Culture, For and Against: Some Patterns of ‘Culturespeak’ in New Zealand

‘Multiculturalism’ has largely been displaced in New Zealand public discourse by the concept of ‘biculturalism’. In fact, they are widely regarded as politically antagonistic. Nevertheless, these two complexes of ideas have some theoretical affinity, and there is a historical relation between them. They clearly form a system of some kind (along with such repressed notions as ‘monoculturalism’). Rather than assume conceptual coherence vis-à-vis the notion of culture that such notions appear to share, however, this paper proposes to analyse them as terms within a broad and open-ended field of ‘culturespeak’ (to borrow Ulf Hannerz’s convenient label).

Viewed through this frame, the question of biculturalism and its relation to multiculturalism becomes a matter for empirical study that requires specific exegesis for New Zealand. In particular, the forms of what Verena Stolcke has called ‘cultural fundamentalism’ seem to have their own weight and purpose within a bicultural policy approach as opposed to a multicultural one.

In pursuing the implications of this argument, this paper will investigate some uses of the word ‘culture’ in popular discourse in contemporary New Zealand. In addition, it will draw on, and attempt to understand, the writings of Irihapeti Ramsden, Elizabeth Rata, Michael Jackson and others who either have formulated versions of ‘culture’ that underpin bicultural or multicultural social policies or have criticised its application to those policies.