When perceptions of the past obscure the future

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The editors of this 'special edition' freely acknowledge its limitations; despite the focus on Oceania, it omits the political challenges facing Tonga's absolute monarchy, Nauru's economic debacle and the rapid depopulation of Niue (217). The editors acknowledge also the limitations of a postcolonial focus for a region with many islands still not independent (220–1). What we are left with is a collection of articles that focuses largely on conflict in Melanesia, and in ways that for the most part do not enable us to escape the self-serving rhetoric of the past.

This criticism is not intended in any way to detract from the individual value of each contribution. The editors have a fine set of articles that by highlighting factors such as low economic dynamism, poor governance, free market liberalism and deeper historic and structural changes contributes meaningfully to our understanding of the causes of conflict in the Pacific. However, what this reviewer found most disappointing was the weight it continues to give to the colonial–neocolonial continuum as the central feature of Oceanic postcolonial transformations and political conflict.

> We argue that what we have is a region characterised by many damaging colonial legacies upon which new challenges are being superimposed to create a fragility which is unprecedented. New nation states, often containing quite disparate social and political entities attempt to forge out a place in a harsh global market, where the forces of globalisation increasingly assault and transcend national borders and deeply ingrained socio-cultural traits. (221)

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Hence the editors' plea for 'an open dialogue between the people on the "outside" with those on the "inside" with a view to gaining more nuanced understandings which take both local contingency and regional structural/historical forces into account' (222).

But to what extent is this dichotomised view of the Pacific going to provide us with the kind of understanding necessary to move forward? It is an observation made towards the end of the collection. In a book review, Margaret Jolly is quoted as denying the value of binary opposites such as tradition and modernity. These reifications, she argues, 'hide the fluidity of past–present and present–future relations' (359). The same might be said of an external–internal focus.

The reasons for such an approach are honourable enough. John Henderson wants us to question the inference that 'Pacific Islands are the authors of their own misfortune' (225). He rightly notes the many costs of colonialism borne by its successors: no experience of democracy, borders that pay scant regard to local cultures or geography, and the centralised nature of inherited 'Western' political systems (227–9). But his contemporary analysis continues the 'us and them' theme, or more specifically 'the "disconnection" between traditional and Western forms of governance'. We need 'a Pacific solution to the governance issue' (235), he says. To be fair, Henderson does stress that this means that solutions need to be 'home grown' (239), but for much of his paper it is the modern–traditional dichotomy that seems, to this reviewer at least, to dominate.

All Pacific Islands are modern societies. Like all societies, they confront similar problems but from widely different backgrounds and with vastly different resources. Even within the Pacific itself, differences between the islands are profound. Henderson is probably correct when he argues that aid donors often act in ways that might be regarded as neocolonial; but it is by no means clear that such inappropriate behaviour is the primary cause of contemporary Pacific Island problems. Henderson himself concedes that in any society, changes can be destabilising and that politics by nature is competitive (229).

Elise Huffer and Asofou So'o's article on consensus and dissent in Samoa clearly demonstrates the latter point. Samoan leaders like to argue

that consensus is the traditional character of Samoan politics; in fact, only the struggle for independence and the desire by contemporary politicians to minimise national public debates created this view of the past (281–94). Today, the authors argue, as a result of urbanisation, higher levels of education and the greater penetration of market economics, such responses are less tenable.

This focus on the dynamics of internal change takes us further from most postcolonial concerns, with their fixation on victimhood and powerlessness. So too the separate articles on urbanisation in Melanesia by John Connell and Donovan Storey. Urban centres, each argues, attest to the failures of postcolonial development strategies and to the failures of postcolonial states (245, 254). Of course outside forces contribute to problems faced by Pacific states, but there are also issues that all societies confront globally.

Leaders everywhere now continually confront the fact that as the nature of their societies rapidly changes, old mechanisms of rule no longer work as they once did or were perceived to. Connell notes that many Pacific leaders fall back on the virtues of rural life as their solution to the dislocations associated with urbanisation (254–5). This is a universal response. Unfortunately its goal is invariably to reinforce existing structures of authority and identity rather than meet the challenges faced by social change. Storey laments the failure of governments to promote community participatory planning models; this, too, is not unique to the Pacific. New social circumstances require new and more effective systems of governance and decision-making (275–6) but it is not easy to convince those who control and benefit from existing systems.

Unfortunately, nothing so clouds the mind as old ideologies and perceptions born of colonial and postcolonial angst. Why do these ideologies and perceptions continue to resonate so strongly? Perhaps we need to ask who stands to benefit from their persistence. Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah demonstrates that inequalities within Fiji's two major ethnic groups are far greater than those between them, and yet it is the latter that continue to shape Fiji politics most. Sriskandarajah offers no deep analysis for the persistence of this sate of affairs, but certainly

records its consequences: slow economic growth, diminishing infrastructural investment, rural underdevelopment, expanding poverty, greater urbanisation, and—as expectations remain unmet—increased political instability (316, 320).

Sriskandarajah knows what needs to be done. Fiji should reduce ethnic polarisation by emphasising intra-ethnic differences. It should also redistribute resources to lift the standards of living of the poorest in *all* communities, to diminish grievances and feelings of resentment (321). However, the existing hierarchy does not yet believe that it is to its advantage to change. Having benefited from racial politics in the past, it sees little need to modify this way of operating. Brij Lal believes that it is 'riding a tiger it cannot dismount at will' (347). This may well be the case, but it is equally true that the environment on which it depends for survival is rapidly changing. Expanding urban middle and working classes have different concerns. For many of them the politics of neocolonialism is no panacea for development.

In many respects Lal's article is the most perceptive in the collection. Fiji's 1970 Constitution was not just a colonial legacy; it was also an agreement that maintained existing power bases, in particular that of Fiji's chiefly bureaucratic elite, which has managed to exploit every opportunity to enhance its power base. Nothing will change, he argues, until Fiji rejects 'the old and exhausted orthodoxies of the past' (348). But even Lal is not entirely free of those perceptions. 'An obsession with race encourages ethnic chauvinism, poisons multi-ethnic discourse, and hinders the search for solutions to Fiji's deep-seated social and economic problems, which have little to do with race', he correctly notes, then adds 'but everything to do with colour-blind forces of globalisation' (347). We are back where we started with passive victims of colonialism and neocolonialism.

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