



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

Mana and Ideological Integrity

Solidarity or Just a Flash in the Pan?

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ON OCTOBER 20, 2014, Aotearoa New Zealand voted into office for a third term, with a convincing margin, the centre-right National Party led by John Key. Earlier in 2014, politicians from all parties appeared to be meandering towards another uneventful election filled with conservative debate and political rhetoric. However, on May 27 a surprising alliance was announced between Mana and the Internet Party. Internet-Mana emerged with great gusto – momentarily challenging the terms of political debate between the two major parties' relative policy positions in the lead-up to the election.

Initially, the Mana Party attempted to reinvigorate a Leftist identity with an injection of class consciousness. The staging of this political spectacle on the Left was initially embraced, by some, as a means of progressing socialism in the country. Historically, groups such as the suffragettes in the late nineteenth century, or environmental activists more recently, have successfully mobilised populist sentiment as a means of initiating lasting social transformations – when Mana attempted a similar move it failed to convince the public, notwithstanding its popular anti-surveillance stance. In order to understand this failure, we critically examine the ‘ideological markers’ that both shaped and problematised political figures such as Harawira and Dotcom. The problematising of these figures, particularly within the media sphere, obscured how connections could be forged with the people. The example of the Mana Movement highlights how radical and potentially populist projects aiming for substantive social transformation can become quickly undone, or even overturned.

This paper examines the trajectory of Mana together with its odd alliance with the Internet Party. To date, little scholarly attention has been given to analysis of Mana’s emergence and short history in terms of its attempt to reinvigorate Leftist politics. Mana’s ideological tendencies and positioning will be explored in what follows to remedy this shortcoming. Rather than focusing on quantitative considerations, such as voting patterns and social-political demographics, this paper draws upon the notion of ‘ideology’ as a way to explore the party politics of the Mana and Internet Party alliance.

Slavoj Žižek and Ideology

Slavoj Žižek is one of today’s most influential political and cultural philosophers. He offers a critical return to ideology – arguing that individuals are often unwittingly enslaved by it. He asserts

that ideology is an efficient way of regulating social relations as it ‘holds’ the individual within systems of control and coercion. What is most pertinent about ideology, argues Žižek, is that it entails a great number of presuppositions that underlie the contemporary conditions of social and economic life. For example, Žižek often interrogates the value and problem of ‘freedom’ as both a desirable ideological concept and in terms of the form it might take. From this perspective the individual assesses the merit of ideology according to its practical efficiency – a structure Žižek understands as being self-referential because it problematically assumes it is possible to distance oneself from ideology. Žižek challenges this assumption by insisting that, on the contrary, ideals, desires and aspirations are themselves ideologically produced through our prior fantasies about how ideology operates.

A well-known example offered by Žižek to illustrate ideological processes at play concerns the purchasing of a cup of Starbucks coffee – where, within the price of a cup of coffee, there is a donation made to those who harvest the coffee beans in another, less economically developed, country. Here, for the consumer, ideological beliefs and ethics are expressed through the materiality of consumption. That is, the fantasy of being ethical is upheld through the process of consumerism. The ‘ethical’ act of consumption is an ‘ideological fantasy’ that obscures (screens off) the persistent systems of material exploitation that underpin capitalist production and consumption – obscuring, for instance, the fundamental economic asymmetry between the ‘first world’ consumer and the ‘third world’ producer (an asymmetry impossible to understand without accounting for historical processes of imperialism and colonisation). The consumer can ‘enjoy’ their great fortune in being a member of the ‘developed world’ *and* feel ethically validated when doing so. This enjoyment, Žižek argues, maintains a compliance with the workings of exploitative and oppressive ideological conditions – conditions that covertly main-

tain the ‘social fantasies’ of consensual economic and political relations. Consequently, ideology here has the function of filling the ‘gap’ between everyday realities (‘I am caught within systems of capitalist exploitation and inequality’) and utopian fantasies (‘Through engaging in acts of pleasurable consumption I am also able to act ethically and contribute to the realisation of a just and equitable world’).¹

Ultimately, however, ideology fails to secure the social fantasies it propagates, as it inevitably leaves people dissatisfied with, and even antagonistic towards, the very system they struggle to reconcile themselves with. Nevertheless, Žižek argues, ideology is a persistent presence within contemporary spectacular (mediatised) politics precisely because it *can* be so easily dismissed by those who struggle with it. As Matthew Sharpe notes, apropos Žižek:

If the term ‘ideology’ has any meaning at all, ideological positions are always what people impute to others (for today’s left, the political right are the dupes of one or another noble lie about natural community; for the right, the left are the dupes of well-meaning but utopian egalitarianism bound to lead to economic and moral collapse, and so forth). For subjects to believe in an ideology, it must have been presented to them, and been accepted, as non-ideological ... true and right, and what anyone sensible would believe.²

It is here that Žižek’s critical return to ideology as a place for social and political critique offers a position from which to interrogate the Mana Movement and specifically its alliance with Dot-com’s Internet Party. Today’s critical return to ideology entails the activity of breaking down representations and assumptions which constitute how people operate in social and political environments. Here, ideology can be best understood as being necessary for social, political and institutional cohesion, most nota-

1 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London and New York 2002.

2 Matthew Sharpe, Slavoj Žižek, in John Simmons (ed.) *From Agamben to Žižek*, Edinburgh 2011, pp. 224-225.

bly within formalisations of capitalism, nationalism or freedom. However, the political and intellectual identification with ideology fell out of fashion with the ascent of postmodernism. Generally speaking, proponents of postmodernism argued against ideology as that which is necessary to conceptualise important political terms and practices. Instead, relativism – that in which truth can only be articulated within specific and constructed relations of engagement and power – was asserted as being central to understanding social and political attitudes and practices. Thus, ideology was increasingly dismissed or treated with a degree of suspicion.

This fashionable aversion to ideology as the preferred cynical position is critiqued by intellectuals such as Žižek and Terry Eagleton. As a way of addressing and reinvigorating Leftist issues, Žižek critically returns to the concept, practice and refinement of ideology understood as signifying sets of social conditions. Eagleton suggests the ‘end of ideology’ is no more than a ploy instigated from the far right in the guise of social democratic alliances.³ Ideology has certainly been criticised for being dogmatic, inflexible and closed. However, Žižek cautions us to keep our eyes open to the less visible forces of ideology which operate in the guise of, for example, freedom and democracy. Rather than denounce ideology, he encourages us to instead critique those conditions which structure its misrecognition.

Mana’s Political Trajectory in New Zealand

The sequence of events leading up to the formation of the Mana Party is complex and peppered with controversy. In the beginning Minto, Potter and Sykes articulated Mana’s campaign goal as ‘attracting support from both Māori and general roll voters who

3 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology*, London and New York 2007, p. xxi.

wanted a fair and just Aotearoa, and who supported the development of a broad movement of social, economic, and constitutional transformation – and not merely a parliamentary political party to bring about'.⁴ It was positioned as being a 'movement' as much as it was a 'party'. Mana emerged following Hone Harawira's departure from the Māori Party, which itself had arisen when the prominent MP Tariana Turia acrimoniously broke with the Labour Party – a break precipitated by the controversy surrounding the Foreshore and Seabed Act 2004. The Māori Party's vision prioritised manaakitanga (respecting others as equal as or more important than oneself), rangatiratanga (self-determination), and whanaungatanga (connection to family and community). In upholding these values, the Māori Party remained engaged in the foreshore and seabed debate, while also becoming involved in wider parliamentary issues – becoming a comprehensive parliamentary party in its own right.

Despite forming around a single issue the Māori Party was far from ideologically coherent in its early days. Turia and her co-leader Pita Sharples were both conservative Māori activists who were comfortable in coalition with John Key's centre-right National Party in 2008. Harawira, the elected MP for Te Tai Tokerau, was not so sanguine about the coalition. He was regularly dubbed a 'firebrand' by the media because of his public questioning of the National government's economic policies – to the discomfort of many within the Māori Party.⁵ Despite this, Harawira was still very much a part of the Māori Party's decision-making processes in its supportive relationship with the National government.

4 John Minto, Helen Potter & Annette Sykes, Mana, in Jon Johansson and Stephen Levine (eds.) *Kicking the Tyres*, Wellington 2012, p. 153.

5 The Press 'Harawira Forces Tough Choices on Party'. Accessed 9 November 2015 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/columnists/colin-espiner/3065554/Harawira-forces-tough-choices-on-party>

The division between Harawira and the Māori Party opened spectacularly in late 2010 when Harawira deliberately provoked the party into suspending him by publicly criticising its right-leaning policies – particularly those to do with employee dismissal after 90 days, a rise in GST and the Marine and Coastal Area Act 2011.⁶

Harawira's Mana Party, launched on April 30, 2011, aimed to champion the causes of the dispossessed. Combining the Māori political position of *tino rangatiratanga* with a reinvigoration of a class-conscious Leftism, Mana attempted to fuse identity politics with a less fashionable class politics. As Minto, Potter and Sykes state, the intention of Mana was to 'create a political movement that was firmly of the Left and which prioritised political action and community involvement'.⁷ The result of this ideological combination of class and identity was predictable: they became trapped in a deadlock that made it impossible for Mana to secure the cohesive identity essential for its survival. Perhaps the reason for this political and ideological move stemmed from the 1980s, when Labour shifted from being a class-based party focussed on collectivity to a 'post-materialist' party embracing individual acquisition. Whereas the 1980s had seen the Left give ground on social issues, Mana offered an opportunity to return to legitimate former Leftist causes, while also attempting to promote Māori-infused biculturalism, although this tended not to be integral to their media and public campaigns.

At the same time it is important to consider the tension between the conservative and radical factions of the *tino rangatiratanga* movement from which the Mana Party had sprung. Morgan Godfery argues that, despite tensions within the Māori Party prior to the 2011 general election, these two factions were able to

6 Minto, Potter & Sykes, *Mana*, p. 153.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

coexist in the party.⁸ Harawira's exit, however, upset this coexistence, which led to a split between the two factions. Because of this, the policies of Mana were, in part, a retaliation against the more conservative arm of the Māori Party. Godfery identifies, for instance, Mana's lack of tino rangatiratanga policy initiatives:

Of the party's policies – the abolition of GST, free breakfasts in low decile schools, implementing a financial transactions tax, and building 20, 000 new state homes – none can be considered *kaupapa Māori*. The reasons for this seem clear:

The Mana Party was aiming beyond Māori and towards the wider working class.

The party believed material issues were more pervasive than cultural issues.

Tino rangatiratanga is not the ideology of young, urban, working class Māori.⁹

In this way, argues Godfery, Mana benefited from the Māori Party's failure to forge a strong identity politics that could be shared between the party's leaders and its supporters. As Maria Bargh suggests, when referring to the 2011 general election, there should have been more effort to support Māori participation in the political system from which many voters felt alienated.¹⁰ Interestingly, however, Minto, Potter and Sykes also note that most of the Mana Party votes came from Māori electorates, with only a third coming from general seats.¹¹

This brings us to the ideological problem Mana faced: that in pitching their campaign and policies towards material needs they side lined an explicit appeal to biculturalism. This

8 Morgan Godfery, The Fragmentation of Māori Politics, in Jon Johansson and Stephen Levine (eds.) *Kicking the Tyres*, Wellington 2012.

9 Ibid, p. 273.

10 Maria Bargh, Māori in Australia and the 2011 Election and Referendum, in Jon Johansson and Stephen Levine (eds.) *Kicking the Tyres*, Wellington 2012.

11 Minto, Potter & Sykes, Mana, p. 154.

trading of one ideological position for another failed to appeal to ‘flaxroot’ voters. Mana had to consider those ideological markers which appealed to voters across generations – namely those who had investment in Māori or bicultural identity, as well as those younger voters who rejected this in preference to contemporary social media, such as online news feeds, Twitter and Facebook. Thus the Mana Party failed to create a national presence among voters and even their local appearance in door-to-door and telephone canvassing was limited.¹² The problem facing Mana was how to posit a coherent and transparent ideology that appeared authentic to potential voters in the general electorates and, at the same time, avoided any ‘voter confusion’ that could be caused by the perception that Mana and Māori were simply two similar Māori parties. This underscores the importance of understanding ideology as having both critical and productive dimensions.

Žižek suggests that such an insistence on specific ideological markers, such as freedom and transparency, does not necessarily produce authenticity – either within or outside ideology. Instead, it is the fantasy of how freedom and transparency *ought* to operate that obfuscates less compatible ideological markers, thus ensuring inevitable misrecognition. Again, using Žižek’s example of purchasing a cup of coffee at Starbucks, the donation contained within the price changes nothing regarding labour exploitation and oppression; rather, this kind of ‘ethical capitalism’ mystifies the very foundation from which an insistence on ideological coherence might arise. Instead of confronting and critiquing capitalism, one clings to the ideology of ethical consumption as a way of justifying it. However, a more productive understanding of Žižek’s return to ideology grapples with how it remains a crucial form of contemporary critique – one that allows us to grasp the nature of political transformations. For new

12 Godfery, *The Fragmentation of Māori Politics*, p. 275.

political parties such as Mana, a way out of this kind of double bind might lie in revealing the darkness of one social fantasy, that of capitalism, and replacing it with a more ethical one, for example, that of a national Leftist class consciousness. It seems as though, by not foregrounding a 'millennial' inspired biculturalism, Mana missed a poignant opportunity to forge a different ideological solidarity.

Mana's ideological intentions became apparent when it defined its Leftist position in terms of a commitment to participatory justice emanating largely from its 'social democratic vision'.¹³ Here Mana attempted to engage in a political rhetoric that was also intellectually rigorous. It was in this mode that Mana was at its strongest, able to engage with a diverse group of Leftist factions, boundaries and generations in order to create a significant position opposing the National government's policies, thus temporarily bolstering the overall weak position of the Left in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mana was, arguably, the first Left party to align with Māori with a plan to push beyond Māori agendas and work politically with non-Māori groups. This was reflected in their collectivised, easy-to-read policy slogans: 'Feed the Kids', 'Jobs for all', 'Abolish GST'.¹⁴ It was also apparent in Mana's willingness to work with Labour to oppose the Māori 'capitalists' in the Māori Party.¹⁵ However, because the Labour Party appears to have viewed Māori politics as homogeneous, Mana was not appreciated as a counterpoint to the increasing conservatism of the Māori Party. Mana sought not only to legitimise political power for various collectives (such as the rights of young people and workers), it also offered a position for individuals motivated by social interests (such as class division and technology). It was

13 'Mana'. Accessed 14 January 2016 http://mana.net.nz/wpcontent/uploads/2011/10/Mana_pamphlet_web.pdf

14 Minto, Potter & Sykes, *Mana*, p. 153.

15 Godfery, *The Fragmentation of Māori Politics*, p. 272.

in this way that Mana straddled the conjuncture between mainstream political discourses and attempts to redistribute political power, particularly to younger voters; it allowed for the integration of social structures, such as class, which maintained people's lived realities, with a critique of those political processes which were repressive towards particular collectives.

Soon after its formation, Mana recorded a respectable, although modest, 1.08% in the 2011 general election, passing other established minor parties including ACT and United Future.¹⁶ Despite this, Mana struggled to progress in the polls and was largely excluded from mainstream political discussions. More significantly, Mana failed to influence those political processes that were firmly situated within a third-way, neo-liberal context. The best it could manage was to push a welfare-state inspired 'Feed the Kids' Bill. As the 2014 election drew closer Mana looked as though it would be able to hold its single parliamentary seat, and possibly secure two, but was just as likely to end up outside Parliament.

As it played out, Mana struggled to gain the support of the Left because of the perception generated in the media that there were ideological contradictions between the members of its leadership team. Analysts and pundits were quick to pigeonhole key people as either Māori *or* anti-capitalist activists. However, it is probably more accurate to consider them all as possessing varying shades of both categories, as well as being influenced by traditional Māori conservatism, which maintains traditional differences between Māori and Pākehā. During the 1970s, Harawira was a member of such anti-capitalist Māori based movements as Ngā Tamatoa and The Waitangi Action Committee, both of which were considered economically revolutionary.¹⁷ Mana at-

¹⁶ Election Commission. Accessed 14 January 2016 <http://www.elections.org.nz/events/past-events-0/2011-general-election/2011-general-election-official-results>

¹⁷ Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou*, Auckland 1990, p. 220.

tempted to return certain issues relating to class consciousness to a Leftist agenda; its ultimate failure to do so remains perplexing. At the time the political scene in Aotearoa New Zealand was littered with dirty laundry, as shown in Nicky Hager's *The Hollow Men*¹⁸ and *Dirty Politics*.¹⁹ In contrast to Labour and National, Mana had clean hands regarding the social, economic and cultural issues troubling many New Zealanders. Why, then, did they lose traction so quickly?

The visibility of ideological cohesion is for any party a crucial element in how it and its leaders present issues and policies. On the one hand, Mana vehemently reinvigorated Leftist ideological convictions as a way of combating what it considered the imperialist forces of the National Party. On the other, such staunch convictions rendered the party somewhat inaccessible to the New Zealand public. For the apolitical, issues that incorporate ideological conviction are merely representations which are seldom enacted. To not act is an easily assumed and distinctive political stance. It is easy to fall back into a cynical position because ideology can, here, be framed as an excuse for lying. Furthermore, it is problematic to position cynicism as rational critique when, as Peter Sloterdijk claims in his classic *Critique of Cynical Reason*, cynicism is the dominant operating mode for contemporary society.²⁰ For Sloterdijk, cynicism arises from disillusionment, stoicism and a failure of trust. These, he argues, are infused within peoples' day-to-day lives – their work, their mindsets and in their depersonalisation of social and political issues. The specificity of this depersonalisation (incorrectly) insists that political engagement, and thus potential transformation, is beyond the realm of ordinary people. Cynicism, he asserts, is

18 Nicky Hager, *The Hollow Men*, Nelson 2006.

19 Nicky Hager, *Dirty Politics*, Nelson 2014.

20 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Minneapolis MN 1987.

an ‘enlightened false consciousness’.²¹ It has been suggested we live in post-ideological times, where ideology is (or rather, ought to be) rendered obsolete through cynicism. Certainly many New Zealanders resist the ideological imperative politics discursively posits and which, as in Mana’s case, is perceived to have the potential to undermine mainstream political agendas. Aotearoa New Zealand prides itself on appearing ‘progressive’, yet at the same time there exists a reluctance to challenge ideological and political positions that appear stable and rational. Here New Zealanders, on the whole, demonstrate resignation and a certain degree of political apathy, a return to unenlightened cynicism, to ‘the tried and true’ as forms of ‘false consciousness’ which confuse self-interest with political rationalism.²² Indeed, such false consciousness, through its refusal to engage anything politically new helps in maintaining outdated political identities. Mana challenged such cynicism by attempting to not only invigorate a new political subject, but also to pull the rug from beneath dominant ideological structures.

It was at this point, when asserting ideological conviction, that the party found itself in a bind. Mana sought to legitimate power through class-based analysis, but without collapsing into liberal welfare discourses of social inequality. This meant that Mana attempted to keep political consciousness of social issues in the spotlight, all the while keeping the party in line with an ‘economic justice’ platform involving worker rights and oriented towards material needs. As Godfery states: ‘the Mana Party’s policy and rhetoric combined to create a picture of a party based on class, rather than ethnicity’.²³ All political parties must at some stage grapple with ideology. As Terry Eagleton poignantly states, ‘what persuades men and women to mistake each

21 Ibid p. xii.

22 Gordon McLaughlan, *The Passionless People Revisited*, Auckland 2012.

23 Godfery, *The Fragmentation of Māori Politics*, p. 273.

other from time to time for gods or vermin is ideology'.²⁴ Indeed, it can be argued that a party constitutes itself as simultaneously both God and vermin (often interchangeably or simultaneously) through complex sets of ideological conditions that have the potential to obfuscate or mystify the party's intentions. A good example here is the alliance between the Mana Party and Dotcom where the God/vermin binary left voters confused as to the authenticity of Mana's ideological framework. However, new hopes and desires are sometimes fully apprehended by specific populations who are not always cynical about leadership and change. Obama-mania and the 2015 appointment of the Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis attest to a kind of hysteria based on the cult of personality manifesting ideologically from material struggle and despair. Sanders and Corbyn also manifest as traits of spectacular politics within personalised figures. The singularity of a personality can thus become synonymous with a party's ideological conviction – Mana was a good example of such a conflation.

Annette Sykes provides an example of how focussing on one person narrows the public's vision of a political party. Sykes, whose legal advocacy work has centered on Māori empowerment and independence, was ranked deputy leader on Mana's list, but was considered within the party more as Tame Iti's lawyer.²⁵ For much of her career Sykes focused on addressing Treaty issues and land claims, and she adopted anarchist and socialist positions as appropriate. Bryce Edwards, lecturer in politics at the University of Otago, points out her past political participation – alongside Harawira in socialist-leaning Ngā Tamatoa – as well as her various anti-capitalist sentiments, as being effective in the fight against Pakeha-centric colonial capitalism. This was par-

24 Ibid.

25 New Zealand Herald, Iti and Tuhoe to Make Waitangi Mark. Accessed July 15 2016, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/242924>

ticularly pertinent when Mana applied a Māori nationalistic perspective to highlighting the deleterious effects of colonialism.²⁶ In contrast to Harawira and Sykes, Sue Bradford and John Minto were usually framed as Pakeha socialists and the leaders of the more class-based faction within Mana.

Although the fragmentation of Mana was most visible during its alliance with Dotcom, it became increasingly evident that the Mana and Māori Parties were divided along specific policy issues. This ideological tension between the two parties culminated in the Māori Party aligning with either National or Labour. It is here worth examining, in some detail, the reasons behind Mana's decision to join forces with Dotcom as a strategy for stronger political leverage.

Mana's Alliance with the Internet Party and Surveillance

Following the 2011 by-election, it was becoming apparent that Harawira needed more financial and political traction for the Mana Party to continue. Stephen Levine offers the following reasons for the Mana-Internet alliance:

In 2014, Harawira accepted the idea that his influence within Parliament could be increased at the helm of a larger political force – Internet Mana. In order to gain access to considerable financial resources – and to what was hoped to be a larger constituency of young, techno-savvy voters – Harawira, to the dismay to some of his followers, accepted the terms of an alliance with the Internet Party.²⁷

26 Bryce Edwards, The 2010 Bruce Jesson Memorial lecture. Accessed March 8 2015, <http://liberation.typepad.com/liberation/2010/08/the-2010-bruce-jesson-memorial-lecture-annette-sykes.html>

27 Stephen Levine, Moments of Truth, in Jon Johansson and Stephen Levine (eds.) *Kicking the Tyres*, Wellington 2012, p. 32.

The alliance with Dotcom certainly signalled a new and complicated ideological direction for Mana, one that was the beginning of their undoing. It was during the inception of this alliance that Mana's ideological conviction was placed under greater scrutiny, particularly when it came to issues regarding technology and surveillance.

The Internet Party was founded by Kim Dotcom, a controversial German entrepreneur, three years after the launching of Mana (the party registered on May 13, 2014).²⁸ When Dotcom launched the Internet Party its ideological position was difficult to define. It appeared that Dotcom himself sat on the liberal-right of mainstream politics and was influenced by classic liberalism. This had been apparent when in 2010 he donated \$50,000 to the then-Mayor of Auckland, John Banks – a member of the conservative ACT Party.²⁹ Yet despite his links with this high profile right-wing libertarian politician, Dotcom's motivation for entering politics appeared to be more driven by the government's raid on his house and his subsequent arrest in 2012 for corporate theft and copyright infringement.³⁰ At this time the New Zealand government was attempting to form closer ties with the United States, ties which brought the country in line with multinational interests – consequently Dotcom's arrest was seen as an outcome of these political manoeuvres. His court appearances relating to this case started in 2012 and continued through the election year of 2014 and after.

28 Election Commission 2014, Registration of Internet Party and Logo. Accessed April 10 2015, <http://www.elections.org.nz/news-media/registration-internet-party-and-logo>.

29 Chris Keall, Why Donate \$50 000 to John Banks in the First Place? Accessed January 14 2016 <http://www.nbr.co.nz/opinion/why-donate-50k-john-banks-first-place-dotcom-camp-explains>.

30 This raid was justified and carried out by the US federal police because Dotcom was suspected of fraud and copyright infringement. Dotcom's assets were seized and his bank accounts frozen. He was arrested and charged, but later released on bail. See Radio New Zealand, Long journey to Dotcom extradition verdict. Accessed January 14 2016 <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/292895/long-journey-to-dotcom-verdict>

Dotcom likened himself to anti-surveillance whistle blowers Edward Snowden and Julian Assange, whom he perceived as public guardians in maintaining and propagating social ethics. Indeed, the inclusion of Laila Harré as a candidate for the Internet Party appeared to grant it a degree of Leftist legitimacy. From this anti-surveillance platform, Dotcom proceeded to court celebrity while constructing a distinctly odd moral code derived from a fusion of neoliberalism and civil libertarianism. In spite of appearing as the least politically correct of figures, his insistence on transparency had its appeal. He was challenging the authoritative power of surveillance. Consequently, it was no surprise that the Auckland Town Hall was inundated with concerned New Zealanders desirous to hear his ‘Moment of Truth’.³¹

The problem of surveillance is complex and its interface with ideology has the capacity to both neutralise and contradict how we might approach political platforms and policies. Most obviously, surveillance incites paranoia (‘When am I being watched?’) and is a threat to an individual’s well-being (‘How should I behave accordingly?’). The technology and materiality utilised in surveillance is constantly changing and unable to be understood or regulated by the average person. There is a passive status the individual is subjected to as a consequence of surveillance – the individual feels exposed to the workings of surveillance and thus self-monitors behaviour, gesture and speech. Not only does surveillance harbour a potential for exploitation, but also for what can be considered a form of ‘fetishistic voyeurism’ – the enjoyment of watching and of being watched – from which ideology marks what are considered socially acceptable

31 Dotcom’s ‘Moment of Truth’ was revealed nationally on live TV. Dotcom was joined by Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Glenn Greenwald to discuss the practice of surveillance in New Zealand. They maintained that New Zealand was accessing global data harvesting programs as well as global spying software, which Snowden backed up with NSA documents. Dotcom called for stronger transparency on intelligence and security issues.

behaviours and gestures. That is, we act in accordance to how we think we ought to act, because we are aware that we could be being watched.³² Under the conditions of surveillance the individual is alienated because submission to its ideological imperative *to obey* entails that the individual is always under a presumption of guilt. Maybe this is what underlay Dotcom's ideological conviction, which, by shifting the focus from his alleged crime on to surveillance, enabled him to establish his brand of integrity. This is ironic, because for Dotcom emphasis on surveillance ensures that much less attention is being given to the person being monitored because what is called into question is the ethics and morals of surveillance itself. And yet, by his own admission, it was his 'brand' that Dotcom attributed to the demise of the Mana-Internet alliance.

The function of surveillance is to create and reproduce an unchanging image or representation to others. The justification for the institution of surveillance is that individuals may threaten to break the rules. Surveillance attempts to remove the impetus to break existing rules of behaviour. And when new rules are instigated, the conditions surrounding individual privacy require constant (re)negotiation. Dotcom intended his 'Moment of Truth' to attest to this because he was equating the 'problem' of surveillance with the voice of ideological authority. This is both the most ideologically accomplished, yet simultaneously the most threatening, position for individuals under capitalism and neoliberalism to assume.

Interestingly, and controversially, Žižek shifts the preoccupation with surveillance for the individual when he states: 'I don't care if we are watched. So what? Let the big Other watch me. Maybe he will learn something and be less stupid! This is not

³² 'Fetishistic voyeurism' is used deliberately here to convey that there is a certain *enjoyment* at play in the process and maintenance of surveillance.

my problem'.³³ Žižek considers the paranoia induced by surveillance to obfuscate the more important and urgent issues to be addressed. He maintains that we, as individuals, do not necessarily change our behaviour when being watched. Rather, what truly antagonises the watchers on the other side of the surveillance screen is that we apparently do not care our privacy is being monitored. While Žižek's call to dispense with the paranoia surrounding surveillance is compelling, the right to privacy is highly valued in Aotearoa New Zealand society, and infringements are met with disapproval. That Dotcom's 'Moment of Truth' at Auckland's Town Hall was full in anticipation of his anti-surveillance platform attests to this.

Investment in not being watched was the platform for Dotcom's political mantra, notwithstanding that one could assume, given his involvement in the political spectacle, that he in fact enjoyed it. Given the backdrop to the formation of the Internet Party, it came as no surprise that Dotcom's biggest challenge would be to remain in control of what he considered could be important issues for the media – an ongoing problem for all politicians. However, it can be argued Dotcom did not have the media on side from the beginning. Of the many media views that emerged in response to the inception of the Internet Party the dominant narratives reduced social issues to individualised narratives: Dotcom was either attempting to gain enough political power to prevent extradition; or the Internet Party was a grand act of retribution directed at the sitting prime minister, John Key. Maybe there was some truth in Dotcom's claims; they soon, however, became untruths in the eyes of the electorate and he became isolated, attacked from both sides of the political spectrum. It is clear that the effect of Dotcom's larger-than-life presence obscured the political platform of the Mana-Internet Alliance.

33 Slavoj Žižek & Paul Holdengräber, *Surveillance and Whistleblowers*. Accessed April 15 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBBzYG8szmc>

The Demise of the Mana Party

In April 2014 it became clear the Internet Party and Mana were planning to form a political alliance for the upcoming election. However, formal discussions between them resulted in prominent figures within Mana stepping away from the movement, the highest profile resignation being that of former Green Party MP Sue Bradford. The loss of Bradford was damaging for Mana and its imminent alliance with the Internet Party. Bradford resigned in a far from subtle manner on the day the alliance with Dotcom was formalised – she seemed determined to ignite the political tinderbox on leaving, arguing: ‘Kim Dotcom is a gamer and it’s a big game that he’s playing, and I don’t want to become his pawn... I think it’s a big mistake that a party that prided themselves on having the least becoming part of the same party as an internet mogul’.³⁴ Referring to Dotcom’s support of ACT, Bradford stated: ‘I find it incredible that a party with the kaupapa Mana has, should be considering going into an alliance with Kim Dotcom – a man who tried to buy off the right and failed and now he seems to have turned to the left to buy the left off’.³⁵ It seems as though the public agreed with Bradford’s sentiments as the ‘two parties managed to achieve an even lower level of political credibility than the almost negligible amount each possessed on its own’.³⁶

The formation of the Internet-Mana coalition attracted a high level of media coverage for such a relatively small political event. While the Left’s political adversaries had already vilified Dotcom and Mana with some success in the media, Bradford’s comments boosted their position. Her accusations were repeated *ad nauseam* by media commentators and political opponents,

34 TV3, Sue Bradford Quits Mana Over Internet Party Deal. Accessed March 10 2016 <http://www.3news.co.nz/politics/sue-bradford-quits-mana-over-internet-party-deal-2014052712#axzz3mtcX3vEU>.

35 Ibid

36 Levine, Moments of Truth, p. 59.

right up to election day. Colin Craig, leader of the newly created Conservative Party, found common ground with Bradford's anti-Dotcom comments and took out a full page advertisement in Aotearoa New Zealand's largest weekend paper, with the headline 'Nice One Sue'.³⁷ The dramatic departure of Bradford, one of New Zealand's most outspoken and principled Left wing activists, upset the framing of Internet-Mana – a frame that the party was unable to fully reconfigure. The Mana Party began to lose traction, the most obvious explanation being that those ideals which prop up convictions of freedom and transparency – such as honesty, public engagement and choice – were beginning to unravel. As Žižek argues, without fantasmatic support ideology and social reality conflate into a territory this is indistinguishable from that occupied by the cynic. Political ideals need, at least, have some chance of being put into practice. It could be argued Bradford had reached a political impasse. She simply did not think Mana could move forward while in alliance with Dotcom.

The arguments put forward by those opposed to the Internet-Mana merger appeared to misjudge both parties' ideological positions. Mana sat, arguably, within a class-based social democratic paradigm where capitalism is managed – rather than actively resisted or opposed. This attests to their appropriation of technology. At the same time it appeared as if Bradford and many of those opposed to the coalition genuinely believed Mana sat to the Left of social democracy and offered a working alternative to the capitalist order. This kind of reappropriation or demonstration of the Left, as demonstrated by both Mana and Bradford, is a current global phenomenon which does not escape Žižek when he states that the current figure of the Left is akin to 'an apostle who just embodies and delivers a truth – he just goes on and on repeating the same message . . . and although it may ap-

³⁷ Stuff NZ, Craig Compliment a Right Game. Accessed January 14 2016 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/10108261/Craig-compliment-a-Right-game-Bradford>

pear that nobody follows him, everyone believes him'.³⁸ The issue here, for Žižek, is that the Left does not sufficiently provoke its own parties' propagation of ideology. Despite this, once the possibility of such critique arises, as with Bradford, the public and the press tend to become suspicious. This suspicion manifests in the conditions which struggle with the sometimes frivolous nature of political culture. It is crucial for Leftist ideals not to relapse into absolutism and acceptance that there are no guarantees to the outcome of any political action.

Bradford's dismissal of Dotcom as a neoliberal billionaire, and the media coverage following from this, was problematic because it shifted the focus away from Internet-Mana's policy and towards the Internet Party's eccentric founder. However, at the same time it can be argued Bradford's resignation benefited other politicians such as Colin Craig and enabled the media to construct a political scandal. The media ran with the narrative that a coalition was formed between Mana and Dotcom, rather than Mana and the Internet Party. This suited the media and the pundits – as well as Dotcom's roadshow, which focused on his personality at the expense of the Internet Party's policies.³⁹ Although this may not have been Dotcom's intention, his style and mode of delivery allowed the media to focus on him rather than the party. This created not only cynical public reactions, but also raised moral questions – as Dotcom was positioned as untrustworthy. The Mana-Dotcom narrative was quickly embedded in the voter's psyche and Internet-Mana was unable to alter the popular perception of being ideologically inadequate. The public's understanding of the coalition became that of a grassroots movement subjected to the whims of a millionaire. The coalition was

38 Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise*, London 2014, p. 176.

39 There manifests a double-edged sword when the cult of personality becomes the focal point for ideology. What tends to occur is that personality obfuscates crucial political campaigns and platforms but at the same time, the success of these campaigns is reliant on the endorsement of a publicly reliable personality.

not viewed as a coherent political party, but rather as an opportunistic agreement between a neoliberal millionaire and a movement that had sold its soul to its ideological enemy. Lost in all of this were the Internet Party's policies and principles, which upon closer inspection neatly complemented Mana's. The alliance, it seems, was heading for political destitution and needed to reorganise itself and preserve what little consistency it had in the eye of the public.

Žižek suggests that we ought to be confronted with those fantasies which prop up ideology – because the site of the political is always, in light of its inconsistencies, a struggle. The urge to participate socially and politically is a drive which holds the individual in an emancipatory bind, even when a party's ideological foundations are unclear. Similarly, the urge to seem active when conditions are unclear can conceal ineffective processes and policies. Driven political figures, such as Dotcom and Bradford, do not function in a state of political inertia – notwithstanding that inertia can be considered a radical position.⁴⁰ These political figures kept policies and social issues alive in the public eye. This created an *enjoyment* of politics as spectacle, as evidenced by Dotcom's 'Moment of Truth'. There was, of course, inevitable disappointment when the 'truth' turned out to be no more than what the public suspected all along – that they were being watched.

The underwhelming 'Moment of Truth' exacerbated the cynical position of the public and press in relation to Leftist politics. Nevertheless, there remained the fall back position provided by the anti-surveillance platform, which for voters had the appearance of neutralising tensions between ideological positions

40 Žižek troubles the modern emancipatory subject when he tells a story of a young man who was grappling with whether he ought to fight for his country or stay with his ailing mother. The young man told his mother he was going to war, and the army that he was staying with his mother. He then left the country to ponder the choice he was faced with. This exemplifies for Žižek a radical act because the young man resisted those ideological conditions which were already framed for him.

– namely those between general Leftist politics and Dotcom. The Internet Party had developed policies through an online platform that was designed to democratise the process of policy formation. Although the newly formed party was influenced by social democratic ideals, its focus was on technological advancement and maintaining privacy. The policies relating to technology included universal internet access, digitising schools and investing in the digital economy. These fitted neatly with Mana’s principles of providing universal welfare, investing in education, and funding job creation. Similarly, the Internet Party’s focus on privacy resonated with existing Mana policies; the security policies of both were based on realigning foreign policy so that it was less influenced by the USA and multinational corporations. Furthermore, cannabis decriminalisation, environmental policies, healthcare and criminal justice were giving equal importance in policy status for both parties.

Jodi Dean critically addresses the intersection of technology and political participation as productively collaborative when she argues that

[t]he fantasy of activity or participation is materialised through technological fetishism. The fantasy of wholeness relies on and produces a global [sic] both imaginary and Real. This fantasy prevents the emergence of a clear division between friend and enemy.⁴¹

The ideological fantasy for Mana-Internet, wherein ideology served to conceal inconsistencies by instituting fantasies of how it can best function, merges technology and communication with social democracy. This attempt at forming a counter-hegemony to neoliberalism instead contributed to damaging the reputation of Mana-Internet. Dean maintains that

‘[t]he role of the Party isn’t to inject new knowledge into the working class. Nor is it to represent the interests of the working class

41 Jodi Dean, Communicative Capitalism, *Cultural Politics* 1/1, 2005, pp. 51-52.

on the terrain of politics. Rather, the function of the Party is to hold open a gap in our setting so as to enable a collective desire for collectivity'.⁴²

This kind of reimagining of the political party arguably did not manifest for the Mana-Internet alliance, as they collapsed into the old Leftist agenda of 'acting on behalf of' the people. Interestingly, in the wake of the Mana-Internet alliance failure, Dotcom stated to the media: 'I take full responsibility for this loss tonight because the brand – the brand Kim Dotcom – was poison for what we were trying to achieve'.⁴³ Here, Dotcom acknowledged the lack of common belonging, admitting that the individual commodification of his name devalued the reputation of the party.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Internet Party was a feminist component that began with its leader Laila Harré and continued through its list of candidates. While initially this was viewed as a strength that could entice a different cohort of voters, it soon became apparent that Dotcom's personal behaviour was unpalatable to those who may have voted on the basis of feminist ideals. It appeared that the Internet Party had attempted to encourage voters who were primarily concerned with gender-based issues at the expense of its solid base of young, technologically minded males. The effort here to be both representative of a political party and to portray its political coherence inevitably failed because this trajectory was similar to that of most other parties, namely of being an apologist for the party's ideological shortcomings and inconsistencies. Such failures manifested with the Mana-Internet alliance when it dispensed with class analysis and fell back on the liberal Left emblems of individualism, capacity and agency – as evidenced by Dotcom postur-

42 Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, London and New York 2016, p.5.

43 New York Times, *New Zealand's Ruling National Party is Re-Elected*. Accessed 15th July 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/world/asia/new-zealands-ruling-national-party-is-re-elected.html>

ing as a remarkable political figure on the level of Snowden and Assange. Although the reaction against Dotcom was not Mana-Internet's intention, what eventuated was a typical neo-liberal gesture: the cult of personality eclipsed the potential for pitching progressive policies.

The dreary decomposition of a party is one the public has become used to and which, in part, accounts for the political apathy pervasive among New Zealanders – as attested to by poor voting turnouts and declining political participation. It would seem Laila Harré was a force to be reckoned with, a feminist, a practising lawyer with a background in trade unionism, and a commitment to the voices of young people and the otherwise disenfranchised. On the face of it, this should have had more appeal to at least some politically minded New Zealanders, notwithstanding that such political mindfulness is often bound up with superficial notions of political correctness. However, following the Mana-Internet's failure to secure a parliamentary seat the party was dissolved on the 19th December, 2014.⁴⁴

What Went Wrong with Internet-Mana?

The New Zealand Left had seemed on the brink of being reinvigorated, yet between 2011 and 2014 the Mana Party was barely able to send a ripple through the governing neoliberal ideological conditions of Aotearoa New Zealand politics. Although an impact was made at the time of the Internet-Mana coalition, the ultimate effect of this was to entrench the existing order rather than challenge it. While it could be argued Harré did not take the party far enough, the public's perception of Dotcom's ongoing legal issues meant the Internet Party could no longer be part of the Left's future. Nevertheless, the Internet-Mana coalition

44 Levine, *Moments of Truth*, p. 69

was more than just a political experiment, as it sought, through a technological conduit, to address and respond to some of the problems of late capitalism – by deliberately targeting young, technologically-minded voters. As the corrosiveness of capitalism intensifies, a space is created to think of alternatives in which technology might play a pivotal role in processes of future social transformation. Mark Fisher contends that an alternative discursive space outside capitalism is difficult to conceive when we continue to appropriate the current state of capitalism as the dominant ideology.⁴⁵

One major problem with ideology is the difficulty of knowing where we are located in relation to it. We cannot be sure how our ideologies are perceived by others, if at all – especially within the confines of the political spectacle propagated by the media. The question arises: is it possible to engage with mainstream politics without becoming interpellated by the existing ideology? If so, how is this to be achieved? This is a question the Aotearoa New Zealand Left has always struggled with. Yet it must continue this struggle before political mobilisation, let alone transformation, can occur. Aotearoa New Zealand has a credible history of active political participation resulting in successful social democratic movements, perhaps because of its small population and relative wealth. It is, by contrast, unfortunate that the popularity achieved by Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain was triggered by economic collapse, which in turn had been precipitated by the fiscal ineptitude and corruption of their previous ‘socialist’ governments and exacerbated by inexcusably risky lending by global bankers. It is interesting that Sanders and Corbyn’s recent political campaigns have followed a trajectory in which the individual form of the political eclipses crisis

45 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, Ropley 2009.

and collectivity. Perhaps, therefore, the goal of the Left should be to illuminate the ideological farce that is mainstream politics, whose parameters are today so narrow that demanding change in terms of ideological purity fails to challenge existing norms. Just as protest can strengthen the illusion of democracy by providing the perception of a dissenting voice, the strength of political parties to the left of neoliberal ideologies helps to legitimise mainstream political agendas. Arguably, through a commitment to class consciousness, Mana retained ideological integrity during its formative years, notwithstanding that even then it was ridiculed for propagating a combination of socialist and cultural ideological imperatives.

Was the Mana Party more than a flash in the pan? While Mana offered a political alternative to institutional neoliberalism, it never posed a significant threat to the establishment and romanticising Mana's impact during its pre-Internet Party era is problematic. However, Mana's inability to disturb Aotearoa New Zealand politics prior to the coalition and its failure at the 2014 election should not be considered mistakes. Instead, Mana, and those situated on the Left, might ponder whether mainstream politics is in fact the right place for attempting ideological purity. There is a tendency for anti-capitalist activists to claim purity in order to project legitimacy. They are, however, operating in a system in which they will never be considered legitimate. This seems the case for Mana-Internet where, interestingly, the alliance precipitated an unexpected effect: to 'persuade potential National-leaning non-voters to vote'.⁴⁶ Given this current political context, it is tempting to conclude that popular perception regards voting for the right as a rational acceptance of a 'lesser evil', and that the Left are out-of-touch utopians enjoying the benefits of capitalism – albeit reluctantly or cynically.

⁴⁶ Levine, *Moments of Truth*, p. 79.

Michael Taylor argues that the current market economy is dehumanising and elevates anxiety and fear of alternative social and economic structures.⁴⁷ If activists of both the Left and Right fail to undertake the necessary critique of capitalism, then ideology is reduced to obfuscating the bigger questions of how social transformation could be envisioned and possibly achieved. A critical return to ideology is important in the Aotearoa New Zealand political context, not least because it provides a rejoinder to the concept of neoliberalism.

Resistance to neoliberalism, it can be argued, was Mana's guiding ideology – in that it provided a persuasive framework in which to configure contemporary power and social relations. Foregrounding the problem of neoliberalism is not merely a guise for excusing the failures of capitalism, it also, ironically, provides an impetus both for critique and for thinking alternative political and social structures. Mana undertook a great challenge in attempting to connect with the people – it sought to critique the existing ideological system and redistribute power relations, all the while operating under the very ideological conditions that oppressed these processes. Seen this way, Mana was more than a mere flash in the pan: it existed, and in part still does, as a transformative social movement that attempts to dislodge the capitalist grip by struggling to push neoliberalism into crisis. The Mana Party, for better or worse, grappled with the malaise of neoliberalism and attempted to position itself as an opponent to those who perpetuate class divisions.

47 Michael Taylor, *Rationality and the Ideology of Disconnection*, Cambridge 2006.

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