The Utopian Dreams of a Poet

Critical reflections on the meritocratic conditions for development of a Knowledge Age in New Zealand

Helen Richardson
Lecturer
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
Information Systems & Technology Section
School of Information & Social Sciences
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
86 Wyndrum Avenue, Lower Hutt, New Zealand
Telephone:+64 4 913 5455
Facsimile: +64 4 913 5727
helen.richardson@openpolytechnic.ac.nz

Darrell Bennetts
Adjunct Lecturer
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
Social Sciences
School of Information & Social Sciences
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
86 Wyndrum Avenue, Lower Hutt, New Zealand
Facsimile: +64 4 913 5727
darrell.bennetts@openpolytechnic.ac.nz

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
New Zealand has often been called Arcadia, a “land of milk and honey”, or “Godzone”. Many tourists who have visited our country will reflect that it is populated with irrepressibly optimistic, friendly, happy and creative individuals (Florida, 2004). This paper will utilise recent critical social research to show that through a collective drive for social and economic progress, New Zealanders have had a long-standing motivation for the realisation of individual, business and social utopias. These utopian aspirations have a corollary to theories of the knowledge age today. For one contemporary Management Theorist, Peter Drucker saw a bright future for all workers in the later decades of the 20th century with the aid of computers. But, contrary to Drucker’s predicted ideal, American-led globalized capitalism has in recent years served to indenture cohorts of knowledge workers, rather than liberate them from their electronic chains. For many critics, the outsourcing of ICT work to India (for example) makes this specialised labour analogous to the historical blue-collar work of textile mills (Witkowski, 2003). The ability of the current knowledge age to transform Western societies into individualised utopias, in Drucker’s particular interpretation at least, has been made wanting. Domestically, local journalists are increasingly claiming fashion incubators, ad agencies and start-up creative business clusters as vanguard knowledge age New Zealand industries (Perrott, 2005, pp19-20; Moore, 2004, pp.18-20; Gray, 2002, pp19-21). Stories such as these draw upon a now familiar stock of promised benefits for our economy and society. In partnership with local and central government, within a favourable policy environment, and due in no small part to the creative enterprise and hard work of individual visionaries, the promise of the knowledge age may be moving from beyond the boundary of imagination to now perhaps be within the reach of those who seek it. This paper returns attention to the question of worldwide homogenization of local cultures that are a purported consequence of Globalization. We will argue that a hitherto under recognised set of local conditions must be considered in any discussion of the net effects of Globalization upon New Zealand.

Our future potential successes in Knowledge Age enterprise stands upon several constituent cultural values that are commonplace among New Zealanders. In terms of our production and consumption of globalized culture, manufactured commodities and services these are values that underpin our engagement with others within a globalized setting. We have for more than a century been – and today remain – a nation of shopkeepers; a nation of pragmatic creative thinkers, and one also that has a particular resonance with its unique landform. Recast in more contemporary language, New Zealanders are a breed of grounded, entrepreneurial, creative, globally oriented people. These statements are not intended to be taken as astute patriotism. If the hegemony of globalised capitalism today makes widespread the modernity of an American Empire, New Zealand is a model alternative modernity within that paradigm. But we can make no claim to exceptionality in this matter, as claims to alternative modernity can be easily made by other nations also: India, Australia, Singapore, Japan and South Korea in the very least today.

It is not overstatement to suggest that New Zealand society has always been reconciled to an Imperial yoke. In our foundation years, the global hegemon was, of course, Great Britain. And within a paradigm of British Imperial modernity, New Zealand barely figured. William Pember Reeves, the founding author of 20th century New Zealand history, has succinctly depicted our place in the British Imperial
hierarchy (1898, p.2): ‘Taken possession of by an English navigator, whose action, at first adopted, was afterwards reversed by his country's rulers, [New Zealand] was only annexed at length by the English Government which did not want it, to keep it from the French who did’. If the colony did not at first figure on a global scale, its role as a social laboratory would soon have visiting scholars make pronouncements for the ‘New Zealandisation’ of the world (Demarest Lloyd, 1903). The radical political reforms of the social laboratory generated social values that have underpinned New Zealand social life for nearly a century: the principle of fair pay for a fair job, universal franchise, superannuation, principled land policies that maintain no single group should control access to what are otherwise ‘public’ lands, and an ethos that communities would look after those who cannot look after themselves. As the historian Keith Sinclair has recalled (1963, p.1), the Liberal government that implemented these policies ‘aimed at greatness in a moral sense’.

They wanted a society which cared for all of its members, including the young and the old, the neglected child, and the female factory worker. In 1900 New Zealand, with a population of less than 800,000, was nevertheless a great country. With some of the Australian colonies, it stood for something of central importance to humanity, as was widely recognized. It was studied and visited by many of the most distinguished reformers, political thinkers, and leaders in the European world.

As a member of that colonial Liberal government, William Pember Reeves was a significant architect of these policies. He was an engaged intellectual whose drive arose from a private passion for state socialism. By way of a small insight into his Weltanschauung, he often gave expression to this passion through poetry, for example in this New Zealand-centred alternative for the then national anthem God Save the Queen:

**New Zealand**

GOD girt her about with the surges
And winds of the masterless deep,
Whose tumult uprouses and urges
Quick billows to sparkle and leap;
He filled from the life of their motion
Her nostrils with breath of the sea,
And gave her afar in the ocean
A citadel free.

Her never the fever-mist shrouding,
Nor drought of the desert may blight,
Nor pall of dun smoke overclouding
Vast cities of clamorous night,
But the voice of abundance of waters,
Cold rivers that stay not or sleep,
Greets children, the sons and the daughters
Of light and the deep.

Lo! here where each league hath its fountains
In isles of deep fern and tall pine,
And breezes snow-cooled on the mountains,
Or keen from the limitless brine,
See men to the battlefield pressing
To conquer one toe—the stern soil,
Their kingship in labour expressing,
Their lordship in toil. 
Though young they are heirs of the ages, 
Though few they are freemen and peers, 
Plain workers—yet sure of the wages 
Slow Destiny pays with the years. 
Though least they and latest their nation, 
Yet this they have won without sword— 
That Woman with Man shall have station, 
And Labour be lord. 
The winds of the sea and high heaven 
Speed pure to her kissed by the foam; 
The steeds of her ocean undriven, 
Unbitted and riderless roam, 
And clear from her lamp newly lighted 
Shall stream o'er the billows upcurled 
A light as of wrongs at length righted, 
Of hope to the world.

William Pember Reeves (2004, p.1)

In politics, Reeves’ aim was to set in place a policy framework that would enable not simply economic wealth or social favour, but social harmony:

In a debate, in 1888, on a tariff Bill, [Reeves] quoted Goldsmith:

… ye statesmen who survey 
The rich man's joys increase, the poor's decay, 
'Tis yours to say how wide the limits stand 
Between a splendid and a happy land.

He made it clear that, if he had to choose, he would prefer that New Zealand should be a happy land rather than a splendid one. He was in some ways unsympathetic to economic growth, which he thought likely to produce a depressed industrial proletariat, and frankly preferred to see the country inhabited by a million people 'happy, prosperous and satisfied' than twice as many living in dreary poverty. (Sinclair, 1963, p.1)

In many respects, Reeves’ policy vision was for a meritocracy among colonists and their descendants. He wanted to preclude the ‘Old World evil’ of class conflict from taking root on New Zealand soil. Here, the desire was for the social structure of the New Zealand colony to have a high floor and a low ceiling (Oliver, 1969). As a suite of legislation, the Liberal’s policies created favourable conditions for social mobility that would enable personal advancement hitherto unseen in Britain or her colonies. Those ideally utopian social conditions for labour have implications for current critical thought and praxis. As we will see the very notion of constructed democratic social conditions that would enable social mobility is one point today where much of the knowledge age and knowledge management theory diverts and reverts to the status quo.

For Peter Drucker the present knowledge age was about blue-collar workers being elevated and becoming self managers through the utility of computers (Drucker, 1993). He envisioned a process of change to model of Western societies from an agricultural age, through an industrial age to what would become a knowledge age. Factory work would end as the ideas in people’s heads would come to have more value than their physical labour. Education would be key to developing knowledge
workers, that although knowledge work often involved manual work, it was the mental skills that were needed to escalate this societal development (Drucker, 1994; 1999).

For Drucker, these new ‘knowledge’ workers’ ability to self manage not only their work activities but an entire career would ultimately bind them to a reformed sense of humanism:

In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event historians will see is not technology, not the Internet, not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time -- literally -- substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves...Throughout history, practically nobody had choices. Until about 1900, even in the most highly developed countries, the overwhelming majority followed their father's line of work -- if they were lucky. If your father was a peasant farmer, you were a peasant farmer. If he was a craftsman, you were a craftsman. There was only downward mobility; there was no upward mobility.  (Drucker, 1994, p.1)

Here, new age management of human resource would become a liberal art. It would understand work as a human activity rather than exploitation merely for profits and would manage labour in such a light. At the centre of what has been called Drucker ‘genius’, he understood that workers actively hated to be managed, and so rightly resisted the traditional command and control style of management passed down from the Victorian servitude to the measurement of time and motion in discrete units of Taylorism, to circumstances today where labour is outsourced or off-shored for increased shareholder value (Drucker, 1999). Drucker argues that the knowledge age has become ideologically swept up and adapted by numerous management gurus, who tussle in their books and consultancy firms; who want to sell their courses, services and technical products. Knowledge management turned in recent decades from a means elevate workers’ value to a brand for making money (Prusak, 1999; Mentzas, Apostolou, Young, & Abecker, 2001). Further, much like other Western centres, New Zealand society today is one where paid white- and blue-collar labour works more than a forty-hour week; has diminished work conditions and experiences employment uncertainty. As Manual Castells has shown, rather than the globalized knowledge age emancipating workers through the utility of self-management, the possibility of social mobility is instead increasingly reduced (Castells, 2000a, 2000b). The gap between rich and poor continues to widen. The prospect of achieving an individualised utopia remains possible within popular imagination, but remains beyond the possibility of realisation for the average salary and wage earner.

**Conclusion**

Although we have shown that the origins of New Zealand’s social life are unique and were significantly shaped by the vision of a poet, our critical reflection upon local cultural identifiers does not assess New Zealand cultural nationalism, past or present, in ‘post-modern’ terms. When examining our historical or contemporary fields of study, we must be careful to not effect a cringe upon their substance. We must instead consider these phenomena on the bases of their own times and places. By understanding some of the unique features of our history, we may be able to reclaim some of Reeves’ original dreams and use them to reform New Zealand in ways that will perpetuate a society built on intellectual equality for all New Zealand rather than a knowledge age built to serve Global capitalism. Much like the British imperial
network during Reeves’ time, New Zealand is today a node within a global network, wherein ideas, ideologies and identities move across space and time. Geographically and intellectually, our society is a modernity alternative to the global hegemony of an age. At a local level this is recognisable in the experiences of vanguard small business owners, today regarded oftentimes as knowledge age entrepreneurs. In its social conditions, this alternative modernity provides the both employed labour and the enterprising small business man or –woman motivation to realise his/her economic emancipation. These conditions similarly advance efforts to realise social utopias, whether in efforts to realise rangatiratanga/ autonomy; in the ability to explore one’s creativity, knowing that the state welfare system will support you if necessary; or in the realisation of personal spirituality; or in the overused notion of quality of life. Call it what you may, the values of New Zealand’s social heritage enable self realisation, within certain limits and ultimately supported by the State through regulation (and since 1935 - welfare), and it is from the common stock of these now long-standing conditions that the knowledge age grows.
REFERENCES


