

Correspondence

CLASS IN NEW ZEALAND *

I HOPE Dr Olssen will not expect me to cling too tenaciously to opinions first set down many years ago — for the essay he is concerned with was unsuccessfully offered to the editor of *Landfall* as a review in 1966. I see the situation in the later 1880s and early 1890s rather differently now, though I do not see much reason for different opinions about the effect of Liberal legislation. I would now give much more prominence to social conflict before, during, and after 1890; I would see the Liberal achievement as including the institutionalization of conflict; I would see New Zealand society and politics as characterized by a set of institutions which have prevented conflict from becoming dysfunctional. I would agree, eight years later, that in the later 1880s and especially in 1890 there are plenty of signs that men and women began to think and act as members of identifiable social groups, which might as well be called classes, and were prompted to do so by depression, by the bankruptcy of the essentially regional development approach to economic problems, by the unavoidable recognition of 'old world' predicaments in a 'new world' environment, and by the explanations of such situations offered by radical social thinkers in Europe and America. Such ways of thinking and acting either cause, or make explicit, or intensify, competition between rival groups, and there seems to be no compelling reason why this should not be called class conflict, if someone wants to do so.

But I still believe that the legislative and administrative *outcomes* of the 1890s suggest that conflict was both contained and muted by a set of developments among which one must include the deliberate governmental actions of the Liberals. It seems to me that, at the very least, conflict recedes in this decade and that its continuing manifestations are either too minor to be of political significance, or so institutionalized that they contribute to, rather than detract from, consensus. Thus I persist with the view that Reeves, if he took his rhetoric of conflict literally, disqualified himself as an effective politician. Much that Dr Olssen writes is perhaps closer to such views than the rather doctrinaire approach I took earlier.

However, I think there are some points I should make — one of a general character and some others more specific — least it should be assumed by readers without *The Feel of Truth* beside them that he gives a wholly correct reading of my essay.

Dr Olssen must surely be aware that I took a little care to say that I thought Professor Sinclair was using the word class in a Marxist sense (p. 167), that some (but not all) of Reeves' language had a similar character (p. 171), and that the question I was raising was whether the concept of class, especially when given a Marxist connotation, may be 'profitably put to work to clarify New Zealand society and history'. (p. 163). I think he would have done better to

* Erik, Olssen, 'The "Working Class" in New Zealand', NZJH, VIII, 1, pp. 44-60.

give his readers references to these fairly extensive passages, rather than to a single line on p. 165 (Dr Olssen's note 9). I find it easy to agree with him that a quite different usage of the word class might illuminate the study of New Zealand history — but not so easy to see what that argument has to do with my essay. Nor do I see that he has any right to the curious statement (note 3, p. 44) that 'Oliver claims that class has never been important'. A passage beginning at the foot of p. 163 and ending at the foot of p. 166, and another on p. 176, do not seem to me to support that interpretation. More generally, I was not naive enough to think that social mobility goes on in some kind of stratification vacuum; I assumed that everyone supposes that it can only be from one social location to another, whatever the terminology employed.

Further, there are a number of smallish points of accuracy in citation which should not, in any case, go uncorrected, and which may, taken together, be thought to detract from the cogency of Dr Olssen's case.

1. He begins by attributing to me the opinion that 'social classes have been less important in New Zealand's history than the "short expanse from floor to ceiling . . . [and] the persistence of social osmosis"'. In fact I wrote (p. 164) that we 'should adjust the concept of class, if we persist with it, in accord with two criteria; first, the short expanse from floor to ceiling, and second, the persistence of social osmosis.' I think I was trying to say something about the *relationship* of classes; they can still be very important while not existing in a relationship of hostility.

2. On pp. 44-45 he attributes to me the view that the 'Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act . . . threatened the "maintenance of the Liberal consensus"'. The sentence to which this curious statement must refer reads, 'Why . . . did Reeves try to push labour legislation past the point at which . . . it threatened the maintenance of the Liberal consensus?' The next sentence refers to 1895: surely it is clear that I was not referring to the I.C. and A. Act?

3. On p. 48 he writes of my 'insistence . . . that Populists seeking wider opportunity never "excited the least suspicion that they were socially revolutionary"'. The reference is to p. 169, where I wrote 'For at least a century in America creditless farmers had been asking for public credit . . . and were to go on doing so without existing the least suspicion etc'. Again, a shift of meaning has occurred, and an important one, for my concern in this essay was to try, however unsuccessfully, to shift attention away from the all too available statements of leaders to the much less accessible aspirations of followers.

4. Finally, on p. 45, but without benefit of citation, Dr Olssen writes: 'he never claims that the rhetoric class conflict has been absent from New Zealand, only that the rhetoric has been irrelevant to the reality of New Zealand society.' In fact, on p. 176, I wrote briefly (and not especially well, I fear) of the function of rhetoric in political movements designed to effect social change. I think that this at least implies some kind of connection between rhetoric and social reality, but I would have to concede that the passage cited is neither explicit nor clear.

I am sorry to write in a slightly sharp manner, for I believe that he has written very valuably about an important subject. I was responding, rather too dogmatically, to what seemed to me Professor Sinclair's (and perhaps Reeves's) uncritical acceptance of categories which needed a good deal of adaptation before they were useful in New Zealand history. Dr Olssen, I think, is responding a little too dogmatically to my dogmatism (and erecting rather too many straw men in the process). But in doing so he has gone a fair distance along the path of adaptation. If he looks carefully at what I was attacking, he will see that it was not the kind of conclusions he advances towards, with proper caution, in his article.

W. H. OLIVER

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