

**Dougal McNeill. *Forms of Freedom: Marxist Essays in New Zealand and Australian Literature*. Otago University Press. 2024, 248 pages. AU\$49.95, ISBN 9781990048760 (Paperback)**

**Generational Reinvention:  
Neo-Marxism's New Perspectives in Oceanic Literature**

Dougal McNeill wants his readers to believe that reinterpreting an outdated Marxism is the way forward to a better world for the Oceanic region. Such a path is evident in his incorporation of the elements of liberation ideology as the referents for his text.

He applies his interpretation of neo-Marxism to the anti-colonial struggles of Indigenous writers, Aotearoan and Samoan, and, especially, women writers in Australia and New Zealand, as no male heterosexual Communist writers receive any attention in his essays. However, he makes extensive usage of Eurocentric critics of capitalism, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukacs, and E. P. Thompson, to support his analysis.

McNeill's neo-Marxism is aligned with the climate change agenda and against the proliferation of fossil fuels and nuclear energy, social inequality, and concern for Indigenous peoples. The proletariat no longer provides the momentum for revolutionary action, which has been transformed into a universalism only available to the marginalised and disenfranchised in advanced late capitalist societies.

The trendiness of neo-Marxism's relevance to young, socialist-minded, university educated adults lies in its innate call to collective action. The appropriateness of this appeal is questionable in a postmodern context where the attributes of the individual—one's peculiar identity—is the determinant of one's status.

He engages in the process of extending Indigenous writing into the globalisation of literature, bringing Oceania into the realm of world literature in English. This is a double-edged sword, as English is not the Indigenous language of the writers, although they have been schooled in it. They write in the language of the imperial power in order to advance their particular indigeneity.

McNeill's bilingualism, his extensive knowledge of the Maori language, allows him to advocate for reconciliation between exploited Indigenous peoples, as he perceives them, and the European colonisers. That position is augmented by the diversity, equality, and inclusion doctrine. This articulation is only a ventriloquism of political rhetorical strategies tinged with a veneer of neo-Marxism.

The selection of Australian white women's fictions under interrogation lacks any recent publications of note. Eve Langley's *The Pea Pickers* (1942), Dorothy Hewett's *Bobbin Up* (1959), and Amanda Lohrey's *The Morality of Gentlemen* (1984) and *The Reading Group* (1988) could be considered old line communist fiction. In contrast, his choice of Aotearoa/New Zealand fictional texts by Pip Adam and Emily Perkins are all published within the past fifteen years. Such a gigantic leap from what could be interpreted as Australian social[ist] realism to postmodernist subjectivism examining the problematic structure of the narrator's state of consciousness seems to pass unnoticed by McNeill's critical stance.

Marxism's concentration on the plight of the factory worker in the industrial age has been replaced in these texts by the casualisation of labour in the internet age, where

the gig economy has commodified part-time, temporary work. McNeill's reference to Marxism in the subtitle of this book seems a seeking after an authorial figure to support his literary analysis. Marx himself would be aghast at the transference of his critiques of capitalist production into the technological issues of computer geeks working from home today, although in dissimilar circumstances with more freedom available to the millennial generation.

The omission of the horrible revelations of Marxist adherents in Stalin's Reign of Terror, the excesses of Mao's Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, and Pol Pot's Cambodian Genocide, in which one-quarter of that country's population was murdered, completely escapes McNeill's gaze. His focus on the freedoms inherent in socialism blinds him to the crimes against humanity of the communist era, which must be part of our comprehension today. A serious prolepsis suffuses McNeill's freedom project.

Important work is accomplished in the significant comparisons he draws between Pakeha and Maori writers in New Zealand. His critical analysis creates an apocalyptic vision joining colonial invasion and subjugation with the climate emergency engulfing the world in pollution that heralds the collapse and closure of the extractive industries. The Oceania region is at the forefront of this confrontation as the island of Tuvalu is destined to be totally immersed in the not-too-distant future, according to the latest scientific data.

Socialism's universalist appeal produces a likeness between all minority Indigenous discourses, although the difference between a Samoan wish for independence may not be exactly the same as that of a Maori in Aotearoa or a First Nations person in Canada. The Nisga Nation in British Columbia is demanding that the government of Canada complete an oil pipeline across their territory to the Pacific Ocean so that they can collect the royalties from it.

A vision of paradise on earth was offered to the masses of Europe through Mussolini's fascism, Hitler's national socialism, and Stalin's communism—none of these turned out to be the utopia they were intended to be. That evidence points to the persistence of a delusion that inflicts far more harm on people than any benefit to humankind. McNeill's socialist utopian vision is inadvertently partially framed through the lens of one of the late Fredric Jameson's titles: *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), as this connection propels most of the argumentative structure of the text.

Western liberal democracies have moved on from the syndicalism that provided the momentum for revolutionary change in the past century. We now have to acknowledge that the entrepreneurship of a few talented individuals, such as Elon Musk of Tesla Inc., or Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com Inc., has transformed the basis of late capitalist nations. Musk's electric vehicle and battery storage company and Bezos's online shopping emporium have made considerable impact on the functioning of future societies. Their success has disclosed a significant paradox: two of the wealthiest people in the world, multi-billionaires, have advanced the environmental aims of socialists by innovating products that have enabled the production of electric vehicles and ecommerce, which have decreased the necessity for fossil fuels and expansive shopping malls.

The white cover of the book, illustrated with *The Real Bird (Red)* by Joanna Paul, is a symbol as outdated as the hammer and sickle of the red flag. Are people gathering in

large numbers to sing *The Internationale*? What would Marx himself have thought of his “dismal science” treatises becoming relevant to twenty-first-century dynamics?

McNeill’s book makes a significant contribution to the emerging space of cross-cultural literary studies, reflecting the increasing activity of Indigenous writers within their dominant national societies. He gives a firm thematic shape to his interrogation of postcolonial writing, albeit one that is framed by his liberationist ideology. The author needs to be commended for undertaking such a reading of a multiplicity of texts in the tension elicited by an intelligentsia questioning the definitions of colonies, empires, and cultures that formerly saturated the public’s understanding of global relations.

*Marvin Gilman, Independent Scholar*