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Raewyn Connell

Excerpt

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1

Approach to Class Analysis

In 1973 there was a long strike at the Ford car-assembly plant at Broadmeadows near Melbourne. During the late 1960s and early 1970s Ford Australia, a subsidiary of the American multinational, had expanded rapidly with a strategy of producing large, flashy, fast saloons, which turned out to be immensely popular. In early 1973 it was on the point of displacing General Motors-Holden from its leading position in the Australian car market. At the same time the motor industry unions, spurred by a rising rate of inflation, were about to launch a campaign for increased over-award payments to employees, one of the more flexible parts of the wage structure. They intended to put pressure first on GMH, as the company in the most vulnerable position.

But the Ford workers took the issue away from their officials. At a mass meeting on 18 May, where union officials were explaining their tactics, they insisted that demands be more actively pressed on Ford, and stopped work. After some weeks' strike the Ford management offered a modest wage rise, and at a mass meeting of workers on 11 June a vote was taken to return to work. But the vote was close; many of the workers did not speak English and had not understood what was being voted on; there remained bitter opposition to a return without more concessions from the company. On 13 June, the day scheduled, some went back to work but others, perhaps 2000 strong, gathered outside the plant to picket it. The Ford management decided to close the gates, and a violent demonstration erupted, with the workers attacking the buildings, smashing windows, and clashing with the police who had been sent in by the state government. The company refused to negotiate further until the unions were able to 'control' their members; the union officials, badly shaken, moved to a more militant position in support of

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[More information](#)*Approach to class analysis*

their members; and the strike resumed. The Federal Minister for Labor weighed in with an attack on the multinational company and its control of industrial issues from New York. In early July GMH arrived at an agreement with the unions for higher over-award payments, but Ford remained intransigent on this issue, while offering concessions about working conditions on the assembly line. After nine weeks' strike the position of the workers had deteriorated. The deadlock ended with a proposal for an enquiry on the wage issue by an Arbitration Commission judge; at a mass meeting on 23 July, carefully organized by the unions with interpreters, the assembly workers voted by a large majority to go back to work. A month later the arbitrator recommended a small rise in over-award payments and a relaxation of the company's penalties for late attendance. Both sides accepted the solution.

How can an event like this be understood? At one level, simply as an industrial episode: a squabble over pay which happened to turn nasty; which cost, as the newspapers duly calculated, \$60 million worth of car production and \$3 million in wages. Yet in every way the industrial dispute points beyond itself, to a larger structure of relationships. The fact of a largely migrant workforce points to the way the expansion of industrial capitalism in Australia has depended on an inflow of relatively cheap labour from Europe; and their unexpected militancy challenges the common assumption that migrants make a docile labour force. The unions' tactics depended on the oligopolistic structure of the motor industry, and the pressure that a threat to profit or market share can place on the management of capitalist enterprises. The company's determined resistance is one illustration of the financial strength of multinational companies, even when employer solidarity within an industry, the traditional basis of the industrial strength of local capital, is lacking. The intervention of the two governments – one to protect the company's property, the other to criticize multinational control – and the Arbitration Commission, raise the question of the relationship of the state to the system of industrial production, and the connections of the major parties with industrial interests.

And at a deeper level again, the Broadmeadows strike relates to some basic features of the social order in which it occurred. If one asks what the strike was 'about', the immediate answer

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is over-award payments; if one asks why the sums involved were important to workers, the answer relates mainly to their positions in families and the dependence of domestic life on wage income. Wages, moreover, were only one of the issues in the strike. Others related to the nature of work and social control on an assembly line, penalties for lateness, getting an afternoon tea break, getting a relief worker for those who wanted to go to the toilet. The last point is not meant to be humorous – it is rather a striking illustration of the physical humiliation imposed on workers by social control in the workplace under industrial capitalism. The dramatic shift of a section of the Broadmeadows workers, well beyond the position taken by a union leadership that was actually quite militant – even the Communist officials in the unions concerned were left flat-footed – points to a level of anger and a potential for radicalization in the workforce that is normally completely concealed. And the context in which the whole thing happened, as the immigrant origins of both the workers and the company illustrate, was not simply the outskirts of Melbourne in a particular winter, but a pattern of relationships that extends across the world and back through decades of history.

To understand the strike in depth, then, demands more than an account of industrial relations. It demands an analysis of politics, of the structure of business, of the nature of industrial production and private life; and in particular it demands a way of accounting for the relationships among all these things. This is essentially what class analysis attempts to do. The theory of class is a theory of the organization of social relationships on the very large scale, which is concerned above all to establish the connections between disparate facts, and apparently separate spheres of life. An event like the Broadmeadows strike can then be understood as a crystallization of patterns, and a realization of possibilities, that can be traced through many other places and times.

‘Class analysis’ is not a single pattern itself. On the contrary, there is an enormous range of theory and speculation about class. This is to be expected from its importance, complexity, and opacity, not to mention the struggles of classes and their intellectuals to define the social world in ways that are friendly to their own interests. To begin to cut through the mighty jungle of modern literature on class and stratification, it is useful to

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[More information](#)*Approach to class analysis*

make some logical distinctions. I would suggest that the most important, in terms of what a theory is good for, is between two types of approach which may be called respectively 'categorical' and 'generative'.

A categorical theory is one whose basic move is to find a systematic way of sorting people. All societies, a familiar argument runs, are 'stratified', that is to say divided into groups or sections which are hierarchically ordered in some way. The task of theory is to discover and formulate the bases of this division and ordering in various societies, and the task of research is to trace out their correlates and consequences. The underlying notion of class is that of a kind of map-maker's grid, on which people (or in some versions, families) can be located. Spatial metaphors – 'social mobility', 'social distance', 'dimensions' of differentiation, even 'stratification' itself – are so fundamental to it that their non-metaphorical meaning is normally taken for granted. The characteristic research problems that arise are matters of technique: identifying the dimensions, measuring the distances, and correlating other things with them.

This is the conception of class that underlies most of the modern sociology of stratification, including survey research on mobility and the various dimensions of differentiation, some American functionalist theories of social hierarchy, and neo-Weberian stratification theories. But it is by no means confined to the universities, nor to bourgeois theory. A lot of left-wing thinking about class is also in the 'categorical' style: notably versions of marxism which take a bourgeois–proletarian distinction as a fixed framework and devote themselves to fitting particular groups into it, or interpreting events, particularly political events, as signifying the presence of this framework.

Marx's own theory was not of that type; the systematic exposition of class categories was of such minor importance to him that he left it an unfinished fragment at his death. *Capital* begins with something quite different, a discussion of the nature of commodities and the transactions that make up a labour market; and from this foundation Marx's massive analysis of the history and dynamics of capitalism is developed. Here is a theory of class as a structure generated by the operation of some fundamental and highly general processes, whose effects ramify from the labour market into all other spheres of life.

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We may call this type of theory ‘generative’ (on the analogy of linguistics) to stress its most distinctive feature, the way in which elementary structures and processes are seen to generate a huge and complex historical reality. The stress here is on the processes producing social groupings, rather than the categories they produce; and on the activity of people, not merely their location in social space. There have been other attempts to develop this kind of theory, such as Dahrendorf’s attempt to make authority relations (rather than property relations) the basis of class theory; and, in some regards, Parsons’ sophisticated functionalism. Marxism of Marx’s kind remains the most important and fully developed instance of generative theory.

Its importance lies, as his work shows, in the possibility of offering an account of the historical dynamics of societies. If class is, as Thompson roundly declared, an event, rather than a category – and that idea, however formulated, underlies all socialist politics – then we need an approach to class that makes it possible to reveal its historical emergence and analyse it as a causal pattern. It is generative theory that is needed to give an account of the linkages that become apparent in analysing an episode like the Broadmeadows strike; and this type of theory underlies the analyses in this book.

The basic ideas used, briefly, are these. The system of power that we call private property or private ownership defines a labour market, in which employer–employee relationships are formed. The system of property means that the employer keeps control of the product of the work. This makes possible the gaining of profit and the accumulation of capital, a basic dynamic of the system. Rights of property are transferable, and the system has been modified to allow a partial transfer of rights, which allows the combination of capitals and the formation of companies, now the main form in which private ownership of industry is organized.

Capitalist society, characterized by these processes, develops a class structure, and it is the structure as a whole that is primary – classes develop in interaction (both conflict and alliance) with each other. The class structure develops by the extension of the labour market to engulf other forms of economic organization, and by the economic, social and political mobilization of the groups who appear in the labour market. Mobilization typically occurs under the influence of smaller

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[More information](#)*Approach to class analysis*

groups, who may find their positions solidifying as the leadership of a class. It is conditioned by the consciousness of class membership, and the possibilities of class action, that have been developed by the members of emergent classes. Mobilization is never total, and can be reversed. Working-class mobilization is always undertaken against odds, not only the economic but also the political and cultural strength of the owners of capital. Where the mobilization is weak and the indirect controls effective, we speak of a hegemonic situation.

A vital means by which direct and indirect controls are imposed is the activity of the state. The state is understood as the sphere of direct enforceable social relationships (as against the indirect relationships of markets), which underlie markets and also provide the basis for the construction of the state organizations such as courts, parliaments and government departments. One of the characteristic forms of class mobilization is a struggle for control of these organizations. A major form of working-class politics devotes itself to this struggle in order to use the state organizations to improve the lot of the underprivileged without changing the basic character of the state or the labour market. Following a convenient though tendentious left-wing tradition, we may call this 'reformism', and contrast it with anarchist and socialist politics which imply an abolition of the state and the labour market.

The state organizations are typically confined within the boundaries of 'nation-states'; but the growth of capitalism has seen a spread of property relations across the world and the development of imperialist systems where the labour and raw materials of one region are exploited by the capitalists of another. There is a tendency for a reproduction of the entire capitalist system wherever its basic structures are introduced. But in much of the world this is checked by the overwhelming economic strength of the major capitalist powers. In recognition of this we speak of the world system of capitalism as 'imperialism' while acknowledging its polycentric character.

This is a very bald outline; some suggestions about how it can be filled in in the analysis of specific problems, will be made in later chapters. The ideas derive, as will be obvious, from the socialist tradition of class analysis. Within that tradition they are eclectic, though not, I think, inconsistent. I depart from the marxist system on some crucial points, such as the postulates in

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[More information](#)

Approach to class analysis

the analysis of the labour market from which such conclusions as the declining rate of profit are deduced; but have found a great deal of value in Marx's work as a model of method, and his modern followers' in the analysis of consciousness and culture.

A generative theory, however convincing or unconvincing in the abstract, is only validated by yielding an intelligible account of historical reality. And a schematized history is of no value. The detail of events must be examined, and at times rather more than detail; facts, as Norman Mailer remarked at the trial of the Chicago Seven, are nothing without their nuances. Here I have tried to get some of the nuances, as well as the brutal outlines, of Australian capitalism, and to show how all can be used in building an interpretation of the whole.

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[More information](#)

2

*The idea of class in
Australian social science*

Both of the great upswings in class conflict in twentieth-century Australia, in the 1910s and the 1940s, produced a burst of socialist argument about class relations and political change, and both produced an outstanding critic, researcher, and analyst. The first, Vere Gordon Childe, served an apprenticeship in the NSW Labor Party, and out of the depth of his anger produced what is still the most informed, sustained, and biting critique of Australian labour politics. But his anger also drove him from the country, and so the most brilliant intellectual Australia has produced never gave a full-scale analysis of his own society – though it drew him back to a strange death in the end.¹ The task was taken up by Brian Fitzpatrick, in a series of books and pamphlets produced in the years 1939 to 1946. Sharing with most socialists a conviction of the importance of economic process, Fitzpatrick produced a detailed economic history of Australia as the product and field of British imperial expansion. From this base he moved to a history of the Australian people and of the labour movement, reading this partly as the bearer of democracy and partly as a means of social integration in the interests of capital. As a radical activist he produced a vivid analysis of power and ownership in Australian business, and fought a sustained battle against censorship and repression by successive governments.²

No one will deny that there were flaws in Fitzpatrick's arguments. They were, as Irving and Berzins have argued, strongly tinted with the populism common in Australian radicalism; he often simplified the analysis of the ruling class to an attack on 'monopoly', and hence among other things missed the rise of the new groups of capitalists involved in industrial diversification that were gathering strength in the 1940s. Looking back into history, he, like other contemporary intellectuals

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The idea of class in Australian social science*

such as H. V. Evatt, was prone to discover classes wherever he discovered oppression.³ Both tendencies perhaps flowed from the lack of any formal theory of class, an impatience with what George Orwell in 1940 called 'the smelly little orthodoxies' that dominated political thinking at the time, but which happened to include, in marxism, the strongest line of socialist theory about class. Fitzpatrick also, by focussing on the place of the Australian colonies in the trading economy of the British empire, underplayed the formation and growth of cities, whose economic weight has been shown by later technical research, and whose significance as the matrix of class formation has also become increasingly clear.⁴

But such criticisms of the details of Fitzpatrick's formulations pale beside the intellectual and moral scale of his project. Here, produced under difficulties (he was not cushioned by university lectureships) in the heat of political struggle, was an attempt to grasp the whole process of formation of the social structure, not as an object of literary contemplation but as a guide to the transformation of an oppressive society. Here was an attempt to show the interconnections of the structure of economic power, the life of ordinary people, the emergence of resistance movements, and the place of the country in a world context. It was a remarkable achievement; and however corrected by later research, it remains the most impressive model in Australian writing of what class analysis is about.

But to say that, is to say that Fitzpatrick produced no successors – at least, none who attempted to do the same kind of thing. The period of class struggle in the 1940s ended, not with a break-out towards socialism, but with a ruling class victory. The next generation saw a conservative hegemony in politics and the completion of industrialization under firm capitalist control. In intellectual life, a corresponding movement occurred. Fitzpatrick's flawed synthesis broke up and was replaced with specialisms. In the universities, sociology emerged with a claim to give a scientific account of social structure independent of historical method; while history became more technical, and itself divided into specialisms like economic history, labour history, and the history of politics. In tracing the accounts of class given by both disciplines, we are in effect studying, at the most rarefied level, the emergence of a

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[More information](#)*The idea of class in Australian social science*

new hegemony: a slow, complex, but very definite retreat from the radical implications of Fitzpatrick's intellectual position.

Class and the historians

In the 1950s and 1960s academic studies in Australian history multiplied. As Rowse has argued, there was an attempt by many intellectuals to re-think the character of Australian civilisation and society from the new vantage-point of an advanced industrial capitalism.⁵ In academic history this mainly took the form of a monographic exploration of political and economic developments. Class processes of course come into most of the problems that were written about. This is particularly clear in regional studies: thus we find treatments of class differentiation and economic relationships in regional histories of pastoralism and its transformation such as Kiddle on the Western District and Waterson on the Darling Downs, and we find a sketch of 'class relations and the rise of Labour' in Serle's history of Victoria in the 1880s.⁶ So a full analysis of the treatment of class would require a complete historiography. Since my concern is with the underlying conception of class and its relationship to methods of analysis, I will concentrate on the work of a smaller number of historians where the approach to class is relatively explicit or fully worked out.

The banner of class analysis since Fitzpatrick's day has been most prominently carried by historians of the labour movement.

Labour history is history of a new kind: it introduces the concept of masses rather than *élites* as the moving forces in the historical process . . . The labour movement is the institutional method by which the masses transform themselves from passive to active elements in society, from weights to be pushed around to social levers in their own right.⁷

So Turner in 1965, in what remains the most complete statement and illustration of the project of labour history: history written by the left, for the left, and – by virtue of the second sentence – mostly about the left. What theory of class, and what method of analysis, are contained in its practice?

Gollan's *Radical and Working Class Politics*, which appeared in 1960, is a useful point of departure. The book announced a class framework in its title, and its author had no inhibitions about talking of classes. His usage is in fact remarkably unin-