

Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature, 1984–2008: Market Fictions

By Jennifer Lawn

Lexington Books, Lanham, 2016.

RRP: US\$104 ISBN 9780739177419

Reviewed by Shintaro Kono

Does neoliberalism have its national and local variants? If so, is it important to emphasise their differences, or is it more productive to look for their similarities? The answer to the first question would be yes and no. Yes, because each nation has its historical moment when neoliberalism took its root in its soil, and its historical specificity is crucial in understanding its workings, and also in seeking ways out of this regime of accumulation. No, because if it is true that the driving force of neoliberalism is globalisation, it is essentially a global, therefore a “universal” phenomenon; and as such, what looks like national variation may be seen as emanating from the same source of globalisation, and we need a global solution to this global problem. These answers seem equally true; I contend that it is indispensable for any argument about neoliberalism to have a general theory of neoliberalism which encompasses what is happening in each country across the globe, and at the same time to offer historically located and specific understanding of the workings of the ideology in each place.

Jennifer Lawn’s *Neoliberalism and Cultural Transition in New Zealand Literature, 1984-2008: Market Fictions* teaches a foreign reader like me precisely that: that neoliberalism has taken a specifically New Zealand form, but it has much in common with that of other countries like, for instance, Japan. As for the distinctively New Zealand features of neoliberalism, unfortunately I have to inform the readers that the impression I got from the book was that neoliberalism took a much harsher, and a deeper form in New Zealand than even, say, Japan, which might be supposed to be a country with much affinity with neoliberalism (because of its well-known hard-working ethic). But on the other hand, if my impression is correct, that could also mean that New Zealand has been a *typical* country, embodying the logic of neoliberalism which has been shared globally. Lawn’s book is, I believe, an invaluable contribution to the debate about neoliberalism as both something local and global. Her thoroughgoing examination of the contemporary literature of Aotearoa/New Zealand offers a fine example of an analysis of neoliberalism in its local expression. But at the same time, her analyses are backed up by a general theory of neoliberalism, which gives her argument a general – or even global, I dare say – relevance.

If I am to sum up that general theory, or the problem, of neoliberalism formulated by Lawn, it would be the troubled, and sometimes nullified, relations between culture and society. Famously, neoliberalism begins with Margaret Thatcher’s declaration that “There is no such thing as society”. Society, if any, is seen as coextensive with the market; people’s political choice is reduced to their consumer behaviour, and culture, which used to have an organic, or sometimes critical, relationship with society, is now a body of commodities, creative activities being a model for entrepreneurial innovation. This, and the “post-socialist” condition after the 90s, gravely damaged leftist movements. If, as Nancy Fraser famously expressed in her formulation of the dilemma of redistribution and recognition, social politics (or class politics) waned and cultural politics (or identity politics) became the only terrain in which the left had any say, it was because neoliberalism was so successful in dissolving the tradition of “culture

and society” which Raymond Williams depicted as central to modern critical thinking in his celebrated book.

Lawn’s chapters are organised so as to take issue with this problem. The two chapters following the introducing chapter – which should itself be a reference point for all those who are interested in the theme of neoliberalism and culture – go straight into the heart of the matter by investigating the destination of our “social” and “political” imagination. The two chapters after these, entitled “Indigeneity” and “Creativity”, are investigation into the problem of cultural politics in the neoliberal era, the former being a critical exploration into postcolonialism in the age of identity politics and neoliberalism, and the latter into the place of literary creation and its once-critical function in the era in which creation itself is subsumed into post-Fordist “creative economy”.

It is crucially important that Lawn does not try to offer a simple ‘way out’ of neoliberalism through these chapters, because its strength lies in the very fact, as she makes explicit in the introduction, that neoliberalism has had “utopian appeal” for the left, as “it appropriated the “progressive spaces” of identity, self-determination and choice” (3). As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have shown in their seminal book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, we will miss much about neoliberalism if we just separate it from the leftist aspiration for a better society; on the contrary, neoliberalism was partly born out of 1968, as it were. If we take feminism – one subject to which Lawn could have dedicated another chapter – as an example, the political aspiration of second-wave feminism, which was partly a critical aspiration against the welfare-state regime and towards individual self-determination, found itself compatible with neoliberalism’s critique of welfare states and their attendant bureaucracy. (It is again Nancy Fraser, in her *Fortunes of Feminism*, who pointed this out.)

But this does not, and should not, mean that we should embrace neoliberalism as it is, or that we should decry any radical aspiration of feminism or other movements as complicitous with neoliberalism. Rather, precisely by understanding such overlapping of aspirations, we can overcome the present deadlock.

More concretely, how do we disentangle this dilemma of radical movements amid neoliberalism? Lawn’s critique of Walter Benn Michaels in chapter 4 may offer a fine example. Michaels, in *Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, constructed his argument along lines similar to Fraser’s, and famously criticised identity politics by way of this aphorism: “we love race – we love identity – because we don’t love class”. Lawn criticises this, stating that there is “something drastically wrong, and even abhorrent” about Michaels’s prescriptions for those who have any interest in postcolonialism, and that Michaels’s “abstract separation of exploitation from discrimination uncannily mirror[s] the characteristics of neoliberalism in some respects”. Here, Lawn’s claim reminds one of Judith Butler’s polemic against Fraser’s argument about recognition and redistribution in “Merely Cultural”, in so far as Butler took issue with the “abstract separation” of the cultural and the social/material in Fraser’s argument. The abstract separation is itself the product of neoliberalism; founding one’s argument on the assumption of this separation would be an implicit replication of neoliberal ideology. The counter case that Lawn presents is the recent settlements of the historical breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi. In these settlements, “indigenous self-determination” and “neocolonial assimilation” cannot be seen as antithetical. Representing settlements solely as either of these would be to fall prey to the ruse of

neoliberalism. Reclamation of properties by the Maori peoples is a form of self-determination, and at the same time settlements are conducted on neoliberal principles of devolved economic development. Michaels's formulation cannot grasp, much less solve, this real contradiction.

The same goes with the problem of creativity, discussed in chapter 5. In this chapter, Lawn shows how art and literature, which had had a critical function in society since Romanticism, have been incorporated into what Richard Florida and others call the creative economy. This does not only mean that creation has been commodified, but also that economic activity itself has been immaterialised and conducted on the model of creative activity under post-Fordism. But Lawn does not just claim that creation is subsumed into creative economy; ultimately, what she does is, keeping a firm grasp of such reality, put faith in writers' conscious efforts to rethink and reform their creative activity itself. Finally, I have to warn the reader that the present review does not do justice to Lawn's book insofar as it has not been able to refer to her detailed discussions about writers who grappled with neoliberal situations in their particularity. But I believe that their struggle is, again, not only local but global, and the critics' task is to make visible their common struggles. Lawn's study is a guiding light for those who try to render invisible local struggles visible as a common global battle.