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Empowerment in a Neo-Liberal Climate: 
The Maori Experience

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"[I]t is only the liberal who disdains power..., partly because he has enough of it under his belt, partly because he falls in his privileged way to recognize that power can be emancipatory as well as oppressive. The dispossessed are less likely to underestimate the benefits of power, though only when the very meaning of power has been transfigured out of every recognition could they be said to have scored a definitive victory" (Terry Eagleton, The Gatekeeper, p.87).

This paper critically reflects upon the widespread currency and far-reaching use and abuse of the term 'empowerment' by governments, corporations, and pressure groups.

If there is one term that has become a kind of all-encompassing lingua franca for political/cultural discourse it is ‘empowerment’. Whether it is used to discuss the structural makeover of multi-nationals, or the civil rights of disenfranchised groups, ‘empowerment’ acts as a powerful signifier for theories of access and enablement. In development discourse, empowerment is believed to be the mechanism through which poverty can be combated (Singh & Titi, 1995:6). The concept has been central to development strategies aimed at alleviating poverty and social exclusion (Singh & Titi, 1995:6; Hopa, 1999:103) in which individuals take responsibility for their own needs and development (Craig & Mayo, 1995:1).

In many ways, the discourse of empowerment is an attack on, and a systematic critique of traditional Marxist/socialist paradigms that attribute all social/economic problems to the irreconcilable antithesis of class. Its ideological roots stem from the end of the 1960s with the post-structural eclipse of Marxism and the concomitant rise of neo-liberal ideology across the globe. Opponents of neo-liberal hegemony, however, have noted that it is the marshalling of empowerment for pro-capitalist ends that has robbed the concept of its threatening implications (Tandon, 1995:32). Empowerment, they argue, instead of being an emancipating, macro-driven philosophy which, by suggestion, should attack the idea of power itself, is by its ideological nature a theory obsessed with particularity and specificity that conveniently leaves the status quo intact.
Such dichotomies, viz. the concept of (re-)empowerment, is illustrated in New Zealand by Maori political struggles, particularly since the 1970s, to re-secure tribal control over resources “stolen by confiscation and ‘legislative theft’” (Hopa, 1999:105). The confiscation of Maori resources has been “part of a process of cultural and political destruction” (Phillips, in Macdonald, 1990:2), the legacy of which is a politically and economically subordinate indigenous population. Kelsey (1995:365-6) argues that the key to ‘true Maori development’, and therefore empowerment, lies in Maori control over resources and the promotion of self-determination according to Maori cultural values. Yet, the strategies of successive governments have been to “maximize the pursuit of individual wealth and power” (Sullivan, 1995:43) and in so doing demonstrate a denial of Maori tribal and cultural values. This paper argues that the government’s neo-liberal discourse of empowerment through democracy masks a prevailing colonial Enlightenment ideology that not only underlies such strategies, but also justifies Pakeha (the colonial, settler society) dominance in New Zealand.

Since the 1970s, the concept of empowerment has been central to the “reconceptualisation of development strategies” which have attempted to alleviate escalating global poverty and social exclusion (Singh & Titi, 1995:6; Hopa, 1999:103). Within development practices increasing emphasis has been placed on individuals to take responsibility for their own needs to promote “sustainable, people centred development, equal opportunity and social justice” (Craig & Mayo, 1995:1). The World Bank stated that “[t]he aims [of development] should be to empower ordinary people to take charge of their lives, to make communities more responsible for their development, and to make governments listen to their people” (World Bank, 1989, cit. in Rowlands, 1997:1). The UNDP ‘Human Development Report’ states that “Development must be woven around people, not people around development – and it should empower...rather than disempower them” (1993:1, cit. in Singh & Titi, 1995:6). Empowerment, it is believed, is the mechanism through which poverty can be combated (Singh & Titi, 1995:7). This ideological change within development was representative of a greater sea change in Western democracies. Since the 1970s the stability of the old paradigm of the welfare state has been seriously undermined (Sissons, 1995:3-64). In its place is a new political paradigm of neo-liberalism that subscribes to the language of empowerment, devolution and decentralisation (Sissons, 1995; Lashley, 2000; Sullivan, 1997).

Tandon (1995:31) argues that empowerment, if taken to its full limit, “can only mean equalising or near-equalising power, empowering those who do not have the power in the system”. The logic of the concept of empowerment “should drive the disempowered into positions of power and, equally, bring down those riding high on power” (Tandon, 1995:32). However, he argues that “[s]ince the concept is located within the very centre of ‘power relations’ and therefore challenging to powerholders, they have no choice but to incorporate it within their language and rob it of its threatening implications” (Tandon, 1995:32). Hegemonic liberal ideology in capitalist society legitimates and justifies existing systems of economic and political power.
(Hopa, 1999:105). Hopa (1999:105) notes that, from the Marxist perspective, if "political power is inseparable from economic power [since it is] associated with the...interests of capitalist transnationals operating [globally]", then empowering the powerless is limited. Hopa (1999:105) states that this is illustrated in New Zealand where the state, in its attempt not to dissuade overseas investment, has tried to settle claims "as quickly and as cheaply as possible".

The assumption is that empowerment is achieved through increased community involvement in the cultural and socio-economic structures of society (Botchway, 2001:135). In theory, a more democratic approach to development is a good idea. However, Henkel & Stirrat (2001:178) argue that the notion of empowerment through community-based development is not "so straightforwardly liberating as it appears...[and]...suggest that what the new orthodoxy...calls 'empowerment' might be...very similar to what...Foucault calls 'subjection'" (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001:178). They argue that instead of empowering the people, 'democratic' approaches to development introduces "other forms of...authoritarianism" (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001:178-9). A focus on empowerment through community-based development by the state "eases authoritative force, in turn placing responsibility on the 'participants'" (Henkel & Stirrat, 2001:179). Similarly, the state is provided "with a legitimate opportunity for shirking its responsibilities by dumping them on local areas even though those areas lack the resources needed" (Botchway, 2001:136). If communities lack the means to bring about social transformation, then, instead of becoming empowered, they remain dependent on institutional structures (Green, 2001:68).

Moreover, the emphasis on empowerment deflects from the wider socio-economic processes and institutional constraints which ensure continued impoverishment and contribute to the need for development (Botchway, 2001:146-7; Green, 2000:68). Democratic and liberal language obscures the fact that development "rarely engages with the human realities of the situations in which it is employed and applied" (James, 1999:13). Not only does it shift the focus away from the macro onto the local level, but it also places responsibility for development onto local actors. Yet, it is not local level actions that shape and change the world, but political and financial decisions made at the macro level (James, 1999:14). Community-based development rests on the philosophical assumption that it leads to the emancipation of the community (Green, 2000:68). Green argues, however, that "individual[s] are empowered at the level of consciousness, in a vacuum divorced from actual social and political action" (2000,68). Botchway (2000:139) argues that empowerment is "more than opening up access to decision-making", but for the local community to be able to see the bigger picture and to "challeng[e] the structural inequalities that...led to...social [problems] in the first place" (Botchway, 2000:139).

The focus on community-based development serves as a divisive tool to ignore the bleak reality of the chronic social problems which persist and has become, as Botchway (2001:136) argues, "a substitute for the structural reforms needed for social change".
Prior to colonisation, the Maori had been the undisputed occupants of Aotearoa (New Zealand) for nearly 1000 years (Fleras, 1989:222, n1). The Maori people see themselves as people of the land, tangata whenua. Since the whenua "is both land and placenta...land [is both] a birthplace and source of identity" (Turner, 1999:410). Although collectively they are Maori, identification is first with the family, whanau, the sub-tribe hapu and then the tribe iwi (Sullivan, 1995:55). Society was organised around relatively self-sufficient hapu of extended families whanau, (Fleras, 1989, n1) in which the "means of production were based on kinship and the major means of subsistence was communally held land" (Sullivan, 1995:44). The collective good was emphasised "by subjecting individual freedoms to social constraints...enforced through a kinship system" (Sullivan, 1995:43). Tribal identity is based on kinship, collective development and loyalty, whanaungatanga (Sullivan, 1995:44). Genealogy, whakapapa, "determine[s] who belongs to the tribe and form[s] the basis of communal rights, obligations, co-operation and loyalties (Sullivan, 1995:44). For the Maori, right or justice, tika, is based on kinship, and is, therefore, inseparable from genealogy, whakapapa (Turner, 1999:416). The tribe and its ancestors are the source of power and authority, mana, and to gain or to redress a loss of mana, Maori must act 'rightly' by seeking "to balance the debt to their ancestors“ (Turner, 1999:416, 418-9).

In 1840 the Treaty of Waitangi was signed by Maori Chiefs and the British Crown and represents the founding stone of the modern state of New Zealand. For the Maori people, the Treaty was understood as a contract under which power and governance would be shared equally with the British in "the cultural, social, economic and political life of New Zealand” (Lashley, 2000:4). However, there are fundamental differences between the English and the Maori texts (Lashley, 2000:3-5). In Article I of the English version, the Maori were to cede to the Crown "sovereignty ...over their respective territories” (cit. in Lashley, 2000:3-4), whereas in the Maori text, the Crown was granted governance, kawanatanga, not sovereignty. Thus, as Sharp (1997:388) notes, the fundamental difference between the Maori and the English texts, respectively, is "a power to govern for strictly limited purposes and...[a] supreme power which ‘sovereignty’ suggests”. In exchange for what was ceded under Article I (whether ‘sovereignty’ or kawanatanga), the English text of Article II, guarantees the Maori “full exclusive... possession of their lands and estates, forests, fisheries and other properties” (cit. in Lashley, 2000:4). The Maori version, however, guarantees the Maori te tino rangatiratanga, full chieftainship, or, in other words, 'sovereignty' (Sharp, 1997:388).

Since the Treaty of Waitangi, the political and legal systems of New Zealand have been developed from the capitalist assumption that land can be privately owned and exploited for profit (Sullivan, 1995:47). Based on this ideology, successive governments have sought to undermine the tribal structure of Maori society and to assimilate the Maori people into the colonial society and political system (Sullivan, 1995:43). But the dominant ethos of a nation of one people has not been achieved and problems of race relations, chronic poverty and poor
social conditions continue to be the reality for the majority (Lashley, 2000; Macdonald, 1990; Sullivan, 1995; Sullivan 1997). In the Past 150 years, approximately three and a quarter million acres of land has been "lost through confiscation, illegal deals, breach of contract or other irregularities" (Sullivan, 1997:361). This includes "some of the richest [dairy] land in New Zealand" (Macdonald, 1990:13). Today, the Maori people hold less than 5% of the land (Macdonald, 1990:4, 15). The systematic stripping of resources has denied the Maori their economic, cultural and spiritual base and has subsequently led to alienation from their ancestral homelands, detribalisation and marginalisation.

The economic boom and industrialisation in post-war New Zealand led to a Maori rural exodus in the 1950s and began to highlight both problems of race relations and the low socio-economic status of the Maori people (Lashley, 2000:2; Macdonald, 1990:16). Many Maori remain concentrated in economically impoverished urban areas, and suffer from increasing poverty and alienation from New Zealand society and from their own culture (Lashley, 2000:34-5). Dispossession of an economic resource base has created a "disempowered, marginalised...and dependent minority struggling to correct their unequal position in the social structure of Aotearoa/New Zealand" (Hoppe, 1999:113). For many Maori, New Zealand remains occupied by a colonial power and the Treaty of Waitangi serves as the main point of reference for Maori resistance (Kelsey, 1995:22). Protest over loss of land and resources has been part of a long history since the mid-19th century when Maori political power and economic resources began to be systematically eroded by the state "by force, fraud and guile" (Kelsey, 1995:365).

By the beginning of the 1970s protest over the land question, culture, social exclusion and socio-economic status began to take a militant turn (Macdonald, 1990:16). Protests and legal battles marked the decade, shocking many Pakeha into the realisation that New Zealand was not the egalitarian and racially tolerant society they had believed it to be. Instead, it became clear that the modern state of New Zealand was a monocultural, white dominated society in which the Maori were a disadvantaged minority (Macdonald, 1990:16). In response to Maori protest, in 1975 the government passed the Treaty of Waitangi Act and created the Waitangi Tribunal to monitor new legislation for possible treaty breaches and to hear claims of breached treaty rights after 1975 (Lashley, 2000:7). By 1985 Maori dissent had almost reached fever pitch. To quell a potentially explosive situation, the government promised to address outstanding grievances by extending the Tribunal’s jurisdiction back to 1840. Thus, for the first time, the Maori people were allowed to pursue and obtain redress for grievances dating back to the Treaty of Waitangi (Kelsey, 1995:319; Macdonald, 1990:4).

Reparative treaty settlement policies, at the end of the 1970s, coincided with an array of social policies targeted at Maori development (Lashley, 2000:14) which attempted "to incorporate cultural and spiritual values" (Sullivan, 1997:363). Maori affairs were decentralised and the emphasis was placed on community-based development to find long-term solutions to Maori
social and economic inequality (Sullivan, 1997:363-4; Fleras, 1989:217-8). The Community Services Report (1977) found that post-war bureaucratisation of the Department of Maori Affairs had created a centralised, paternalistic agency out of touch with the Maori population it served; and it was assumed that "excessive state dependency contributed to the Maori 'problem'" (Fleras, 1989:217). To promote Maori development, the government began a process of devolving power and decision-making from the Department to the local community (Fleras, 1989:217). Steps were taken to indigenise the Department and community members were encouraged to become involved in programme planning and implementation (Fleras, 1989:217). The Department’s efforts were complemented by government policies of biculturalism and integration aimed to "provide Maori greater inclusion in New Zealand society" (Lashley, 2000:14).

In October 1984, the government sponsored, Maori Economic Development Summit (Hui Taumata) brought together Maori tribal representatives and government officials to identify ways to improve Maori socio-economic position in an economically depressed New Zealand (Lashley, 2000:14, Sullivan, 1995:52-3; Sullivan, 1997:364, Durie, 1997:374). Maori leaders advocated that they were to define their own objectives and to control their own resources through tribal organisations and authorities (Sullivan, 1995:53) arguing that "operating from their traditional base of tribalism [they] could...do no worse than government" (Sullivan, 1995:53). The Decade of Maori Development (1984-1994) was subsequently launched (Durie, 1997:374; Sullivan, 1997:364) with the tribe as the vehicle for economic development and limited sovereignty (Durie, 1997:374). In 1988 the Maori Affairs Restructuring Act transferred responsibility for Maori social and economic programmes to mainstream government departments and agencies with the intention of making them “more ‘responsive’ to their Maori clients” (Sullivan, 1997:364). Under the Runanga Iwi Act (1989) iwi (tribal) authorities were legally recognised as corporate entities responsible for carrying out government programmes “in a manner more consistent with tribal values” (Sullivan, 1997:365).

Sullivan (1997:364) argues that the Economic Summit represents Maori attempts to end state paternalism "partly through a...transfer of power from government to the tribes (devolution) and partly by a demand for limited self-determination". ‘Devolution’ "had provided more flexibility to tailor programmes to [Maori] needs which the centralised and monocultural welfare state had persistently ignored” (Kelsey, 1995:315). Initially under devolution "many Maori...sought to work alongside the government” (Kelsey, 1995:319). However, in 1991, the State Services Commission found that employment in public service failed to “attract and retain Maori” (Sullivan, 1997:364). The decentralisation of Maori Affairs had only achieved limited success and was criticised as a public relations exercise which transferred “the burden of responsibility and accountability to the local community without any visible redistribution of power” (Fleras, 1989:219).
Development programmes were contracted directly to tribal organisations (Sullivan, 1997:364, Lashley, 2000:14) regardless of the fact that "few tribes had the management structures or sound infrastructures necessary for commercial activities and social service delivery” (Durie, 1997:374). In a climate of reduced public spending, tribes were forced to compete with each other to secure limited government funds (Durie, 1997:375; Kelsey, 1995:141) and many argued that inadequate funding and training undermined efforts to implement programmes (Fleras, 1989:219). Similarly, many criticised the government’s claims “to have embraced biculturalism...as another device to placate demands to share real power” (Kelsey, 1995:141). Government integration policies, dressed up as biculturalism, “failed to advance the relative socio-economic position of Maori in New Zealand society” (Sullivan, 1997:364). It was argued that policies under the government’s bicultural drive “rarely went beyond the cosmetic co-option of Maori intellectual and cultural property by ‘mainstreaming’ government departments” (Kelsey, 1995:141). Finally, the Runanga Iwi Act was repealed in 1990 by the incoming National government which effectively ended attempts to decentralise power to tribes by placing control under central government (Sullivan, 1995:53).

Although the term ‘biculturalism’ was first officially recognised and adopted in 1982 (Sissons, 1995:61), the government’s definition was “elusive [and] poorly defined” (Sissons, 1995:62). It side-stepped any notion of “equal civil rights; full sharing in the processes of government and the exercise of power; and equality of resources and capacities necessary to make equal rights into fully equal opportunities” (Sissons, 1995:62). This reflected the government’s “reluctance...to seriously address questions of Maori political and economic empowerment” (Sissons, 1995:62). As Fleras argues, government efforts to provide Maori sovereignty and to embrace biculturalism “all but [ignore references to power-sharing]...except in the implicit sense of endorsing the political status quo and the primacy of those Western liberal-democratic values to have governed New Zealand since colonization” (Fleras, 1989:220).

It is important to remember that the Maori Decade of Development and (limited) self-determination coincided with the structural adjustment policy programme implemented in 1984. Within a decade, state operations and assets had been privatised thus ending state paternalism (Kelsey, 1995:348-9). The neo-liberal language of empowerment and devolution took hold as power, resources and responsibility were transferred from central government to local-level agencies (Lashley, 2000:16-17) and the focus was placed on community-based development. The discourse, however, stood in for the reality: economic stagnation, recession and instability; growing unemployment, poverty and inequality, forcing many to depend on a diminishing welfare safety net or private charity (Kelsey, 1995:349-50). By 1995, “collective responsibility, redistribution of resources and power, social stability [and] democratic participation...seemed to have been [forgotten]” (Kelsey, 1995:350). The social cost of the structural adjustment programme impacted heaviest on the Maori and compounded inequalities within New Zealand society (Kelsey, 1995:366).
Over the past three decades, Maori tribes have focused on the tribal base to seek economic and political alternatives for self-determination, *tino rangatiratanga* and to promote tribal empowerment (Hopa, 1999:105). These alternatives seek to balance socio-economic factors with Maori social, cultural, material, environmental and spiritual needs through tribal values of reciprocity and collective responsibility (Kelsey, 1995:350, 364-365). Treaty settlement claims are negotiated, distributed and managed at the tribal, *iwi* and *hapu*, levels. Settlement assets as well as the land itself, either retained or regained, provide many tribal authorities with an economic base. However, while these organisations fund some development programmes and provide limited social services, assets were neither intended nor conceived as social welfare and the aim is not to replace government responsibility (Kelsey, 1995:365; Lashley, 2000:46). Thus, while treaty settlement has provided economic redress and social justice at the collective level, to tribal groups, the limited trickle-down effect at the individual, or household level has proved inadequate in improving Maori economic and social well-being (Lashley, 2000:1, 46). Instead, settlement claims provide commercial and investment capital (Lashley, 2000:46).

But there seems to be an inherent contradiction within Maori economic models. Priority is placed on people-centred development over market-led economic growth with the belief that economic development lies in the hands of the people (Kelsey, 1995:366). Treaty settlement claims have empowered tribes on a corporate basis in the form of tribal trust boards and authorities and funds are centrally controlled (Hopa, 1999:105, 110). Tribal resources are used as commercial operations with the free-market philosophy that profit will benefit the masses (Kelsey, 1995:366). Contrary to this, it is Maori entrepreneurs who reap the rewards with little trickle-down effect to the people (Kelsey, 1995:366). Hopa notes that, post-settlement, the structures of Maori tribal authorities seem to be emerging as top-heavy and top-down in contrast to earlier bottom-up structures which potentially allowed for greater empowerment of the people (1999:110).

It seems, then, that many Maori entrepreneurs "seek to locate tribal structures and traditional values within the global market-place" to the detriment of the Maori people at large (Kelsey, 1995:365-6). Central control of resources has empowered an elite. Moreover, Sissons argues that a move towards political and economic inclusion in a capitalist, bureaucratic state rationalises and centralises Maori tribal knowledge and expertise and threatens the participatory-democratic base of Maori social, cultural and economic development (1995:63). Further, and more importantly, the rationalisation of Maori organisations "has the potential to stifle...democratic challenges to capitalist development and established state structures" (Sissons, 1995:65).

Neo-liberal theories suggest that rolling back the power of the state ultimately leads to 'democracy' (Ferguson, 1998:16). However, Ferguson argues that "both the 'top' and the 'bottom' of the vertical [topography of power]...today operate within a profoundly
transnationalized global context that makes the constructed and fictive nature of [this topography] increasingly visible” (Ferguson, 1998:6). Thus the ‘new paradigm’ of the ‘state’ and ‘society’ is not so democratic or liberating as it seems and, in fact, reflects the old paradigm which stifles both democracy, and social and economic development (Ferguson, 1998:9-12). According to Ferguson, the ‘state’ should not be seen in opposition to ‘society’, but as "composed of bundles of social practices, every bit as ‘local’ in their social situatedness and materiality as any other“ (1998:15). Civil society is made up of local organisations which “turn out to be integrally linked with national and transnational-level entities” (Ferguson, 1998:18). This seems comparable to Maori tribal authorities. Thus, local-level organisations “come as much from the putative ‘above’...as from the supposed ‘below’” (Ferguson, 1998:19). This new apparatus, Ferguson (1998:21) argues, "does not replace the older system...but overlays...and coexists with it” therefore creating a horizontal topography of power.

Policies of assimilation and integration reflect the ruling Pakeha’s denial of cultural difference, a denial which is “the determining factor in the construction …[and] basis of...[New Zealand] society” (Turner 1999:419). The conflict of cultural values is the legacy of colonial Enlightenment ideology, the intellectual inheritance of which “remains relatively unquestioned...[and] continues to unconsciously shape discussion of cultural relations” (Turner, 1999:409). This legacy, therefore, has been problematic for the Maori since to deny Maori culture is to prevent Maori (re-)empowerment. Neo-liberal language of empowerment, by power structures, merely masks the maintenance of the status quo. Fleras argues that the status quo of power relations, the distribution of wealth, and the social and political order has been legitimised and maintained by government reluctance to carry out its responsibility to indigenous peoples (Fleras, 1989:215).

Maori respect and acceptance of Pakeha traditions has legitimised the imposed form of colonial government; yet the (colonial) government has been determined not to recognise, politically or legally, Maori tribalism (Sullivan, 1995:56). The collective basis of Maori society can not be accounted for within the prevailing ideology of liberalism, the ideology of the individual. Moreover, Sullivan explains that “[t]ribalism...and the notion that political power is best exercised by consensus decision-making undermines the philosophical, individualistic principles of Western liberalism, capitalism and representative government” (Sullivan, 1995:56-7). Appropriation of Maori resources by the government has systematically suppressed the indigenous population while reinforcing the colonialist position of power within the system.

While reparative treaty settlement has provided economic redress at the collective level, it has “neither improved economic and social well-being among the majority of Maori households nor offset the impact of the [structural adjustment] reforms” (Lashley, 2000:46). Similarly, social policies have failed to alleviate socio-economic conditions for the majority of Maori who remain both dispossessed, marginalised and excluded from the state apparatus. Government efforts for
Maori self-determination, through treaty settlement legislation and devolution of Maori affairs, have been superficial and have, at best, empowered an elite few. Sullivan (1995:43) states that “governments still ignore the importance of tribal organization even though policies and the means of implementing those policies fail to improve the major disparities between Maori and non-Maori on all socio-economic indicators”.

Attempts by the state to assimilate and integrate the Maori population into the dominant Pakeha society have failed to destroy Maori culture and identity. Instead, Maori values have been “transplanted into an urban environment and paved the way for the emergence of contemporary political activism” (Sullivan, 1995:55). In response to government failure to remedy their marginal status, political activism is no longer a simple address for equality before the law or redress for past injustices, but is now a demand for “power and equity with respect to land, identity, and resources” (Fleras, 1989:215). Indigenous peoples have begun to seek radical change from dependency to a right to self-determination “which they claim existed prior to...[colonisation] and [has] never been extinguished by treaty, discovery, or conquest” (Fleras, 1989:215). Fleras states that “[w]ith their focus on power, special status, and non-negotiable collective rights, aboriginal demands are opposed to those individualist, meritocratic, and universal values embedded within liberal-democratic contexts” (Fleras, 1989:215).

Based on notions of race-class hierarchy and progressive values of commerce and liberty, colonial Enlightenment thought held that contact with Europeans would advance ‘primitive’ peoples to a state of civilisation (Turner, 1999:409, 415). Yet, government policies have systematically stripped the Maori of resources that guaranteed their economic, cultural and spiritual well-being. Thus, instead of advancing the Maori people, contact with Europeans has reduced them “to an underclass in their own land” (Kelsey, 1995:283). In contrast with the Maori philosophy of collectivism, the liberal-democratic system of government encourages the pursuit of wealth. Maori society is regulated by the ethic of balance, utu; thus, as Turner (1999:419) argues, problems of social inequality have been created not through the imposition of capitalism, but the imbalance of accumulation that accompanies capitalism. Despite the 'new paradigm', colonial Enlightenment ideology (albeit at a subconscious level) prevails. For the Pakeha, it justifies and reinforces their dominant position in the colony. Acknowledgement of the Maori as "tangata whenua, indigenous people of the land, and...Pakeha...[as] non-indigenous colonisers” (Walker, 1982, cit. in Sissons, 1995:61) infringes on the Pakeha’s liberty to rule that land.

Empowerment is, in one sense, a very post-modern philosophy. Individuals are imbued with the belief that they have access to power and resources. There is a repudiation of a belief of any form in state paternalism whether in the socialist or in the capitalist sense. Its origins lie in the theoretical rethink of post-modern and post-structuralist philosophies and a rejection of state paternalism. But it also interfaces with the philosophy of neo-liberalism. As it filters down into
the political world, the concept of empowerment tries to efface the dichotomy between the free-market and the increasing demand of diverse social groups and their needs, expectations, and demands for economic and social equality. One of the salient arguments of radical ideologies such as Marxism is that the needs and aspirations of social groups cannot be reconciled with the demand of free-market philosophy. In a sense, then, empowerment tries to address a glaring problem: the needs of social groups and the needs of the free-market. This raises the question of whether it is successful as an alternative to socialist arguments. Empowerment philosophy tries to work from within the system whereas old school Marxist philosophies dismiss any attempt to look for short-term solutions to unresolvable contradiction(s). A non-interventionist government policy sounds utopian in the sense that it appears to give power back to the people, but, in many ways, it is a way for the government to concentrate on the maintenance of a fluid economy and free-market. It places responsibility for social issues onto the community and the people and in so doing deflects the blame for failure away from bad economic policies.

The language of neo-liberalism is a powerful tool. Slogans such as ‘empowerment through democracy’ and ‘community-based development’ direct the focus toward issues at the micro level. In so doing, attention is deflected from macro factors that maintain oppressive and exploitative power relations. In an ironical sense, then, it is a sad reflection on the redundancy of free-market ideology that empowerment politics still seems to have such saliency in contemporary life.

With this in mind, I propose, that the rationale that everybody can be empowered should be abandoned as a liberal utopian dream. There is nothing wrong with empowerment in itself and nothing within it that is alien to other theories of empowerment such as socialism. The Marxist notion of empowerment can be located in Marx’s famous dictum ‘each according to his ability, each according to his needs’. But Marx stressed that equality of opportunity could never be achieved under capitalism. Neo-liberal assertions of empowerment are basically pipe dreams. As long as the dominant political ideology is guided by an economic system where the profit motive is central, it will always create vast differences between those who are lucky enough to ‘feel’ empowered and those who are not. Empowerment, in any form under capitalism, is not a remedy for social ills. I propose, therefore, the jettisoning of the term empowerment since its use is a smokescreen that conceals the real problems of social exclusion. Empowerment, in relation to the Maori in New Zealand is – please excuse the pun - a wolf dressed up in sheep’s clothing.
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