

PhD Thesis Summaries 2024

This section showcases recently completed PhD theses in sociology and associated disciplines in Aotearoa.

Reimagining Social Activism with Intersectional Subaltern Activist Consciousness

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Summary

In the Sri Lankan post-war context, young activists are beginning to articulate and redefine the understanding of social activism both by their self-criticisms, dominations within the movement, and the pressing questions they are asking of other movements. Aspects of divisions and fractures strategically turned into points of connection that discretely address these divisions. On the one hand, due to troubling legacies of difference, communities remain divided and fractured. On the other, social activists come together into spaces to address these differences and antagonisms, to negotiate them around manifest purposes. Often, the activists are part of communities that are significantly fractured, yet deeply connected by their experiences of various forms of marginalisation. Their activism is one of the main pillars of resistance and resurgence against different forms of oppression.

Hence, I explored the textures and contours of social activism organised by young trans, intersex, and women activists from the margins who seek social justice in post-war Northern Sri Lanka. I analysed the diverse forms of social activism emerging from these contexts, encompassing dialogues, lived experiences, and significant events that shape activist consciousness. I searched for voices and experiences pushed to the margins by hegemonic and destructive powers and structures of society.

I aim to augment knowledge production from the Global South by advocating for subaltern voices and experiences on the margins guided by the following main research question: *In contexts of historical violence and the troubling legacy of social, cultural, and ideological divisions, how do young activists sustain their consciousness to work for social change in post-war social justice movements even as divisions and difficulties persist?*

I developed an analytical framework that helps us to better understand the intertwined, complex everyday experiences of marginalised activists that are often overlooked by dominant norms, values, and practices. By treating the activists as credible knowers, I co-weave a metaphorical mat of activist consciousness to argue several findings. The findings are supported by conceptual frameworks rooted in the Global South, as well as in subaltern contexts and histories. For instance, the subaltern theories developed by the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group scholars—inspired by Gramscian ideas—argue for an epistemic standpoint to evolve from the subaltern perspective (Chakrabarty, 2015; Chaturvedi, 2000;

Guha and Spivak, 1988). As noted earlier, Spivak (1988) eloquently points out that researchers, knowledge producers, and practitioners ought to be constantly self-reflexive and self-critical when representing the West's Other (the Third World) and the Third World's Other (the subaltern). I use Spivak's concept of the subaltern to emphasise how particular experiences of young activists in the highly controlled—both by the community as well as the state—post-war context of Northern Lanka¹ bring nuances to intersectional subaltern identities (i.e., how they influence the understanding of social activism by young women) and occupy a unique place in the context of the Global South (Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1979; Crenshaw, 1991). This is a novel contribution to theory and practice.

My thesis contributes to scholarly debates on the search for social justice by demonstrating how political praxis founded on collective consciousness and action is nurtured by the unlikelyst of solidarities in the context of post-war society. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand's sociological and decolonial scholarship, subaltern theories can help to deepen our understanding of social activism and activist consciousness within the unique dynamics of power hierarchies and interconnected forms of marginalisation.

[Link to thesis](#)

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¹ I use the name Lanka, the most ancient (Jayewardene, 2017) and, I believe, the Indigenous name of this unique island with many potentials.

Technocracy Ascendant: Central Banking and Ideology after 2008

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Summary

This thesis explores technocratic economic governance as a form of power in contemporary society. Technocracy is an ‘ideology of method’ that claims technical solutions can be found for political problems (Bickerton & Invernizzi-Accetti, 2021; Centeno, 1993; Fischer, 1990). The rise of technocracy in economic governance has dovetailed with the rise of neoliberalism as a political project that seeks to encase market economies against democratic interference (Biebricher, 2015; Gill, 1998; Slobodian, 2018). Technocratic economic governance is thus characterised by the depoliticisation and de-democratisation of economic policy, and by the weight given to technical authority in legitimating the status quo.

This thesis examines how technocratic economic governance has evolved following the financial crash of 2008. Attention is focused on central banks of the capitalist core, which played outsized roles as crisis managers and guarantors of the neoliberal order during this period. The thesis develops a novel conceptualisation of central banks as public–private governors who govern primarily in the interests of, and are penetrated by, finance capital. It also interrogates the social function of central bankers. I argue that central bankers function as organic intellectuals of and for finance capital: they are organically connected to this class fraction, develop the mental frameworks by which it can recognise, interpret, and promote its interests, and are active in reproducing a biased terrain that favours finance capital.

This theoretical work is substantiated through case studies of the Federal Reserve System, the European Central Bank, and the Bank for International Settlements from 2007–2020. Empirical chapters explore instances of extraordinary central bank intervention, placing these in the context of neoliberalism’s broader authoritarian drift. I argue that emergency central bank intervention is a form of economic governance appropriate to the spatial compression and temporal acceleration engendered by globalisation and financialisation. This analysis contributes to the sociological understanding of how actually existing neoliberalism works and how it is reproduced in crisis.

The empirical chapters analyse the intellectual and ideological resources developed by central bank(er)s in response to the political and intellectual disorientation of the post-2008 world (Foster & el-Ojeili, 2023; Tooze, 2018). This work generates sociological insights into processes of (attempted) elite consensus formation. It also illuminates the technocratic project at the heart of modern central banking. This is characterised by the development of sophisticated conceptual frameworks through which the complexity of the global financial system can be rendered intelligible; the relentless collection of data on financial flows that enable (or provide the illusion of enabling) real-time market surveillance; and continual policy innovation to enable central banks to manage financial systems.

By foregrounding and theorising the entanglement between central bank(er)s and finance capital, the thesis contributes to the sociological understanding of the porous boundaries between technical knowledge, political ideology, and structures of power in neoliberal capitalism. By focusing attention on

technocracy as an ideological and intellectual force in economic governance, the thesis also challenges the idea—dominant in sociology—that neoliberalism is a form of governance that pivots around the idea that the market is unknowable and that active, centralised economic planning is therefore quixotic. In contradiction to this view, the thesis shows how, in their quest to stabilise an unstable world, central bank(er)s seek to constantly improve their understanding of, and their ability to control, financial systems. In this respect, the stability of actually existing neoliberalism rests precisely on the kind of active, centralised economic planning that neoliberal ideology repudiates (Jones, 2020).

A comparative research programme could be opened up to further substantiate the idea that central bankers perform a function as organic intellectuals of and for finance capital. This could focus on the differences in intellectual leadership between central banks and how and why particular systems of thought develop within, and are disseminated from, these institutions. While this thesis, and most of the other sociological research on central banking, focuses on the major central banks of the capitalist core, it would be valuable if future work examined countries of the periphery and semi-periphery. In particular, a sociological analysis of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand, and its role in New Zealand capitalism, is yet to be written.

[Link to thesis](#)

Associated publications

Foster, J. (2022). Envisaging global balance-sheet capitalism: The Bank for International Settlements as a collective organic intellectual. *Capital & Class*, 46(3), 401–425.
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Abolitionist Justice: Towards an Abolitionist Theory of Justice and the State

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Summary

Taking the necessity of prison abolition as its starting point, *Abolitionist Justice* asks what an Aotearoa without prisons could look like. As a work of political sociology, it invokes imagination for a radical social, economic, and constitutional transformation of Aotearoa, centring *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. Its objective is to provide answers to the consistent challenge from abolition's critics: what should we do instead of prisons?

Abolitionist Justice begins by situating abolitionist thought within the Aotearoa context, demonstrating the inefficacy of imprisonment in achieving public safety, (re)habilitation of people who cause harm, and justice for victims, as well as imprisonment's profoundly deleterious social and political consequences, particularly for Māori, working class people, people with disabilities and other multiply marginalised people. Synthesising decades of abolitionist thought, the thesis offers a framework for abolitionist alternatives to imprisonment, providing a guide for assessing the appropriateness of a non-prison alternative in an Aotearoa without prisons.

In its specific context, *Abolitionist Justice* draws together international abolitionist praxis with a vision for constitutional transformation outlined in *Matike Mai* (2016). Instead of offering a vision for abolition to be imposed on Māori, it suggests a path to abolition from within the Tangata Tiriti sphere, hand in hand with a Tino Rangatiratanga sphere. It asks what Aotearoa could look like if *Te Tiriti* was honoured and there were no prisons.

In grappling with the possibilities of abolition in Aotearoa, the thesis forces a confrontation between contemporary abolitionist thought and debates about informal justice from the 1970s and 1980s. In the contradictions of these debates, the thesis argues that contemporary abolitionist praxis too often ignores the tyrannical possibilities of 'community' or informal justice. By ignoring the lessons of earlier scholars and activists, contemporary abolitionists risk repeating them. Instead, the thesis contends that a specifically abolitionist system of justice would require a state, as well as formal mechanisms of control, oversight, and regulation. It is in a mixed model of both community and state-based justice systems and procedures that an abolitionist system of justice without prisons is possible.

Accepting the inevitability of state involvement in justice, *Abolitionist Justice* mines the contradictions of restorative justice philosophy and practices, drawing out deeper insights for an abolitionist system of justice. While providing fundamental critiques of restorative justice, and particularly its operation in the settler colonial justice system, restorative justice philosophy, nonetheless, provides a useful stepping stone for abolitionist theory. The thesis argues that restorative justice's proponents' attempts to resolve the contradictions of informalism provide insight into how abolitionists could do the same. It takes the radical kernels of possibility within restorative justice philosophy, taking them to their abolitionist conclusion. By synthesising the contradictions of formal, informal, and restorative justice, the thesis proposes an abolitionist justice: a system, and an underpinning philosophy, that responds to harm when it occurs, using a mixture of state and non-state responses, which does not include prisons, and has mechanisms for the oversight and control of abuses of power in both state and non-state systems.

The thesis provides a challenge to international abolitionist and restorative justice scholarship. It contests the anarchist or ‘folk politics’ impulse that dominates abolitionist thought, demonstrating that this approach ignores the lessons of informal justice from the 1970s and 1980s. It challenges restorative justice proponents to find its radical potentiality. Finally, it contributes to an emerging body of abolitionist thought in Aotearoa, which sees liberation on the horizon. Ultimately, the thesis provides a framework for abolitionist justice that requires considerably more research to provide a fully realised vision for an Aotearoa without prisons. Adopting an abolitionist justice framework, this could include a critical re-examination of discrete alternatives, including victimisation insurance, therapeutic justice, day fines, and the expansion of restorative practices in schools and other organisations.

[Link to thesis](#)

Associated publications

- Lamuse, T. (2022). Doing justice without prisons: A framework to build the abolitionist movement. *Socialism and Democracy*, 35(2–3), 300–322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2021.2092985>
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Climate Activist Knowledge-Practices and Radicalism in Extinction Rebellion Aotearoa New Zealand

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Summary

In a time of global climate crisis, and a surge in radical climate activism, the ways in which activists undertake the work of social change matters. This ethnographic research focuses on a significant player in that surge, Extinction Rebellion (XR), as enacted in Aotearoa (New Zealand). I critically examine the process by which activists adopted, and adapted, this social movement in order to enact it in Aotearoa.

This research draws on the relationships between two key concepts: radicalism and knowledge-practices. Radicalism is the ways that activists conceptualise their goals and performances in transformational terms. Knowledge-practices are situated, embodied, and concrete practices that enact knowledge. Radical knowledge-practices not only inform activism, but are also imbued with power, as activists make claims to ‘truth’ to justify their arguments. I therefore analyse how the power attached to knowledge affects radical performances as activists discover, learn, and teach, but also direct and dominate social movements.

I bring together these two concepts to address five research questions:

1. What are the origins of activist knowledge, how does it travel, and how is it adopted in new locations?
2. How are radical activist identities informed by knowledge and theories of change?
3. How does knowledge influence the choices that activists make in their activism?
4. How do activists conceive of, use, reject, or redefine radicalism in their work?
5. What is the significance of XR to climate and broader social movements?

I draw four main conclusions. First, I argue that XR in Aotearoa, over time, adapted XR’s globalised knowledge-practices in ways that are responsive to the local context and its colonial past and present. In particular, the work of a group of Māori activists and Pākehā allies were key to challenging and decolonising XR. Second, I argue that a movement ecosystem with a diversity of knowledge-practices supports activists engaging with alternative approaches to social change, particularly climate and decolonial justice. I therefore highlight the ways in which activists think carefully about their role within the movement ecosystem, adapting their understandings and role in response to it and other actors. Third, I suggest that thinking broadly about radical activist identities can reduce conflict and facilitate social change. Rather than ‘disciplining’ how other individuals perform their activism, activists should accept that a diversity of approaches to the activist identity is appropriate. Finally, I trace a series of protests in which activist understandings about likely police responses were confounded, which meant that protesters struggled to achieve their objectives. I argue that when activists make assumptions about how police respond to protest, activists’ actions can be less effective.

This research sheds light on the intersection of knowledge and radical activism. In particular, it provides a practical framework for assessing how social movements think of and use radicalism in their work. It challenges the colonising nature of social movements by examining the ways that radical activism is shaped by knowledge-practices drawn from multiple locations, culture, and activist dynamics. It also advances our understanding of how knowledge, and what is deemed truth, affect activist identities, theories of change, and activist performances. Lastly, it provides a unique perspective from a settler colonial state on XR, a new climate activist group that has reinvigorated climate activism, but which raises significant questions about the ways that social movements adopt and adapt knowledge-practices.

[Link to thesis](#)

Associated publications

Matthews, K. R. (2020). Social movements and the (mis)use of research: Extinction Rebellion and the 3.5% rule. *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 12(1), 591–615.

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Music as Critical Social Theory: Developing Intersectional Feminist Praxis Through Music in Aotearoa (New Zealand)

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PhD completed: 2023

Summary

Equally theoretical provocation and relational enquiry, my thesis asks how music may be understood as critical social theory. Drawing on intersectionality, critical race theory, queer and feminist notions of musical affect, and decolonial and Indigenous scholarship, I enquire how music as critical social theory may resonate in the context of neoliberal, settler colonial hegemonies continually permeating Aotearoa society. Engaging with the radical musical practices and praxes of four local artists, Sam Howard-Tawhara, Nikau Te Huki, Marika Pratley, and Cee Te Pania, I conceptualise how intersectional feminist praxis might be developed through music in Aotearoa (Collins, 2019). I deploy a range of methods for exploring how these artists' practices constitute each of their modes of critical social theory, guided by feminist notions of relational reciprocity and art as affective enquiry (Allen, 2012; hooks, 1994; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Nagar, 2016). For Collins and Bilge (2016), intersectional feminist praxis is about seeing both scholarship and everyday practice and action as interconnected and co-constitutive. I illustrate this multidimensionality throughout the thesis, writing in the spirit of solidarity and co-conspiratorship as a singer, listener, tangata Tiriti, intersectional feminist, and sociologist (Barber, 2020; de Saxe & Ker, 2023; Garza in Santana, 2016).

Inspired by Sam, Nikau, Marika and Cee's modes of musical critical social theory, I explore how intersectional feminist praxis might develop through music by considering the two interrelated and generative questions:

1. How might music be simultaneously a site to resist and a site of resistance?
2. How might the university be simultaneously a site to resist and a site of resistance?

Each part of the thesis continuously orbits these questions with the aim of cultivating praxis-oriented ways of theorising.

Alongside what I learned from each artist's mode of critical social theory, the two above questions guide the key intervention of the thesis—my conceptualisation of developing intersectional feminist musical praxis in Aotearoa. I discuss six key aspects of this praxis in reflective meditations that bring the artists' modes of critical social theory in dialogue with the literature. The first meditation affirms the concept of musical whakapapa in Aotearoa, and its potential to resist the racial politics of commodification and erasure (Henderson, 2018; Morrison, 2019). The second meditation discusses the significance of affective love politics for nurturing one's musical whakapapa or genealogy. The third explores resonance and hope, as a musical expression of love politics and solidarity for a restoration of Aotearoa (Jackson, 2020). Fourth, I look at how honouring and deepening Te Tiriti relations strengthens the resonant work of hope in music (Matike Mai, 2016). This sets up my fifth meditation, a consideration of intersectional ethics of care in

Aotearoa as rooted in the relational tenets of intersectionality and praxis (Collins, 2019). The sixth meditation considers music education and pedagogy as one location where the work of developing intersectional feminist musical praxis might be carried out, what it might look like, and what would continue to be at stake. Here I echo Cheng's (2016) call for a redefining of musicological and pedagogical relationalities along the lines of active listening, care, and slow scholarship (cf. Eidsheim, 2019; Kidman et al., 2018).

Building on the six tenets of intersectional feminist musical praxis in Aotearoa, I propose several directions for both future research and flourishing praxis. These include, but are not limited to:

- A deeper exploration of the acoustemological interrelationship of musical praxis and connections between peoples, lands, seas, rivers, and animals (Feld, 2015). Within Aotearoa, such an inquiry could benefit the relational aspirations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and constitutional transformation work by illuminating further dimensions of knowledge and possibility (Forster, 2022; Matike Mai, 2016).
- Ongoing kōrero between tangata whenua and tangata Tiriti about the cultivation and nourishing of musical whakapapa in an Aotearoa context, relational potentialities, and the limits of positionality.
- Future research on how music as critical social theory works in tandem with extra-musical features in Aotearoa (and/or elsewhere), such as community-driven safe space initiatives at gigs and festivals, or at venues run by music collectives who aim to honour tino rangatiratanga and uphold intersectional values (Collins, 2019; Douglas, 2014; Garcia, 2020).

[Link to thesis](#)

Associated publications

de Saxe, J. G., & Trotter-Simons, B.-E. (2021). Intersectionality, decolonization, and educating for critical consciousness: Rethinking praxis and resistance in education. *Journal of Thought*, 55(1/2), 3–20.
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