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978-1-107-08741-5 - Anthropologies of Class: Power, Practice and Inequality

Edited by James G. Carrier and Don Kalb

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## Anthropologies of Class

Rising social, political and economic inequality in many countries, and rising protest against it, has seen the restoration of the concept of “class” to a prominent place in contemporary anthropological debates. A timely intervention in these discussions, this book explores the concept of class and its importance for understanding the key sources of this inequality and of people’s attempts to deal with it. Highly topical, it situates class within the context of the current economic crisis, integrating elements from today into the discussion of an earlier agenda. Using cases from North and South America, Western Europe and South Asia, it shows the – sometimes surprising – forms that class can take, as well as the various effects it has on people’s lives and societies.

JAMES G. CARRIER is an Associate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, and the Departments of Anthropology at the University of Indiana and at Oxford Brookes University.

DON KALB is Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Central European University, Budapest, and Senior Researcher in the Anthropology Department at Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

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# Anthropologies of Class

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on urban space and social class in Majorca and Malta and his relevant publications are “*Fent Barri*” (*Etnográfica: Revista de Antropologia* 3(2), 2009), “*Ġebbla and the Maltese grumbling civil society*” (*En Cours: Mondes et Dynamiques des Sociétés* 11, 2009) and “Working class heritage without the working class” in *Heritage, Labour and the Working Classes* (2011, L. Smith, P. Shackel, and G. Campbell, eds.).

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

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Capitalism has been getting a lot of attention recently. In anthropology, and in the social sciences more generally, the work of Karl Polanyi and the phenomenon known as neoliberalism have attracted growing interest for the past decade or two. More broadly, the financial crisis that began in 2007, and that quickly turned into an economic, social and political crisis, made central aspects of capitalism visible, noteworthy and painful for many people in a way that they had not been for some time. This attention has led a growing number of people to the old, but long-ignored, topic of the organization and nature of capitalism. After all, Polanyi's (1944) *The Great Transformation* is a tale of the emergence and development of industrial and commercial capitalism, especially in England in the nineteenth century. "Neoliberalism" has become the common term for the reconfiguration of capitalism and its geographical expansion that became especially visible in the last third of the twentieth century (Harvey 2005).

This growing interest in capitalism has not, however, been matched by a growing interest in the idea of class, at least not in anthropology. Rather, anthropologists generally still seem to be bewitched by the idea of *The Death of Class* (Pakulski and Waters 1995). They seem to agree with the words of the chairman of Unilever: "The old, rigid barriers are disappearing – class and rank; blue collar and white collar; council tenant and home owner; employee and housewife. More and more we are simply consumers" (Perry 1994: 4, quoted by Gabriel and Lang 1995: 36).

Class is not dead; we are not all simply consumers. The thought that it is, and that we are, springs in part from the decrease in large-scale manufacturing in Western societies. It also, however, seems to spring from a set of disciplinary prescriptions that make the idea of class unappealing. Since the rise of post-modernism we have, after all, foresworn grand narrative, a tar with which class is liberally smeared. And we have, after all, foresworn authorial authority and, with the cultural turn, increasingly restricted our concern to What and How the Natives Think, sure in the knowledge that these are *sui generis* and that we can hope only to describe them, never to identify the things that may shape them or the things that they may shape. Worse still, class is part of the Western

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conceptual universe, tainted by its provincialism and, therefore, of no help in understanding that Thinking (see Carrier 2012a).

However faintly, though, there are signs of a growing awareness that the Native's Point of View does not encompass all that is significant. However faintly, there are signs that A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) was right all those years ago, when he wrote that ethnographic description should be complemented by generalization, even theory.

This volume is our contribution to this process. It has its origins in a panel that James G. Carrier and Don Kalb organized for the 2010 meeting of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, "Class, crisis and anthropology: the place of class in understanding the discipline and the world." That panel was stimulating, and we agreed that it was worth trying to produce a volume of papers from it. Some of those on the panel found that the press of their other work meant that they could not undertake a paper for this collection, and we have recruited others in their stead. The result is what you see here. In the summer of 2012, the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology invited the two of us to spend a month working on the papers for this volume. That month was fruitful, both for allowing us to think about those papers and ways that they might be strengthened, and for clarifying our own thoughts about class and about this collection. For the opportunity to do this, we are grateful to the Institute, and especially to Chris Hann, who extended that invitation.

JAMES G. CARRIER  
DON KALB