

## Review Article

*Social Class in New Zealand*. Edited by David Pitt. Longman Paul, Auckland, 1977. 139 pp. N.Z. price: \$4.50.

IN other countries, where such issues are taken more seriously than in New Zealand, a growing number of historians and sociologists have attempted to use sociological concepts to illumine the past. The results generally have not been applauded. The response of many in the historical fraternity is to insist that sociology has nothing to offer historians. Sociological jargon, the cry goes, is unreadable and obscure. At best, it dresses up the obvious in tedious pretensions. At worst, the categories implied by the jargon, drawn from an industrializing Europe in the nineteenth century and an industrialized America since 1900, if applied to different spatial and temporal contexts, distort the meaning of the past.

Of the six essays in the volume, one has been written by a historian, another by an economist, and the rest by sociologists. What unites them is that all use sociological ideas and jargon that will succeed in confirming the worst prejudices traditional historians have towards sociology. Who can warm to such distasteful prose as this?

The implications of a set of life styles associated with different socio-economic groups who are spatially segregated is a differentiated urban structure. . . .

The evidence presented in respect to the role of the suburb as an attracter[sic] of population because of its particular way of life suggests that the attraction is not produced by its spatial characteristics, e.g. its low density, single family homes, peripheral location, but by its social composition in particular its socioeconomic structure. . . .

I do not myself condemn the writers for using such jargon. In the early modern European era, theologians and lawyers communicated in a language that was often equally barbaric and such stylistic imperfection does not render the thought it conveys unworthy of analysis and discussion. In this volume, however, the writing is irritatingly careless and the thought unforgivably sloppy. The editor, a professor of sociology, in the introductory essay, 'Are there social classes in New Zealand?', tries to make the point that there are as many theories about class as there are schools of sociological thought, and that no singular concept of class will do for New Zealand: 'our

material stresses complexity'. It is a declaration that not a sentence by the essayists the editor has selected confirms. Indeed all of them, the editor tells us, without turning a hair, uphold either 'Marxist' or 'functionalist' lines of thought — thus so much for complexity. Professor Pitt also states that the essays in this book 'stress the distinctiveness of the New Zealand situation. Certainly overseas models and paradigms are useful, but the particular application in New Zealand time and space inevitably involves some modifications, combinations, and permutations.' Again Pitt's contributors make nonsense of Pitt's lofty appeal for pluralism. He leaves the last word in the collection to David Bedggood ('Class Consciousness in New Zealand') where in the last paragraph the tocsin of international socialism sounds, prophesying that with a worsening of the present economic crisis, 'New Zealand will face the prospect of a choice of two roads ahead; that of fascism or that of socialism.'

But if Pitt's introductory article confuses, then Dr Erik Olssen's succeeding piece will plunge the reader in despair. In 'Social Class in Nineteenth Century New Zealand' Olssen commences with some attempt at definition: 'I shall follow the tradition', he asseverates, 'of using class to mean conflict group (implying some degree of consciousness) or, at times, a sociological group with a life of its own (a sub-culture). Strata, on the other hand, will be used as a statistical concept for the purpose of descriptive analysis, implying neither consciousness of class nor the presence of sub-culture'. From this I take it that if we perceive social classes they exist but when we do not they are social 'strata'. I would like to know more about what constitutes 'sub-culture' and 'consciousness'; but no matter. The important point is that Olssen cannot use his definitions rigorously. How, for instance, is the reader to respond to the statement that 'By 1848 whalers, sawyers, and prostitutes constituted the only reminder of the British industrial working class to be found in the northern Wakefield settlements' — if they belong to an *industrial* working class then the category is meaningless. Olssen goes on to say that the aspiration behind the Wakefield schemes was to recreate 'pre-industrial forms of social life', and then indicates how New Zealand conditions prevented the elite in these settlements from building the 'class structure of their dreams'. These statements are equally unhistorical; pre-industrial European society was not class-bound; for the web of reciprocating obligations and dependencies largely blocked the development of Olssen's 'conflict groups'. We also have Olssen claiming at one point that nineteenth-century 'rural New Zealand was egalitarian, men were on first name terms', and on another saying that 'Pastoral society' was 'essentially a two-class system'. (The editor adds to the jumble: on page 7 he summarizes Olssen, stating 'The frontier was not simply an egalitarian utopia', but by page 14 he has changed his mind, 'there have been times too in New Zealand history, as Olssen states in his paper, where there was perhaps more egalitarianism, particularly on the rural frontier'.)

Where the sociologist supposedly has the edge over the historian is that he is far more self-aware about the assumptions behind his interpretation; but in this respect, too, *Social Class in New Zealand* is deficient. The contributors take for granted that social classes exist in New Zealand according to their arbitrary (and vague) definitions. Yet nothing is said about why in the first place the myth of New Zealand as a classless society developed, whether New Zealanders have a preconception about class that does not correspond to

imported sociological models. The one conviction that underlies all the articles is the belief that the existence of social classes in New Zealand is wrong, and must be combatted. Pitt betrays less certainty over this; so much so that he describes the existence of such social differences as an 'almost moral question'! The irony is that the authors tacitly affirm the inequality they think they expose. In the Table of Contents, beside the name of each article is inscribed every contributor's academic title and position. We readers are given all the details in other words of the occupational status of the contributors, leaving us in no doubt about their respective class identities. From the inception, then, the contributors have reinforced the power of the social mechanism from which they purport to be alienated.

The two essays of greatest interest to historians, by Olssen and Bedggood, exemplify the pitfalls of applying to one social situation sociological concepts derived in another. Dr Bedggood seems to think that during the period in which New Zealand society developed its modern character, from the late 1880s to 1914, a working class was formed. An insignificant number of workers benefitted from upward occupational mobility, and real wages rose too slowly to allow 'workers' to enjoy bourgeois affluence. The failure of the 'working class' to emerge as an independent and politically powerful force stemmed, paradoxically, from the integration of its institutions into the fabric of the bourgeois state, and its assimilation of nationalist and imperialist sentiment. Although this interpretation, I must say, is a less boring argument than the old faithfulness that King Dick's wizardry and the trauma of the 1890 Maritime Strike maintained social harmony for most of the Liberal period, it is unacceptably crude nonetheless. What the nationalism of this period was Bedggood does not intimate; and given the pervasiveness of 'false consciousness' amongst 'workers' how did even the most diluted forms of working-class identity ever arise? The other problem Bedggood does not face up to is that of establishing the 'objective' existence of his 'working class'. If it lacked a separate identity then in word and deed it can hardly have left a record of itself. If the formation of the state's 'infrastructure' submerged the class struggle then logically the past society will have deposited no evidence about its class character; instead the data will bear the imprint of the state as an agency of social integration. Without past class consciousness (except in vestigial forms) there will be no extant evidence about class – it would be impossible for anyone, even Bedggood, to test his hypothesis. Indeed, Bedggood, like Olssen, should have asked himself why for the nineteenth century the data on personal income and occupations are poor. There was no income tax until 1891; the statistics on the distribution of income supplied by the tax department were not published (it seems) before 1907; the Census took no information on incomes until 1926; and there is practically little else – apart from, for example, the sketchy tables in the annual statistics on wage rates published up to 1913 – on the breakdown of personal income bequeathed to us by the past society. Although the material on the structure of occupations appears copious, it is evident nonetheless that people were in the habit of describing their jobs 'in a negligent and indefinite manner' – to quote the 1878 report of the Census taker, a point he repeatedly made until 1916. There seems, in other words, to be insufficient evidence to sustain the conduct of a class analysis on nineteenth-century society; the two conventional units of class analysis, income and occupation, are untenable. It is naive

to think this is simply a methodological problem; it is a conceptual issue, reaching into the heart of nineteenth-century society itself; for paradoxically the material the past society has deposited on the distribution of landed wealth is almost embarrassingly rich.

Leaving aside the meaning of this paradox for the moment let us probe Bedggood's notion that in the emergent period of our history 'workers' benefitted little from upward mobility. He makes much of the point that by 1900 the 'rural safety valve ... no longer offered an escape route for disgruntled workers'. I agree that nineteenth-century 'workers' possessed rural land-holding aspirations; that the chances to satisfy these diminished with the declining number of rural landholders per capita (which in fact ensued from the late 1880s); and that the resulting frustration has a lot to do with the discontent of the late 1880s and from 1908 to 1913. But by no means did this situation create a permanent 'working class'. A variety of witnesses to the 1912 Royal Commission on the Cost of Living noted how, in dress, food, housing, furnishing, and entertainment, 'workers' had since 1890 assimilated the consumer pattern of the affluent. Notwithstanding the slow growth in real wages, after the slump of the late 1880s to 1914, the standard of living of workers' families improved substantially consequent upon the contraction in family size, the movement of women into paid employment, the fall in unemployment after 1895, the expansion of credit mechanisms like hire purchase after 1900, and the cheapening of many consumer durables. Certainly the inflation of rent on urban dwellings imposed severe burdens on the budgets of 'workers' — but in large measure this resulted from the demand for and the construction of houses with more rooms and more 'comforts'. The rapid growth of mass communications during the first decade of the new century (as demonstrated by the attention given to sport in the newspapers) by accelerating consumer aspirations, contributed strongly to the revival of union militancy after 1908 (and that too must be put into perspective, as only 5-7 per cent of manual workers were affiliated to the Federation of Labour at the point of its greatest membership in 1912). It is ironic that at the very time of the upheavals from 1908 to 1913 alternatives to the acquisition of rural land were emerging. A rapidly increasing proportion of workers acquired their own homes as a result of a vigorous state advances policy after 1906. In addition, as a recent study of Census material suggests, whereas from 1896 to 1926 total manual workers fell from 65 per cent to 58 per cent of the workforce, salaried white collar workers increased from 10 per cent to 22 per cent. By Seddon's death these two new sources of social advancement had not developed sufficiently to prevent the development of labour self-consciousness; but thereafter they grew rapidly, curbing the electoral growth of the Labour Party, ensuring the moderation of unionists, sustaining the political conservatism of New Zealanders up to the Great Depression. There is abundant evidence, in other words, of workers experiencing *embourgeoisement* — but false consciousness (as Marxists would have it) on Bedggood's part impairs his perception of the process.

Where Olssen goes wrong is in applying alien sociological concepts to historical conventions of dubious validity. He believes, for example, that 'workers' in the urban centres developed a strong sense of class consciousness during the late 1880s. This was of course a period of unprecedented growth in trade union organization; yet if we take Olssen's figure for the number of

trade unionists in mid-1890, the climax of nineteenth-century unionism, it seems plain that union combination was a minority concern. Olssen asserts that about 30,000 men and several hundred women were unionised by mid-1890 (he does not give a reference for this but another piece of research confirms it); so in round figures let us say there were 35,000 unionists. Now this is small in relation to the 148,421 men and women described as receiving wages and salary by the April 1891 Census (assuming the Census figures are accurate); to be precise the unionists were equal to 23.5 per cent of wage and salary earners. Olssen, however, presupposes (wrongly, as I will later suggest) that the rural worker was quite distinct from the urban. In that case let us subtract from the 148,421 figure the 20,176 farm labourers and station hands which Olssen claims the Census counted in 1891, making 128,245 'non-rural' wage and salary earners in all. On this basis the 35,000 unionists are equivalent to merely 27 per cent of the total. Even if he discounted the salary earners on top of all this, the unionists remain a minority. Roughly 15 per cent of wage and salary earners were on salary in 1891. Reduce the figure of 148,421 by that proportion, and the result is 126,157; take away Olssen's rural wage workers, and the balance is 105,981; the 35,000 unionists of mid-1890 constitute 33 per cent of this group. Moreover, if there was so much urban class consciousness amongst workers by mid-1890, why, we should ask Olssen, was it necessary for the state in 1894 to establish Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration – a system that practically compelled workers to join unions since they were not otherwise covered by awards? By 1926 the proportion of trade unionists was still only equal to 32 per cent of all manual workers, and in 1936 the state formalized and extended compulsory unionism. It seems, then, that most of the 'working classes' in New Zealand so lacked the capacity of spontaneous occupational organization that the state had to push them into it.

Where Olssen goes most astray (and again I must add that he is not unique here) is in his conception of the nineteenth-century social process. Throughout, he says, social stratification was based principally on wealth and occupation; but while in the earlier part of the century these operated within a series of discrete local social structures, by about the 1880s (the timing is vague) they operated within the two distinct 'social systems' of rural and urban New Zealand, each with its own unitary class (or should it be 'strata?') structure. Frankly, I doubt whether nineteenth-century society was ever as cohesive as this; most people had a tendency to be more or less free-floating – to judge from the plethora of lodging houses in the towns, the concern with vagrancy, the breadth of meaning of labels like 'workingman', the addiction to speculation, the emphasis by the state on closer land settlement as a mechanism to 'settle down' the nomadic, the paucity of stylized social categories, the emphasis on the ties of family life and so forth. It was atomized, institutionally weak and residentially unstable: demographically – because of the large excess of unattached males and the rapid turnover of the population through external migration; ideologically – because the imported ethic of possessive individualism idealized the self-reliant and self-regulating man; economically – because work was characterized by self-employment and transiency. In addition, community development was stunted in the more urban areas by the reputedly astronomical costs of rent and setting up a household, and in the countryside by the

dispersal of settlement, the marginal profitability of small farming, and the reluctance of station owners to house married employees. Circumstances like these created a highly mobile, versatile and unspecialized workforce, and sources of income that for each person tended to be unstable and multiple. As a consequence, the records deposited by the past society on occupations are untrustworthy and on income distribution, grossly deficient; but those on property holding (especially of land) are, as previously stated, almost embarrassingly rich. New Zealand's social realities are expressed in the careful and vast documentation the state made of freeholders (needed for taxation purposes since immovable land was easier to record and tax than the multiform and mobile income producer), transfers in land ownership (a registration demanded by the high turnover of ownership resulting from speculation), and of its own activity as New Zealand's largest landlord and land agent (a patronizing role it was compelled to play to fill the institutional vacuum in our social organization). Necessarily, the distinctions between town and country were blurred – why historians like Olssen maintain these I cannot understand: the 1882 Freeholders List spells out the overlapping investments of large estate owners and city businessmen; the reports of local labour conditions in the *Journal of the Department of Labour* emphasize the strength of a regular and irregular movement of labour between country and town over the year; most towns in the nineteenth century are described as *rus in urbe*, which is exemplified by the part-time 'farming' of Katherine Mansfield's father. Naturally, with a very high labour turnover union organization was weak and identity minimal; a key factor in killing the 1890 Maritime Strike for example, was that the seasonal influx of workers into the towns during the winter of 1890 caused the strikers to lose control over the supply of urban labour. Inevitably, although people did use singular occupational labels (a practice which they took with them from an industrializing society where work roles were highly specialized) these diminished in clarity and power in the new society – a fact, incidentally, that does not deter the foolhardy from using occupation as a form of social analysis. It is not surprising that this situation reinforced the belief of New Zealanders that theirs was a classless society: so lacking in structure was it that social classes could not have existed.

When the workforce stabilized and jobs became more specialized after 1895 did social classes then emerge? In twentieth-century New Zealand men have acquired property perhaps less through the jobs they hold than through inheritance, speculation, and state beneficence – the latter being of particular importance in enabling home-makers to acquire 'everything necessary to make "home" and "home life" in the best sense of the meaning of these terms' (to quote Labour's 1935 Manifesto). Such prodigality, by lessening economic competition, has ensured that social distinctions are based less on producer roles than on marginal differences in domestic consumption. It is a sad testimony to the failure of the sociological imagination that not one of the contributors to *Social Class in New Zealand* comments on the manner in which overseas borrowing has financed this source of social control and created a classless but not necessarily an equal society.

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