Trouble with social cohesion: The geographies and politics of COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand

Nicolas Lewis1 | John Morgan2

1School of the Environment, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
2School of Critical Studies in Education, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Correspondence
Nicolas Lewis, School of the Environment, University of Auckland, Auckland 1010, New Zealand.
Email: n.lewis@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract
In September 2020, the Centre for Informed Futures (Koi Tū) attributed the success of New Zealand's response to the great lockdown of March 2020 as a triumph of social cohesiveness. In this commentary we examine the use of terms such as ‘society’, ‘resilience’, ‘nation’ and ‘social cohesion’ in the light of the spread of the Delta variant, and the importance of geography and politics. We conclude that there is a need for a critical engagement with widely touted ideas of social cohesion.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, geography, politics of knowledge production, social cohesion

1 | INTRODUCTION

When Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) went into lockdown on March 25th 2020, the government’s policy was to seek to prevent the coronavirus reaching our shores. National togetherness was key— we were repeatedly told that ‘we were all in it together’ and exhorted to play our part in defeating the virus as part of a ‘team of five million’. To collective joy, COVID was stopped at the border. In the summer of 2020–2021, New Zealand seemed the envy of the world. Live rugby matches with real crowds were beamed across global TV networks. As one banner announced to the rest of the world: ‘Wish you were here’. As we write (November 2021), the Delta variant has evaded New Zealand’s border controls and taken hold, prompting a new strategy of suppressing the virus. Auckland is at the centre and faces its third month of lockdown as cases trend upwards. The real topographies of the pandemic have emerged into plain sight: the geography of exposure to COVID, the experience and impacts of COVID, and the profile of risks. Popular and social media attention has turned to who is being vaccinated and where, who has the disease and where, who is being most affected and where. In this context, we question the narrative of togetherness and explore why it is important for geographers to challenge ideological metaphors that parade as analysis.

Our approach is to examine the monograph He Oranga Hou: Social cohesion in a post-COVID world (Spoonley et al., 2020). It is an important document for several reasons. It was published in the heat of COVID anxiety and at a moment when New Zealand was celebrating the success of its initial lockdown in May 2020. It was the first extended academic commentary on the sociology of New Zealand’s experience of the pandemic and published by the newly established Centre for Informed Futures (Koi Tū). Its lead writers are two of New Zealand’s most prominent public academics: sociologist Paul Spoonley and Sir Peter Gluckman, the former Prime Minister’s Chief Science Adviser and Director of the Centre. Echoing the widely accepted narrative that defeating COVID had been a collective effort (Kearns, 2021), the report attributed the success to high levels of ‘social cohesiveness’. It drew on a conceptual architecture of ‘social cohesion’, but neither engaged critically with the concept or presented evidence of its presence or its affect/effects. We examine the document to ask what is lost when the social cohesion argument runs up against the hard realities of geography and politics, what is lost when academic analysis is dressed-up as...
widely accepted common sense, and what this means for critical scholarship.

2 | THE TROUBLE WITH SOCIAL COHESION

It is a compelling story: New Zealand’s ‘team of five million’ united against COVID-19, eliminating the virus, to the applause of a watching world. The Prime Minister – Jacinda Ardern – received international plaudits for her caring approach and empathetic communication, and this was a source, for many, of national pride. The problem is: it is just a story, and we think that one of the roles of academics is to maintain a measure of critical distance from the claims of politicians and the media, even in times of acute crisis. That is why we were concerned to read in He Oranga Hou that: (1) New Zealand demonstrates high levels of social cohesiveness; (2) that this helps explain New Zealand’s initial success in battling COVID; and (3) sustaining and enhancing social cohesion should be a collective priority. Propositions one and two were used to sustain proposition three. Prioritising social cohesion as both a ‘tradition’ and as a national goal require that the concept stands up to critical examination. However, while the monograph is only brief, its failure to confront the meaning and politics of its core concept is telling and important.

The report talks of ‘society’ and the ‘social’, concepts whose meanings cannot be assumed. For instance, Elliott and Turner (2013) trace three dominant traditions of thinking about society in sociological thought: society as structure, society as solidarity and society as creation. Without explanation, He Oranga Hou adopts a view of society as solidarity – a state of concern for others, care of the self, civic bonding and communal integration. This sets up a view of the ‘good’ society as one characterised by strong bonds that tie people together – a ‘stickiness’ that can become more cohesive through acts of creation. As others have remarked, as a concept designed to explore the work of social institutions, group practices and shared values/perceptions shape society (as structure and creation), the concept has been ‘endowed with extraordinary capacities’ (Jenson, 2019). In He Oranga Hou, this presents some problems.

First, these capacities are extended to nation building by the argument that social cohesion is a condition and/or platform for resilient, prosperous and healthy futures. Second, the document invokes an imagined national community that is ‘all in it together’. Third, as in other contexts (Mulhall, 2016), social cohesion comes to stand as a common sense that is presented as value free – an ideal in which society, culture and economy operate without friction or contradiction, and a policy goal in and of itself. Fourth, as a metaphor, ideology, or policy goal, the concept smooths over many of the structures that divide society. In the context of the pandemic and in relation to resilience, individuals and communities are to adapt to new realities, rather than seek to change that reality. This is a problem for those who would inform the future.

We recognise that it is hard to avoid metaphors in descriptions and explanations of society and social change, but we can at least explain how and why we are using them. This is especially important at a time of profound uncertainty. Further, a focus on social cohesion could be justified, if it can be demonstrated why other, perhaps more powerful, explanatory concepts are not selected, and if the specific critical work of the concept is examined in spatial–temporal context. The trouble with social cohesion in He Oranga Hou is that avoiding the academic imperative to explain conceptual choices turns concept into ideology.

3 | THE TROUBLE WITH GEOGRAPHY

Epidemics are inseparable from geography. Starting at one point, they spread elsewhere. Some places are spared for the moment, able to make plans and marshal resources. Social topographies also play a role. In 2020 and the first half of 2021, COVID-19 was largely thwarted at the New Zealand border, and then eradicated at point-specific sites where it was detected. People were locked into place and the virus with them. With New Zealand escaping the fates of large numbers of cases, hospitalisations and deaths, the lockdown offered many a welcome break from the rhythms of economic life in March and April 2020. The novelty of the experience and clement weather meant that New Zealanders could play their part in the media performance of togetherness. The government’s commitment to provide income support meant that many were able to wait out the inconvenience, while new technologies allowed others to work from home. The different experiences of lockdown remained largely hidden.

However, experiences were different. Families in poorer neighbourhoods or isolated in rural areas had their daily lives more severely impacted (Freeman et al., 2021). The elderly and those with ill health faced greater direct risks from the virus and suffered associated anxieties. Those in more crowded dwellings were less able to work or learn from home. Front-line health workers bore the brunt of dealing with the first wave of the pandemic. Those working in low-wage occupations at and around the borders or at MIQ facilities were more vulnerable to catching COVID. Jobs and businesses were lost in international tourism, hospitality, airport services,
public transport and retail. The taps were turned off on low-cost, short-term labour and on the departure of un- or underemployed young New Zealand emigrants, while New Zealand citizens abroad looked to return home. Foodbanks and emergency benefits became a reality for many, while social housing waitlists increased.

Much of this could be seen as temporary as long as the virus did not take hold, the narratives of national togetherness were convincing, and the government’s crisis management was effective. However, the arrival of the Delta variant and the prospect of a long period of disruption now direct attention to the way that the virus has inserted itself into a highly uneven human geography and is exacerbating and widening existing divisions. Poorer New Zealanders, many of them Māori or from Pacific origins, find themselves disproportionately affected. The New Zealand beyond talk of the ‘team of 5 million’ is a New Zealand where politics matters.

4 | THE TROUBLE WITH POLITICS

In late September 2021, as the government’s toolkit of testing, surveillance, vaccination, isolation and levels of shutdown failed to eliminate the Delta variant of coronavirus, former Prime Minister John Key clarified the politics of the pandemic. Key latched on to the government’s struggle to preserve the ‘we’re all in this together’ narrative in the face of empirical reality. He summoned an oppositional coalition of self-interests comprised of those stuck overseas, ‘brave’ small-business people, those prevented from visiting sick and dying relatives, and those who just want to ‘get on with it’. His intervention highlighted the differences in experience and their political potentialities.

Whatever we make of his politics – and they are not always pretty for those of us on the ‘broad left’ – we must admit that when read against Koi Tū’s Panglossian view of a socially cohesive New Zealand, his argument had a certain refreshing honesty. He sought to appeal to a ‘real’ New Zealand that wants to get back to the business of making money and enjoying privilege. Of course, this is not the only ‘real’ New Zealand. More troubling for those who would deny the politics of the pandemic, Māori and Pacific voices have become more insistent and more prominent as the government strategy has shifted from elimination to vaccination and suppression. Māori and Pacific vaccination rates are lower than those of Pakeha as at 15 October 2021 and their vulnerability to COVID higher, for reasons to do with the intersectionality of poverty, housing, educational unevenness and levels of alienation from the national social project. This is not to mention, in the noisy fringe, a vocal coalition of the disaffected and marginalised who are ‘pro-choice’ when it comes to vaccination.

5 | WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Despite these divisions, Koi Tū’s latest report (Gluckman, 2021) reaffirms its utopian view of a national future centred on resilience and cohesion and adds a series of sweeping declarations about the need to rebuild the global commons and establish a new geo-political order. Titled Transitions, transformations and tradeoffs, it warns of threats to social cohesion and resilience in New Zealand from a suite of global “social, technological, economic, environmental and geopolitical transitions and transformations” (Gluckman, 2021, p. 5). Social cohesion remains the goal, both morally and as a platform for mobilising national resources collectively to achieve competitive advantage in an uncertain world. Why has Koi Tū doubled down on its use of the pandemic to declare a socially cohesive nation as a platform for its own futures thinking, what are the consequences, and why are we bothered?

We suggest three possible answers. The first lies in the politics of the moment. As He Oranga Hou illustrates, the ‘all in it together’ narrative prioritises social cohesion as the key capacity that will allow the nation to prosper in a post-COVID world. As the policy goal in itself, all that remains is to erect a technical and institutional framework to promote it. That is the limit to political ambition in the report. Thus, the report stresses the need for transparent and responsive leadership, regular and transparent information flows, the assessment and evaluation of policy levers, and uncovering ‘what works’ by devising ways to measure impacts on social cohesion. The often visceral contemporary politics of place, representation and access to resources are absent.

The second lies in two dimensions of the politics of knowledge production. First, social science’s mission is reduced to supporting the actions of governments and the state – a model of uncritical policy work. It is as if the debates about the general crisis of the state of the 1970s or New Zealand’s colonial and neoliberal state forms of the 1970s–1990s never happened. Second, social cohesion catches the eye of politicians and policy makers. The 2021 Living Standards Framework asserts that ‘social cohesion’ is a form of capital that provides the basis for wealth creation in New Zealand. It is a fundable concept and one locked into a broader governmentality of measurement, utilitarianism, behaviouralism and an ideology of technocratic utopianism (Vallely, 2021). There is much to be gained in the world of public good research by claiming expertise in defining and measuring social cohesion and by being able to demonstrate an ability to rapidly define social change in its terms. On one level this is ‘all good’, and who can argue with well-being and the promise of social cohesion? The exception surely, we suggest, is a research centre that seeks to offer a guide to ‘informed futures’.
Our third answer lies in the ideology of social cohesion itself. The story offered is of a New Zealand characterised by high levels of cohesiveness and trust, now threatened by COVID and which requires social policy fixes. The virus represents an unforeseen, external shock to a stable and settled society, one that was ticking along quite nicely thank you. This glosses over the real and increasingly well-documented divisions within New Zealand society. It also feeds into an unhelpful (and unhealthy) ‘COVID nationalism’, where nations look to place themselves in a ‘league table’ of successful responses. This ideological reading is even now having political effects, as the Government’s real successes are being undermined by the story’s contradictions. Its struggle with the inconvenient truths of the ‘we’re all in it together’ narrative threatens to bring down the government.

In framing COVID-19 in this way, He Oranga Hou conveniently bypassed any analysis that requires looking at the political and economic structures and processes that shape New Zealand society and culture. In recent years, New Zealand has pursued a path of ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (Fraser, 2017) in which a broad cultural inclusivity and well-being agenda (based on tropes of care and kindness) has papered over the cracks of ‘pure’ economic neoliberalism. The COVID crisis does promise economic instabilities and the shift of debt sideways to particular groups and forward to another generation (Sparke & Williams, 2021). Pre-COVID, New Zealand already faced the challenge of how to reinvent economic growth at the same time as managing social inequality and effecting the transition to a more sustainable mode of production and consumption. Whether or not we interpret these as local or organic crises, it is surely incumbent on academics to build these into their models and theories. Geographers internationally have begun to do this with more creative and critical metaphors such as the ‘co-pathogenesis of COVID and neoliberalism’ (Sparke & Williams, 2021).

As geographers and educators, we share with Koi Tū a passion for informed futures. However, in a world where academics must confront tricky questions about public responsibilities and accountabilities when they work on, with, or for the state, we insist that they must resist ideology and the temptation to either serve policy or declare the world and seek to bend it to a single core set of values or principles. If critical social science has any role to play in analysing the pandemic, it must have a sharper analysis of what is happening in the world, reveal the assumptions and values embedded in its conceptual architecture, and resist easy narratives about the existence of social cohesion and wistful narrations of the nation. It must analyse why we are not all in COVID together in the same place and the same way (Baldwin, 2021). ‘We’re all in this together’ is not an empirically accurate, just or helpful analytical starting point for informing or imagining futures. The geographer might better begin by asking ‘Whose Futures?’ (Murtola & Walsh, 2020) and where?

**ORCID**

Nicolas Lewis [https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8645-0704](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8645-0704)

John Morgan [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1072-0488](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1072-0488)

**REFERENCES**

Baldwin, P. (2021). Fighting the first wave: Why the coronavirus was tackled so differently across the globe. Cambridge University Press.

Elliott, A., & Turner, B. (2013). On society. Polity Press.

Fraser, N. (2017). From progressive neoliberalism to Trump- and beyond. *American Affairs*, 1(4), 46–64. [https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/](https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/)

Freeman, C., Ergler, C., Kearns, R., & Smith, M. (2021). COVID-19 in New Zealand and the Pacific: Implications for children and families. *Children’s Geographies*, 1–10. [https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1907312](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1907312)

Gluckman, P. (2021). Transitions, transformations and tradeoffs: Protecting and strengthening societal resilience and cohesion. Auckland: The Centre for Informed Futures.

Jenson, J. (2019). Intersections of pluralism and social cohesion. *Global Centre for Pluralism*. Available online: [https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Jane-Jenson-Social-Cohesion-FINAL.pdf](https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Jane-Jenson-Social-Cohesion-FINAL.pdf) (accessed on 25 July 2019).

Kearns, R. (2021). Narrative and metaphors in New Zealand’s efforts to eliminate COVID-19. *Geographical Research*, 59, 1–7. [https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12)

Mulhall, A. (2016). Mind yourself: Well-being and resilience as governmentality in contemporary Ireland. *The Irish Review*, 53, 29–44.

Murtola, A.-M., & Walsh, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Whose futures?*. Auckland: Economic and Social Research Association.

Sparke, M., & Williams, O. D. (2021). Neoliberal disease: COVID-19, co-pathogenesis and global health insecurities. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X211048905](https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X211048905)

Spoonley, P., Gluckman, P., Bardsley, A., McIntosh, T., Hunia, R., Johal, S., & Poulton, R. (2020). He Oranga Hou: Social cohesion in a post-COVID world: ‘The Future is Now’ Conversation Series. Auckland: The Centre for Informed Futures. Retrieved from [https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/Social-Cohesion-in-a-Post-Covid-World.pdf](https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/Social-Cohesion-in-a-Post-Covid-World.pdf)

Valletty, N. (2021). Bentham in the beehive: Utilitarianism, neoliberalism and the wellbeing budgets. Economic and Social Research Aotearoa Retrieved from [https://esra.nz/bentham-beehive-utilitarianism-neoliberalism-wellbeing-budgets/](https://esra.nz/bentham-beehive-utilitarianism-neoliberalism-wellbeing-budgets/)

**How to cite this article**: Lewis, N., & Morgan, J. (2021). Trouble with social cohesion: The geographies and politics of COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Geographer*, 77(3), 170–173. [https://doi.org/10.1111/nzg.12314](https://doi.org/10.1111/nzg.12314)