand, among other advanced nations, has experienced major economic, political and cultural change in recent times. Yet the causes, the extent and the implications of these changes are still very much contested. The 'New Times' thesis has offered one interpretation of change which suggests a transformational shift has occurred following the 'breakdown' of the 'postwar settlement'. This breakdown is seen as a result of the declining influence of structural forces where the effect has been the emergence of a society characterised by diversity and difference.

In this thesis, I critically assess the New Times position, and in doing so, contemplate its ability to help clarify and define more precisely the meaning of New Zealand's recent change. I conclude that while the New Times project is ultimately ineffectual in providing a sound theoretical and empirical account of contemporary developments, it does usefully highlight the need, particularly in New Zealand, for a new approach to account for changing social formations.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1984, New Zealand has experienced widespread changes throughout all spheres of society. This has seen the emergence of a new era in New Zealand's development which has in the process generated extensive social upheaval, resulting in a protracted mood of uncertainty. Given the general level of apprehension and perplexity that is characterising contemporary New Zealand society as it contemplates its ongoing insecurity in the global economy, a new system of political representation and the uneasy development of a post-colonial national identity, this thesis is an attempt to provide a clearer indication of what the changes since 1984 have meant. This is achieved through defining the *extent* of change that has occurred more precisely, and reflecting on what these changes mean for future economic, political, and cultural developments in New Zealand.

In doing so, the thesis offers an evaluation of the reformations of 'Left' thinking, in light of the perceived transformational changes experienced in *all* the advanced nations in the past decades. In particular, it assesses the contentions put forward by the New Times project, and considers the possibility of applying New Times to New Zealand. While providing a descriptive account of recent change in capitalist society, New Times is in essence a 'theoretically' and 'politically' engaged project which has been most often associated with offering a sharp departure from conventional Left thinking to help explain the increasing complexity and diversity of modern capitalism.

The first chapter is concerned with outlining the New Times debate in some detail, contextualising its origins, motives and theoretical orientations. A critique is then made of the project which draws from some of the critical responses to New Times' major theoretical departures. This is followed by a brief comparison of the changes associated with Britain and New Zealand in order to assess the potential

for using New Times style analysis to explain New Zealand's experience of change.

In considering the efforts of various commentaries to make sense of New Zealand's transformations, the main issue in assessing the viability of New Times is whether New Zealand's unique, regional and national characteristics can possibly fit such a general, abstract explanation of change. I conclude here that despite the importance and the continual influence of historic developments, New Zealand as much as any other advanced nation is able to be contemplated in such a way. Indeed, regardless of the apparent theoretical and empirical inaccuracies of New Times, its explanation of change in a holistic fashion does offer something that can be used in trying to establish what kind of socio-political formation New Zealand is, or could become.

The remaining chapters are concerned with looking at specific dimensions of social structure and political change, namely the economy, politics and cultural identity, assessing both the level of change that has occurred in these areas, and the degree to which a New Times explanation convincingly represents that change. For each of these related components an overview of the general New Times position is given, followed by a detailed consideration of New Zealand's experience in these particular areas. The second chapter is concerned with the economy, paying particular attention to changes in the production process, work organisation and the labour market. The third chapter considers changes in political life and consciousness, specifically in voting behaviour, the profile of political parties and political culture in general.

The fourth chapter considers changes in the socio-cultural sphere, and in particular assesses the New Times contention that cultural identities are no longer fixed and determined by structural forces, rather that they are increasingly chosen and fragmentary. While this element was not initially a part of the main New Times line of thought, it is an area where the New Times argument corresponds with a

wider recent literature articulating the decline of nationalism and national culture, and positioning the growth of more hybrid cultural formations. Put this way, it is reasonable to associate the 'new cultural politics of difference' with the New Times project, and by extension, with the important issue of New Zealand's engagement with a post-colonial future.

Overall, the position I have taken in this thesis is one of guarded scepticism towards the interpretation of change made by the New Timers. At the same time, in recognising that *some* quite significant changes have occurred in New Zealand (among other advanced nations), I find the New Times paradigm useful in the ongoing attempt to more precisely conceptualise these shifts, and in the matter of reconstituting an intelligently robust and popular style of radical politics.