

Class and struggle in Australia: an introduction

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How we get an income has a profound influence over our whole lives. Those who manage large numbers of people or own valuable assets, have very different experiences from the rest of us. We basically do what we are told at work, run small businesses or have limited supervisory or professional responsibilities at the middle levels of a big corporate or government hierarchy. That has obvious implications for our wealth and income. Workers on construction sites, clerks in banks or public service offices, even medical practitioners, lawyers and engineers whose incomes depend on their special skills, are not billionaires.

The richest 10 per cent of Australians owned 45 per cent of wealth in the country in 1998, according to one study. Eighty six per cent of shares and other investments, 62 per cent of rental properties and 60 per cent of interest bearing deposits (like money in bank accounts) belonged to this small group. The top 1 per cent, less than 100 000 households, owned 52 per cent of shares and other investments, 22 per cent of rental properties and 25 per cent of interest bearing deposits. Another study found that the top 5 per cent held 59 per cent of investible wealth, in 2002. Both concluded that inequality in the distribution of investible wealth was rising.²

Income *seems* to be more evenly spread: the richest 20 per cent of households only earn 39 per cent of all income.³ But there are massive incentives to legally minimise your taxable income, if you can afford accountants, solicitors and barristers.

The amount of money and other assets we have profoundly shapes what we eat and wear, the kinds of homes we live in, our access to education and information, whether or not we spend time in jail.

Of course, this is a matter of probabilities and the range of choices available to us. Even relatively poor people can choose to consume some luxuries. An occasional box of Belgian chocolates, bottle of good wine or whiskey, ticket to a pricy sporting event or concert, dinner in an expensive restaurant is within the reach of most people. On my academic salary, I could buy a \$10 000 cocktail dress, a month-long holiday at a comfortable resort in the Bahamas, even a \$100 000 car or an elite private school education for my daughter. But I would have to think carefully about how these fitted in to my budget. If they want, the really wealthy can have all these things and much more, all the time, without thinking about trade-offs.

Our jobs affect our health directly, not only through the kind of medical care we can afford. The more control people exercise over their jobs, the less stress they suffer and the healthier they are. The image of the anxious senior manager, whose enormous responsibilities give her (but usually him) the biggest risk of a heart attack, is a myth. Even allowing for the effects of heredity, education, diet etc, people at the bottom of the heap are more likely to suffer from such diseases.⁴

Taken separately, social patterns of wealth and income distribution, education, health and housing, *describe* important aspects of our world. Such inequalities don't *explain* much. They are symptoms. People at the top and many lower down believe that inequality just reflects the fact that some people are more hard working or clever than others. But this common sense explanation makes huge assumptions. First there is no solid evidence, as opposed to morality tales about poor but bright or dedicated kids making good, that the rich really do work harder and have greater intellectual capacities than the rest of us. This explanation takes as given, secondly, that it is natural for differences in brains and single-mindedness to result in profound social inequality.

It is not possible to account for patterns of inequality simply in terms of individual characteristics and behaviour. That leaves out relationships amongst people. It therefore leaves out the question of social power. To explain how and why these patterns occur, their connections and their influence on politics, it is essential to go beyond surface appearances, beyond 'common sense' to examine social

structures. This is what a Marxist approach does, by identifying class, grounded in social relationships in production, as the basis of power in our society.⁵ Marxism also provides a framework for understanding the treatment of oppressed groups and social conflict, as symptoms of a class divided society.

The next section looks at how the organisation of work gives rise to class relations. The following sections examine factors that influence the behaviour of classes: the way capitalist society obscures their existence; the effects of class struggle; the nature of class interests; ideas which deny or downplay the significance of classes; and the distinction between these ideologies and class analysis.

Forces and relations of production

Class has been a fundamental feature of all societies in which the *forces of production* (the capacities of the workforce--skills, technologies and scientific knowledge--as well as the tools and equipment it uses) have made it possible and necessary for a few people to specialise in decision making, without themselves producing the food, clothing, shelter or tools they need to stay alive. So class is about power, grounded in a relatively small ruling class's control over the surplus beyond what direct producers consume. Who makes key decisions, the nature of those decisions and who benefits or suffers from them are shaped by class.

The cultivation of plants and rearing of animals made a social surplus possible. Class societies began to emerge from previously universal hunter-gatherer bands, characterised by egalitarian decision making, around 11 000 years ago. Since then there have been different ways of organising the creation of the things we need to survive (*modes of production*). Under the slave mode of production in the ancient Greek and Roman world, ruling class power was based on the ownership of slave producers, as well as raw materials and tools (the *means of production*). Feudal lords in Europe exercised authority over the peasants tied to their land, who had a large degree of control over their own productive activities. In ancient China, peasant communities paid tribute to the state, whose officials made up the ruling class. The fundamental classes in societies are defined by the nature of their relationships with each other. These *relations of production* define contradictory class interests between producers and exploiters.

Not only Australia, but the entire world is now dominated by the capitalist mode of production. It has not always existed. Nor will it continue to exist forever.

There is a very long-term tendency, despite periods of regression, for the productivity of human labour to increase, due to improvements in the forces of production. Capitalism's competitive pursuit of profits dramatically accelerated this process. Under previous modes of production relations of production which facilitated the development of the forces of production eventually became barriers to their further development. Similarly, capitalist relations of production periodically undermine the conditions of its own existence. Economic crises (discussed in chapter 1), the erosion of working class living standards (chapter 3) and expenditure on education (chapter 5), falling birth rates (chapter 6), war (chapter 10) and environmental degradation (chapter 11) can be understood as consequences of contradictions between the forces of production and the organisation of production along capitalist class lines.

Class today is inseparable from the ownership and control that a tiny minority of employers, senior officials and politicians exercise over productive resources like factories, offices, machinery and land or, in more abstract form, money available for the purchase of these things. Employers need the labour of other people to bring such resources into motion. With a part of their capital, bosses buy the right to direct workers' activities, that is, to make use of employees' ability to work (*labour power*) over a specific time. Wages reflect the value of (the amount of labour that went into producing) the things workers need to feed, clothe and house themselves, as well as bring up the next generation of workers so that labour power is continually available to capital.

Human labour, unlike machines, creates new wealth, so labour power is a peculiar commodity: it creates more value than that embodied in it. Because employers own the means of production they own the product of the labour done under their supervision or that of subordinate managers. The new value created by workers therefore belongs to capitalists. Profits derive from this *surplus value*, the difference between the costs of means of production and workers' labour power, on the one hand, and the value of the products workers make, on the other. This analysis, rather than a moral argument about nastiness, cheating or theft, is the basis of the Marxist theory of exploitation.⁶ The defining relationship of capitalism is that between bosses and workers. It gives rise to class struggle. And it underpins the logic of *capital accumulation*: the way competition amongst capitalists drives them to reinvest surplus value in order to be able to make profits in the future. Those who fail to extend their activity or to use new technologies to produce more cheaply will eventually be driven to the wall by rivals who do. This logic has dramatically and continually increased the productivity of human labour.

The capitalist class (or bourgeoisie), in summary, is made up of those who own or control productive resources and compete with each other to make profits; people whose only means of making a living is to sell their ability to work to an employer are members of the working class (or the proletariat). This includes spouses and children dependent on a wage. Unemployed people, who are unable to labour or cannot get a job and therefore have to try to survive on meagre social security payments, are also part of the working class. While chapters 1 and 3 in this book deal with the capitalist and working classes, the situation of adult students, another group not necessarily directly involved in the relations of production is discussed in chapter 5.

Not everyone in the Australian workforce is either a boss or a worker. There are middle layers which share some characteristics with capitalists and others with the majority of wage earners. The traditional middle class (or petty bourgeoisie) own small amounts of productive resources. Often their ownership of a truck, a shop, computers or other kinds of equipment is only possible because of heavy indebtedness. Unlike capitalists, members of the petty bourgeoisie are primarily dependent on their own labour, perhaps aided by family or a small number of employees. Some professionals, independent solicitors, accountants and doctors, operate in a similar way.

A 'new middle class' also exists, made up of diverse groups of employees of large organisations in a hierarchy of senior supervisors, professionals and middle managers.⁷ Specialised professionals, engineers, lawyers or accountants in such bureaucracies may have considerable autonomy in their work. Supervisors have power over subordinates and limited authority to decide how productive resources are used. But they don't participate in major decisions about levels of employment, large scale transactions or the kind of business their organisation is in.

All the employees of a large business or government department, from cleaners through technicians, team leaders and managers to the chief executive officer, may get their income in the form of a salary. But this is much less important in shaping their lives and, usually, in determining the level of their income, than their *role in production*: whether they do what they are told at one extreme or make the key decisions and give the most important orders at the other.

Class relations are not just about economics. Human beings are fundamentally creative: they shape the non-human material world and their relationships with each other. Capitalist relations of production radically limit our scope to realise our creative capacities by depriving us of control over the means of production, the products of our labour, our relations with other people at work and our biological selves (in the form of our physical activity). This *alienation* influences many other aspects of human existence for two reasons. First, work is essential for survival and takes up such a large proportion of our waking lives. Secondly, the conflict between bosses and workers and the competition amongst capitalists which are built into capitalist relations of production mean that no one is in overall control of social processes.⁸

Bosses have more control over circumstances and events than workers, but their creative capacities are also limited by capitalism. In order to compete and survive, individual capitalists and national ruling classes are forced to try to improve their profitability at the expense of workers and their competitors. Their personal relations, like ours, are affected by the fact that the capitalist mode of production encourages us all to treat everything and everyone like a commodity. The priority of profit making over the maintenance of a sustainable environment affects their health and pleasure too. The discussions in chapters 6, 7 and 11 deal more systematically with the way capitalism alienates us from our sexuality and our biology in general.

Consciousness

Marxist class analysis accounts not only for class as an objective feature of society but also for important aspects of our understanding of the world. In particular, it explains why the existence of class is systematically obscured in the consciousness of most people, for most of the time, as well as the circumstances under which people's identification with a class is likely to grow.

Capitalism is the first class system in history that pretends not to be one. It has a self-camouflage mechanism, which Karl Marx labelled the *fetishism of commodities*.⁹ The defining social relationship of capitalism, that between bosses and workers, appears to be one between equals. Normally, in the wage contract, they really do exchange equivalents: a portion of the employers' capital (in the form of wages) against labour power of the same value. Exploitation takes place because employers own the products which result from the application of labour power.

Capitalists get to own the surplus value produced by workers without the kind of direct coercion that accompanied the extraction of surplus under previous modes of production. Slaves were themselves owned outright as means of production. Masters had the right to do whatever they wanted with their slaves and what their slaves produced. Social surpluses were created in the feudal and the ancient Chinese modes of production, for example, by peasants without rulers being directly involved in the immediate production process. So force or the threat of it, by the lord's military retinue or the central state's soldiers, was necessary to extract the surplus from the peasants or to coerce them to spend periods of time working on their rulers' projects.

Direct coercion is not the norm for the extraction of surplus value under capitalism. Bosses and workers appear to be equal, individual parties to wage contracts. There is, however, indirect coercion and a radical imbalance between the power of individual employers and individual employees. Behind the apparent equal relationships between individuals lie class relations.¹⁰ If workers are not to suffer from very low living standards and, in some capitalist societies, even to starve, they have to sell their labour power to those who have the money, i.e. capital, to employ them. Once employed, the threat of dismissal for not doing following orders is generally a serious one.

Apparent equality in the production process extends to the formal equality of workers and bosses as citizens, in relation to the state. Yet, despite the appearance of impartiality, states are vital guarantors of capitalist class interests. Chapter 2 examines the mechanisms involved in greater detail.

Class interests and class struggle

The everyday experience of capitalism, interpreted through the fetishism of commodities and ideologies promoted by the capitalist class, generally reinforces acceptance of the existing order, as natural and inevitable, together with the ideas that individual workers are incapable of bringing about change and that class is unimportant. One aspect of capitalism, however, tends to promote working class consciousness. Struggle between the capitalist and working classes is a necessary consequence of capitalist relations of production. For both sides it is a matter of survival. Competition amongst bosses over profits, markets and investments forces them to try to limit and,

where possible, to reduce the wages, while increasing employees' hours and pace of work. The living standards of workers, on the other hand, depend on success in defending, if not improving, their pay and conditions. Bosses and workers, therefore have contradictory interests, arising directly from the relations of production, that give rise to *class struggles*. These go on all the time.

At times such struggles are out in the open. Lockouts, reorganising work, reducing pay and conditions, attacking employees' ability or right to organise, raising working hours, cutting labour forces are measures bosses use to secure their profits. Workers may pursue their interests by striking, banning certain kinds of work, occupying their workplaces or engaging in political protests. But class struggle is usually at a much lower level. Supervisors may tighten up existing rules or work practices concerning the length of a lunch break or the pace of work. Individual workers may slack off, take sickies, turn up for work drunk or stoned, add a few minutes to breaks, or just reduce the authority of supervisors by taking the piss.

Because individual workers lack power compared to individual bosses, to be effective their struggle usually has to be collective. If one employee dawdles, stops working or protests, she or he can easily be replaced or ignored. Group of workers that strike, demonstrate, go slow or occupy their workplaces exert far more pressure on their bosses.

Collective action can give rise to ongoing working class organisations and class consciousness. The trade unions and the Labor Party (ALP) reflect the way large numbers of workers have a partial awareness of the implications of class. These organisations, the subjects of chapters 2 and 4, appeal to workers by challenging some of the *consequences* of capitalism even though they accept the existence of capitalism as a system.

In open class conflicts, the politically creative and organisational capacities of ordinary people become apparent, as workers take on responsibilities and do things--from addressing meetings, writing leaflets and making banners, to coordinating picket lines, collecting funds and arranging large events--that lie outside their normal range of activities.

The greater the scale of class struggles, the more they can undermine conservative ideas amongst workers and propel them into making and implementing decisions together. When the class struggle is particularly intense, the long term interests of the fundamental classes of capitalism can become apparent to large numbers of people. It becomes more obvious that capitalism is an exploitative system and that working class interests lie not only in winning short term improvements in living standards, by reducing the level of exploitation, but ultimately in overthrowing capitalism.

Rising consciousness of class interests, and the working out of the kinds of actions which will advance or damage them, are subjective processes that are individual but also shared with other members of a class. Through class struggle, the whole working class can become a self-aware collective actor, an historical subject. The proletariat, an objective consequence of the relations of production, becomes, in Marx's terms a 'class for itself'.¹¹ The outcomes of particular struggles and debates within and between classes may advance or set back the level of class consciousness, consensus and cohesion. Along with relations of production, they influence the outlooks and actions of individuals and therefore the classes to which they belong.

Classes and the boundaries between them are made and remade through changes in the relations of production, class struggles, conflicts within classes and shifts in consciousness. As a consequence, the extent to which you are convinced by the arguments in this book probably depends rather more on the wider political climate, shaped in turn by historic events, and hence your experiences of class struggle than our persuasive powers as authors.

Marxist class analysis can provide a framework for understanding both the objective interests and the consciousness of social classes and the decisions of individual and collective social actors. It demonstrates the connections between general class interests and the specific interests and consciousnesses of the individuals who wield power and make crucial decisions. Leaders

sometimes act because they have a clear understanding of what serves the interests of their class. But key decision makers may also make decisions that advance those interests, without being particularly aware of the mechanisms involved. This is particularly true in the capitalist class, because its power is hierarchically organised and a small group controls the institutions of production and the state.

The Howard government's use of racism illustrates how influential individuals or groups can advance capitalist class interests, while denying that a capitalist class as a ruling, exploiting group, even exists. The importance of racism for the Australian capitalist class has varied (though it has never disappeared). As chapters 8 and 9 argue, racism undermines working class solidarity. It distracts attention from the real causes of problems like unemployment, job insecurity, declining social services, longer work hours, low wages or environmental degradation, by blaming them on scapegoats.

Ideologies and imagined communities

Class analysis will always be controversial. The people who control the most powerful mechanisms for generating and shaping ideas--media barons, government ministers, vice chancellors--are amongst the main beneficiaries of capitalism, and naturally oppose theories pointing to the inherent inequalities, injustices, and tendencies towards crisis in our society. Many intellectuals follow their lead. Capitalists and their favourite thinkers, publicists and spokespeople are not shy about identifying their own interests with those of the entire society or about inventing and promoting ideas that dispute or obscure the significance of class and hinder the constitution of the working class as an effective and conscious actor. Some such *ideologies* and the activities that go along with them create 'imagined communities' and illusory social contradictions, between people understood to members of such a community and those deemed to be outside it.¹² Specific forms of oppression also create identities, tied to gender, sexual orientation and race.

The experience of oppression--including higher unemployment, restricted access to better paid work, harassment by police, inferior treatment before courts or by public bureaucracies--shapes the self-understanding of very large numbers of people and the way they organise and think about class. Women, gays and lesbians, Aborigines, 'non-white' migrants and refugees suffer from oppression in some or all of these forms. Oppression also influences the behaviour of those who are not subject to it. Chapters 6 to 8 examine the divisions and oppressions justified by sexism, homophobia and racism and struggles against them.

Imagined communities and illusory social contradictions are real in the sense that they have practical effects. But they are also fabrications whose appearance and continued existence is best explained in terms of ruling class interests.

As this book was being written, conservative politicians and commentators were trying to create an illusory contradiction between generations. This blamed 'selfish baby boomers' (born between 1946 and 1965) who are now reaching retirement age for higher taxes, crowded hospitals and housing shortages. But older generations are, like younger ones, mainly made up of workers. These older workers engaged in years of wage labour, paid taxes and made their bosses (or at least the competent and lucky ones amongst them) rich. Employers, senior politicians and public servants are the ones with power in this society whose decisions benefit themselves and other members of their own class. Yet, we are told, 'the young may resent the old ... if they see old people as owning most of the community's assets'.¹³ This argument manufactures illusory generational interests and fabricates contradictions between them.

Australian nationalism and populism, discussed below, are well-established ideologies without even the basis in the realities that we all age, belong to a biological sex, have sexual orientations and various superficial physical attributes, like skin colour.

Nationalism

All of the parties in Australian parliaments, from One Nation, through the Nationals, the Liberals and Labor to the Greens, justify their actions in terms of the national interest. This concept lies at the centre of political debate in Australia. Even if there is disagreement about its content, the national interest is generally just assumed to exist. Does it really? And where did the concept come from? To answer these questions we have to examine the ideology of Australian nationalism that underpins the supposed national interest.

Echoing the Liberals' 1996 election slogan, 'For all of us', Prime Minister John Howard summed up the essence of Australian nationalism, after winning office again in 2001, when he said

There is something special about being an Australian... That Australian spirit, that capacity, that mateship that allows us to pull together in times of challenge and times of adversity that is something very special... [T]he things that unite us are infinitely greater and more enduring than the things that divide us.¹⁴

There were two points here. The first was that Australians are fundamentally different from people of other nationalities. Howard implied that other folk don't help each other out when there are floods, or fires, droughts or hurricanes. In particular, confronted with adversity which is entirely a social product, war, Australians are supposed to behave in a distinctive way. *All* nations make similar claims to their own 'special' unity of purpose which is, of course, supposedly unique. This assertion of Australian specialness has often been reinforced by explicit or implicit appeals to racism.

Howard's second argument was that the national community is more important than differences or divisions in Australia and, by implication, that cleavages between nations are fundamental. But just how much do women gutting chickens on a Steggle's production line share with the overwhelmingly male directors and top managers of the company they work for? Control in the workplace? Responsibility for preparing the kids' dinners? Attendance at a private school and university? A six figure annual income?

The Labor Party also stresses the distinctiveness and coherence of Australians. As leader of the opposition, Mark Latham insisted that, 'As a nation, our identity and values matter. They underpin our patriotism and sense of belonging'. The ALP has sometimes acknowledged the existence of social divisions, counterbalancing it with the myth, which Latham gave much greater emphasis to, that 'the most characteristic and unifying of all Australia's traits [is] our egalitarianism'.¹⁵

The divisions within Australian society, between exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed underpinned by the class divisions that arise in the organisation of production are, in fact, profound. What is more, they extend across national boundaries. Indonesian, Australian, Japanese and US workers have common interests in improved wages and conditions. Their bosses pursue profits in similar ways, even as they identify competition with foreign workers and corporations as the reason for squeezing pay, increasing the pace of production and extending working hours.

Nationalists often assert that nations have existed since time immemorial. But nationalism itself was a product, from the 15th century onwards, of capitalist development and the emergence of modern states.¹⁶ Most national traditions are 19th century inventions¹⁷ and only during and 20th century was the whole world organised along national lines.

The Australian national tradition was invented in the late 19th century. The Australian Natives Association, under the leadership of young businessmen, promoted Australian patriotism. One of its prominent members came up with the slogan 'Australia for the Australians in the 1880s'.¹⁸ But state activities, notably those of politicians, were and are at the centre of the ongoing campaign to create and sustain Australian nationalism. That is not surprising, because the idea that the modern state is the custodian of national interests and acts in the interests of the entire community is its main justification.

The intensity of Australians' desire for federation and nationhood has been exaggerated. So motivated by national enthusiasm were the populations of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria that less than half of the people on the electoral rolls in each colony even voted in the 1898 referenda on federation. Thanks to extensive campaigning by colonial governments and newspapers, the level of participation went up from 45 percent to 61 per cent in the next round of referenda, in 1899 and 1900. But this still meant that only 43 of those who were entitled to actually voted for federation.¹⁹

Class solidarity, with its own massive annual celebrations, the Eight Hour Day processions, was powerful in Australia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and potentially a rival to national loyalty. Official efforts to boost Australian patriotism before the turn of the century were stepped up after federation, to inculcate a sense of national community and national identity. Today the state-sponsored barrage of nationalist ideology is unrelenting. The state organises and pays for Australia Day, the selection of the Australian of the year and other prizes as well as one-off festivals like the bicentenary of the British invasion and the centenary of federation. *National priorities* for investment, trade, research, immigration, employment, health, welfare and culture etc form the explicit framework for public policy. National lore features prominently on school syllabuses and in school rituals. The federal government conjured up and coddles the Australian Institute of Sport, to secure glory in international sporting competitions. The Sydney Olympics, with its orgiastic displays of Australian nationalism, received massive government subsidies.

Governments have been especially keen to give Australian nationalism a military flavour. ANZAC Day commemorates military encounters involving Australian armed forces back into the 19th Century. It shapes the perception of war in Australia. Australian troops were a minority of the French-British imperial forces that failed to conquer Turkish territory, in order to control the Dardanelles, the narrow straits in the route between the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Less than a sixth of the casualties on the invading side were Australian.²⁰ A very selective telling of the story underpins the annual celebrations. The official version emphasises unity of national purpose as Australia 'came of age' as a nation through a 'blood sacrifice'. The class differences and conflicts among the soldiers who actually participated, let alone the contradictions in Australian society as a whole, have no place in this account.²¹

C. W. Bean, the official historian of Australia's involvement in World War I, was the most influential inventor and promoter of the ANZAC myth. While encouraged and funded by governments, ANZAC Day is also the special trust of the Returned Services League. During the 1920s, this politically conservative organisation, with the benefit of government patronage, squeezed out rival and less militarist associations to claim a monopoly in representing former service personnel. Other official commemorations of Australian military anniversaries, in addition to ANZAC Day, are used to heighten national pride and legitimise current 'defence' policies.

Most nations have their own 'special' variant of the 'ANZAC spirit' of comradeship in the trenches focussed on some defining moments of national bloodshed. Yet a sense of solidarity and sympathy, practical help and even heroism are *human* responses to the suffering of others.

Government sponsorship and the efforts journalists, academics and public intellectuals attached to the capitalist class have been very successful. Nationalist assumptions pervade not only parliamentary debate, but the mass media; not only discussions of government policy and economics, but of scientific innovations and especially sport.

The national community is primarily a matter of the ideas in its members' heads rather real, shared material interests. What, then, do national interests amount to; in whose interests do state institutions act? When the veil of national consciousness is removed, 'national' interests are revealed as the naked self-interests of the dominant class. National prosperity depends on the profitability of capital invested in Australia. National security, explored in chapter 10, is revealed as the ability of those who own and control capital to see off threats to their rights, whether from

opponents at home or overseas. The Australian ruling class, sometimes through internal or wider debates, defines the national interest, which conceals and advances its own class interests. National interests are ideological, conditional on national consciousness. In contrast, class interests derive directly from the objective existence of classes, whether they are consciously perceived or not.²²

The international interests of the Australian ruling class have, moreover, always belied its profession of national sentiment. Thus Rupert Murdoch, a congenial newspaper magnate, founder of *The Australian* newspaper and long the chief executive officer of the largest corporation by market capitalisation on the Australian stock exchange, ceased to be an Australian in 1985. This famous ex-Australian became a citizen of the United States of America so he could take over media assets there. The point is not that a 'genuine' Australian nationalism, free of foreign influence exists. It is simply to highlight the foolishness of taking *any* ideology, especially nationalism, at face value and of ignoring the material interests it serves.

Populism

A variety of ideologies deny the importance of social divisions grounded in the relations of production. Populists concede that there important are divisions within Australia and sometimes use the language of class. They counterpose an imagined community of 'the people', generally very hazily defined, to a small and powerful elite. Radical sections of the labour movement, from the 1890s to the 1930s, concentrated their hostility on the parasitic 'money power' made up of bankers and financiers. During the 1930s, the Communist Party of Australia compromised its Marxism with nationalism, identifying foreign-influenced monopolists and 'rich families' as Australia's main problem. This diagnosis was widespread in the Labor left and unions too. US-based transnational corporations became the focus for the labour movement left in the 1960s. The influence of the left and this perspective subsided during the 1980s. One of the factors in Labor's victory in the 1993 federal election, however, was the Party's populist appeal to class sentiments and use of the argument that the Liberal and National Parties would govern for the rich.

Left populists have portrayed 'the people' as including workers, the middle class and even capitalists. They have understood the relationship between the people and their opponents in economic and national terms: the elite is made up of foreigners or stooges under the influence of foreigners, which economically exploits 'the people', who constitute the Australian nation.²³

While left populism, associated with the institutions of the labour movement, has obscured Australia's class structure it has sometimes also mobilised people along class lines and justified working class struggles. That has not been the case for right wing populism. Like racism, it has redirected resentment and frustration, generated by the experience of exploitation or oppression, away from the class that benefits from the established order. It has targeted groups who bear little or no responsibility for the operation of Australian capitalism. Robert Menzies, the Liberal prime minister from 1949 until 1965 claimed to be championing the interests of a 'middle class' he identified as 'the forgotten people' against the forces of socialism.²⁴ Stimulated by the success of Pauline Hanson who voiced a more radical right wing populism, John Howard spoke for the 'battlers' who were being pushed around by know-it-all 'elites'. Labor leader Mark Latham's appeal to 'the aspirational classes' had a similar resonance.

Membership of the community of battlers, like Menzies' 'middle class' and Latham's 'aspirational classes', has been defined in terms of the characteristics of individuals, not social relationships. Anyone who worked hard and had sensible ideas could be a battler: workers along side bosses; single parents in poorly paid, dead-end, casual jobs along side society matrons who slog out their guts for charity. These good people were underdogs being taken advantage of by dole bludgers, welfare roting Aborigines, coercive union leaders, queue jumping asylum seekers, and the 'new class' of thinkers and writers which, through its domination of the mass media and most charities, was imposing its 'politically correct' ideas on everyone else.

The social function of this ideology is particularly apparent when we identify a few of the fearless crusaders who have most forthrightly denounced the baneful influence of 'elites'. They have included politicians, like prime minister John Howard and Tony Abbott, one of his ministers; senior academics like Katherine Betts and David Flint, who Howard appointed to chair the Australian Broadcasting Authority; newspaper columnists like Christopher Pearson, Andrew Bolt and Miranda Devine; and monarchists who want the headship of the Australian state to remain the hereditary right of members of a billionaire family.²⁵

The author of *The twilight of the elites*, Flint argued in late 2003 that the Iraqi people should be forced to readopt the monarchist constitution of 1925, when the British were in control and propped up the king they had imposed on the country a few years earlier. A descendent of the 'ancient' royal family, who happily enough was then a merchant banker in London, should have become the interim head of state.²⁶ Like his political allies, Flint believed that the sun should rise rather than set on his own *favourite* elites.

Objectivity

The promotion of conservative ideologies through and in businesses, government, education, the media and churches reinforces commodity fetishism. Generally, '[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas'.²⁷ This hegemony of ideas that serve capitalists' interests is not, however, total. They pervade common sense understandings of the way society works. But direct and indirect experiences of struggle also influence the way we think. Common sense can be contradictory.²⁸ People are often hostile, as the media and government encourage them to be, when a group of workers takes strike action. Yet, if we know individuals who are on strike we are much more likely to be sympathetic to their industrial action. The Hawke, Keating and especially the Howard governments appealed to and reinforced racist hostility against refugees, by defaming them and locking them up in concentration camps. Nevertheless many of those who supported the policy of 'mandatory detention' are fine about workmates, friends and acquaintances of another race. Common sense, like its close relation public opinion, can shift rapidly in response to changed circumstances.

This book challenges many dominant, common sense ideas. Its chapters illustrate in greater detail the ways that class shapes the world, influences political action and shapes consciousness. The first four examine the fundamental classes in Australian society and the most important institutions associated with them. Sam Pietsch profiles the ruling class, while Rick Kuhn deals with the structure and operation of the state. Diane Fieldes sketches the structure and recent struggles of the working class and its unions. Tom Bramble considers the ways in which the established working class leadership, in the unions and Labor Party, is both shaped and compromised by its position between capital and labour. In chapter 5, Graham Hastings looks at the role of the Australian education system and how students, a politically volatile group, fit into the class structure.

Forms of oppression and resistance to them are the focus in the four chapters that follow. The family is an institutional pivot of the oppression of women and homosexuals, whose situation Sandra Bloodworth and Rachel Morgain outline in chapters 6 and 7. Modern Australia was founded as a racist society and racism remains a major prop for the capitalist class. Mick Armstrong, in chapter 8, uses a largely historical approach to assess the prospects for unity between black and white workers, while Phil Griffiths, in chapter 9, explores the experiences of migrants and refugees and the conflicts over their treatment.

The final chapters broaden the scope of class analysis. The Australian capitalist class has long sought to influence developments beyond the country's borders. The way it has done so, often through alliances with other larger powers, and the resistance it has faced to its adventures are the focus of Tom O'Lincoln's study in chapter 10. The environment is not something external to human beings: it pervades us as biological entities. Capitalism has transformed the natural world and

undermined our viability as a species. Jeff Sparrow, in chapter 11, investigates struggles over the environment and the Green Party, which emerged from these conflicts during the 1980s.

So much Marxist discussion of Australian society, so little space for other views. The contributors to this book have drawn on their years of engagement, informed by Marxist theory, in struggles against the excesses of capitalism and for socialism. We do not apologise for our unashamedly partisan approach. But it does need explanation.

There is no ‘value free’ science. Science is conducted by human beings with histories, emotions and political leanings that necessarily influence their research to some extent. This is particularly true in the social sciences, where the political and personal implications of research are more direct. While basing their arguments on conservative, common sense assumptions, most political and social commentators make claims for their own objectivity or simply ignore the issue.

Objectivity in the mass media is said to derive from ‘balance’. In politics, this usually means hearing from both Liberal or National Party politicians and Labor spokespeople or, at best, from representatives of more parties which have members of parliament. Explicitly Marxist perspectives are seldom covered. To find alternatives to our Marxist views, all you have to do is turn on the TV or open a newspaper. The balance argument justifies the massive ideological imbalance in the Australian mass media and education system, which this book attempts to even up just a little. Even if you don’t agree with Marxism, it does provide a strikingly systematic approach to understanding the world against which other theories can be measured.

We make a bigger claim, however. Marxism can provide a more objective understanding of society precisely *because* it is partisan, adopting the standpoint of the working class. Ideas which obscure social realities and especially the existence of class serve the interests of the capitalist class because they make it harder for workers and the oppressed to organise in their own interests. The working class, on the other hand, needs to cut through such illusions if it is to fight effectively for improved wages, free abortion on demand, land rights, better public health care or, ultimately, the abolition of class society itself.²⁹ Marxism is a means by which the working class can become a collective actor and understand the world in order to change it.

Further reading

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Endnotes

- 1 I am grateful to Tom O'Lincoln, Sam Pietsch and David Pope for their comments on this chapter.
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- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Income Distribution, Australia* catalogue number 6523.0, 2001.
- 4 For accessible accounts of the mechanisms involved see 'Mastering the control factor' *The health report* Radio National, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 9 November 1998, www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/helthrpt/stories/s14314.htm, accessed 28 September 2004; and Richard Wilkinson and Michael Marmot *The solid facts* World Health Organization, London 1998, www.who.dk/document/E59555.pdf or www.euro.who.int/document/e59555.pdf, accessed 28 September 2004, especially pp. 16-17.
- 5 For a very readable account of Marx and Engels' treatment of class see Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's theory of revolution: 2 The politics of social classes*, Monthly Review Press, New York 1978.
- 6 Karl Marx, *Capital* (3 volumes) is a systematic study of capitalist production as the foundation of class society. For good, brief introductions to Marxist economics see Ernest Mandel *An introduction to Marxist economic theory*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1979 or David Smith and Phil Evans *Marx's Kapital for beginners*, Pantheon, New York, 1982.
- 7 See Alex Callinicos and Chris Harman, *The changing working class: essays on class structure today*, Bookmarks, London, 1987 and C. Carchedi, 'The economic identification of the new middle class', *Economic and Society*, 4 (1) 1975.
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 - 28 See Antonio Gramsci *Selections from the prison notebooks* International Publishers, New York 1971 pp. 5-14, 169-170, 234-239, 333, 423-424. Gramsci's effort to evade the prison censors makes reading his *Notebooks* hard work. Perry Anderson provides an excellent discussion of Gramsci's use of the term 'hegemony', 'The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' *New left review* 100, 1976 pp. 5-78.
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