

The Meaning of John Key

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The latest form of neo-liberal capitalism may prove ironically similar to the final forms of state socialism: incapable of reform (Tronti, 139).

Neoclassical economics uses basically the same analysis in the bedroom as in the boardroom, in labor markets as in grain markets, and in the twenty-first century as in the seventeenth century. It is the behavior of an *emperor with a limited wardrobe* (Cohn, 36).

The aim of this paper is not to present some kind of special biographical insight into John Key, Prime Minister of New Zealand and leader of the National Party. The making of the man narrative is by now well worn, and we readily admit that we do not know what psychological processes motivate John Key. Unlike much of the news media, we do not hold the view that the character and interior world of the private individual directly explains the very public space of political statements and activity. This is not to say, of course, that there is no such thing as personal style, or a predisposition to particular ways of doing things, or a set of beliefs that might engender specific commitments. It is to say that the interior worlds of politicians, which are no doubt interesting in some cases, ultimately don't tell us very much about the assemblages in which politicians and contemporary government operate. The meaning of John Key thus does not stray into that mythic terrain that celebrates / denigrates the possessive individualism of a political figure. John Key is a specific politician, but he is a figure expressed in and through the highly mediated world that he inhabits. Ultimately, the main question, for us, is how Key as a figure has been grafted onto and made to mean in a political context that is characterized as post-ideological. His political party affiliation is of little consequence in this discussion. If Key were a member of the Labour party, he would, perhaps, be a different kind of politician. But the central question of how his persona connects to and is expressed by a post-ideological political context would remain the same.

The Meaning of John Key is thus not about John Key per se. It is, more precisely, about Brand Key, of which the individual John Philip Key is the manifestation, neoliberal capitalism, and media coverage. The purpose of this article is to unpack and make sense of the rationality upon which Brand Key is foregrounded. So, what do we mean by Brand Key? For us, it captures a complex assemblage of connections and intersections that articulate a cognitive map that can be summarily expressed as such:

- Brand Key is part of a trend that has been in place ‘in the past two decades [which has seen] ... politicians ... increasingly utilize what are known as the ‘branding’ techniques of commercial marketers to just such an end, in the hopes of persuading the citizen / consumer to trust their ‘products’ — their platform and policy positions — to the exclusion of all others’ (Warner, 18). Branding techniques are not isolated to goods, services, products and objects only: it has also been strongly integrated into the political domain, giving rise to what Warner calls ‘the fetish of political branding’ (19). In a climate of ‘media saturated politics’ (20), what we might call surface politics, branding functions as ‘the apotheosis and central representative figure’ (Hearn, 207) of contemporary society. If we agree with Warner that political branding is the same as commercial branding in that both rely upon ‘the creation of such unquestioning trust in the brand that the citizen/consumer allows the brand do the ‘thinking; for him or her’ (20-21), then, consequently, we must also agree that it marks the intimacy or more precisely the similarities between politics (and politicians) and capitalism. And this brings us to the next point: Brand Key is not just about branding but is, more crucially, about post-Fordist capitalism.
- The alliance between politics and commercialism through the optic of branding is no coincidence. It is rather a symptom of the change or transition from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism that ushered in a ‘more diffuse and expanded systems of production ... where social interaction and communication enter as directly productive elements’ (Arvidsson, 2), where ‘the practices of marketing and branding become increasingly central to processes of capital accumulation’ (Hearn, 204) and where ‘branding and advertising ... [function] as the culturally dominant form of signification’ (Hearn, 207). In that sense Brand Key, for us, epitomizes contemporary capitalism. Brand Key, in the words of David Harvey, ‘proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade’ (2005, 2). This of course comes as no surprise to many for the policies, speeches and commitments of the current government clearly reinforces this. But this is not all: less we forget, post-Fordist capitalism is not simply a politico-economic theory; it is also a mode of governmentality.
- Brand Key, conceptualized in this way, therefore, is the name we give to ‘the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed’ (Foucault, 2000, 341). It is a name we give to a contemporary form of power that ‘structures the possible field of action of others’ (ibid). More precisely, Brand Key stands for a technology of power Foucault calls biopower, a technology of power that organises the multiplicity of individuals that is the population and which brings ‘life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations’ (1997, 143) to quantify, measure, objectify, and classify the forces of life in ways or relations that ‘maximize and extract forces’ (246) most productively. Biopower seeks to set up social relations to extract maximum potential. In other words we are suggesting that Brand Key works to organise social relations in such a way that regularises the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism through the articulation of free market principles as the structuring mechanism of social life.

Brand Key, however, is not an exception: rather it is the rule, for Brand Key is just one instance of a global phenomenon that is dominating the political landscape: David Cameron,

Barack Obama, Manmohan Singh, Julia Gillard, amongst the many other political leaders, constitute the other parts of this phenomenon. This is why we emphasize that the subject of this article is *not* John Key; he is, rather, as Richard Seymour puts it in reference to David Cameron, the occasion for it. As Seymour writes, 'David Cameron is not so much the subject of this book as the occasion for it. Cameron is of little interest, except as a cipher, a sort of nonentity who channels the prevailing *geist*' (1).

What does it mean to think of Cameron, or indeed, in this case, Key as a cipher? According to the *OED* (2012), etymologically, cipher is 'an arithmetical symbol or character (0) of no value by itself'; it is without value in and of itself, and thus we might say that Key as cipher is a nonentity. However, the cipher also performs another function. It 'increases or decreases the value of other figures according to its position' (*ibid*) and hence is quite powerful for it has the potential to either increase or decrease the value of other figures when placed alongside them. Thus we might say that Key as cipher is a powerful entity for it determines, in its alliance or non-alliance with other interests, discourses, and forms of power, what the value-form of these are. It is, therefore, simultaneously an empty signifier (aka the *Hollow Man* thesis proposed by Nicky Harger), and a shifting one that connects to and builds alliances to produce a biopolitical rationality whose name is Brand Key. To push the idea of the cipher further, we should also recollect that etymologically, the cipher also refers to a coded message — 'to write in cipher or cryptogram' (*OED*) — which, in this context, we read as a strategy of articulation that seeks to maintain a secret, a message, and here the message is a powerful commitment to post-Fordist capitalism. Surely, you might say that there is nothing secret here! We all know about the capitalist commitments of the National Party. Yes, we concur; but when we think of secret here we are thinking in the terms outlined by Derrida in 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', an exposition on democracy and the obligation to respond. A secret is a secret insofar as it effectuates some form of exclusion in that some others will not be allowed participation in a particular discourse. That is to say for a secret to be a secret a politics of exclusion is necessary. Otherwise a secret no longer remains a secret. A secret, like all other forms of truth regimes, need not necessarily be privatised, kept in the property of oneself without the commitment to sharing. A secret can be shared, that is become common to all, but insofar as this secret is not testified to, acknowledged, recognised, and legitimised as part-and-parcel of the social text, it remains a secret. Thus, it is not a question of whether we know the secret or not. This is unimportant: what remains important is the refusal to expose the secret, and this is how we might conceive of Key's refusal to stray away from the code, and a recognition that this 'open-secret' works on the principle of exclusion: the secret code which Key maintains functions through the exclusion of all bodies, lives, that are not, contributing productively to the neoliberal fantasy of capital accumulation. This is precisely why we see the constant attack on recipients of social and state services. They embody the exclusion that this secret works on.

We are however getting ahead of ourselves here: to make this argument charted above, we specifically examine two media coverage, which took place in 2011, supplemented with several interviews and commentaries. The first takes place in the October 2011 issue of the *Women's Weekly (NZ Edition)*, and the second is the interview with John Key on BBC's *HARDtalk*. These statements and interviews are by no means exhaustive of the masses of media material — from the press to blogs, to television, radio, lifestyle magazines, youtube and tweets, to parliament records and the National party propaganda machine — all generated in relation to John Key. However, across this array of media material there are

specific images and statements that become points of reference for this vast discursive production that take place when the cipher operates. The aim of this article is thus not simply to chart the slogans that mark the Key brand, it is to determine the rationality of this brand and its role in the organisation of global capitalism. We argue that Brand Key is a heterogeneously composed assemblage that works to organise and regulate a specific kind of normativity.

Cipher 1

In October 2011 the *Women's Weekly* ran a feature story on John Key, his wife, Bronagh, and their family life. The couple gaze the cover accompanied by the tag line: 'Inside the Key Marriage: 'Bronagh's the Boss''. The full detail, spread across five pages, is titled 'Shaping the Prime Minister' with a one-page image of the couple, intimately gazing at each other, and a vertical half-page five-picture collage that shows Key, individually meeting Obama in the White House and Richie McCaw in the All Blacks changing room; with Bronagh alongside Prince William in Wellington and Julia Gillard at two separate meetings; and a picture of the couple against the backdrop of the Taj Mahal. Below the title is a two-sentence blurb confirming that while John Key might be Prime Minister of New Zealand, Bronagh is 'the Prime Minister of St Stephens Ave', where the family resides. The visual collage is telling for it locates Key simultaneously as part of, and as connected to, a global circuit of power, the Empire if you wish, framing him as a serious world leader and thus geopolitically elevating New Zealand's significance upon the global stage; a true blue Kiwi who loves his rugby, enjoys his beer and is comfortable conversing with a national sporting icon in the most intimate of spaces (the changing room); as husband, family man, and loving heteronormative partner; and finally, it emphasizes that he is fluid across different spaces — the White House or the All Black's changing room. These multiple animations of Key do not contradict each other. On the contrary, they affirm him as the exemplary figure of authority. His capacity to operate across different terrains, the global, national, domestic spaces, and embody different subject positions — politician, husband, and rugby bloke — seamlessly confirms his mobility and authority. These mobile subject positions effectively cancel each other out. Key's connection to financial and political elites is undone by media images of a fumbling, and grinning everyman, most memorable in 2011 for his awkward performance during the presentation of the Webb Ellis Cup to Richie McCaw at the conclusion of the Rugby World Cup. Images of Key's hand pathetically flailing about in an attempt to shake McCaw's hand as McCaw shook the hand of Chairman of the International Rugby Board, Bernard Lapasset, were circulated through youtube and other social media sites.

His mobility is further expressed in the *Woman's Weekly* narrative itself: phrases such as 'John Key comes across as Mr Kiwi Everybloke' interspersed with acknowledgement of his '\$50 million fortune working in foreign exchange' and recognition that 'John ... and ... Bronagh are the products of working class Christchurch families ... so their roots are firmly planted in a blue-collar landscape' confirm his mobility across class, social status and position. He is simultaneously an everyday bloke and an elite financier, simultaneously of the bourgeoisie and of the working class, and simultaneously Prime Minister of New Zealand and not so: after all, as he himself points out, 'Bronagh ... [is] 'The Prime Minister of St Stephen Ave''. This ability to move, shift across different registers, subject positions and discursive regimes captured so eloquently by the narrative and supplemented by the visual collage is significant for it tells us that he is being sold as these many (and various) things to the public. How might we make sense of this multiple commodifications of Key? How might we grasp the way the cipher works here?

We argue that the *Women's Weekly's* construction of John Key through the trope of mobility is central to the meaning of Brand Key. To be blunt, mobility as expressed here, confirms him as the right(ful) postmodern mobile figure of authority for New Zealand in the contemporary global scene. The politics of mobility has been taken up in various fields: in postcolonial studies, anthropology, and sociology (to name a few), the concept of mobility has been embraced as a productive intervention into static categories of race, culture, ethnicity and practices of what Roland Barthes' (2012: 215-274) calls exnominations. Here mobility is seized as breaking various borders (imagined and real), challenging categorizations and codifications, and producing fragmented and deterritorialized subjects. This view, of course, has been challenged, by Ien Ang (1994) and Janet Wolff (1992), amongst others, who suggest that the emphasis on mobility serves to 'decontextualize and flatten out difference' (Ang, 4) and that the 'suggestion of free and equal mobility is a deception, since we all don't have the same access to the road' (Wolff, 253). In that regard they caution against a wholesale, celebratory embracing of mobility and underscore the unevenness of mobility. Mobility is graduated. We wish to add to this chorus of caution and suggest that the idea of mobility as the mark of the contemporary postmodern subject is connected to dominant power, neoliberalism, and contemporary politics.

One of the key coordinates, or foundational anchors of the neoliberal project is its commitment to mobility: David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* writes, one of the foundational premises of neoliberalism is 'the free mobility of capital between sectors, regions, and countries' (64). Aihwa Ong in 'Neoliberalism as a mobile technology' similarly underscores mobility as a key coordinate of neoliberalism, or more precisely 'the very conditions associated with the neoliberal — extreme dynamism, mobility of practices, responsiveness to contingencies and strategic entanglements with politics' (3). Mobility, in this regard, is foundational to neoliberalism: the capacity to move, shift, adapt, transform, is central to the triumph of neoliberalism. John Key, as we already know through his biography, is a mobile subject of neoliberalism: he epitomizes a rag to riches story, a working class lad who made it big in the financial world and who now, armed with economic knowledge, is fit to govern the nation. This narrative is constantly evoked by the mainstream media in its framing of the Key story, making him exemplary of neoliberal triumphalism.

But mobility, as expressed in the visual and narrative collage, is not just about economics and neoliberalism. It is, more significantly, a tool for the biopolitical management of the population through Brand Key. To put it differently, we argue that the mobility expressed as foundational to Brand Key functions as a form of power that regularizes a particular way of social life, and sets up social relations in such a way that validate Key's authority. The image of Key 'enjoying a beer in the changing room with All Blacks captain Richie McCaw', for example, connects him to one of the discursive blocks of nation-building in New Zealand: rugby, which as various scholars have pointed out, is not just a sport as it is intimately connected to the articulations of masculinity, national identity, everydayness, and mateship. The image of Key with Bronagh provides 'the classic tourist photo while visiting India recently', conjuring his other role as a partner in a heteronormative relation who, like most of us, enjoys the occasional break from the routine rhythm of life, and like most of us do pose in front of tourist sites (like the Taj Mahal) to remember our visits. In that sense he is quite ordinary, one of us. The slight of hand of course is that in this photo the bustling crowd that one expects at such a site is missing: the empty backdrop for a shot like this is not quite ordinary as most of us would not have had the privilege or opportunity to make sure that

the crowd 'disappeared'; only a head of state with all kinds of security measures put in place could pose for and get such an 'empty' shot. His ordinariness is further entrenched by the narrative, specifically those instances when it is made clear to us that in the domestic realm, Bronagh holds the reins of power even though he is Prime Minister of the country. Discussions of how she has encouraged him take up an exercise regime and that they engage in 'amiable spouse-baiting' confirms that things in the Key household are, for the most part, just the same as in any other household in New Zealand. After all, Key goes out to the 'video shop' and has a 'low-key life', like most of us, and quite unlike Obama, who as Key informs us shared this with him — 'President Obama said he can't go anywhere'. This is why Key emphasises, 'We're lucky in New Zealand'. The simultaneous coupling and decoupling to Obama reminds us that Key is a global leader — he has been the guest of the White House — and at the same time that he is a different kind of global leader: an ordinary bloke in a very lucky country, whom you and I can get to know — whether this is through a chance encounter at the video-store or through submission of questions to *Women's Weekly* which would be addressed by John Key. This forms the rest of the coverage as Key responds to 18 questions sent in by readers ranging from those concerned with his overseas travels to specific policies to much more private ones relating to his relationship with his wife and family and his retirement plans. While it is safe to assume that more than 18 questions were received, it is interesting to note that the range of the questions selected brought across Key as a mobile postmodern subject in that they shore up various countenances: politician, father, husband, New Zealander, bloke, mate, humanitarian, and so on. These countenances work powerfully, for they collectively disavow that Key is a financial speculator turned Prime Minister who made his money by leaving the country, and therefore without sufficient credentials as Stephen Sakur in *HARDtalk* puts it, and rather represents him as a humanist capitalist. These countenances, collectively, thus articulate the tenor of the neoliberal Third Way, most eloquently captured in the current, globally circulating slogan 'Keep Calm and Carry On'. Indeed, this image of Key reassures us: Keep Calm and Carry On New Zealanders for we live in a lucky country, where security threats are almost non-existent (the trip to the video-store is a reminder), where our Prime Minister has solid global connections with likeminded figures of authority (just in case we needed them), is very invested in our country and culture, and perhaps, most importantly, is just like one of us. All things given, this image is produced at a time when social, political, economic upheavals and crisis are taking place, and many are not keeping calm and carrying on. Globally and, more specifically, nationally jobs are being lost regularly and the exodus of the laboring sector to Australia is at an all time high. The *Women's Weekly* spread serves to consolidate the legitimacy of Brand Key: in short Brand Key functions as the antidote to the climate of crisis. In other words, amidst the crisis and uncertainties that mark the social present, the production of John Key in this magazine, we suggest, works to assure us that we have a stable man who can ride the crisis. This image production, qua Žižek, serves "to minimize the human costs of the global capitalist machinery, whose functioning is left undisturbed" (62-3) for after all neither the images nor the narrative of this text actually confronts the violence of the conservative government. On the contrary, and rather quite perversely, this branding simply forecloses any kind of criticisms of the very agent of the crisis: a conservative government that has embraced the Third Way as a politico-ideological standard while seeking to humanize capitalism. John Key, or more precisely the meaning of John Key in this rendition functions powerfully to entrench such a dominant meaning.

Here we have sought to demonstrate how Key functions as a cipher: as both a non-entity and a powerful force that is highly mobile, flexible, who encapsulates the neoliberal logic par

excellence. He is an epitome of neoliberalism, which as Ong points out, is ‘a migratory technology of governing that intersects with situated sets of elements and circumstances’ (5). The *Women’s Weekly* feature reinforces this technology. This is the man who seamlessly was able to move from being a financial speculator to being a Prime Minister, a point not lost to Stephen Sarkur in the *HARDtalk* interview we discuss next.

Cipher 2

The interview with John Key for *HARDtalk* screened on 9 May 2011 on *BBC*, begins with Sarkur going through his normal introductory pitch before framing his interview in terms of the question of resilience: the resilience of New Zealand in the face of financial, ecological, environmental, and natural crisis that marked 2011 — the earthquake, the Pike River mining tragedy, rising unemployment, and environmental degradation. And the resilience of the Prime Minister’s government in its first term, described by Sarkur as a ‘baptism of fire’. Much has been written about Key’s under-performance in the media circuit, and most of it is critical of the way he projected himself. We wish to select two moments in the interview: Key’s response to Sarkur’s suggestion that he is ‘the most inexperienced Prime Minister in the last 100 years of New Zealand’s history’ and his response to the nation’s poor environmental report. We are not interested in evaluating his performance in terms of whether it was adequate or not, whether he “‘handled this *HardTalk* interview well and seemed relaxed and confident”, as media trainer Judy Callingham judged, or put in an “embarrassing performance” that saw him “crucified”, as Martyn Bradbury concluded’ (Manhire, 2011). Rather, we are interested in using the *HARDtalk* responses to underscore the workings of the cipher as code: Key’s responses confirm for us the power, force and immutability of the code and the need to keep it intact.

In response to Sackur’s claim about his political inexperience, Key responds that this is an open question for it depends on what one thinks are the necessary skills to be a ‘good Prime Minister’ and then claims that that in ‘modern politics’ we see the emergence of young leaders such as, including himself, Obama and Cameron. While locating himself alongside other global leaders, thus explicitly legitimizing his credentials by way of association, Key also reminds Sackur of his experiences working in the international markets in Singapore, UK and Australia: ‘that banking experience where you have very much the economy at the front and centre stage of the issues New Zealand faces’. He then closes with this: ‘The mixture of skills I have is the right one’. The *mixture* of skills is questionable but that is not important here: rather what is significant is the way he tailors his response to close down the question altogether and thus disavow his lack of political experience. After all, the only thing that matters, Sackur, is the economy! The sole emphasis on the economy not only maintains his credentials but, more crucially, confirms that the government’s response to the various crises is built exclusively upon a capitalist rationality, as the rest of the interview confirms.

However, there is a nagging problem at work here, a problem forcefully articulated by Marx. Expanding on a passage from Goethe’s *Faust*, and parodying a capitalist logic that retains much resonance in the context of the present discussion, Marx writes:

The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money’s properties are my properties and essential powers – the properties and powers of its possessor. Thus, what I *am* and *am capable* of is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* – its deterrent power – is nullified by money. I, as an individual, am

lame, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest. I am *stupid*, but money is the *real mind* of all things and how then should its possessor be stupid? (167, emphasis in original).

Key literally personifies the acidic point made by Marx here. He explains that it is precisely his experience in the investment banking industry, his work with investment capital that provides him with the necessary attributes for political leadership and for dealing with the various crises. In this section of the *Manuscripts*, Marx is suggesting that subjects come into being, emerge, in, and through the *relation* between subject and object. It is mediated and the crucial question, for Marx, is what mediates this relation. And in this instance, money is such a mediator. The problem is that money, Marx writes, 'is the *pimp* between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But *that which* mediates *my* life for me, also *mediates* the existence of other people for me' (165-166). In that regard, the power of money lies precisely in its power to pervert the possibility of an ethical existence and underscore a social system that remains unable to transcend relations involving money. This is precisely how we must understand Key's response because for him, his expertise in dealing with money (the transcendental signifier that replaced God), provides him with the legitimacy to not only govern as Prime Minister, but more importantly, provides him with the necessary skills to deal with the various crises (financial to ecological). And this comes through clearly in the interview with Sackur because every decision that the government has made, which is defended by Key in the interview, is driven by the logic of money: in short, money or the market logic remains the singular mediator in responding to the crises. The power of money, qua Marx, is transformative: it makes a financial speculator a Prime Minister; it mediates social relations so that the market logic remains the only measure or barometer; and it reduces the complexity of the social world and relations such that other explanations, positions, are vacuumed out. This is precisely why time and time again, the response from the Prime Minister of New Zealand to the Christchurch earthquake, Pike River, and the environment is couched in terms of the larger financescape. So when Sarkur points out that the residents of Christchurch would like to leave the city (given the uncertainty of aftershocks and the possibility of other catastrophic shakes) and that an exodus from the second largest city would be unimaginable, the Prime Minister responds by discussing GDP, the Budget process, a zero-budget, and so on to 'pay for the earthquake'. He does not discuss the emotional, personal, collective upheaval such events produce, or reassure the people that there is a plan for them to deal with the trauma of displacement. This non-response, or more precisely, the only response articulated is a direct manifestation of Marx's point: the only way that Brand Key responds is mediated by money. This is the cipher as code being maintained.

It is important to note that Key's authority relates specifically to economic matters. On the subject of cultural issues he has had very little to say. In fact, it would not be a stretch to suggest Key's worldview revolves solely around the financial market and he has little or no engagement with cultural politics. When faced with questions that require a knowledge of cultural and social institutions, and a thoughtful response to the facts at hand, Key tends to resort to clichés and the techniques of party media managers for handling the difficult question. When challenged, for instance, by Sackur on the issue of New Zealand's

advertising slogan “100% pure New Zealand”, Key resorted to the postmodern strategy that characterizes conservative defenses of political power. Here is the exchange:

Sackur: [...] one of the county’s unique selling points ... that is your advertising slogan I think was all about this: about ‘the 100% pure New Zealand’; the idea that you’re a greener nation than any other in the developed world. That already isn’t true as your population does slowly rise, and it’s going to get worse. Dr Mike Joy of Massey University, a leading environmental scientist in your country, said just the other day [...], we are delusional about how clean and green we are.

Key: Well that might be Mike Joy’s view, but I don’t share that view.

Sackur: But he is very well qualified isn’t he. He has looked, for example, at the number of species threatened with extinction in New Zealand. He’s looked at the fact that half your lakes, ninety percent of your lowland rivers are now classed as polluted.

Key: Well look. I’d hate to get into a flaming row with one of our academics, but he’s offering his view. I think any person who goes down to New Zealand ...

Sackur: But he’s a scientist ... it’s not just an opinion that’s plucked out of the air.

Key: And like lawyers I can provide you another one but I’ll give you a counter view. If anybody goes down to New Zealand and looks at our environmental credentials, and looks at New Zealand, then for the most part I think, in comparison with the rest of the world, we are a hundred percent pure. In other words our air quality is very high, our water quality ...

Sackur: A hundred percent is a hundred percent, and clearly you’re not a hundred percent. I mean, you know ... whether you agree with Mike Joy’s figures or not you’ve clearly got problems of river pollution, you’ve clearly got problems with species which are declining, threatened with extinction. And he says the problem is with central government, he’s not just blaming you, but over decades central government in New Zealand has been complacent about this. So what are you going to do about it?

Key: Yes, so I don’t actually totally agree with that proposition. For a start off, yes of course the population is getting larger and that creates some form of pollution. And yes, we have a large agricultural base and so as we become ... intensifying our dairying operations it’s had some impact on our river quality. Now what the government has been doing is demanding much higher environmental standards. So actually for the most part, you jump in any New Zealand river or stream, you go and breathe the air, and you walk up a mountain, I’d argue with you that if you don’t believe it’s clean and green that you need to show me a country that’s cleaner and greener.

When Sackur mentions a fact substantiated by a leading scientist’s findings, Key responds by dismissing it (even though he is not a scientist), claiming that Mike Joy’s assertions are just

his views, that he can provide a counter view (possibly from a scientist) that challenges Joy's claims. This is a common strategy employed by Key when he is confronted by data or factual evidence that runs counter to government policy. We call this the postmodern 'I don't share that view' strategy. Through this strategy Key is able to inoculate himself against criticism and maintain power. On the one hand, the 'I don't share that view' claim is a refusal to challenge the facts squarely, and suggests, magnanimously, that each is entitled to their view. On the other hand, and more disturbing, this strategy protects power, simply because not all views enjoy the same political efficacy. Key's postmodern largess is actually an expression of power. The 'I don't share that view' strategy, when considered with an emphasis upon I, is an attempt to hide the dogmatism that lurks beneath. Key doesn't waiver when Sakur presses him on this point, and he ends up resorting to an affective framing – contact with the river, the air, mountain, stream, and water (experiences which are possible only if one were here, and not in a BBC studio) – to offset the scientific rationality that underpins Sackur and Joy's positions. The affective is here used to render the scientific suspicious. This is what we hear Key say.

What is also important here is what Key doesn't say. The curious thing about this exchange is that it revolves around the veracity of an advertising slogan, a "destination brand" that was first launched by Tourism New Zealand in 1999. When faced with scientific statements that challenge the brand, Key refuses to concede that there could be a disjunction between the brand image and the actual world. In accord with Baudrillard's (1996) pronouncement on the 'perfect crime', in which the real is unconsciously murdered, Key is heavily invested in the production of the hyperreal for it is the hyperreal that maintains the code, the secret. He doggedly 'stays on message' and in character as the CEO defending the brand. Key also appeared on *The Late Show* with David Letterman as entrepreneurial CEO of the nation in a "semi-comedy role delivering Letterman's "top 10' the next list" (Scherer and Jackson, 216). His insistence in the Sackur interview upon ranking New Zealand is clearly a symptom of the competitiveness of the market logic upon which Key constructs his Minister for Tourism role, which he holds in conjunction with his role as Prime Minister. As Margret Werry observes, Key's dual role situates the production of the national brand "at the epicenter of governmental strategy" (238). Key could also be considered here as the plucky antipodean defending the international reputation of New Zealand. In the build up to the Rugby World Cup, the question of New Zealand's capacity in the eyes of the world to host large events and be a desirable tourist destination became a daily preoccupation. Key's resoluteness should thus be applauded from this perspective. Conversely, the postmodern strategy of staying on message could be understood as an example of the shortcomings of contemporary politics. The problem with applauding Key in this interview situation is that important environmental concerns take a back seat to economics, and to New Zealand as destination for the flow of global capital in the form of the tourist dollar. In this view, New Zealand is the brand image. The actual world of everyday social life and the ecosystem that supports it, are subordinate to the brand. Key's resoluteness can be understood as a kind of dogmatism that attempts to make the world in its own image. Curiously, there are instances when this strategy completely fails to comprehend the world.

Consider Key's glaring incapacity during a television appearance on TVNZ's *Breakfast* programme (4 October 2010). Key regularly appeared on the show in a segment with conservative social commentator, Paul Henry. Henry is a well-known and controversial media personality who has built a reputation for making 'politically incorrect' statements. He has cultivated a media persona who suffers from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (Henry

2011), with the effect that he can't help but to speak what he thinks, to 'tell it like it is'. The disorder serves the double function of, on the one hand, absolving Henry from his many misdemeanors, while, on the other, it suggest Henry's statements are innocent assertions of the truth. On this occasion, Henry clearly makes a racist remark that Key doesn't seem to notice.

Henry: Finally, it's almost time is it for you to chose a Governor General?

Key: Yeah it is. What happens is we have to choose because the current Governor General Sir Anand Satyanand's term finishes in the middle of next year.

Henry: Is he even a New Zealander?

Key: Ah, yes he's a New Zealander.

Henry: Are you going to choose a New Zealander who looks and sounds like a New Zealander this time?

Key: Well in fact every Governor General since Porritt has been a New Zealand born New Zealander.

Henry: Mmm. Yeah, so are we going to go for someone who is more like a New Zealander this time though? Will you go for someone who you look at and ...

Key: There's you ... we are open to invitations ...

Henry: I'm going to tread very carefully here because I do want this job.

Key: Oh OK [laughing].

Henry: Not this time round though ... I appreciate ... because I don't want to spoil our friendship.

What this exchange reveals is a highly mediatized politician staying on script, not aware of what an impromptu, in character Henry is doing. Key is an unresponsive automaton in this situation. He is the kind of figure that served as the source of humor in Bergson's late Nineteenth Century world. This is, unfortunately, the meaning of John Key. He is ensconced in the neoliberal world of financial markets, and the characteristic refusal to modify/abandon basic doctrine even when faced with the actual world of social relations.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to unpack the meaning of John Key in light of two key media texts and the larger discursive terrain in which Key situates himself and which he consistently seeks to (re)produce. Against the standard critique of Key that he is a kind of 'hollow man' we have demonstrated that Key as cipher is both a non-entity and a cipher for the flow of power. The meaning of John Key, in that regard, is not singular: it is a multiplicity that, like a free-floating signifier, can be made to mean and comes to mean when it connects with other utterances. While that is so, as we have also argued, Key as cipher (code) also betrays something else: a commitment to a specific singularity, the continued advancement

of neoliberal rationality. The intertwined rags to riches narrative, rhetoric of belonging and care, attained financial expertise, and privileged speaking position all form a tightly knit image machine that structurally perpetuates neoliberal political ideas, which are, by now, well worn. It is true that it is possible to resist this image and refuse to be seduced by it. In fact, if we take the low voter participation in the last election as an indication (McBride), we could say, in fact, that many within the voting population are not taken in. To occupy such a position is, however, to occupy the margins from the hegemonic perspective of official politics. The question that the Key image really poses, is to what extent do actually existing liberal democracies open up the terrain of politics? In its very structure, we claim the Key image disavows politics, and closes down an actual politics in terms of politics as disconnected figure.

In that sense we might say that the meaning of John Key is that he ‘speaks for’ us rather than the more representative ‘on behalf of’, because despite the appearance of democracy in the form of elections, the current political situation is such that there is a huge gap between the electorate and the financial experts who analyze markets, produce credit risk ratings, and guide policy direction. The basic claim by defenders of neoclassical economic orthodoxy is that this gap is an unfortunate byproduct of the complexity of ‘the market’. The centrality and complexity of ‘the market’ is routinely weaved into prime time television news, with market analysis segments designed as a vehicle for in text advertising and as a reminder of the crucial place of financial markets in our lives, and of the necessity of the expert (always a representative from the banking industry) briefly outlining financial trends and stock market performance. There is no room in the segment for an extended analysis of markets. The segment functions as a daily reminder that financial markets are just as integral to our lives as the weather. Political and social issues do occasionally make an appearance in this segment, but only as contextual information for charting how markets might autonomously respond. At base, the construction of an autonomous economic sphere in the news bulletin dutifully performs the antidemocratic tenants of neoclassical economics. As Barry puts it,

one of the main achievements of the dominance of neoclassical economics is public silence (and hence compliance) about economics – or to put it another way, economics is reduced to a ‘technical’ exercise in which only experts can participate (129).

John Key’s ‘speaking for’ expresses the ideology of the financial market segment, as well as what has become the accepted view of governments internationally. This is the resolute claim that our future as individuals and as a nation is inseparably linked to the health of corporations and global finance. As we have argued elsewhere, this is how the democratic imperative functions: it collapses “the distinction in German between *vertretung* ... [which] assumes a complete understanding of the subject that is being spoken for, takes for granted the assumed surety of representation and positions itself as the authority of representation” (Devadas and Nicholls, 83) — speaking for — and *darstellung* — speaking with — where the agent of representation places him / herself in the very constituents of those which they represent.

John Key is a highly visible figure in New Zealand exhaustive of the masses of media material that pre-embodies the central ideals of conservative politics, and more importantly legitimizes the policies and politics of the National government. The media treatment as we discussed, particularly in *Women’s Weekly*, also foreshadows the possibility that people born into difficult social conditions can actually rise up and succeed. This is the fulfillment of the

neoliberal promise epitomized by Brand Key: 'and the implication of that is that the state should not be involved in the economy too much, but it should use its power to preserve private property rights and the institutions of the market and promote those on the global stage if necessary' (Harvey, 2011, 43). At the same time, his brand as success story disavows the violence of neoliberalism, the inequalities it relies upon and produces, for John Key, as brand, also signals something else. The clear conclusion one can derive is this: 'if these people [those who are unable to make it] want to get on, they can — but they are *failing to do* so. The brutal truth was that those at the bottom only had themselves to blame (Jones, 249). In that regard, Brand Key works to dismiss poverty, social inequalities and differences not as structural problems produced by neoliberalism but as conditions which people find themselves in because they have not done enough or have failed to do enough. The media is a key agent in reproducing this image. It would be remiss for us to forget that as much as Brand Key smacks of elitism, he also plays up the figure of an everyman with a humble beginnings story, who on the other is an initiate of high-end financial capital. He takes on the figure of the everyman with his trademark boyish grin and through embarrassing behaviors that serves to re-emphasize the possibility of mobility across class, economic rank, and social status. This apparent contradiction, between elite financier and everyman, however, has tended to empower Key's image rather than deflate it.

'What then is the meaning of John Key?' He means both nothing and everything, like so many shopping malls around the globe that belong everywhere and nowhere. He means the hegemony of brutal capitalism.

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