Interwoven Journeys: Comparative Reflections on the Study of Aotearoa New Zealand

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Home Thoughts

I do not dream of Sussex downs,

or quaint old England's quaint old towns.

I think of what may yet be seen,

in Johnsonville or Geraldine.

This poem by Denis Glover, the New Zealand poet, written in 1936, would have been prophetic if I had read it on my flight to the Pacific in 1974. But Glover was asserting an independence from the United Kingdom (UK) that could never mature entirely for me, even if relocation proved successful. Those Downs were close to the village where I spent my youth, and Geraldine, a delightful township in the South Island, soon became another home from home since a cousin lived there. As for Johnsonville, it was just down the road from where I lived in Wellington after my arrival. However, much like the poem, its career importance was not evident then.

In 1973, I taught Sociology at the University of Exeter in the UK. It was my first appointment, and I had only a two-year contract. The previous occupant of my office, whose courses I was offering, had gone overseas. Given that it was only a temporary job and there was no prospect of extending my stay in Devon, my Head of Department advised me to look around for other possibilities. I vividly recall him saying: ‘Things are

[1] My thanks to the Editor-in-chief of the journal, Dr. Jatinder Mann for his suggestions.

very tight in the UK, so why don't you consider the colonies? You could get in touch with Thorns[2]. I believe he is doing rather well in New Zealand.'

After some prevarication, I followed his advice, and the following year, my predecessor met me at Auckland Airport on my way to a position at Victoria University of Wellington that proved to be enduring. If this sounds like yet another story of serendipity, it is. However, as my later research on the experience of English migrants journeying from the UK confirmed, settlement is theoretically, politically, and personally far from straightforward. Consequently, any account of my professional career interweaves with private journeys of discovery.

For example, my national identity remains an intriguing enigma. When I arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand, the local brand of multiculturalism differed from its namesake in the UK and was not formally recognised, like in Australia. In contrast, biculturalism, which had barely arrived officially, varied significantly from its Anglo-French version in Canada. As the Australian historian John Hirst pithily observed, all these '"isms" "make ethnic origin into destiny".'[3] My research illustrated the point, and my life moved in new ethnonational directions after I migrated. On hearing my accent, most New Zealanders saw me as working class and English. In short, a typical Pom. And when faced with that proverbial question, 'Where are you from?' many inquirers expected me to give a Home Counties (shades of Glover) or London regional reply. Yet outward appearances, as we all know, can be deceptive. Only one of my grandparents came from England (three being Scots or Welsh), and their class allegiances conflicted. My mother came from

[2] David Thorns, who became Professor in Sociology at Canterbury University, a co-author and life-long friend.
[3] John Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (Black Inc., 2009), 149.

Glasgow, while my father was from rural Shropshire. She had authentic proletarian credentials from a family of shipyard workers. Like his father, he was a gardener working on an estate, although he eventually moved into horticultural self-employment. Mum was a staunch Labour voter, but Dad was far coyer about his political allegiances. When I went to Leicester University as a mature student in 1968 and enrolled in a BA Social Studies course majoring in Sociology, I was introduced to Howard Newby's thoughts (with Colin Bell) on community.[4] I later read his book on 'deferential' agricultural workers,[5] which helped me understand some of my father's attitudes and proved useful when exploring small-scale capitalism in Aotearoa New Zealand. At Leicester, I also learnt an academic vocabulary that made sense of my accent and how it became even more interesting when acquiring a tinge of Kiwi twang. The latter never disguised my British origins in Aotearoa New Zealand but occasionally did in the UK.

New Zealand and other settler societies, except for the United States of America, Israel, and South Africa, were hardly touched on in Leicester syllabuses. Nonetheless, the excellent teaching department, which included Tony Giddens, Norbert Elias, and many other sociologists who went on to occupy senior positions in a burgeoning discipline in the UK and Australasia, instilled a comparative historical perspective that remained throughout my career. The first signs are discernible in my Leicester Ph.D. thesis, which started with a simple local inquiry that turned into a far more expansive venture. Namely, why were so-called 'Asians' and 'West Indians' so different in the form and level of their political activism in the face of shared minority prejudice and discrimination in a city where the white supremacist National Front emerged? What

[4] Colin Bell and Howard Newby, *Community Studies* (Routledge, 1971)
[5] Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker* (Allen Lane, 1977).

began as a modest community study into diverse types of voluntary association finished as an over-ambitious attempt to grapple with various influences encompassing large-scale geographical journeys and lengthy historical stories. Both entailed unravelling complex global family, religious, and political networks. This focus on South Asia and the Caribbean did not lead me to dwell on the peculiarities of Australasia and Canada. However, it encouraged an interest in the historical sweep of the British Empire's tentacles that remain with me today.

When I first arrived at Victoria, I thought my students would know far more than I did about their country's socio-historical origins. So, I looked forward to them assisting me in getting up to speed quickly. I was teaching Introductory Sociology and a course on Social Inequality, and I hoped to intermix local and overseas material. However, I was surprised to find that, in many cases, they were better acquainted with British institutions than their own. Indeed, I learnt much of their schooling, and even university teaching had something in common with the Anglo bias I knew existed in the Caribbean. I was also bemused to find there was no course specifically on Aotearoa New Zealand in the History Department, where the reasons their students found other countries more exciting were fiercely debated. Could this be simply explained by colonialism? Undoubtedly, in part, but this seemed a facile explanation for what proved to be far more complex linkages between internal and external relations of adaptation, resistance, and domination. [OBJ]

What questions most struck me after I arrived in the Pacific? I soon experienced class debates that, in some ways, resembled familiar UK ones. Yet they had a distinctive Antipodean flavour that posed thought-provoking conundrums. Like other

observers, I noticed the mismatch between a capitalist society with visible stratified features and a frequent disavowal of class relations among many New Zealanders. Historical and literary sources were often as illuminating as sociological and political studies in searches for explanations. Hence, the cross-disciplinary contacts I cultivated at Victoria proved highly profitable. My community study of Johnsonville[6], which examined the transformation of a small township into a Wellington suburb over more than a century, bolstered relations with local historians, including Miles Fairburn and Erik Olssen. Both were open to sociological theorising and using quantitative methods to complement their expertise in archival sources. Given his links with academics pursuing similar studies overseas, I was fortunate to become involved in Erik's groundbreaking Caversham study, which further enlarged my Australian and North American contacts.

Critical issues that the Johnsonville study highlighted continued to fascinate me, including what we mean by egalitarianism, especially in settler societies. How do conventions of equal social regard like mateship and 'the fair go' coexist with visible unequal rewards and outcomes? And in what way do personal, often intimate, inclusive relations persist despite observable widening public differences in status? Such issues inevitably move, with regrettable jargon, into intersectional spaces and times. More simply, in terms of my journeys, an interest in class relations inevitably confronted broader questions about hierarchy and how it affects divisions within and between people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Consequently, my original interest in ethnic and national relations, which remained prominent in much of my teaching, returned to the

[6] David Pearson, *Johnsonville: Change and Continuity in a New Zealand Township* (Allen & Unwin, 1980).

forefront of my research. Nevertheless, a decade and a half of residence passed before I felt confident enough fully to express my thoughts on the origins of ethnic conflict in New Zealand[7]

Frequent visits to Australia and Canada increasingly influenced my work, two of which were particularly noteworthy. An exchange teaching half-year in the Sociology Department at La Trobe University, Melbourne and an ongoing relationship with several staff members and postgrads, including Peter Beilharz and the Thesis Eleven group, sharpened my theoretical thinking and broadened my knowledge of Australian perspectives. It also strengthened my view that the benefits of comparative research ought to overshadow persistent national rivalries or signs of indifference that often-inhibited academic intercourse across the Tasman. I taught an ethnic relations course at La Trobe and found the students attracted to assessing their own and my new home. But what was conspicuous was the lack of perceivable direct contact between its original inhabitants and newcomers in the city. There were some Koori students, but the multicultural flavour of the campus was much more apparent. This lack of intimate proximity differed markedly from my Wellington experience, where Māori were often neighbours and kin.

A Visiting Scholarship at the Institute of Economic Research at Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John’s was also memorable. The Award required me to spend time at other universities before being based in St. John's. Stimulating visits to UBC, McGill University, and York University, Toronto, preceded a more extended sojourn at Memorial. They enabled me to converse directly with academics across

[7] David Pearson, *A Dream Deferred* (Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, 1990).

several disciplines and had a lasting influence on subsequent work. I was already familiar with the publications of, for example, Alan Cairns, John A. Hall, and Robert Paine, but having personal discussions with them was invaluable. These sessions touched on citizenship, multiculturalism, and the relations between First Nations and immigrant minorities set against 'the French fact' and Canada's diverse 'majority'. Not all these interactions were with faculty or students. At a rally in Montreal addressed by a Cree leader, I had an opportunity to talk to him about the Aotearoa New Zealand situation and the Treaty of Waitangi. He acknowledged the strength of Māori activism and how a broadly common language, similar iwi and hapu (tribal and sub-tribal) sociocultural mores, and a universally signed foundational document differed appreciably from the Canadian situation. However, he said he did not face unceasing political and legal disagreements about the meaning of Treaty documents. Endless wars on words often detract from deeds was his prescient comment.

The ISER scholarship made me even more aware of the dangers of generalities that area and period specialists rightly cautioned against. However, it also reinforced my belief that holistic theoretical and empirical views of settler societies and their histories were a productive avenue for enhancing my personal and academic understanding. Let alone achieving meaningful political solutions to persistent power imbalances and social inequalities. Carefully selected historical case studies still were a fruitful compromise between more tightly circumscribed time and space analyses and expansive global or world system approaches.[8]

[8] See, for example, the contributions, including my own, in Jasper M. Trautsch, ed., *Civic Nationalisms in Global Perspective* (Routledge, 2019).

Reflecting on my various journeys towards an abiding interest in Aotearoa New Zealand, I remain unsure if my explorations of its social history through a comparative lens changed my views or whether my views changed and then my teaching, research, and writing. My national identity is equally embryonic. In 1976, I wrote ‘British’ on a New Zealand census form. By the 1980s, with literally no ceremony, I had become a New Zealand citizen. At this time, with some hesitation, like many local-born, I ticked the ‘European New Zealand’ census label provided, although I knew it was a debatable code name. Despite misgivings post-Brexit, I wrote in ‘British New Zealander’ on the last form that I completed. If this civic episode reveals some ethnonational vacillation, more incontrovertible is how the avuncular advice of my colleague in Exeter set me off on a journey to a place that proved to be an absorbing centre from which to study the feats and foibles of differing peoples. I penned these words a few weeks after thousands, Māori, and non-Māori, marched on the New Zealand Parliament to protest an attempt by the right-wing ACT Party to hold a referendum on the meaning of 'Treaty Principles'. An action that many rightly saw as a politically opportunistic move to weaken or nullify Indigenous Treaty rights. Those who took part in the hikoi (protest march), particularly younger generations than my own, give one hope that increasingly New Zealanders, citizens or otherwise, are comfortable with the prospect of living in a cosmopolitan and independent Aotearoa. Their schooling now contains considerable local content, often including te reo, and New Zealand History courses are a staple at local universities. Like Glover many decades ago, the UK is not home for them. Yet the volume of misinformed rhetoric, slogans, myths, and counter-myths influencing current debate from all sides of

the political spectrum about so-called ‘race relations’ still provokes pessimism. We continue to live in states of unease.

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