

Book Reviews

Class Structure in Australian History

by Ann Curthoys

INTRODUCTION

Bob Connell's and Terry Irving's, Class Structure in Australian History is one of the most substantial and innovative contributions to a Marxist understanding of Australian society. Going far beyond orthodox historiography, which sees Australia as a classless society, and beyond labour history with its concentration on the working class, Connell and Irving attempt an analysis of the development of social classes in Australia over the last two centuries. This is an ambitious task, one which has daunted all left historians since Brian Fitzpatrick's, The British Empire in Australia. Many comments have been very critical, but this in itself is a sign of the crucial importance of the task Connell and Irving have undertaken. What they have achieved is thus likely to be obscured.

Nonetheless, the problems of the book are very important, both for Australian history and for Marxist studies generally. In the following review Ann Curthoys takes up three areas: the concept of class, genders and race/ethnicity. In each, she suggests advances and problems in the Connell and Irving approach.

Given the undoubted importance of this book and of the reinterpretation of Australian history it opens up, JAPE encourages further discussion of the issues raised. We would especially like to add to Curthoys' list the relationship of economic development to the formation of classes and the question of the nature of the middle class.

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R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving, Class Structure in Australian History, Longman Cheshire, 1980.

This book sets out to provide a history of the structuring of class relationships in Australia. Both of the authors began their intellectual training as historians; one now teaches sociology, the other, political science; but both have maintained their initial historical orientations. The result is a work - unusual in Australian writing - that is informed both by an awareness of social and political theory and by a commitment to providing concrete historical analyses and narrative. This very welcome fusion is prefigured in the subtitle: "Documents, Narrative, and Argument". Teachers of Australian history, sociology, political science, and political economy will all find it invaluable - there is a theoretical chapter on class analysis, a wide ranging analysis of Australian history from 1788 to 1975, and some wonderful documents. How have we managed so far without it?

The task the authors set themselves is unbelievably ambitious. This is no less than an attempt to synthesise all previous work on Australian history - especially but not only that concerned with class formation, relations, structure,

and conflict - into one readable volume. The copious endnotes - in which all manner of Australian historians and other social scientists are given good marks or bad with a frightening swiftness and authority - make this clear. The scope of the book is enormous; it is about national politics, local politics, and industrial politics, about work and leisure, communities and suburbs and families, about divisions by gender and ethnic group, about the development of Australian capitalism and about the lived experience of all sorts of people, variously defined, in Australia in the last almost-200 years.

How can one begin to respond to such a book? Here I consider first the theoretical argument advanced in the first chapter, then in a skeletal way the historical analysis given in the following chapters, and finally the historical treatment of two particular social structures - gender and race/ethnicity. A great deal of the analysis - meat and bone - may safely be left to others to pick over.

The Theoretical Argument on Class

The first chapter goes through, and wholly or partially rejects, a number of conceptions of class. The first of these is class as a category, where people are hierarchically classified into groups called "classes" according to certain characteristics, or where people are categorised as being in two conflicting groups, e.g. bosses/workers, men/women, people/monopoly. This approach is rejected as ahistorical and, at least in the cases of hierarchical ordering and of defining conflicting groups by their "relationship to the means of production", as beset by the necessary ambiguities of the defining boundaries that are used.

The second conception of class that is rejected is that developed from Althusser and Poulantzas - the idea of classes being sets of people where the people occupy class "places", for a time, the "places" being structurally determined by the social division of labour as a whole, that is by political, ideological, and economic relations. These structurally determined "places" are distinguished from the class "positions" which are created in the actual historical situation, the "conjuncture". These "positions" are the actual group alliances that people make and take. This approach is rejected as yielding improbable class definitions (e.g. regarding only 20% of the U.S. workforce as "working class"), as too abstract, and as seeing people as "puppets" rather than as "flesh-and-blood" makers of history.

The third view of class up for criticism is that which stresses the existence of "class" as depending on communalisation, or group awareness and action based on a common position in the social structure (class "for" itself). The problem here, argue Connell and Irving, is that - as with Poulantzas - "structure" and "history" are separated. The structural division is pre-existing, outside "history", and the historical analysis of class therefore concentrates not on the creation of any "common position" or a "social structure", but only on the process of groups of people becoming aware of a given common position in a given social structure.

Finally, there is the use of class by the British Marxist historian, Edward Thompson, whose "argument is central to our own approach" (p.9). They praise Thompson for avoiding the distinction between "structure" and "history", and for being, they say, concerned with the history of how the "structure" got to be there. They approve of his emphasis on the historical creation, not of "a class", but of "a-class-in-relationship-with-another-class". But the problem with Thompson, they seem to be saying, is that his approach allows for the existence of a class only when it has "consciousness of itself as a class" (p.10). And they do not want to see this high degree of "class consciousness" as necessary for the existence of a class society and of class relationships.

So there is an unresolved problem here. On the one hand, Connell and Irving want to be able to define and discuss class relationships as existing whatever the consciousness of the historical actors about those relationships being, in fact, class relationships; on the other, they object to an approach which sees an underlying structuring of class (e.g. by "relationship to the means of production") in any given historical situation as analytically distinct from, or temporarily prior to, the emergence of class consciousness and action. (The "structure" must not be outside the "history"). Can we analytically distinguish class relations from class consciousness, or can't we?

Richard Johnson, another British Marxist historian, working at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, would make the same criticism of Thompson himself, and it would seem to me that Connell and Irving's confusions are Thompson's own confusions. It is difficult to go into these issues in all their complexity in a short review. There is, Johnson argues in a 1978 article, in Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class (1963), an uneasy shift between structuralist and culturalist conceptions of class, between, that is, structuralist approaches which analytically distinguish the "structure of capitalist economic relations" from the cultural handling and lived experience of class relationships as a whole, and culturalist approaches, which did not.¹ In a later article Johnson again attacks Thompson's tendency towards culturalism and his "massive overloading of the term 'experience'", and concludes that against this "...it is important to argue for certain minimal distinctions...the distinction "class as against capital"/"class for itself" should be retained".² In other words, there is, under capitalism, a structural determination of class relations which can be held to exist and historically change whatever the precise nature of the "cultural handling of this relation".³ The Connell-Irving book appears to have been completed before Johnson's work became available, which is a pity, since Johnson's concerns are precisely Connell's and Irving's own, and he has clarified more than they have both the class/class consciousness problem and the structuralist/culturalist division.

In any case, Connell and Irving conclude that we must neither abandon the idea of class relationships being in some way "structured", nor distinguish analytically between "structure" and "actual historical situations". We should not, that is, proceed by looking for the structural determination of class and then investigating the degree to which people who are, structurally speaking, in the same class, themselves see it that way and act on that basis. No, what we should do is to analyse the history of the structuring of class relationships. For any class society, this will involve an investigation of the totality of social relations, and of the degree to which class relations dominate other forms of division and relation. So the history of the structuring of class relations will be a history of a social structure (p.16).

Given that this statement of aims tends to avoid the class/class consciousness problem altogether and to sidestep the difficulties raised above, I can find little to disagree with in it (if I have got it right - I do not think that Connell and Irving are altogether clear). It seems to get the notions of "history", "structural determination", "class", and "class relationships" together in an acceptable fashion.

The next question then, is have they managed to pull it off, to actually write a history of the structuring of class relationships in Australia? Well, yes and no.

The Historical Argument

The strengths of their historical analysis in chapters 2 to 5 lie in the connections made between political struggle and the development of the capitalist

mode of production in Australia. They demonstrate the ways in which capitalist development depended on the state of class struggle as well as defining that state. An important paragraph on p.279 argues, in part:

Australia had developed a clearly defined capitalist class structure before being industrialised...industrialisation occurred partly because of the class struggle so produced, which forced capitalist development along a new path...This altered sequence is crucial in explaining the relative peacefulness of the process in Australia, and the marked economism of the working class responses that did occur.

The book is best on working class politics, on the complex relationship between workplace and locality as sites of class mobilisation, and on the relationship - whether oppositional or otherwise - between working class and ruling class political ideologies and mobilisations. No functionalist Althusserianism here. We are made conscious of the non-linear history of class struggles, the periods of growth and decline in working class defensive strength, distinctive identity, and political and industrial organisation. The ruling class, too, we see, undergoes changes in its character, and fluctuations in the certainty and pervasiveness of its cultural/ideological leadership - it too can be on the defensive as well as the offensive. There is a very interesting historical generalisation made on p.286 when they say:

throughout the period of industrialisation (they are referring to the period from the 1920's to the 1950's) the ruling class was culturally on the defensive. Its power rested less on consent and more on force than it had done before, or was to do later.

The best of what we have here, then, is an historical class analysis of Australian industrial relations and of Australian politics at a number of levels. Yet this is a somewhat narrower focus than the authors claimed at the beginning. In particular they hoped to investigate the importance of class as structuring other forms of division and relation, and general to write a history of the total social structure (pp.15-16). In keeping with this aim, they have tried to take due notice of gender and, to a lesser extent, race/ethnicity, as integrally related to the particular structuring of class relationships. It is in these two areas that I find the book disappointing.

Gender in Australian History

One hesitates in developing this criticism, but having hesitated, plunges on. Neither of the authors is a specialist on this area, and they have, of necessity, relied heavily on the secondary sources. And by and large those sources have failed them. This failure is compounded by the authors' own uneasiness in relation to feminist scholarship, an uneasiness represented by a strange combination of deference and authority, an uneasiness which feminism in Australia has conferred in recent years on "sympathetic" men. Gender as it appears in this book will be discussed here under three main related themes - the sexual division of the labour market and in the workplace; the family, sexuality, and ideology; and male/female differences in political and industrial struggle.

Connell and Irving state that women in the nineteenth century were confined mainly to domestic labour, either paid - as domestic servants - or unpaid, as housewives. In the early colonial period they could sometimes be independent traders and even pastoralists, but this option had virtually ended by mid-century,

as women increasingly "disappeared into domesticity" (p.55). Later in the century they emerged, if single or if sole parents, as workers in the boot, tobacco, and clothing trades, displacing men and working for wages which were less than half those of them. Married women supplemented family incomes through casual work. Women do not appear as paid workers at all in the 1890-1930 chapter, but re-emerge as workers after 1930. In this recent period women were concentrated in certain industries such as clothing and electrical manufacturing and in clerical work especially after World War II.

In other words, the sexual division of labour is treated descriptively rather than analytically. The sexual segmentation of the labour market is mentioned, but not explained. We do not know from this account - or from the historiography on which it is based - why the sexual division of labour operated in the way it did, whether in the nineteenth century it was different from that in Britain, whether women's absence from many areas of work was reproduced from Britain or whether there were special colonial exigencies reinforcing, altering, or undermining it. The analytical weakness is especially evident in the 1840-1890 chapter, where labour market segmentation overall is seen as having been retarded (p.131) in comparison to Europe, without considering the degree to which the acknowledged marked sexual segmentation of the labour market might undermine this generalisation. This chapter is also particularly confused on the effects of marriage and marriage breakdown on women's labour (p.126), and there is a very strange absence of a class analysis in the suggestion that "not all women were destined to become bourgeois housewives, because some bourgeois women expected to manage the domestic labour of other women, as female servants". (p.125). Indeed, domestic labour tends to be portrayed as being for the benefit of bourgeois women, as if bourgeois men did not benefit from it.

In general, and this is especially relevant for the 1930-75 chapter, there is little discussion of changes in the degree and manner of women's workforce participation, and little understanding of the interconnections between demographic and structural economic change in the dramatic shifts in that participation and in family patterns. Although working class women's domestic and family responsibilities are stressed, there is little analysis of the way capital's tendency to draw increasing numbers of activities into the market, drawing many activities from the sphere of unpaid domestic labour into that of capital, radically affected the nature of domestic work itself and the changing relationship between unpaid domestic work itself and the changing relationship between unpaid domestic and paid work. One can sum all this up by saying that, in the area of women's work, while there is an attempt to be class specific - distinguishing women as working class housewives, factory workers, and domestic servants from women as middle class or bourgeois wives (middle class women as paid workers scarcely appear) - the relationship between gender and class remains untheorised and historically unrealised; the sexual division of labour is unexplained.

"The family" is portrayed by Connell and Irving as an agency of social control, of sexual repression, and conservatism generally. It became, they argue, strongly institutionalised by the mid nineteenth century, and later middle class women sought to strengthen it further through advocating sexual repression, embourgeoisifying the working class through institutions such as kindergartens, and through seeking and gaining state intervention on behalf of the family via maternity allowances and the teaching of domestic science to girls at school. The main changes to family life mentioned are the increasing prosperity and independent solidity of middle class families in the second half of the nineteenth century, and, in the post 1950 period, the increasing tendency to home-centred social life and entertainment and the isolating effects of the suburban sprawl. Working class

families are seen both as a site for the subjection of women and as sources of considerable defensive strength for the working class as a whole, especially in bad times. All this is a picture heavily reliant on Anne Summer's Damned Whores and God's Police (1975).

Too often, in discussing "the family", Connell and Irving's conscientious desire for class specificity deserts them. Women as a whole "disappeared into domesticity" (p.65), were increasingly subjected (p.56), and were connected with "cultural conservatism and instinctual repression". What happened to the "damned whores"? Were middle and working class women seen (and by whom?) in the same way? And were they in fact what they were supposed ideologically to be, in the way Connell and Irving assume?

The discussions of working class family life are perfunctory, and imply much more often than I suspect to have been the case, a stable nuclear family unit. Widows, deserted wives, de facto relationships, lodgers, step-parents, foster children, institutions for children and for adults - all scarcely appear. The degree to which state and philanthropic institutions penetrated, or remained aloof from, working class family life is not analysed.

The discussion of sexuality is especially strange. Sexuality emerges mainly in the context of the sexual repression of women within marriage; non-marital sexuality is implicitly held to be necessarily superior or less repressed - at least for women: "The insistence on marriage as the condition for sex improved their (working class women's, in this case) bargaining position at the expense of their libido". This is conjectural in the extreme; I do not see how we can begin to assess the state of working women's libidos in nineteenth century Australia, and it seems curious that only women's - and not men's - libidos should come under this sort of scrutiny. Male sexuality has no history - and certainly no class-specific history - in this book. The one exception is a passing reference to the venom directed against male homosexual relationships formed by many convict and pastoral workers (p.65), and even here we do not learn how widely spread, or class specific, these venomous feelings were. Overall, the references to sexuality and sexual repression - confined nearly always to women - are invariably vague and speculative.

Women are generally portrayed by Connell and Irving as politically and industrially inactive, because of their domestic responsibilities and their acceptance of a bourgeois ideology dictating such inactivity. There were, however, they point out, exceptions: middle class women mobilised around the suffrage and other issues from the late nineteenth century, and erected a new women's movement in the 1970's; working class women, especially between about 1900 and 1950, were important in maintaining working class communal solidarity, for example in supporting strikes and lockouts in mining towns. This role was substantially undermined by the effects of the suburban sprawl after World War II.

This account appears to me to be reasonably accurate, though the success of conservative parties in mobilising women, especially middle class and rural women, after World War I, and the importance of women in all parties at branch level, are both seriously underestimated. The identification of women as culturally and politically conservative is, despite the contrary instances given, rather too readily made. In general, women's political activity is seen as confined to separatist or auxiliary activity, which is incorrect, and both forms of political activity are scantily and inadequately analysed.

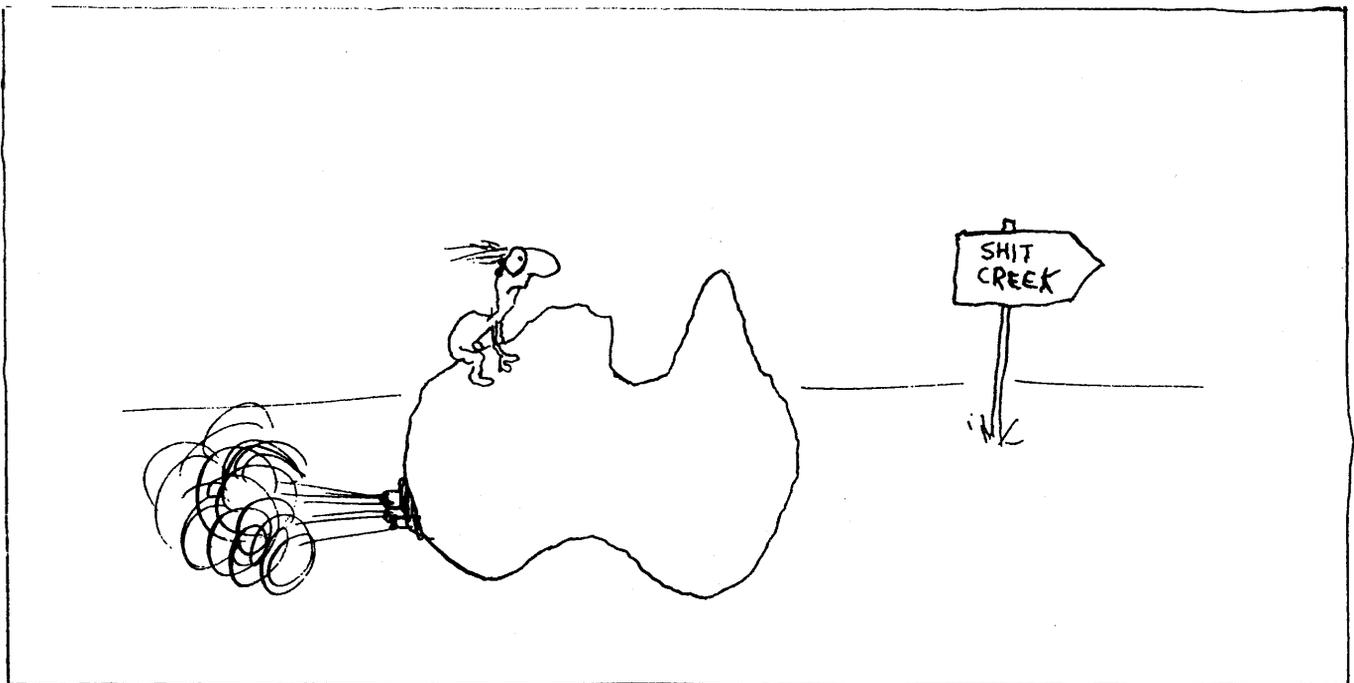
All these weaknesses are the weaknesses of much of Australian feminist historiography, although there is some useful criticism (in footnotes) of its

most idealist aspects. The key concerns of this historiography are mentioned - sexual division of labour, family structures, patriarchal ideology, the family wage, and so forth - but only very uneasily in connection with those overall historical political, ideological, and industrial struggles that form the central concerns of the book. This lack of connection means that while class relations in general are shown as changing considerably during the historical period discussed, the social structuring of gender is seen as largely unchanging - both largely unaffected by the changing structuration of class relationships and as not generating any very major changes in those class relationships. The amalgam of Summers, Kingston, Power and others that we get in this book is not, then, ultimately very satisfying. As such it is a clear indication that feminist historians are being heard, but also that they have not yet been able themselves to write, or stimulate others to write, women truly into Australian history, and most importantly, into Australian historical class analysis.

Race and Ethnicity

In looking at Connell and Irving's treatment of race/ethnicity in relation to class, we can be much briefer, for the attempt they make in this case is a good deal more perfunctory than that for gender and class.

The 1788-1840 chapter (but, alas, no subsequent chapters) stresses the dispossession of Aborigines by force - and the key role of the state, and of the alliance of pastoralists and pastoral workers, in the process. These actions are seen as the product both of the shared "clear interest in smashing the Aboriginal tribes" and of "racist doctrines" (p.63). Aborigines, once defeated in the south-



east in the 1840's, virtually disappear from the narrative, except to re-emerge fleetingly after 1950 as being disregarded in the outback as labour (sic) (p.292), as re-recognised by intellectuals as part of "the poor", and, in the 1970's, as actively "stressing the inbuilt racism of white Australian society" (p.303).

If women proved hard to fit into an historical class analysis, then Aborigines appear to have proved well nigh impossible. Here, Connell and Irving cannot be so easily excused as being let down by existing scholarship. The work of Rowley, Stevens, Markus, Barwick, Hartwig, Hamilton, Hagan and Castle, and others should have enabled them to locate Aborigines within the structure of Australian capitalism; to distinguish between urban, semi-rural, and outback Aboriginal communities and economic situations; to trace historically the processes of institutionalisation and exploitation of Aborigines as a distinct group, or series of groups; to examine changing forms of Aboriginal resistance, protest, and political organisation; to investigate varying labour movement, middle class, and state responses to Aborigines; and much else besides.

There is some discussion of non-British immigration and the consequent ethnic segmentation of the labour market. This segmentation is seen as arising with the employment of Chinese and Melanesians in the nineteenth century, declining with the emergence of a White Australia Policy at the end of the century, and re-emerging with the massive post - WWII non-British immigration. Yet, as in the case of the sexual segmentation of the labour market referred to earlier, the acknowledgement of the large-scale use of Melanesian labour and of the presence of the Chinese (the largely petit-bourgeois economic position of the Chinese is never made clear) is not used to modify the argument that labour market segmentation was retarded in the 1840-1880 period. And Aborigines are not mentioned at all in this context.

In general, racial/ethnic divisions are not presented as particularly important for working class action before the 1950's, and only then for producing "ethnic" communities which generally lacked any connection with labour politics and, rather questionably, working class consciousness. Racist ideology does get the occasional mention: as unifying pastoral owners and workers, as part of bourgeois and working class nationalism, and as retarding the ability of Southern European workers after 1950 to enter labour's political and industrial organisations (pp.63, 201, 300). But the ways in which working class racism subverted, and was reproduced by the extreme weakness of, revolutionary socialist internationalist politics, is scarcely examined. Class relationships in Australia have been profoundly, and not marginally, mediated and altered in both the industrial and political spheres by racism, especially in rural areas, and by ethnic distinctions and divisions; these ideologies and divisions deserve a much more central place in the analysis.

If all this sounds very critical, let me end by saying that Class Structure in Australian History is a must for all those Australian political economists who wish to place economic analyses within a wider - ideological, cultural, political, historical, - framework.

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Johnson, "Thompson, Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History", History Workshop, no.5, Autumn 1978, p.95.
2. Richard Johnson, "Three Problematics: Elements of a Theory of Working Class Culture", in John Clarke, Chas Chrichter and Richard Johnson (eds.), Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory (Hutchinson of London and CCCS, University of Birmingham, 1979), p.222.
3. Ibid., p.223.



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