Trouble with Social Cohesion: the geographies and politics of Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand went into strict lockdown on March 25th 2020. The government's policy was to seek to prevent the coronavirus reaching our shores. National togetherness was key– we were repeatedly told that 'we were all in it together' and exhorted to play our part in defeating the virus as part of a 'team of five million'. To collective joy, Covid was stopped at the border. In the summer of 2020-21 New Zealand seemed the envy of the world. Live rugby matches with real crowds were beamed across global TV networks. As one banner announced to the rest of the world: "Wish you were here". As we write (in mid-October 2021) Auckland faces its third month of lockdown and the government strategy is now to suppress the virus. Cases are trending upwards, with Auckland at the centre. There is talk of 'learning to live with the virus'.

In September 2020, six months after New Zealand first went into 'lockdown' we drafted – but did not attempt to publish - a review of *He Oranga Hou,* a report produced by the newly established *Centre for Informed Futures* (Koi Tu) at the University of Auckland. Subtitled 'Social cohesion in a post-Covid world' the report was the first extended academic commentary on the sociology of New Zealand's experience of the pandemic, its writing led by two of New Zealand's most prominent public academics, sociologist Paul Spoonley and Sir Peter Gluckman, former PMCSA and Director of Koi Tu.. Echoing the widely accepted view that defeating Covid-19 had been a collective effort, it attributed the success to an assumed 'social cohesiveness'. At the time, we (Lewis and Morgan) privately questioned this reading and the report's failure to engage with its own conceptual architecture - notions of 'society', 'resilience', 'nation', and 'social cohesion'. We thought it abrogated the responsibility of social science scholars to question critically, rather than dress up widely accepted common-sense in academic terms. The report's enthusiastic acceptance of a future for New Zealand' that stressed integration and belonging required analysis.

A year later, we think there is an urgent need to acknowledge that using the pandemic to declare a socially cohesive nation as a platform for futures thinking was a mistake. Lockdown 2021 has re-exposed the hard social divisions cuddled over by the teddy bears in windows presented by Koi Tu as evidence of social cohesion. As the real topographies of the pandemic emerge, divisions have become apparent in the incidence of exposure to Covid, the geography of risk, and their underlying inequalities. Political actors are now targeting the fault lines of social difference and inequality. Yet, critical academics remain largely silent, journalists seek comment from the usual experts who tweak familiar metaphors, and Koi Tu is doubling down on its assertions (Gluckman 2021). Depressingly, deeper analyses of New Zealand's Covid experience is more likely to be found in the quality international press than at home. At this time we are minded to complete and publish our unfinished critique. In what follows, we trouble the social cohesion argument and its metaphorical architecture of togetherness..

The trouble with social cohesion

It is a compelling story: New Zealand's 'team of five million' united against Covid-19', eliminating the virus, to the applause of a watching world. The Prime Minister – Jacinda Ardern – received international plaudits for her caring approach and empathetic communication, and this was a source, for many, of national pride. The problem is: it is just a story, and we think that one of the roles of academics is to maintain a measure of critical distance from the claims of politicians and the media, even in times of acute crisis. That is why we were concerned to read in *He Oranga Hou* that: (1) New Zealand demonstrates high levels of social cohesiveness; (2) that this helps explain New Zealand's initial success in battling Covid; and (3) sustaining and enhancing social cohesion should be a collective priority. Propositions one and two were used to sustain proposition three. Prioritizing social cohesion as both a 'tradition' and as a national goal require that the concept stands up to

critical examination. However, *He Oranga Hou*'s use of the concept raises more questions than answers:

(1) The report fails to define and explain what it means by 'society' and the 'social'. A shared understanding of these concepts cannot be assumed. For instance, Elliott and Turner (2013) trace three dominant traditions of thinking about society in sociological thought: society as structure, society as solidarity, and society as creation. *He Oranga Hou* adopts a view of *society as solidarity*, stressing concern for others, care of the self, civic bonding and communal integration. The 'good' society is one characterised by strong bonds that tie people together - a 'stickiness' that can become more cohesive through acts of creation. In its repetitive use of the collective 'we', *He Oranga Hou* invokes an imagined community, one that is 'all in it together'. However, even if 'we' think that this is an accurate description of social reality, researchers might be expected to explain their conceptual choices.

(2) This failure to make clear the basis for conceptual choices is also evident in the report's notion of 'resilience', a biological concept imported into sociology from ecology via psychology. Talk of a resilient society, however, is not value free: it tends to smooth over many of the structures that divide society – individuals and communities are to adapt to new realities, rather than seek to change that reality. Re-iterating our previous point: it *is* hard to avoid metaphors in descriptions and explanations of society and social change, but we can at least explain how and why we are using them. This is especially important at a time of profound uncertainty.

(3) Even the central term in the report - *social cohesion* – is not fully explained. There's a vague explanation for why it adopts 'social cohesion' in preference to 'social inclusion', a term that appeared in social policy in the 1990s as centre-left governments sought belatedly to shoulder some responsibility for those citizens left behind by globalization Whilst social inclusion implies the existence of an 'other' - social exclusion, and invites discussion about the exact form that an inclusive society might take, social cohesion focuses the achievement of a state of connectedness through bonds including social relations, individual and group practices, and perceptions.

We are not claiming that a focus on social cohesion is not legitimate. But it demands interpretation in the context of any specific use, and a defence of why it is more productive or helpful than focusing on other structuring forces.

The trouble with geography

Epidemics are inseparable from geography. Starting at one point, they spread elsewhere. Some places are spared for the moment, able to make plans and marshal resources. Social topographies also play a role. In 2020 and the first half of 2021, Covid-19 was largely thwarted at the NZ border, and then eradicated at point-specific sites where it was detected. People were locked into place and the virus with them, which meant that everyone else could carry on relatively normally. Indeed, some commentators remarked on how the lockdown offered a welcome break from the rhythms of economic life. The novelty and clement weather meant that we could pretend that we *were* 'all in it together' in March and April 2020. The state's undertaking to provide income support meant that many were able to wait out the inconvenience, while new technologies allowed others to work from home.

Of course, the 2020 lockdowns impacted people differently. Families in poorer neighbourhoods or isolated in rural areas had different experiences. Many had their daily lives more severely impacted. The elderly and those with ill-health faced greater direct risks from the virus and suffered associated anxieties. Those in more crowded dwellings were less able to work or learn from home. Front-line

health workers bore the brunt of dealing with the first wave of the pandemic. Others working in low-wage occupations at and around the borders or at MIQ facilities were less well acknowledged. Jobs and businesses were lost in international tourism, hospitality, airport services, public transport, and regional high street retail. The taps were turned off on low-cost, short-term labour and on the departure of un- or underemployed young NZ emigrants, while NZ citizens abroad looked to return home. Foodbanks and emergency benefits became a reality for many, while social housing waitlists increased.

But much of this could be tolerated and seen as temporary as long as the virus did not take hold, the narratives of national togetherness were well rehearsed, and the government's crisis management was effective. However, the arrival of the Delta variant and the prospect of a long period of disruption now direct attention to the way that the virus has inserted itself into a highly uneven human geography and is exacerbating and widening existing divisions. The more contagious Delta variant impacts disproportionately on communities with lower vaccination rates and fewer opportunities to work from home or 'socially distance' within and beyond households. As the government backs away from an elimination strategy, differences in risk profiles among communities across the country become even more salient. Had *He Oranga Hou* made use of a more structural view of society, it would have analysed how the virus sought out the fault lines and striations of a stratified society, as poorer New Zealanders, many of them Māori or from Pacific origins, find themselves in a number of these losing social categories.The New Zealand behind the surface of teddy bears and talk of the team of 5 million is a New Zealand where politics matters.

The trouble with politics

The 'all in it together' narrative that underpinned government strategy and *He Organa Hou* prioritises social cohesion as *the* key indicator that will allow the nation to prosper in a post-COVID world. Once it is decided that social cohesion is the goal, all that remains is to erect a technical and institutional framework to promote it. That is the limit to political ambition in the report. Thus, the report stresses the need for transparent and responsive leadership, regular and transparent information flows, the assessment and evaluation of policy levers, and uncovering 'what works' by devising ways to measure impacts on social cohesion. This is a case of applying a social science that sees its role as supporting the actions of governments and the state - a model of uncritical policy work. It is as if the debates about the general crisis of the state of the 1970s or New Zealand's colonial and neoliberal state forms of the 1970s-90s never happened.

Efforts to gloss over social divisions by forging a post-political alignment of technocratic reason and practice with inclusive ethics and ideology always fall prey to empirical realities. Little more than a year after its publication, the report's 'politics' look decidedly shaky, undone by the *realpolitik* of a crisis of accumulation and reproduction. In late September 2021, as the government's toolkit of testing, surveillance, vaccination, isolation, and levels of shut-down failed to eliminate the Delta variant of coronavirus, former Prime Minister John Key reopened the politics of the pandemic. Putting the teddy bears firmly to bed and picking at the fault lines at the heart of NZ political economy, Key invoked an oppositional coalition of self-interests between those who are stuck overseas, 'brave' small-business people, those prevented from visiting sick and dying relatives, those who just want to get on with it.

Whatever we make of Key's politics, we must admit that when read against Koi Tu 's panglossian view of a socially cohesive New Zealand, Key's argument had a certain refreshing honesty. He sought to appeal to a 'real' New Zealand that wants to get back to the business of making money and enjoying privilege. Of course, this is not the only real New Zealand. More troubling for those who would deny the politics of the pandemic, Māori and Pacific voices have become more insistent and more prominent as the strategy has changed to vaccination and suppression . Māori and Pacific vaccination rates are lower as at October 15 2021 and their vulnerability to Covid higher, for reasons

to do with the intersectionality of poverty, housing, educational unevenness, and levels of alienation from the national social project. Not to mention, in the noisy fringe, a vocal coalition of the disaffected and marginalised against vaccination.

Why does this matter?

Readers may wonder why we have resurfaced our critical reaction to a report published a year ago. Our answer is that these arguments about societal cohesion and resilience are even more urgent as New Zealand attempts to fight the next wave of Covid (Baldwin, 2021). The wider threats to the value and role of critique, the disappearance of critical political-economy in New Zealand public discourse, the contemporary conjuncture of domestic and global politics, and attempts to come up with 'technical fixes' all give our critique an important immediacy. So what are the enduring issues?

First, there is the question of 'evidence'. Koi Tu has been vigorous in promoting itself as the 'go-to' place for evidence-based policy. The authors write that 'transparency around the evidence base for key decisions is critically important if they are to be accepted by the public', insisting that evidence is what will allow social science to become a central arm of policy management. But what is that evidence in the case of social cohesion? People putting out teddy bears, self-reporting that they trust the government, and Google tracking data which shows that they complied with the lockdown. It is hard to take this seriously.

Second, if we are generous, we can perhaps view the report as an overly hasty attempt to contribute a social science voice to policy debate and make an impact. Unfortunately, in speaking for social science and in its claim to define New Zealand society in terms of one dimension, it limits the space for other perspectives. Less positively still, it is an example of what happens when policy-focused academics fail to do the conceptual work needed to contribute in constructive ways to the debate on societal futures. The report offers a severely limited version of 'the sociological imagination'.

Following on from this, a key tenet of 'Futures Studies' is the need to explore a wide range of alternatives and explore the types of societal transformations that render them possible, probable or preferable - and to ask 'whose futures' (Murtola and Walsh 2020). As the idea that New Zealand is socially cohesive falls apart, Koi Tu continues to cling to it. Its latest report (Gluckman 2021) links a restatement of a utopian view of a national future centred on resilience and cohesion to a series of sweeping declarations about the need to rebuild the global commons and establish a new geo-political order. Titled *Transitions, transformations and tradeoffs*, it warns of threats to social cohesion and resilience in New Zealand from a suite of global 'social, technological, economic, environmental and geopolitical transitions and transformations'. Social cohesion remains the goal, morally and as a platform for mobilising national resources collectively to achieve competitive advantage in an uncertain world. All fine in the circuit of global policy conferences where these pronouncements tend ordinarily to be made, but back in the real world of New Lynn, Albany, Otahuhu and countless other suburbs where people eye each other warily through their face coverings, there are few signs of the type of social cohesion imagined in He Oranga Hou.

We need to move on. There is a need for academic work that directs attention to the communities and nation addressing the pandemic and how these are constructed, and holds key political narratives, their conceptual architecture, and the work they perform to an account. That is the role of the critical social sciences in the pandemic: to analyse why we are not all in Covid together in the same place and the same way (the pandemic has geographies as does society), and to resist easy narratives about the existence of social cohesion and wistful narrations of the nation. Academics should not serve and bolster the interests of the state or declare the world and seek to bend it to a single core set of moral values or principles. There is much work to do to live up to the imposing

challenge Koi Tu poses itself: to be the site of 'authentic deliberation to build a coherent sense of direction'.

References

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