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The Hobbit and New Zealand's heritage industry

Rodanthe Tzanelli, 05th January 2011

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Gollum has succeeded where politicians have failed, in replacing a colonial narrative with a myth that changes the ethno-symbolic basis of New Zealand's imagination

About the author

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We are accustomed to think of movies as part of our leisure activities rather than terrains on which political battles are enacted. However, in a highly commercialised globe that has turned image and sound into pathways to political inclusion and global recognition, films have become politicized arenas. Take movies that successfully [promote global pilgrimage](#) [7] (fan tourism and other types of tourism) to filmed locales, making filmed regions and nation-states internationally famous. The list of such films - beginning with the phenomenal global reception of products as old as the 1960's *Guns of Navarone* and *Zorba the Greek* (with Rhodes and Crete as respective backdrops) - is long and constantly growing. Since 2000 alone, we have seen geographically-situated tourism picking up, thanks to blockbusters including *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-3), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (2005 and 2008) and the *Harry Potter* (2001-10) series, or individual movies such as *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2001) and *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). The attraction to sought-after tourist 'clientele' has prompted nation-states to support similar enterprises (see for example the Australian Tourist Office's backing of *Australia* (2009), the Greek conservative government's decision to open the gates of the Acropolis for the shooting of *My life in Ruins* (2009) or the Thai government's support of *The Beach* (2000)) in the hope that they will get their share of such film-induced prestige.

But global recognition is not politics-free - indeed, under certain circumstances it might even spawn the sort of populist agenda that both amplifies nationalist emotion and threatens to leave the venture's hosting country poorer or more isolated globally. Transactions and communications with the rest of the world can become compromised by the conviction that the products of such cinematic enterprise (images and tourist trade) ought to be legally treated as exclusive national property. This depends on the degree and nature of regional or national involvement or investment in the enterprise, as distortions to exclusive rights and brands invariably take place in the more organised forms of this involvement. In any country involved in the promotion of tourism through films, powerful interest groups operating within the nation-state (whether these be the government, the opposition or other independent political formations) or outside it (e.g. culture industries and corporate business relating to media and tourism) act as catalysts for the emergence of collective responses to cinematic tourism.

The Lord of the Rings

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a stark example of such responses at regional, national and international levels: not only did it transform New Zealand into a global brand as 'Middle Earth', it also laid the foundations for a generation of increased business traffic, with films such as *King Kong* (2005) and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) subsequently performing the same surgical facelift on the country.



It took almost a decade for this transformation to prove both uneven and problematic. But in late October 2010, on the back of a strike organised by the Australian Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance union, New Zealand's workforce, finding itself dependent on the *Lord of the Rings* culture industry, began to protest. The strikes and the protests revolved around two distinctive issues that the country's political leadership appeared to intentionally confuse. The first involved a dispute over the status of employees in the *Lord of the Rings* media circus that dated as far back as 2005. Then, the Supreme Court had ruled in favour of long-term workers in New Zealand, recognising them as employees regardless of the type of contract they had signed. At the time special effects worker James Bryson took legal action against *Lord of the Rings* director [Peter Jackson](#) [8] because he was made redundant, claiming that he was an employee rather than a contractor. He won the case.

In 2010, after years of delay in the production of the trilogy's double prequel, *The Hobbit*, production giant Warner Bros threatened to relocate the shooting of the new films elsewhere (hinting that Britain might be the first alternative). The threats produced a chain effect: the government (a coalition led by John Key's National party) rushed through parliament an amendment bill that 'corrected' the 2005 incident by reconsidering the conditions under which film industry contractors can claim rights as employees. The so-called 'Hobbit Amendment Act' set a damaging precedent for the rights of international creative labour, using the excuse that New Zealand's political leadership was 'looking after' native worker's jobs. This profoundly ethno-nationalist argument was followed by Key's concessions to the foreign studio, including an offer of \$25 NZ million (about \$15million NZ in tax breaks), making the overall arrangement anything but favourable to regional development, especially in those regions from which the creative industries would recruit labour for their projects.

We can read these events against a global systemic (economic) collapse that made creative industries meaner and more cautious towards spending: [it has been noted](#) [9] that the appreciation of the New Zealand dollar from being worth 50 cents US to 75 cents US since the conception of *The Hobbit* project would have placed Warner Bros at a disadvantage prior to the Amendment. The government's populist agenda that put the idea of 'saving jobs' before and *in front of* this unjust arrangement also weakened the opposition's argument against it. Although the cinematic tourist legacy of the country should be attributed to the previous Labour government (1999-2008), the National coalition reaped the fruits of its success, stressing how it looked after 'native interests' first (in opposition to Labour rebels who pushed media and tourist revenues out of the country with their actions). Labour's support for the Foreshore and Seabed Act on New Zealand's heritage did sour the party's relations with indigenous populations in 2005, probably pushing them in 2010 to the right of the political spectrum. The Act, which damaged Labour's global reputation, prompting a [UN investigation](#) [10] of human rights violations, declared that the land in question was owned by the Crown, allowing the Maoris (its traditional custodians) to apply for 'guardianship' only over certain areas.

So how was the country's public sphere manipulated into supporting labour nativism when what was truly at stake was the workforce's submission to corporate demands, irrespective of whether these workers were artists or crafters, natives or foreigners? The focus on 'saving native jobs' rested on the deployment of an ancient technique of *divide* (the workforce into 'highbrow' and mobile and 'lowbrow' and rooted) *et conquera* - that in this case appeared to suit New Zealand's political leadership well.

The shaky [2008 coalition](#) [11] of Key's National Party with free-market ACT (Association of Consumers and Taxpayers) and United Future New Zealand, a political formation emanating from the merger of centrists and Christian-dominated conservatives, needed legitimating by the masses at home. There is no better way to achieve both internal (political coalition) and national cohesion as well as external (corporate) support than by stressing these conservative values that prey on ethno-nationalist sentiment: our 'own' national 'family's' interests must come before the interests of those mobile strangers/artists whose unionised action may take away our global membership, driving media industries out of the country.

Unfortunately, actions by Labour MPs, such as Trevor Mallard's raising a national flag on which a Warner Bros logo had been superimposed in Parliament, spoke in exactly the same language of ethno-cultural exclusivity. The Union Jack box in the corner of this piece of cloth has been at the centre of a national debate that in 2001 escalated into a national referendum on the design of the



flag. Labour MP Charles Chauvel, spokesperson for the opposition in 2010, led the debate in 2001. It is particularly frightening that corporate blackmailing has achieved what Chauvel was unable to do a decade ago: change [the ethno-symbolic basis](#) [12] of New Zealand's imagination, replacing a colonial narrative (St George's Cross) with a myth (Tolkien's fiction). On this point one may remark how the anti-union protesters dressed up for their protest-marches as characters from J.R.R. Tolkien's tales, holding Gollum posters with the caption '[Please Save my precious Home!](#) [13]'

The popular-come-populist claim that the *Lord of the Rings-Hobbit* cultural industry is part of New Zealand's heritage rests on this rationale: before the films, the country was known as a peasant sheep-farming backdrop of human civilisation. After the cinematic success, a different entrepreneurial narrative emerged, 'professionalising' Zealandish national character. A (notably, foreign) Australian union and a foreign culture industry (e.g. the suggestion to move the *Hobbit* shootings to the UK) became satanic intruders in the national terrain, willing to steal the country's hardly-earned status and its revenues. This is the mindset on which corporate capital thrives, as it sanctions competition at the expense of weaker nations that began their life as post-colonial backdrops.

It is forgotten of course that the driving minds behind New Zealand's hosted creative industries (Peter Jackson for *Lord of the Rings-Hobbit* and Andrew Adamson for *The Chronicles of Narnia*) are 'native stock' collaborating with those corporations that attempt to set the rules of work. As they contribute to the country's reputation, they are excused for their moral 'defect', allowing for a redirection of resentment towards those artists who do not have their socio-cultural leverage.

The harmful consequences of the 'Hobbit Amendment Act' manifested themselves in late October 2010, when a British woman of Pakistani origin was reportedly refused part in the scheduled films for [not being 'light-skinned'](#) [12] enough. Conveniently, when the story hit the news, a spokesman for the film-maker's company, Wingnut Films, said the crew member who uttered this was an independent *contractor* who had been sacked. So, artistic labourers of lesser global status now get the blow from both ends: not only are they divested of their legal right to protest against employee abuse because they are 'contractors', they can also be discriminated upon if they do not possess the right phenotype for whitewashed fairy tales like that of *The Hobbit*. One would expect some solidarity at least on the basis of colonial history's injustices in the second case, but this is not so: the memory of racial and class inequality has had to take a back seat in favour of a plausible national public face.

Country or region: New Zealand

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