

**FLAX ROPE OR IRON FETTER?  
HOW CULTURAL ESSENTIALISM THREATENS INTELLECTUAL  
FREEDOM IN THE NEW ZEALAND TERTIARY EDUCATION  
SECTOR.**

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**ABSTRACT**

As a consequence of the shift from class to identity politics that characterises multiculturalism, administrators and academics in a number of Western universities are now obliged to defer to politically powerful interest groups that derive their power to condemn from culturalist principles. The ways in which this dominant intellectual orthodoxy of cultural essentialism in university management structures threatens academic freedom is illustrated in a number of case studies taken from the New Zealand experience. These include cases where staff members have suffered threats and harassment, gate-keeping mechanisms in research funding processes, and examples of research and teaching constrained by the ideology. They show the extent to which such ideological conformity compromises the scientific and critical analysis of social phenomena, thereby limiting the university's ability to serve as the critic and conscience of society.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Outlining New Zealand's tertiary policy in April 2006, the Hon Dr Michael Cullen, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Tertiary Education, and Minister of Finance observed that:

Universities are research-led institutions, and are expected to provide a broad intellectual leadership within the community, as well as equipping people with skills that go beyond the vocational and foster critical thinking and innovation. Academic independence must be

protected, not only to ensure that universities can act as the conscience and critic of society, but also to support the flexibility and innovation that comes with independence of thought (Cullen, 2006).

For many New Zealand academics, these will be reassuring words from a senior politician and tertiary education policy-maker. In stark contrast, however, is the actual reality of intellectual repression that characterises a number of New Zealand's tertiary institutions, one most vividly exemplified by the rather ominous phrase 'Academic freedom is a Western concept' that remained inscribed on a whiteboard for the edification of pre-service teacher education students in a leading New Zealand tertiary institution for much of 2005. This paper argues that, whilst for New Zealand tertiary institutions academic freedom remains essential to quality research of international standard, the concept is now seriously endangered as commitment to key stakeholders, adherence to various equity targets, and compliance to Treaty of Waitangi 'partnership principles' take precedence over academic independence and the university's role as the conscience and critic of society. There are several reasons for what we see as a progressive erosion of academic freedom over the last decade in particular. Olssen argues that genuine academic freedom has been eroded by the recent introduction of the culture of managerialism in tertiary institutions. New forms of surveillance and control produce 'a de-intellectualised discourse of competency-based training which displaces professional judgement and ethics, as well as the forms of scholarship associated traditionally with the activities of the public intellectual' (Olssen, 2002, p. 55).

Whilst this managerial culture is commonly regarded as being an exclusive manifestation of right-wing neo-liberalism, it is our contention that the erosion of academic freedom in New Zealand has been powerfully reinforced, not just from without, but also from within the academy. A key factor here has been the way in which the liberal left itself has shifted decisively from providing strong support for academic freedom and upholding the necessity of vigorous debate over controversial issues, to an adherence to a narrow intellectual orthodoxy based largely on cultural essentialism (that is, the reification of

culture, Rata, 2004), cultural relativism, and ethnic politicisation (for which we use the term ‘culturalism’).

Culturalism is the ideology of ethnic politics. In many respects it is aptly defined by the oxymoron, ‘secular religion’. In this ideology, as in religious fundamentalism, ethnic identity becomes a type of sacred identity, one blessed by tradition and evocative of a special destiny for those ‘of the faith’ (Rata and Openshaw, 2006; Nanda, 2003). Both offer the psychological security of group belonging and the stability of a known past (Friedman, 1994). The practitioners observe similar rituals and share in the use of evocative, almost mystical language to emphasise the group’s transcendence of the present into a timeless continuity between past, present and future (Keesing, 1989). Uma Narayan argues that, in Third World countries, this mindset results in the contemptuous labelling of any criticism of traditional cultural practices, even by groups such as indigenous feminists, as being foreign, Western, bourgeois and modernist. Narayan cautions us against uncritically accepting terms such as “cultural preservation” as innocuous descriptors. Rather she urges us to pay ‘critical attention to the agendas that are served by the deployment of these terms’ (Narayan, 1997, p.ix, p.6).

In those countries which have experienced relatively recent European colonisation, such as New Zealand and Australia, this intensity and wholeheartedly uncritical adoption of ritual deemed ‘traditional’ has become as much a feature of predominantly European new middle class professionals as it has amongst the indigenous groups whose culture they embrace (Rata, 2003a; Openshaw, 2006). In both instances there is manifested all too often an intensity of commitment that crosses easily into fanaticism, as the examples we provide from the tertiary education sector in New Zealand clearly illustrate. Furthermore, as these illustrations show, this doctrinal stance finds a ready ally in the consumer focused, market-orientated approach of our tertiary institutions, where good customer relations now go ‘hand-in-glove’ with the tenets of ‘cultural safety’.

GOODNESS, POWER AND LEFT-LIBERAL MILITANT ADVOCACY:

The embracement of cultural essentialism by the liberal left in its own interests has been a phenomenon common to many Western nations since the late 1960s. Gouldner (1979) and other critical scholars (e.g. Kellner and Heuberger, 1992; Eder, 1993; Lasch, 1995) have argued that the liberal left's own ambivalent position in society as a relatively privileged 'new middle class' of 'caring' professionals has been responsible for its retreat from class politics. As early as 1968, Parkin identified the nature of the retreat by describing how many 'middle-class radicals trained in the humanities and social sciences' now found 'acceptable sanctuaries in the welfare and creative professions'. In this way they benefited 'from capitalism's operation while at the same time avoiding direct involvement in capitalist enterprises'. It was a way to 'exercise their talents without compromising their radical political ideals' (Parkin, 1968, p. 192). With its liberal guilt hoisted on the uncomfortable petard (Rata, 1996) of that 'goodness and power' paradox described so succinctly by Gouldner (1979, p. 36), the radicalised new middle class of the 1970s and 80s made the decisive shift from class to cultural politics - a shift that enabled this class to maintain its appearance as the 'legitimate defenders of the common good' (Kellner and Berger, 1992, p. 11) without relinquishing its economic position.

But the shift to cultural politics did more than provide these new middle class humanists with a diversion from confronting the consequences of abandoning democratic politics based in the nation state. It also weakened the political project that had originally enabled a working class intellectual vanguard to emerge as a new professional class, the radicalised section of the mass middle class', described by Cornel West (2005, p. 32) as 'prosperous working class with bourgeois identity'. The '19<sup>th</sup> century project of reform and control, an attempt by working class movements to domesticate capital and its elites in the name of the people and their transparent democratic representative body, the state', (Friedman, unpublished mss) was now denounced as unrepresentative - a white male club that excluded and marginalised minorities. In the new understandings of identity politics, it was no longer the proletariat (the rapidly forgotten origins of the new middle class) that

experienced the oppression of capitalist exploitation. Instead ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, women, gays, the disabled, religious minorities, were the victims in a new discourse of oppressor: colonisation, the patriarchy, and 'Western' culture.

The liberal left of the new professional class particularly championed direct participation by minority groups in the nation's political life on the grounds that new voices were not only heard and respected for the first time but that they contributed to the diversity of a common political culture. Ironically however, the new participatory politics of multiculturalism, whereby governments consulted directly with traditional (or in some cases, self-appointed) leaders representing the various ethnic and religious groups, proved not to be a more direct route to democracy of liberal left expectations. Instead, the brokerage functions and mechanisms of consultation, advice and appointment that accompanied cultural and ethnic politicisation transformed ethnic and religious leaders into self-interested elites whose very claims to 'represent' their respective groups depended upon maintaining the groups' distinctive separateness, ensuring that only they, its leaders, crossed the erected boundaries as the legitimate voice of the group (Rata, 2003a).

Despite the increasingly undemocratic nature of multicultural politics, 'diversity' became the favoured discourse of left wing politics, not least for its role in deflecting attention from the liberal left's discomfort with the contradiction between its own intellectual idealism and its relative economic privilege. This new alliance between the liberal left and identity politics portrayed in Lukes' (2003, p. 92) 'holistic Herderian picture' of cultural wholes, together with its abandonment of class politics, is undoubtedly the reason for what Friedman (in press), citing Jacoby's *The End of Utopia*, argues is 'not simply the defeat of the left, but its conversion and perhaps inversion'. Earlier, Bloom had argued that these 'mutant Marxists', 'de-rationalise(d) Marx and turned Nietzsche into a leftist' (1987, p. 222) as a way to simultaneously expiate the guilt of privilege and to champion the poor in an ingenious resolution of the 'goodness and power' paradox.

This transformation of the liberal left through its conversion from class to cultural politics was thus justified through the intellectual strand of identity politics: postcolonial theory, postmodernism and the numerous forms of cultural studies that subsequently proliferated throughout universities (Kimball, 1998). Academics, drawing upon cultural theories that insisted upon the primacy of culture, also played a major role in the boundary-making strategies that increasingly characterised ethnic politics. Turton (1997, p. 37) has acknowledged the role played by scholars in creating ideologies. ‘Whether we like it or not, our disciplines – especially, perhaps, history and anthropology provide what Hobsbawm calls the “raw material” of nationalist and ethnic ideologies’. Jonathan Friedman cites an insider critique of ‘British cultural sociology, epitomised by the Birmingham School’s move from Marxism via a culturalist version of Gramsci to ethnic and now hybrid discourse, as a shift from the “class struggle to the politics of pleasure”’ (Friedman, mss). Indeed, as we shall shortly see, Gramsci’s notion of ‘organic intellectuals’ was hugely influential in seminal writings by New Zealand’s indigenous educationalists (L. T. Smith, 1999; G. H. Smith, 1997).

Ironically, whilst cultural relativism rapidly became a dominant force in universities, Western culture and Enlightenment values were regularly denounced as racist and sexist, even as non-Western traditionalism and tribalism were uncritically held up as examples of freedom, diversity and tolerance (Bloom, 1987, pp. 216-237). Former radical culturalist activists now turned university managers thus resolved their ideological conflicts in that role through the exercise of more limited campus hegemony (D’Souza, 1992, pp.18-19). The result for many campuses has been a climate of fear leading many scholars and students to adopt the rhetoric of anti-elitism, anti-sexism and anti-racism to avoid being labelled rightists or racists (Kimball, 1998: 351).

## BICULTURALISM IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

As the foregoing discussion clearly demonstrates, the rise of cultural essentialism has been a global phenomenon, not confined to any particular

country. This does not mean, however, that its impact has been uniformly felt. What makes the New Zealand experience of cultural essentialism especially distinctive is its development of biculturalism<sup>1</sup>, and its justification in a new interpretation of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. Biculturalism was the main vehicle through which culturalism as an ideology has become embedded in its tertiary institutions, and particularly its colleges of education (Rata, 2008). This process is documented in a forthcoming study which traces the beginnings of bicultural policy from the 1960s to the present to show how New Zealand's liberal educators became transformed into radical biculturalists to the point where it became unquestioning (and unquestionable) doctrine (Openshaw, 2006).

The tendency for biculturalism to be wielded as a weapon to isolate and to condemn those who do not step into line is particularly prevalent in tertiary institutions which do not have university status. It is in such institutions that left-liberal 'goodness and power' contradictions critically intersect with feelings of academic inferiority to precipitate the zealous embracement of culturalism that both distinguishes such institutions from universities, whilst at the same time furnishing staff with the appropriate ideological credentials to be accepted as radical academics. Although the Wanganui Polytechnic case discussed below is not an isolated example of this phenomenon at work, it is one of few that reached the media and hence received extensive coverage.

In 1996 two pakeha (white) Wanganui Polytechnic students, Hanne Jacobsen and Barbara Osbourne, complained of racial harassment on their social work course. Among their concerns were intimidation by classmates, separate classes for Maori and tauwiwi (literally 'foreigners', sometimes used instead of 'pakeha'), a demand that a karakia (prayer) be said over a photocopier before Maori articles could be copied, a Maori woman being told she could enter the course half-way through the year if she baked her tutors a cake, Maori students being allowed to start a course a week before pakeha students, because they had been disadvantaged all their lives, and all students being made to wear labels promoting issues of Maori sovereignty (Morgan, 1998, p.1). A subsequent favourable review concluded that though the incidents had taken

place, the course was not racist, hence the complaints were not valid and any restrictions on free speech had been self-imposed. Incensed by this dubious outcome from a supposedly neutral body, the two pakeha students took their complaints to the Race Relations Conciliator, Rajen Prasad, who, despite strong criticism from culturalists, found that the Polytechnic had breached the Human Rights Act. Thus, some two years *after* the initial complaint had been laid, the students concerns were finally upheld. Looking back on the lengthy case, *The Dominion* newspaper argued that Osbourne and Jakobsen deserved ‘the nation’s thanks for their courage in persisting with their complaint despite the original finding and despite the attempts of the polytechnic to sweep the issue under the carpet with offers of compensation.’ The editorial further observed that whilst all people of goodwill supported closing the gap between Maori and non-Maori performance and achievement, ‘Racism is racism, and is unacceptable whether the necks of those practising it are red or brown’. (‘End polytech racism, *The Dominion*, 8 September 1998, p.8).

The tendency towards collective coercion of both staff and students, especially where bicultural issues are concerned, has also been noticeable within the former colleges of education, themselves descended from the older teachers’ training colleges. One reason for the strong presence of cultural essentialism within colleges of education lay in their institutional positioning, poised awkwardly between the practical world of the classroom, and the more theoretical world of university-based faculties of education, whilst at the same time obliged to implement the views of their Wellington-based political authorities. Given the ever-increasing criticism from all three sources, the adoption of biculturalism, especially when it could be readily allied to existing educational principles based on progressivism and constructivism, appeared to offer colleges considerable advantages, enabling them to forge a distinctive role within an increasingly threatening political environment (Openshaw, 1996).

Such widespread adoption of biculturalism by teacher education institutions did not go entirely unchallenged however. The Partington Report (1997) strongly critiqued ‘what may be called “Waitangism” ...the doctrine that

places the Treaty of Waitangi as a critical reference point in all teacher education courses as in many aspects of public life in New Zealand' (p. 191). The Report singled out both the Wellington College of Education and the Christchurch College of Education as having responded with particular zeal to the demands of partnership between Maori and pakeha in accordance with the Treaty of Waitangi, with every course now having a Treaty and equity statement (pp. 192-94), with the effect that 'there seems no place where you would not be expected to accept without question a very contestable interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi and its supposed educational implications' (p. 221). The extent of ideological capture by cultural essentialist principles was said to be epitomised in the Wellington College of Education's Early Childhood Handbook, which compared its integrated curriculum to a:

... flax rope with the learner at the centre. The rope uncoils in an endless spiral. As it uncoils it touches on three areas: Personal growth as a member of the community; Early Childhood curriculum; and Professional Development. The strands of the rope are theory, practice and the curriculum. Interwoven through the strands are the threads of issues: Bi-culturalism, Partnership with Parents/Whanau, Mainstreaming, Gender Equity, and Assessment and Evaluation. (Partington, p.98).

Such critiques, however, were to go largely unheeded when, beginning in the 1990s, the increasingly rapid pace of university-college of education mergers resulted in previously cushioned university faculties of education facing similar pressures to their polytechnic and college of education counterparts. Thus by 2006, the historically unjustified notion that the Treaty of Waitangi is a 'partnership' with educational implications was thoroughly naturalised in the new Bachelor of Education (Teaching) and Diploma of Teaching (ECE) programmes of the Faculty of Education at the University of Auckland. The programmes contain the principle: 'Teacher education programmes will develop the knowledge and skills necessary to practise in ways that are consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi', and the related outcome; 'Graduates of initial teacher education programmes will be able to practise in ways that

are consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi' (Programme Handbook, 2006, p. 4).

Such superficially bland policy rhetoric conceals the fact that newly-merged faculties of education are in their turn, uncritically incorporating highly contestable and numerous views about the meaning of the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand. Separately or in various combinations, the Treaty is understood as: an ongoing political 'partnership' between the tribes and the government; New Zealand's founding document; an historical document recording the strategy used by the British to annex New Zealand; a symbol of two separate cultures – Maori and pakeha; a living symbol of two fundamentally different social and political systems, indigenous and Western; a contract between Maori and pakeha; a contract between the tribes and the British Crown; the agreement allowing pakeha to live in New Zealand; an historical document of little or no relevance to contemporary New Zealand; and a political ideology of the neotribal elite (Rata, 2003b) - to articulate just a few of the conflicting views on the Treaty of Waitangi and its meaning.

Given the current range and diversity of views about the meaning of the Treaty of Waitangi, its study as a highly contested document is undoubtedly an academic task of crucial importance. For this reason alone, the promotion of one single 'correct' view within academic programmes is highly undesirable. However, the extent of uncritical self-representation and intellectual orthodoxy found in many of the new professional degrees which include a Treaty component means that the 'correct' view rapidly becomes unchallengeable doctrine. The reason for such orthodoxy lies in the politicisation of culture whereby many academics in teacher education can be described in the same way that Babadzan described anthropologists, observing that (2000, p. 149), 'anthropologists tend to appropriate the essentialist ethnic-culturalist discourse that actors hold about the meaning of their own practices rather than provide the critique that enables reflection and scrutiny'.

This problem of intellectual orthodoxy is compounded further by the recent tendency for new professions, such as teacher education, nursing, social work,

and business studies, to expect their members to have higher education qualifications specific to the profession, rather than an undergraduate diploma or a postgraduate diploma in the professional area underpinned by a degree in the liberal arts, humanities and social sciences. Certainly, these new degree courses are able to draw on the intellectual ideas of the more established social sciences and humanities which, through their wider theoretical base, have the potential to provide greater intellectual rigour. On the other hand, without constantly delving back into that intellectual well to ensure that the theoretical framework of the new subjects remains under constant scrutiny, those frameworks rapidly become rigid orthodoxies.

A specific problem here is that the intellectual framework for these vocational subjects was laid down during the high point of culturalism in the 1980s. There it seems likely to remain, as academics in these subjects tend to concentrate on issues pertinent to the profession itself, rather than attempt to rework the established intellectual framework which would involve wrestling with the philosophical issues of causality and concept definition. One indication of this shortcoming is that the 'culture wars' (Kuper, 1999; Sandall, 2001) raging in anthropology, history and sociology since the mid-1990s are almost unknown in New Zealand teacher education studies.

Considering this intellectually depressing situation it is perhaps hardly surprising that in New Zealand several decades of vocational studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate level in subjects based upon rigidified social science theoretical positions have produced an uncritical conformity to culturalism with highly disputed concepts of ethnicity, culture, and increasingly 'diversity' taken as givens. It seems likely that the separation of vocational studies from their intellectual roots will lead to greater ideological conformity amongst professionals, as new generations of professionals take their first degrees in the vocational subjects themselves rather than acquiring a more general bachelor's degree in the humanities, social sciences or general sciences, followed by a post-graduate qualification in the professional subject.

The limited intellectual legacy and hierarchical management style typical of

many former colleges of education is not the only culprit involved in the increasing assault on basic academic freedoms within New Zealand universities. The tendency of cultural essentialism to permeate both university management structures and university student organisations already noted by a number of overseas commentators, continues to be demonstrated in several recent New Zealand cases where staff have suffered threats and harassment. At Wellington's Victoria University in February 2000, Paul Dunmore, an associate professor in accounting and commercial law, refused to attend a Maori blessing of Rutherford House. He argued in an interdepartmental email that an institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge was inaugurating its new premises with 'an act of animist superstition', adding that he would have opposed other religious superstitions on similar grounds. The following month, the editor of Victoria University's student magazine *Salient* denounced Dunmore as 'bigoted' and 'ill-educated', ominously warning that 'academic freedom is not the right of academics to speak out on any issue, no matter who it might harm, embarrass, demean, belittle, or ridicule', and calling for the recalcitrant professor to be disciplined by the university ("Bigoted" prof under fire. Row over Maori blessing boycott.' *Manawatu Evening Standard*, 6 March 2000, p.3). A senior academic and philosopher at the University of Canterbury compared this disciplinary call to those of Nazi Germany's brownshirts, arguing that the editor was following a long tradition that stretched back from Pol Pot, through Mao Tse-tung, to Hitler. A subsequent article by Peter Rochford, Maori Vice-president of the Association of University Staff, however, strongly upheld the dominant culturalist perspective also embraced by the university's management. Rochford condemned both dissenting academics and supported the call for disciplinary action on the grounds that New Zealand was a bicultural society within which each culture had the right to its own world-view, without denigration. In Rochford's view, senior university staff had a particular responsibility to uphold the University's conduct statute which specifically prohibited causing racial disharmony whilst insisting that all staff consider the University's role, values and standing (Rochford, 2000, p.4).

It is not just outspoken staff members who are put at risk by the continuing dominance of culturalist ideology within university management structures. Ongoing research itself is also threatened, as recent events at the University of Otago demonstrate. In the South Island, Ngai Tahu is the recognised Treaty partner and tertiary institutions are obliged to work with the tribe to ensure ‘a functional relationship based on the Treaty of Waitangi’. In 2003, a paper entitled ‘Treaty-based Guidelines and protocols for tertiary educated institutions’, attempted a much-needed scholarly analysis of the relationship between traditional societies as represented by Ngai Tahu, and modernism, as represented by western science and social sciences taught within the university (Tau, et al., 2003). In contrast to much university-based research by both Maori and pakeha academics that asserted the primacy of cultural relativism and cultural safety, the document strongly upheld the principles of academic freedom and critical rationalism (p.6). Pointing out that tribal systems were essentially ‘closed,’ it was argued that Ngai Tahu would be best to accept that its knowledge system had been superseded by one that was vastly superior. Its authors also correctly viewed the system as being global rather than wholly Western or pakeha-specific, in that other cultures (Babylonian, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, Arab) had materially contributed to its development. The only sensible option was therefore to regard Ngai Tahu’s traditional belief system as a cultural construct that deserved preservation and study, whilst accepting the need to modernise. Thus in science, the authors argued, the problem was essentially one of ensuring suitable Maori academic leadership and presenting knowledge in culturally relevant ways rather than attempting to define knowledge in a way that located it, ”within the infinitely regressive slopes of relativity’ (p. 22)

Notwithstanding this sensible document, however, the consultative process is still prone to capture by excessively culturalist-minded university bureaucracies. The University of Otago’s recent policy decision to consult Ngai Tahu over, not just research concerning or involving Maori, but all research undertaken by employees of the university, is a case in point. An *Otago Daily Times* editorial entitled ‘Research Restricted’ (Friday 22 August 2003), whilst welcoming the debate and the principle of wide research

consultation, warned of the immense bureaucracy involved in having *all* research considered in this manner, not to mention the privileged position a single group now enjoyed regarding the control of researchers.

The extent to which the research bureaucracy has grown exponentially to the point of being 'anti-research' is exemplified by the recent experience of a Masters student in seeking to gain ethics approval for a small research study about the challenges faced by three nurses working in remote rural areas in New Zealand in respect to emergency call outs (personal communication). For reasons which were not made clear to the student, the ethics approval must be authorised by the National Health and Disability Ethics Committee (HDE), not the university where the student is actually enrolled. Questions about what this means for a university's control over its own research policy aside, the research has been considerably delayed by the HDE Committee's requirement that the researcher consult with the regional Maori Health Manager before ethics approval is given. This is notwithstanding the crucial fact that the researcher will not be asking any of her three participants if they identify as Maori. The powerless student's frustrations are compounded and the research further delayed by the HDE Committee's insistence that written evidence be provided of the consultation with Maori before ethics approval enables the interviews to take place. The Maori Health Manager's failure to put his verbal agreement in writing despite repeated requests means that the research is threatened and the student's degree completion put at risk. The consultancy role of such positions as Maori Health Manager provides a clear example of the gate-keeping power implicit in the brokerage function which operates as a result of the politicisation of ethnicity. In addition the HDE Committee's insistence on frequent and regular progress reports, despite the delay caused by its insistence on written evidence of consultation with Maori, means that a small research study and all the student's financial and career commitment to acquiring postgraduate qualifications are in jeopardy. The bureaucratic gatekeeping operated by ethnicised brokers at all levels of research activity, of which this is just one example, leads to an 'anti-research' culture, one quite at odds with the claims made by New Zealand universities to spear-head a research-driven society.

Despite the dominance of culturalist ideology in all areas of New Zealand's intellectual life, there are a small but growing number of academics who are publishing critical analyses. John Clark's (2006) examination of the action of New Zealand's national museum, Te Papa, in suppressing in a display any references to the massacre of the Chatham Islands people by Maori invaders from the mainland follows an earlier work by the historian, Peter Munz (2000) which discussed the objection of four eminent New Zealand historians to the museum's display. Both objected to the museum's justification that there was no real objective truth and that Mātauranga Māori (Maori knowledge) must be protected at all costs. Munz referred to the museum's portrayal of Māori history as 'political propaganda' (p. 16) and 'gross historical misrepresentation' (p. 13). He ascribed the museum's approach to academics' 'propagation of widespread delusions' which happen to be "politically correct" (p. 16). Similarly, Clark critiqued the tendency within tertiary institutions to claim the equal validity of different knowledge bases which are held to be mirror opposites. Thus, typically (western) science is characterised as analytic, sceptical, and evidence-based, whilst the other is said to be holistic, has accepted truths, is close to the natural environment and emphasises relationships. A particularly vivid example of this Western-indigenous dualism comes from a Maori education administrator's invited speech to senior officials of the New Zealand Treasury.

The Pākehā world is clearly compartmentalized. There is a compartment for the mundane and another for the spirit. This allows good Christians to rob and pillage during the week and to go to church on Sunday all with a clear conscience. For indigenous peoples the compartmentalization of one's life and mind is not customarily part of their makeup; the world of the spirit and the world of the mundane are not clearly separated although today as a result of colonization separation has begun and sometimes with dire consequences. (Hook, 2006)

A recent paper by Dannette Marie and Brian Haig (2006) reveals the extent of culturalist orthodoxy in controlling research funding. They express concern that New Zealand's 'Health Research Council describes kaupapa Maori research (i.e., Maori science, paradigms and methodologies) as 'world-class' when its methodology has not been subject to critical evaluation, and little of that research has been published in peer-reviewed journals'. Their analysis demonstrates just how pervasive adherence to culturalism is throughout all stages of the research process. 'Statements requiring research scientists to endorse this methodology are now variously found in government science policies, national-level research funding guidelines, national and university ethics committees guidelines, and professional bodies' research codes of conduct. Further, many departments in the state services sector have commissioned KMR (Kaupapa Maori Research), and a wide range of disciplines within the tertiary sector now teach KMR methodology as a stand-alone, fully-fledged conception of inquiry' (p. 18). Indeed, so institutionalised is the uncritiqued idea of kaupapa Maori research that it is incorporated into the system for determining the allocation of research funding to tertiary education organisations (the Performance-Based Research Fund - PBRF), where it plays a significant role in the assessment of the quality of researchers and the resulting career development opportunities. According to Alcorn, Bishop, Cardno et al (2004) 'the quality of Maori research in education is high. Many Maori education academics were among those receiving the highest quality rating (12% of all A and B grades were in Maori education)' (p. 281). This success is directly tied to the acceptance by academia of kaupapa Maori research. 'Perhaps the most obvious feature was the success of Maori academics in education in developing alternative and critical epistemological models and research methodologies' (p. 281). Within such a repressive ideological climate, it becomes almost impossible for researchers who wish to develop a critique of culturalism, or even to resist its adherence criteria, to undertake or develop research projects given the extent of the gate-keeping at all stages of the research funding approval process.

Christopher Tremewan's 2005 article, 'Ideological Conformity: A Fundamental Challenge to the Social Sciences in New Zealand' is another

provocative challenge to social scientists about the considerable implications of ideological conformity to cultural essentialism. He asks that social scientists engage with ‘the ideological verities which have become aligned with government social policy, which (are) legislatively programmed and ideologically policed.’ Tremewan also perceptively refers to the social sciences as ‘the dead hand that stifled rather than promoted critical debate’ and failed ‘to provide an adequate critique of social norms’ in New Zealand (p. 2).

These papers join earlier work by Nash (1990), Openshaw et al. (1993), Rata (1996, 2000); Oliver (2001), Chapple (2000, 2004) and others in resisting the demands of current intellectual doctrine for a scientific and critical analysis of social phenomena. The current impact of culturalism, however, is such that questions of who controls what counts as legitimate knowledge - and who counts as knowledge-brokers - have become central issues for the maintenance of academic freedom. Ironically, the politics of so-called inclusion, whereby every course development committee and every research ethics and funding committee is required to include a Maori representative, has resulted in the politics of exclusion.

The situation is exacerbated when state agencies continue to act on culturalist principles, frequently fusing them with the rhetoric of the global marketplace to give them added power. The Foundation for Research, Science and Technology for ‘instance, has recently announced that it is to spend more than \$1 million a year on research projects into indigenous Maori knowledge. Justifying the expenditure, the Foundation’s Strategy Manager, John Kupe, claimed that New Zealand could be ‘a world leader in understanding the contribution that indigenous knowledge could make to science and innovation, through traditional technologies which have the potential to deliver products and processes that are globally unique and will give New Zealand a marketing edge’ (*Dominion Post*, 20 April 2006).

The links between cultural essentialism, indigenous science, and global entrepreneurship are noteworthy in the above press release. Maori business has also taken on a life of its own, with people now *believing* there is such a

thing as Maori business (Devlin, 2006). Even in tertiary institutions the concept is promoted on the basis of frequently unsubstantiated assertions which, in turn, are based on essentialist ideology. Academic positions are created; academic courses proliferate, in turn creating the need for advisers and consultants. The growing brokerage infrastructure must be administered, employing more people, necessitating further funding, and further institutional commitment – all without the term and its underlying culturalist ideology being critically examined.

Yet what exactly is Maori knowledge? Many education faculties in New Zealand’s tertiary institutions seem all too willing to include such knowledge, uncritically. One example of this is Auckland University’s Faculty of Education, which recently stated as its goal that ‘Teacher education programmes will develop flexible and accurate understanding of subject matter knowledge, and related to te ao Maori dimensions, associated with the core activities of teaching in curriculum areas’ (Programme Handbook, p.4). (‘Te ao Maori dimensions’ refers to knowledge and understandings of the Maori world.) And if education faculties and even whole universities are culpable in this respect, then who can blame New Zealand’s Energy Safety Service for recently issuing a ludicrous household safety pamphlet outlining the current electrical code of practice recently issued for household use as follows:

From a Maori perspective, the term “earth” or Papatuanuku translates as Earth Mother – the source of all energy. When aligning this concept to the flow of electricity, a useful parallel can be made to the 3-pin plug

<b>Electricity</b>	<b>Maori</b>
Active (phase)	Spiritual element, active, tapu
Neutral	Physical element, neutral, noa
Earth	Mauri or life force derived from Papatuanuku or Earth Mother

(Deputy Secretary, Energy Safety Service, 2004).

Juxtaposing science and mythology in this way, does justice to neither. Rather, it leads to the mockery of both. Mythology is indeed important as the symbolic code that creates social and historical consciousness and cements the important social bonds that enable societies to cohere. However, as Marie and Haig note (2006, p.17), 'the unsatisfactory conclusion drawn by epistemological relativism is that one group's belief in supernatural causation, for example, is epistemologically equivalent to another group's belief in naturalistic causation'. But science surely has a separate function; one jealously guarded in the secularism of the university. Indeed if this separation of belief and science were not the case, pakeha academics would still legitimately be debating key traditionalist questions that reflect a European medieval world view - such as: 'How many Angels can dance on a pin head?' Indeed, if advocates were being really consistent about applying bicultural and culturally essentialist principles, it could be argued that the Energy Safety Service pamphlet requires urgent revision in the interests of Treaty partnership to incorporate a third column based on traditional Christian cosmology, thus relegating the so-called 'scientific' point of view to one of three equally valid world views.

#### EXPANDING THE WEB OF CULTURAL SAFETY:

Whilst biculturalism stands out as the dominant New Zealand variation of a now dominant Western ideology, cultural essentialism as a doctrine has also had a significant impact on research and teaching to the extent where academic freedom has been strongly threatened. As a result tertiary administrations are now obliged to defer to politically powerful interest groups that derive their power to condemn from culturalist principles. This paper concludes by briefly examining two seemingly different events, - the first concerning an academic and the Mormon Church, and the second, concerning supposedly insulting portrayals of Chairman Mao. It should be emphasised that we are not attempting to defend or to justify the positions taken by the

individuals involved in these controversies. Rather, our intention is to further illustrate how essentialist concerns have come to increasingly dictate the way tertiary institutions respond to controversy.

In August 1998 Raymond Richards, a Senior Lecturer in History and American Studies, taught a first-year course in the history of the United States. This course included a lecture on Mormonism which, Richards contended, was based on the research of many respected historians in the field that held Mormonism was a cult, and that its founder, Joseph Smith, was a conman, fraudster and megalomaniac (*Dominion*, 2 October 1998, p.5). Following this lecture, Richards was informed by the University's Mediator, that some students had formally charged him with harassment. They demanded an apology and equal time in which to present the Mormon view. According to Richards, he subsequently received threatening calls but received no support from university management. His letter to Vice-Chancellor, Bryan Gould, which made reference to the concept of academic freedom, allegedly received the response that he would try to 'provide some satisfaction to the complainants.' Richards subsequently related that he was obliged to consent to a public debate with the Mormon Church which resulted in a lecture theatre confrontation in which he was accused of being both incompetent and unprofessional. Although Richards kept his job, and the students later withdrew their complaint, one result of the furor was that several of his colleagues told him that they would drop controversial topics from their programmes to avoid harassment charges (Richards, 2002).

In May 2006, the *Manawatu Standard* reported a furor on Massey University's Turitea Campus when angry Chinese students protested over the alleged 'send-up' of Chairman Mao in the student magazine *Chaff* (Issue 10, May 2006, front cover). A number of Chinese students termed the article racist and likened it to the portrayal of Muhammad in a Danish newspaper the preceding February, warning that Chinese students spent a lot of money in New Zealand, and implying that this beneficial practice could be endangered. Perhaps with similar threats in mind, the Massey University Officer, Bruce Graham, claimed that the cover showed a lack of respect and was in extremely poor

taste, though he accepted the magazine's editorial independence (*Manawatu Standard* 1 May 2006, p.1). Despite considerable pressure including a warning from New Zealand's Race Relations Conciliator, Joris De Bres, that student magazines should be responsible, the editors of *Chaff* bravely refused to apologise. It is noteworthy, however, that a subsequent *Chaff* issue featuring an article on world cup soccer that identified one player's weakness as 'being French', whilst questioning whether readers could really trust anyone playing from Germany because Hitler had come from that country, apparently attracted no adverse comment. Doubtless, American students too, would be expected to show the same forbearance regarding satirical portrayals of President Bush. Culturalism, it seems, disavows even the cultural relativism its own supporters claim to embrace.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Unfortunately, the otherwise worthy sentiments expressed by Dr Cullen concerning the role and mission of New Zealand universities cited at the beginning of this article are being undermined, largely because the academic freedom essential for progress is both hampered and threatened by the uncritical acceptance and promotion of culturalism.

At the heart of cultural essentialism, and biculturalism, lies an essential contradiction that make them dubious approaches for universities to embrace uncritically, especially given their oft-stated goals of promoting intellectual leadership, critical thinking and independence of thought. Culturalists insist that all ways of knowing are inherently equal. In practice, however, they embrace an inverse cultural hierarchy with indigenous knowledge at the top, Western, secular, pakeha culture at the bottom, and the various other cultures strung out in between these polarities. In the hands of tertiary bureaucracies predominantly concerned with keeping their clients happy, however, the case studies we have presented suggests that the dominant response to this contradiction has been the adoption of a somewhat pragmatic cultural hierarchy in respect to which particular cultures enjoy priority in the enforcement of its viewpoints and the suppression of others. If true, then the

formulation of some rules of engagement for tertiary staff is probably possible. Hence, university staff who come under fire for supposedly ridiculing Maori culture, especially spirituality, would be unlikely to survive, but would be on fairly safe ground in critiquing say, Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. Attacking Mormons would probably have a variable outcome for the perpetrator, depending on the grounds the complainants based their case on, and their ability to form alliances with more politically influential groups around common interests. Satirising Chairman Mao is apparently off-limits, but Americans, Hitler, and Germans generally, are legitimate - and safe - subjects for denigration.

This paper, however, is ultimately not about scoring cheap points off dominant ideologies. Neither should our critique of the impact of culturalism on New Zealand's tertiary institutions in its various guises imply a rejection of the role of academics in identifying and critiquing the social reality – including the reality of social inequalities and the fact that groups self-identify or are identified by others in ethnic terms. We are not asserting that specific groups do not experience a particular social reality as a consequence. Neither are we in favour of 'Maori-bashing', or deliberately seeking to insult either Chinese or Mormons. Rather, our concern lies with the issue of power, especially with the way power is currently being wielded and its consequences for academic freedom. For instance, it is noteworthy that although the historical experience of women in New Zealand in some ways parallels that of Maori, direct constraints upon researchers has only occasionally occurred. Moreover, widespread formal requirements that women as an identifiable group be widely consulted by tertiary management, much less vested with the power to effectively discourage research deemed inappropriate, has been far less evident. For these reasons, as critical academics in the social sciences, we are increasingly concerned that the ideology of culture and biculturalism not only hampers us in examining other possibilities, but that institutionalised culturalism has made any serious criticism a risky task.

Instead of meekly surrendering what previous generations of academics have fought so hard to protect to those cultural groups deemed to have the most

justification for defining the nature of the academic task, we wish to endorse a tertiary climate where academic objectivity has been restored, as opposed to the prevailing ‘I know because I am’ rhetoric. Only within such a climate will it again become possible within the academy for biculturalism in all its guises to be critically examined as a political approach based upon cultural essentialist values, that in turn, are contestable – the same as we would wish to do for any other ideology, value or creed. Only in this way can we return to the ideal of the university as a true market place where ideas, theories and innovations can be critically examined in a true spirit of academic freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Originally a progressive project committed to incorporating Maori culture into the nation's symbolic identity, biculturalism became the vehicle for separatist ethnic politics and a fundamentalist 'blood and soil' ideology under the control of an emergent neotribal elite' (Rata, 2005: 267). The post-1987 interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi as a political 'partnership' between the revived tribes and the government played a crucial role in reshaping biculturalism.

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