Culture versus class: towards an understanding of Māori poverty

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Abstract: Interrogating why class has been demoted as a useful concept within anthropology, the author examines the ways in which issues of inequality and ethnicity have been used to explain both the enduring impact of settler colonialism on, and contemporary forms of discrimination against, New Zealand Māori. He weighs up the impact of the cultural turn in academia, the Māori Renaissance, the impact of neoliberalism, and the assumption that class coincides with ethnicity and hence the emphasis on affirmative action in education. The assumption that poverty is either class- or ethnicity-based is false. Māori themselves have been affected by social change: a few making it into a middle class, while, despite growing intermarriage, identification as Māori, appears enhanced by both enduring poverty and racism.

Keywords: class, culture, educational achievement, ethnicity, inequality, intersectionality, New Zealand Māori, poverty, Treaty of Waitangi

Introduction

It is somewhat peculiar that in the social sciences references to class distinctions abound yet the term has never acquired the status of a key analytical concept. Already twenty years ago, Sherry Ortner remarked on this in relation to a

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prestigious anthology, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, entitled *Identities*. On the very first page of their introduction they contend that in the 1980s ‘race, class, and gender became the holy trinity of literary criticism’, whereas in the 1990s, in their view, these concepts tended to become the ‘regnant clichés of . . . critical discourse’. Subsequently, the concept of class does not appear in the book again, although race and gender do receive considerable attention throughout the volume. Class, on the contrary, only reappears in the index, ‘as cliche’. Against this background, it may not be surprising that recently only a handful of people signed up for a workshop on class at a major conference on inequality, organised by the European Society for Oceanists in London/Cambridge in 2018. In view of increasing inequality following globalisation, the worldwide introduction of neoliberal reforms and the credit crunch in 2008, the question is why?

In this article, I will argue that anthropology cannot afford to avoid an analysis of class, although for class to become a key concept in our discipline it is necessary to achieve agreement on what class is and above all how we can disentangle it from other pertinent notions of social difference with which it intersects, such as race, ethnicity and gender. A related question concerns the reasons why race and ethnicity are more dominant in discourses of difference and inequality. These questions will be addressed in a New Zealand setting. The socioeconomic indicators of the indigenous Māori in New Zealand, who make up some 15 per cent of the country’s population, rank consistently below average. Although in recent decades significant progress has been made to ‘close the gaps’ between Māori and non-Māori, differences within Māori society have increased considerably. Should these differences be understood better through a class concept? And how does the debate about different achievements in education fit in?

**What is class?**

It is paradoxical that in the social sciences it is common to write about *social* classes whereas historically class was first and foremost a notion to describe *economic* inequality, in the oeuvres of Karl Marx and Max Weber for example. Furthermore, ‘social class’ is not infrequently used interchangeably with ‘socioeconomic class’, even though the need to distinguish between someone’s social background and her or his economic situation will be obvious. How exactly to delineate someone’s economic situation, however, and what criteria may be applied for that purpose, is the subject of an old debate, which, in turn, is linked to a discussion about the relationship between economic inequality and its social implications. A brief excursion into this debate is necessary to outline the main issue.

Karl Marx, who wrote on classes in capitalist society as it developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is arguably at the root of the contemporary debate about class and socioeconomic inequality. For him, just two classes existed: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, which he defined through their different
relationships to the means of production. In a Marxist view, the bourgeoisie, the capitalists, own the means of production which enables them to live off the surplus produced by the labour of the proletariat, which does not own the means of production and has no option but to sell its labour power to the bourgeoisie.

Of course, Marx also argued that class members share the same consciousness of their common interests, implying a set of shared views about the ideal organisation of society. Given the opposite interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, it was his opinion that ‘[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’, being the opening sentence of the first chapter in The Communist Manifesto. The goal of the proletariat was to overthrow the capitalist system and to resolve the inequality between the classes.

In the social sciences, the founding father of modern sociology Max Weber criticised Marx for having an extremely narrow view of class with an exclusive focus on private property. Weber contended that class is determined not simply by property or relations of production as it should always be compared and contrasted with social status or Stand, which is determined more by social prestige and political influence. He made this distinction after examining stratification in many European countries, which had made clear that some members of the prestigious and influential aristocracy lack economic wealth, whereas some wealthy families, e.g. Jewish families, lack prestige and influence because they were considered inferior on social grounds. Against this background, Weber formulated a theory of stratification consisting of three components: that is, ‘class’ or economic position; ‘status’ or prestige; and ‘power’, defined as the ability of a person to exercise his own will over others. As a corollary, class is to be distinguished analytically from status and power in a Weberian approach, yet it cannot be separated from prestige and influence.

The ambiguous representation of class as reflecting economic indicators yet not exclusively being determined by wealth explains the plethora of concepts used interchangeably in the social sciences, such as class, social class, socioeconomic class, and, since Bourdieu, also cultural class. This lack of analytical precision was compounded by the so-called ‘diversity turn’ in recent decades, which has caused social identities based on ethnicity, religion, race, nationality, and other attributes to take priority over class.4

Discourses of difference

The discourse about diversity originated in the United States in the 1960s, when the civil rights movement was instrumental in drawing attention to disadvantaged minorities. Initially, the debate revolved around the marginalisation of Black Americans, but soon attention was also drawn to Native Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans. Subsequently, advocates of women’s rights rapidly added gender to debates about equality, while disabled people became recognised as disadvantaged, too. Eventually, some six dimensions of difference (i.e. race or
ethnicity, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation and disability) complemented traditional concerns with equality that used to focus primarily on economic disparity.

Slightly later, demands for recognition of multiple dimensions of disadvantage were expressed through the introduction of the concept of ‘intersectionality’. This concept aims at including different dimensions of difference in the struggle against disadvantage or oppression by avoiding an either/or type of thinking in the analysis of socioeconomic inequality. As such, the term intersectionality introduced an understanding of what has been described as the ‘equivalence of differences’.

An upshot of the new discourses of differences, and especially the introduction of the term intersectionality, was that the demand for ‘statistical proportionality’ underlying the struggle of the Black Civil Rights movement that had initiated the diversification process became inherently problematic. After all, the dimensions of difference that were added to the debate about socioeconomic inequality are more difficult to quantify so they are to be judged, rather than ‘measured’, in different ways. For that reason, too, the diversity turn involved a demand for different kinds of emancipation than the classic campaigns for economic equality. Demands for the redistribution of resources were complemented with demands for recognition of cultural differences and a redistribution of social power and influence.

The widening spectrum of diversity and the associated demands for different kinds of redress, in turn, triggered a debate about the need to balance redistribution and recognition in the struggle for emancipation of marginalised groups. Diversity is difficult to disagree with, but the increasing attention on diversity is inclined to empty the debate about inequality of its main content. Nancy Fraser, for example, contended that the increasing focus on recognition should never detract from the need to call for revolutionary reforms of the structural conditions of inequality. She argued compellingly that it is necessary to combine the cultural politics of difference with socioeconomic politics of equality by pointing out that a recognition of cultural difference does not resolve structural problems of inequality and poverty.

The Māori Renaissance

Fraser’s call to balance redistribution and recognition in the struggle for postcolonial justice also constitutes the point of departure for the analysis here when examining the dual predicament of the New Zealand Māori. On the one hand, they face the consequences of socioeconomic injustice, rooted in the colonial history of New Zealand during which they were largely dispossessed of their lands and natural resources. Yet, on the other hand, they face cultural or symbolic injustice, rooted in social and cultural patterns of representation, interpretation and communication in contemporary, multicultural New Zealand. Affected as they are by two different yet related forms of injustice, forces them to claim both
redistribution, aimed at remedying colonial dispossession and economic injustices, and recognition, aimed at remedying cultural injustices. It goes without saying that cultural and economic injustice are intertwined since both extend from colonial relations of inequality, but it is still necessary to distinguish class and culture for analytical purposes. Indeed, Māori constitute an indigenous minority in a predominantly white settler colony, while at the same time the majority of the Māori population belongs to lower socioeconomic classes of New Zealand society. Unemployment rates, for example, are twice as high as the national average and life expectancy of Māori is some eight years less. What then is the interaction between the ethnicity of the Māori population and their low socioeconomic position in New Zealand society?

Although Māori had never stopped seeking redress for the alienation of their lands in the nineteenth century, protest against their dispossession and marginalisation was revived and reinforced towards the end of the 1960s. Initially, it focused mainly on demanding recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi, a covenant signed between Māori and the British Crown in 1840 that protected Māori customary rights, including their rights to land, but which had been systematically reneged on by successive New Zealand governments. In 1975, the government eventually set up a Waitangi Tribunal to examine Māori claims about violations of the Treaty. Subsequently, a settlement process (which is still ongoing) was initiated to redress Māori colonial grievances.

An upshot of Māori protest in the context of the claims settlement process was a tremendous revival and revaluation of Māori culture and traditions since the 1970s. This cannot be seen in isolation from the diversity turn which to some extent generated a worldwide revival of local traditions in response to globalisation, but Māori culture and traditions received a particular boost during the hearings of the Waitangi Tribunal. During those hearings, the loss of land was consequently linked to a loss of cultural traditions, which, in indigenous cosmology, are intimately connected to the land. This became already apparent in one of the very first claims regarding Manukau Harbour in south Auckland, when Māori elders proclaimed that

[for the Maori people . . . their natural resources are the source of spiritual life. This spiritual importance of the Harbour is embodied in mythology and tradition. The belief in Kaiwhare, the guardian spirit of the Harbour is a tangible part of the spiritual relationship between the people and the Harbour.]

Thus, the reach of Māori claims far exceeds the alienation of Māori land and other natural resources, including a whole way of life. The peripheral position of the Māori in contemporary New Zealand is not only explained with reference to the loss of their lands and natural resources, but it is intrinsically related to a degradation of Māori culture. For that reason, not only the land will have to be returned, but, in order to reshape New Zealand into a country in which the indigenous
population holds an equal position to that of settlers, their different cultural values and traditions will have to be accepted and appreciated as well.

Māori campaigns for recognition of their culture and way of life focus on all dimensions of society, although from the outset priority has been given to a revival of the Māori language. The Māori language is not only considered the key to better education; it is also sacred – for in the Māori worldview, language has been passed from the gods to their ancestors. It is by language that Māori are able to know and to communicate with the living spirit of ancestors and gods.14 As a consequence, te reo Māori, literally ‘the Māori voice’ but more broadly referring to the Māori language, has also been subject of a claim on the Waitangi Tribunal. It was represented as a taonga or ‘treasure’, that are protected as resource in Article 2 of the Treaty of Waitangi: ‘Language is an essential part of culture and must be regarded as a “valued possession”’.15 In 1987, this culminated in the Māori Language Act, offering the language legal status. As a consequence, numerous bilingual kindergartens (‘Kohanga Reo’ or ‘language nests’) and schools have been set up. The Māori Language Act also obliged the government to publish official documents both in English and in Māori, while also facilitating the introduction of Māori radio stations and television channels. These have undoubtedly introduced a new era in the history of New Zealand as a bicultural nation, although the gap between the indigenous people and European New Zealanders is still a cause for concern.

The renaissance of Māori culture and the genesis of activism against the marginalisation of the indigenous population in New Zealand did have some positive consequences, but at the same time it must also be understood against the background of a rapid transformation of the country’s economy. In the 1950s, New Zealand still enjoyed one of the highest living standards in the world, with a strong economy based on high wool prices and secure markets. In 1967, however, the export price for wool fell dramatically, which was the beginning of a long-term upheaval in New Zealand’s economic foundation. The country’s main export market was reduced drastically when the United Kingdom joined the European Union in 1973, which resulted in high inflation and high unemployment. Needless to say, the Māori bore the brunt of the economic crisis.

**Class and culture in New Zealand**

Although the disadvantaged position of the Māori in New Zealand had been noted before, Māori poverty was first problematised in the late 1960s by, among others, the sociologist John Foster.16 He suggested that the deprived position of the Māori in New Zealand society was not simply ‘a function of their being Maori, but . . . instead, the result of being poor’.17 Soon, more attention was given to the growing socioeconomic inequality in New Zealand society, which was increasingly analysed in terms of class distinctions.18 Cluny Macpherson even introduced the concept of ‘eth-class’ in this context, which he defined as a condition in
which ‘minority ethnicity and lower socioeconomic status coincide and are likely
to do so permanently’. This concept covers both structural and cultural discrimi-
nation as he adds that ‘[a]n eth-class cannot be “cured” by simply applying com-
 pensatory measures here and there because no amount of compensation will
overcome the majority’s convictions and beliefs about the minority’s supposed
attributes’.19 His conclusion was based on a detailed analysis of extremely low
educational attainment levels among the Māori, which, as he demonstrated,
resulted in a concentration in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. Precisely
these jobs were rapidly disappearing in New Zealand in the 1970s. It caused the
Marxist scholar David Bedggood to argue that Māori constituted the working
class of New Zealand’s capitalist economy: ‘New Zealand evolved as a colony
within a capitalist world economy, where British settlers destroyed Maori society
in their lust for land, and where class exploited, and exploits, class for profit.’20

Notwithstanding increasing signals that New Zealand was suffering from a
structural crisis, it was widely held that the decline of the economy and the asso-
ciated inequality was only temporary. This was partly intertwined with the repu-
tation of New Zealand as perhaps the most egalitarian society in the world. In
1959, the eminent historian Keith Sinclair had still argued that New Zealand
‘must be more nearly classless than any other society in the world’.21 In 1971, he
published an article under the rhetorical title ‘Why are Race Relations in New
Zealand Better than in South Africa, South Australia or South Dakota?’22 Since an
egalitarian ethos was, and, to some extent, still is, deeply embedded in New
Zealand ideology, the coincidence of Māori ethnicity and lower socioeconomic
status, too, was believed to be repairable by introducing policies to produce
higher levels of educational attainment that would, in turn, stimulate upward
mobility of the indigenous population. Māori leaders also argued that the imple-
mentation of such measures could break the negative spiral of circular underde-
velopment and Māori poverty. The influential chief of the Tainui Māori, Robert
Mahuta, for example, argued that ‘the Māori is locked in a vicious socio-economic
cycle in which they will remain unless new policies are developed’.23

Interestingly, these explanations of inequality in New Zealand did not primar-
ily question the continuing impact of colonial history and its underlying struc-
tures that had generated and entrenched the disadvantage of Māori people in
New Zealand in the first place. Instead, campaigns to close the gap merely focused
on the obvious low levels of educational qualifications among the Māori popula-
tion, which also made them vulnerable on the labour market where unskilled
jobs were increasingly scarce. Hence the focus on education and employment in
calls to reduce Māori disadvantage.

The revitalisation of culture in the 1970s, however, added a cultural explana-
tion for Māori disadvantage to the debate about socioeconomic inequality by
arguing that members of the indigenous population were underachieving because
their culture was not recognised in the monocultural education system in New
Zealand. The Māori scholar Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith summarised this new
explanation of inequality by saying that ‘Māori are disadvantaged in wider society because they are “de-culturalised” in the sense that they are deprived of traditional Māori values and pride.’ Pejorative views of Māori culture were widespread in the predominantly Pakeha (i.e. non-Māori or European) schools. As a consequence, Māori children, it was argued, enter an environment that is alien to them, sometimes even hostile, which creates identity confusion that, in turn, causes their attainment levels to be relatively low. At school, Māori children would not develop the self-esteem, let alone pride in their cultural traditions, that was deemed necessary to perform to the best of their ability. In line with this explanation of Māori underachievement in the education system, a focus on cultural recognition became dominant in the Māori struggle for justice in the 1970s. Policies to improve education focused on the introduction of bilingual education and the incorporation of cultural programmes in the curriculum in order to make schools more inclusive of and therefore also more accessible to Māori children.

Cultural explanations for inequality in education must be seen within the wider context of the development of Māori strategies for empowerment. Since the 1970s, the rise of Māori activism against their marginalisation has increasingly been characterised by demands for recognition of Māori culture and a revaluation of Māori identity. A Māori renaissance took place, as part of which cultural practices and traditions were revived and reconstructed. In the words of the Māori scholar Hirini Moko Mead: tikanga Māori (Māori culture, custom and/or values, TvM) has been revived because it is ‘empowering, validates being Māori, provides light where there might be darkness, illuminates the highway of life so we know where we are going, and enriches’. Underlying this revival, however, at least to some extent, is the assumption that the struggle against racial discrimination and Māori inequality may be reduced to a clash of cultures, as pointed out by the Marxist Māori scholar, Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith. Furthermore, this analysis of Māori disadvantage partly personalises the struggle for justice by emphasising the cultural identity of the indigenous population as a decisive aspect of their marginalisation. Accordingly, the struggle for equality is reduced to a fight against prejudice, against individuals and attitudes (e.g. of school teachers), a fight against institutions and practices, but not necessarily against the state structures that introduced and perpetuate the inequality. Cultural explanations for Māori inequality assume, in other words, that the conflict between Māori and Pakeha in wider society is based on the incompatibility of the underlying values of the two ethnic groups. Such a view is fundamentally problematic because it involves an abstraction of culture from its material context.

The emphasis on cultural recognition clarifies principally the goal behind the Māori campaign to revive Māori culture and traditions rather than providing a compelling explanation for ongoing Māori inequality. But at the same time, a culturalist lens involves a serious misconception of ethnic relations in New Zealand when disadvantage is assumed to solely coincide with ethnicity. Both Māori and Pakeha society are represented as forming homogeneous communities, whose
members share similar experiences and have exactly the same political aspirations. This assumption of homogeneity is inherently problematic since the concept of Māori in New Zealand covers a wide range of different cultural practices at the level of family and/or tribe, living either in predominantly rural areas or in cities, involving tremendous varieties in terms of tribal organisation and associated customs (*tikanga*), protocol (*kawa*) and language, not to mention variation in future aspirations. In the words of the urban Māori scholar Lili George:

In New Zealand society, there are several generations of Māori who have lost connection to culture and language, who have experienced the social, political, spiritual and physical consequence of poverty in the social underclass. There are those who have experienced enough prejudice to have internalized those negative experiences, and sadly, to have transmitted those to their children and grandchildren. Their identity as Māori has become tied up with their experiences of poverty and violence.\(^{30}\)

At the same time, however, it must be pointed out that Māori do not have the monopoly on social and economic disadvantage in New Zealand society. This is another weakness of the cultural approach to inequality that has become dominant in New Zealand since the 1970s and 1980s. It cannot explain why some Māori do well in the education system while others do not, nor can it explain different levels of attainment among Pakeha children, some of whom leave school without qualifications. Indeed, it is a misapprehension to think that all Pakeha are well-off.

**A neoliberal reformation**

In fact, inequality and disparity across New Zealand society was exacerbated after a Labour government entered office in 1984. At the time, the longstanding recession was characterised by economic stagnation, high inflation, recurrent balance of payment deficits and rising unemployment – all of which necessitated drastic reforms of the economy. Paradoxically, the Minister of Finance in the new Labour government, Roger Douglas, turned out to be a champion of neoliberalism. He floated the New Zealand dollar, introduced corporatisation of state services, sold off state assets and removed a swathe of regulations and subsidies. His policies were deeply unpopular and regarded as a betrayal of Labour’s leftwing promises, but he defended the reforms as being necessary to revive the economy, which had been tightly regulated since the crisis began.

One of the consequences of the neoliberal reforms and the introduction of a ‘free market’ in New Zealand was a tremendous rise in inequality and widening gaps, not necessarily between Māori and Pakeha, but within Māori society as well as within Pakeha society. In 2017, it was reported that New Zealand has experienced the highest increase in inequality in the developed world since the...
1990s.31 The report by the children’s fund of the United Nations also indicated that a high national income alone was no guarantee of a good record in sustaining child wellbeing: New Zealand ranked thirty-fourth out of forty-one developed countries, with 28 per cent of children living below the poverty line and 16 per cent in jobless households.32 Over the past decade, homelessness grew by 25 per cent and involved 1 per cent of the entire population, with 53 per cent of the homeless involving families with children. In addition, New Zealand was reported to have one of the greatest disparities of educational achievement when related to socioeconomic background, with 90,000 young people not in education, employment or training. The unemployment rate for Māori youth is almost 26 per cent.

The New Zealand’s Ministry of Social Development which publishes an analysis of census data, including an examination of indicators of inequality for Māori and Pacific Islanders living in New Zealand, showed improvements in the form of a decreasing gap between Māori and Pakeha.33 The gap between Māori and non-Māori life expectancy at birth, for example, has narrowed from 22 years in 1950 to 7.1 years by 2014. As pointed out above, significant progress has also been made with the recognition of Māori language and culture as an inherent part of New Zealand society, ranging from education and health to economics, politics and justice. Indeed, it cannot be denied that the socioeconomic status of Māori in New Zealand has improved in some areas since the 1970s. But not in all. Statistically, not enough Māori are making it to university, for example; a discriminatory trend which is also reflected in the proportionally higher unemployment rates and lower incomes. As a consequence, the New Zealand economy cannot be labelled as inclusive of Māori, who are predominantly working in jobs that tend to be low-waged and relatively insecure. Many Māori have casual, minimum-waged jobs and they also work the longest hours. With rising obesity rates and an increasing number of Māori, especially youngsters, committing suicide, there can be no question about the fact that the gap between Māori and Pakeha is still a cause for concern.34 In a comprehensive review of inequality indicators, Marriott and Sim even conclude that ‘while New Zealand has had some successes in reducing inequalities, the gaps in inequality among the majority of the indicators . . . show worsening outcomes for Māori. This growing gap in inequality . . . warrants greater government attention if the gaps are not to continue increasing into the future.’35

In view of developments that have taken place since the introduction of neoliberal reforms in the mid-1980s, however, it can no longer be automatically assumed that all Māori are equally affected by the above-mentioned indicators of inequality. Although in the 1970s it could be argued that ethnicity and class largely coincided, in recent years a considerable number of Māori have benefitted from improvements in social wellbeing. A Māori middle class has been reported to be growing very fast.36 Ten years ago, this was recognised by the head of the Ministry of Māori Development (Te Puni Kokiri), Leith Corner, who acknowledged that ‘Māori
unemployed is the lowest for years; Māori household incomes are improving; Māori life expectancy is improving. Everywhere you look, things are improving.’ At the same time, a range of Treaty of Waitangi claims have been settled with the government returning ancestral lands and monetary compensation to tribal management, which has generated a so-called Māori economy of which the value was recently estimated to be approximately NZ$50 billion. The growth of a Māori economy and the emergence of a distinct group of Māori that no longer suffers the consequences of colonialism, triggered opposition against social policies aimed at ‘closing the gap’ between Māori and Pakeha. It was criticised by some as a programme that encouraged ‘social apartheid’ and denounced as ‘the twenty-first century’s version of the “White Man’s Burden”’. Some ten years ago, nearly half the population of New Zealand also appeared to think that Māori were the ‘privileged’ people in the country because of special policies targeting the indigenous population. Māori politicians, however, consistently pointed to a continuing overrepresentation of Māori in negative statistics, including, for example, exceptionally high imprisonment rates, high levels of dependency on welfare benefits and shocking rates of diabetes. Still, the increasing differentiation within Māori society and the rise of a middle class generated a discussion, not only about the prioritisation of ethnic difference in social policy, but also about the statistical significance of ethnic criteria. The Māori demographer Tahu Kukutai, for example, pointed out that about 20 per cent of all those who reported being of Māori descent did not identify as Māori. And ethnic identification seemed to be related to economic wellbeing (i.e. Māori with jobs and houses were less likely to identify as Māori). It caused her to argue that statistical and legal definitions of Māori be amended to take account of both self-identified ethnicity and descent.

How people choose to identify ethnically is even more complicated in view of high rates of intermarriage, which means many people have multiple identities and their affiliations generally shift according to context. When it is not to their advantage, people might hide their ethnic affiliations, which has instigated some to be branded as so-called ‘weekend Māori’. Affirmative action programmes focusing on the alleviation of poverty among Māori, on the other hand, might trigger people to reconstruct a Māori identity, which is based on ethnic descent, or mixed descent, but with an upbringing in a chiefly non-Māori setting. These increasingly fluid circumstances make it inherently problematic to delineate ethnicity, for, as Paul Callister observed, the measurement of ethnicity not only reflects but also creates ethnic groups.

Ethnicity and inequality

In light of the discussion presented above, it might be argued that ethnicity is inherently problematic as an analytical concept in view of high rates of intermarriage, highly dynamic and fluid Māori identities, and with differences between
Māori and non-Māori becoming increasingly insignificant in the public domain. In common parlance, ethnicity is frequently essentialised, but the New Zealand Māori definitely do not constitute a discrete group, nor are they homogeneous. As a consequence, it is a real challenge to address the disadvantage among particular sections of the Māori population. In view of increasing diversity in Māori society, however, the key question is whether ethnicity, based either on single or multiple affiliations, is still a reliable indicator of class, economic status and power.

In the New Zealand context, this question was first examined by the political scientist Simon Chapple in a rigorous paper, entitled ‘Maori Socio-Economic Disparity’. Chapple proceeds from the strong evidence that there is an average disparity between Māori and non-Māori along a range of economic indicators, especially labour market outcomes, and this disparity, he shows, is either stable or reducing. At the same time, he argued that Māori ethnicity was a poor predictor of success or failure rates since at the same time there is considerable overlap between Māori and non-Māori outcomes. In fact, variation in socioeconomic status within Māori society swamps, in his view, interethnic differences since 86.4 per cent of the two main populations in New Zealand are distributed in the same way in income statistics: ‘Formal statistical analysis using a variety of official data suggests that in all cases very small amounts of individual variance in incomes and employment chances is explained directly or indirectly by being Māori.’ In addition, there is strong evidence that Māori with higher educational qualifications perform barely differently from their non-Māori counterparts. Low-skilled Māori, on the other hand, perform much worse than low-skilled non-Māori. Significantly, Chapple demonstrated in a refined review of a large corpus of statistical data that particular Māori people with a single type of identity living in predominantly rural areas, especially Northland and the centre of the North Island, with low levels of education and lower than average literacy, were severely affected by labour market problems. Accordingly, he argues that Māori do not share a common experience of socioeconomic disadvantage, but that ‘sole Māori’ living in areas where they continue to constitute a majority and who lack the social and cultural capital to participate in wider New Zealand society, where their cultural habits and norms are not accepted, continue to suffer the consequences of colonialism. As a consequence, he concludes that policies addressing socioeconomic disparity should not target all Māori as a whole deprived ethnic group, because socioeconomic problems associated with benefit dependence, sole parenthood, early natality, drug and alcohol abuse, physical violence and illegal cash-cropping statistically outweighed the impact of a nominal ethnicity.

What was important about Chapple’s findings was that he situated his analysis in a historical perspective about the massive rural-urban migration by Māori in the twentieth century after they had lost their land in the nineteenth. Rapid industrialisation and rising wages in the cities accelerated this process after the second world war. Māori entering urban areas, however, were poorly educated and relatively unskilled because of poor rural schooling, few incentives to acquire an
education in rural areas, and because of limited family resources. In addition, there was little or no incentive to acquire skills through education since unskilled jobs paid relatively well in New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960s. The nature of the work, contacts in the workplace and substantial intermarriage with members of the European working class resulted in the emergence of a working-class culture in many Māori communities. This may at least partly explain Māori overrepresentation in the lower socioeconomic classes in New Zealand, which in turn is related only indirectly to their Māori ethnicity.

This explanation is not to deny the existence of gaps between Māori and non-Māori, but these are likely to be influenced by a wide variety of factors, such as different preferences and priorities in life that in Chapple’s account are related to working-class culture rather than to ethnicity. In addition, Māori may lack role models or more general information about and access to social networks that could guide them into the direction of success in socioeconomic terms. Racial discrimination must also be considered a serious barrier, preventing many Māori from taking advantage of educational and/or economic opportunities.

Finally, Chapple suggests that class position in fact can determine ethnic identification itself. He argued that socioeconomic disadvantage in Māori communities arises from their status as an indigenous minority, which causes them to act as though success is an ethnic group sell-out: ‘In other words, a “socio-economic success” is less likely to identify as Māori than is a “socio-economic failure”.’ Indeed, Chapple hypothesises that socioeconomic success influences the choice of ethnicity, with successful people who are of Māori descent less likely, and unsuccessful people of Māori descent more likely to identify ethnically as Māori: ‘Socio-economic outcomes could be a cause of “Maoriness”, rather than “Maoriness” being a cause of socio-economic outcomes for some people.’ In other words, the construction of a Māori ethnicity may be influenced by the lack of socioeconomic success in New Zealand society.

Educational inequality: class or culture?

The question whether it is class or ethnicity that explains the overrepresentation of large sections of the Māori population on various measures of inequality has been discussed most intensively in the domain of education. The disparity between the educational achievements of Māori and non-Māori has concerned all of those interested in social inequality in New Zealand: the gap between Māori and non-Māori school leavers holding the minimum qualification of National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), for example, is decreasing, but was still 21.2 per cent in 2012. In the empiricist tradition of ‘evidence based’ research it has been demonstrated that differences between the educational performance of Māori and non-Māori can by accounted for by environmental variables, but it is a matter of definition and interpretation whether these should be attributed to class or ethnicity. For example, the presence of books in families...
and literacy levels of parents play a significant role in children’s achievements at school, but whether literate family resources and practices are related to either class or ethnicity, or both, is impossible to establish: ‘[this] aspect of the argument, essentially conceptual and perhaps political, [is] not open to resolution by empirical research’.48

It has already been mentioned that the ethnic distribution of occupations in socioeconomic categories is not the same, with a disproportionate number of Māori in lower-skilled jobs. By the same token, the distribution of literate resources in families is not distributed equally by ethnicity within social class categories either. Māori students from low income families are likely to possess significantly fewer books than non-Māori students from the same class, while their parents have a lower level of education as well; those with no educational qualifications number 50.5 per cent as opposed to 37.7 per cent in non-Māori families.49 As a result of this systematic difference within the same social class, the variance is attributed to ethnicity, although the reason for underachievement is in both cases the same, namely a lack of literate family resources and practices. The educationalist Nash50 notes that it may be logical to analyse the observed discrepancy as an effect of ethnicity simply because literate resources and practices are not possessed by Māori and non-Māori to the same extent. On the other hand, literate resources and practices in families are on theoretical grounds normally associated with social class in this type of research. This conceptual question, whether class or ethnicity are the determinants, thus takes on a political form in the New Zealand context.

Although causality is difficult to establish, the general view about differences in educational achievement between Māori and non-Māori had assumed that these are related primarily to literate family resources and practices. However, since the strong revival of Māori traditions, such explanations of inequality in education have been rejected as so-called ‘deficit theories’ because they place the onus for Māori underachievement on Māori themselves.51 Critics of the argument that household material resources and levels of parental education have an impact on the attainment levels of children at school argue that such an approach locates the problem and the entire responsibility for it with the victims, while ignoring the underlying postcolonial structures which have generated and entrenched the disadvantage in the first place. Or, they advance the cultural deprivation theory that focuses on the disadvantage of Māori children when they enter a European dominated school that does not respect and recognise Māori values. Disparaging and derogatory views of Māori culture are believed to cause Māori children to lose the self-esteem that is required to succeed in a culturally alien environment. A Māori student articulated this view in a book on cultural relationships in the classroom: ‘most of the teachers don’t really understand how we want to learn, how we can learn. They don’t know about us...’.52

The discussion about the relevance of class and culture in the explanation of different educational attainment levels is also complex because to some extent it
has been politicised. For statistical analysts such as Simon Chapple and Roy Nash, ethnic differences in the patterns of Māori and non-Māori performance in education, on the labour market and so on, are negligible when complex multivariate models are employed. As a corollary, they are inclined to suggest that class differences outweigh the cultural or ethnic differences in the explanation of socioeconomic disparity. A model prioritising class over culture, however, is considered inadequate by Māori scholars because it does not take into account the need for a programme of cultural mobilisation in order to achieve educational reform. In line with the cultural renaissance, they argue that a revaluation of Māori culture and values is imperative to close the gaps between Māori and non-Māori.

This argument is compounded by questioning the validity of research on Māori issues by non-Māori scholars: ‘Those of us involved in Māori education are greatly concerned about the assumptions made by researchers who are not connected and accountable to Māori people. These are researchers who work on rather than with Māori people.’ The most controversial book invalidating research by outsiders interested in indigenous peoples’ societies is entitled Decolonizing Methodologies (1999) by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. In this book the author argues that acquiring knowledge about indigenous peoples, as distinct from what they narrate about themselves, is a way of colonising them and amounts therefore to imperialism.

Thus, criticism of suggestions that social class matters in explanations of inequality is intertwined with a continuing campaign for Māori self-determination in the organisation of education for Māori. No one can argue about the impact of the introduction of bilingual kindergartens, the so-called Kōhanga Reo or ‘language nests’ in the early 1980s, soon followed by the establishment of bilingual primary schools and later also colleges, and, finally, the introduction of the Māori Language Act in 1987. For, since then, a whole generation of Māori children has grown up very competent in the Māori language and similarly confident about their Māori identity. At the same time, the inequality gap is still significant (though decreasing), with a considerable number of Māori families still living in dire poverty. The question in this context is whether educational policies can overcome the disastrous effects of a lack of education that is associated with low incomes, poor housing, health problems and other domestic issues.

Conclusion

Class differences exist and are real. At the same time, socioeconomic disadvantage associated with class frequently intersects with different dimensions of diversity, including ethnicity and gender. This makes it inherently problematic to disentangle class and ethnicity in analysis, and also in statistical research. Ultimately, conceptual if not political preferences determine whether scholars elect to prioritise class or ethnicity.
In New Zealand, the concept of class was discussed in the analysis of socioeconomic differences between Māori and non-Māori in the 1970s. However, cultural differences have gained prominence in the debate about inequality between the indigenous people and the descendants of European settlers in the country. This follows a revival of Māori culture that was partly generated by the global turn towards increasing recognition of diversity. In New Zealand, it also led to a recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi, which guarantees Māori proprietary rights as well as the principle that Māori are entitled to equal civil rights. The process that was initiated to redress violations of the Treaty of Waitangi in the colonial history of New Zealand opened an avenue for Māori people to improve socioeconomic indicators and for some to achieve upward mobility. This process is still ongoing and will not finish in the foreseeable future.

The rise of culture as opposed to class as an analytical tool may also be explained with reference to the problematic conceptualisation of class differences as they were discussed in New Zealand in the 1970s. The assumption then was that class largely coincided with ethnicity, which meant that intra-ethnic differences were neglected. For that reason, too, affirmative action policies specifically geared to ‘close the gaps’ between Māori and non-Māori in New Zealand were, arguably, to the disadvantage of some non-Māori members of the workless and working-classes while at the same time they might have given extra benefits to some Māori who might not have needed them. Indeed, poverty was not exclusive to Māori society – some Māori were not ‘underprivileged’, while some Pakeha were marginalised, living on the fringes of society. Policies based on the assumption that class coincided with ethnicity were inherently problematic.

With the introduction of neoliberal reforms in New Zealand in the mid-1980s, however, inequality increased, not primarily between Māori and non-Māori, but cutting across ethnic communities. This increase in intra-ethnic inequality should have re-introduced the concept of class, but since the diversity turn there is a reluctance to consider it independent of other dimensions of difference. In any event, the proposition that poverty is either class-based or ethnicity-based is a false dichotomy that does not stand up to scrutiny on the ground. On the one hand, a compensatory cultural programme might not necessarily help poor Māori who have been left out of the cultural renaissance, while a Māori middle class has been able to emerge; and, on the other hand, it appears that identifying as Māori may itself be because poverty and racism have locked people out of mainstream New Zealand society.

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