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Book Review

Peter Cleave, *Data Wars: The Algorithmic State* (Palmerston North: Campus Press 2022), pp. 329.

In recent years, literature on indigenous issues has come to be dominated by two connected themes: the challenges arising from the experiences of colonisation; and the means of (re-) asserting indigenous culture, political influence, and identity. To some degree, the focus on these areas has come at the expense of other developments affecting indigenous groups (among others), particularly the rise of commercial and political forces that subvert the significance of the binary Western-indigenous model of analysis, and that present both material and conceptual challenges to notions of indigeneity. Among much else, the cultural and political ramifications of emerging virtual states on indigenous peoples is a topic of Professor Peter Cleave's new book, *Data Wars: The Algorithmic State*.

Of course, the work encompasses much more. It is built from a series of articles Cleave has had published in the journal *Te Kaharoa*, and addresses substantial issues, particularly the role of 'big tech' firms such as Amazon in the generation and control of data. Cleave explores the notion of Machine Learning, which he explains is 'pivotal in the shift from data is a saved and, as it were, a passive entity to an extensive projection of data pictures that guide behaviour'. Already, the

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implications of such developments raise questions about their potential impact on indigenous communities.

Cleave not only analyses emergence of the algorithmic state, but explores how it might affect concepts of citizenship, statehood, international law, domestic law, and global economics. Again, there is much in here that will have a direct impact on the future of indigenous communities, and the specific nature of the challenges that they face.

At various points in the book, Cleave explores particular tributaries of thought. One such example is the parallel he draws between the emergence of a new form of meta-state, represented by Amazon, in the formation of Kingitanga – the King Movement – in New Zealand in the 1850s and 1860s. the comparison offers many angles for exploration. for both organisations, their emergence occurred in response to circumstances and opportunities. However, also in both cases, these organisations soon shifted from being reactive to proactively establishing new systems and forms of governance. Cleave focuses in on what he labels the 'communication nexus' to illustrate this seam of similarity: 'Amazon offers such and a shared kawa or process of communication on marae where information is presented and debated offer something similar in Maori society'.

From here, further branches of comparison extend out. Cleave has devised a specific version of the multiplier effect, noting that although Amazon was growing for several years, the advent of covid, which has forced more people to work from home, and to avoid conventional in-person shopping, has served is a multiplier for Amazon's growth (and at the same time has altered consumer behaviour in the process). Likewise, Cleave points out that the advent of colonisation in New Zealand acted as a major multiplier for the growth of the King Movement.

The book then opens up as a further avenue for examination the extent to which both Amazon and the King Movement were anchored to conventional state which essentially hosted them.

The geographical space in which both organisations emerged from does not correlate with a requisite loyalty to those spaces. On the contrary, both Amazon and the King Movement have displayed substantial traits of subversion in connexion to the states where they are based.

There are also points of diversion, however. Whereas the King Movement has remained firmly rooted in one particular location, and over a sufficient period of time that the movement is identified with that location - both politically but also culturally and symbolically - Amazon has displayed much less of this tendency to geographical affiliation. Thus, whilst Amazon remains a centralised organisation, the physical location of that centre is negotiable. Of course, location is an essential element of a state, but the way that Amazon engages with location to some degree typifies its unique status. 'The question of which city Amazon chooses as centre becomes a significant issue', Cleave points out. 'more than that though there is the question as to whether Amazon needs to be based anywhere in the USA or anywhere else in particular for that matter. given the matter of the cloud and given the exploration of space we could be talking about cyberspace or outer space as much as terrestrial space when it comes to choosing a centre of operations'. Indigenous groups, almost by definition, do not have this option for mobility, which in turn makes their engagement with their host state both more consistent but also potentially more problematic.

There is also the role of artificial intelligence, robotics and algorithms in the algorithmics state which affect the nature of Amazon's operations in ways that do not apply to most indigenous communities. On the other hand, as Cleave notes, indigenous groups, such as Kingitanga, offer the 'idea of being under the maru or umbrella who under the mana of the King Movement'. In contrast, Cleave asks rhetorically, 'To what extent does Amazon offer protection? To what extent does Amazon offer shelter and security?'

On the surface, the two organisations look radically different, yet in varying ways, their leaders both end up being 'made strangers at home'. This is a particularly important observation but one which poses different challenges for those connected with either of these organisations. For consumers of product sold by Amazon, their relationship with and commitment to generally extends to the price and efficiency of the delivery of goods they purchase. With Kingitanga, however, the person of the leader, along with that leader's relationship with the state and with geographical place, a considerations that followers of the movement are much more concerned with.

Cleave devotes considerable attention in *Data Wars* to the control of data, highlighting that prior to colonisation, in New Zealand, There was a structural management of data that isolation from the rest of the world necessarily caused to be controlled from within. the emergence of the country as a nation state from the colonial period Altered they centres of power when it came to 'the assemblage of data, its processes of collection, the way it was in is structured, it storage, and its use'. The issue of data sovereignty is a pressing one for indigenous groups around the world, and is a rapidly altering field, given the application of technology to the amassing and manipulation of data.

At this point, Cleave provides a thorough and precise review of the relevant literature relating to data control, and some of the challenges it poses for indigenous groups. Several themes emerge from this survey, most of which are centred on ideas of data displacement, and the state of flux that exists between nation states and indigenous communities in an age when technology seems to be outpacing the definitions, structures, processes, and purposes of those entities. The challenges facing indigenous communities in this area in particular are substantial, as Cleave observes: 'There is a serious situation here for indigenous groups. If indigenous groups are trying to

gain control of data, to find again their sovereignty of data in the wrong place then there is a twist again to colonialism. This is a sovereignty game of some portent [which]… shows the kind of energy going in to claim a resource that may not be there in the nation-state, a resource that has shifted in the time of the data claiming process, over the last quarter century, say. Is there a grip that the indigenous society might secure on to the algorithmic state of 'Big Tech'?'

This is not a question that Cleave answers directly, and rightly so. Like so much of the content and analysis in this book, such issues are playing out at real time at the present moment. One of the great accomplishments of *Data Wars* is that the author succeeds in capturing the issues as they are unfolding, and offers readers sufficient analysis to anticipate possibilities for the future without ever making such projections prescriptive. *Data Wars* is possibly one of the most important books to emerge recently that addresses current challenges – both in terms of threats and opportunities – facing indigenous communities, and deserves a wide readership.