

Class in Colonial New Zealand: towards a historiographical
rehabilitation

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Class, once a fundamental organising category of social science, has disappeared from New Zealand historiography. *The shaping of history: essays from the New Zealand journal of history* apparently represents an attempt to codify a canon of innovative and otherwise central articles on New Zealand history. Gender and Maori themes abound, but there is absolutely nothing about class in that collection; an absence which suggests that class is truly irrelevant to New Zealand historiography, or at least to the authorized version.¹

Although the disappearance from, or at least downplaying of class in, western historiography is a well-discussed phenomenon,² the discussion of class in New Zealand history was frequently lopsided. Most discussions approached class almost entirely in terms of class consciousness, and emphasised the working class from 1890 (which is not to deny the impressive contribution made by labour historians to New Zealand historiography). In the absence of acceptably clear expressions of class consciousness before 1890, colonial New Zealand was portrayed as a society in which class was largely irrelevant.

This article argues that class was central to colonial society, and central from the beginning. There is more to class than consciousness, but static portrayals which assume or imply a neat and fully-formed class structure that in turn gives rise to tidy and coherent expressions of consciousness are no more satisfactory.³ As Frederick Engels noted long ago, class analysis

starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged.⁴

That is, classes themselves are groups of people ‘defined *principally* but not exclusively by their place in the *production process*, i.e. by their place in the economic sphere’.⁵ As Engels noted, he and Marx emphasized the economic and

¹ Judith Binney, ed., *The Shaping of History: essays from The New Zealand Journal of History*, Wellington, 2001.

² For a recent admission that things have gone too far, see David Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, New Haven and London, 1998; see also and more systematically Byran D Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: the reification of language and the writing of social history*, Philadelphia, 1990; and an exchange in *Social History*: Patrick Joyce, ‘The end of social history?’ *Social History* 20, 1 (1995), and Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, ‘Starting over: the present, the post-modern and the moment of social history’, *Social History* 20, 3 (1995).

³ The classic warning against such models is, of course, E P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1963, pp. 9-12.

⁴ Friedrich Engels, ‘Socialism: Utopian and Scientific’, in Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels*, p. 131. See generally Derek Sayer, *The violence of abstraction: the analytic foundations of historical materialism*, Oxford, 1997.

⁵ Nicos Poulantzas ‘On Social Classes’ *New Left Review*, 78, 1973 (reprinted in John Scott, ed., *Class: Critical Concepts* vol. 4, New York, 1996), p. 213.

‘laid more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We have to emphasize the main principle over and against our adversaries, who denied it’.⁶ Broadly, I share this approach, insisting, in the last resort, on some objective definition of classes, a definition based on ‘the productive relationship into which [people] are born – or enter involuntarily’.⁷

I stress that this is a last-resort definition, and note that absolute precision is not to be looked for. Poulantzas among others has distinguished between the purity of abstraction and the analysis of concrete social formations, in which purely economic criteria are insufficient explanatory factors.⁸ Erik Olin Wright is an exponent of the relatively rigorous school of Analytical Marxism, yet notes that ‘often it is better to forge ahead and muddle through with somewhat less certain concepts than to devote... an inordinate amount of time attempting to reconstruct the concepts themselves’.⁹ Furthermore, ‘Class analysis does not imply a commitment to the thesis that all social phenomena can be explained primarily in terms of class or even that class is always an important determinant. Rather, class analysis is based on the conviction that class is a pervasive social cause and thus it is worth exploring its ramifications for many social phenomena... that the overall trajectory of historical development can be explained by a properly constructed class analysis’.¹⁰

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Wright’s theorisation of class, but it can be noted that he appears to postulate that class structure results in class interests which results in class consciousness which results in class formation which results in class struggle; although he elsewhere emphasises the dynamic nature of this process.¹¹ He has also observed that ‘the structure of class relations establishes the basic context within which social struggle and change will take place’ which on its own appears to imply that class structure is prior to class struggle.¹² It was apparently mechanistic approaches such as these which provoked E P Thompson’s ire. Thompson, while accepting a basic definition in productive relationships, insisted that class was a process, ‘a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period’.¹³ Derek Sayer, who has been much influenced by the British Marxist historians, emphasizes that ‘to define a class – or any other social phenomenon – is, in the final analysis, to write its history’.¹⁴

⁶ quoted in Sayer, *Violence of abstraction*, p. 10. See also E P. Thompson, ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, in his *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London, 1978, p. 85.

⁷ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 10.

⁸ Nicos Poulantzas, ‘On Social Classes’ *New Left Review* 78, 1973 (reprinted in John Scott, ed, *Class: Critical Concepts* vol 4).

⁹ Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis*, Cambridge, 1997, p. xxix.

¹⁰ Wright, *Class Counts*, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Wright, *Class Counts*, pp. 3-4, p. 402.

¹² Wright, ‘Varieties of Marxist Conceptions of Class Structure’ *Politics and Society* 9, 1980 (reprinted in John Scott, ed, *Class: Critical Concepts* vol 4) p. 422.

¹³ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Sayer, *Violence of Abstraction*, p. 22.

Sayer also quotes Thompson on the perils, when discussing class, of beginning too many sentences with ‘it’. Class analysis is not a matter of assigning people to particular classes, for class is

not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion – not this interest and that interest, but the *friction* of interests – the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise.... When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have a *disposition to behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening.¹⁵

All of which presents an old dilemma: to emphasize the economic structures underpinning a given society and its class structure risks a reductionist approach, while discussing class entirely in terms of the meanings people have attached to the concept risks losing sight of those economic structures and influences, and attempting to cover all bases may well risk straying into ‘bogs of anecdotes of primarily local and antiquarian interest.’¹⁶

This article will deal with a number of issues. The modern historiography of class in New Zealand will be critically discussed. This discussion is important in its own terms, but also because I will suggest that much of this literature is fixated on open expressions of class conflict, involving organized labour after the late 1880s, and that this approach to class is very incomplete. Then, I will briefly advance some suggestions about class structure in colonial New Zealand. This will be followed by a more extensive discussion of class consciousness in the period before 1890. While this part of the article may seem to display the same fault which I criticise in the historiographical discussion, I hope that the explicit consideration of consciousness alongside structure, and in contexts other than the organized working class, will demonstrate the significance of class in colonial society. Moreover, I argue that much of what has been held to disprove the importance of class in colonial New Zealand can plausibly be seen to indicate much about class consciousness, about contending classes, and ultimately about class structure, in the period.

Class made a modest appearance in both the accounts of New Zealand’s past which appeared at the beginning of the 1960s.¹⁷ Keith Sinclair was credited with a greater emphasis on class than was W H Oliver, but the difference was largely rhetorical (and due, perhaps, to the fact that Sinclair indexed ‘social class’ while Oliver did

¹⁵ E P. Thompson, ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, in *Poverty of Theory*, p. 85, quoted in Sayer, *Violence of Abstraction*, p. 146.

¹⁶ Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: the Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*, New York, 1981, p. 230.

¹⁷ Keith Sinclair, *A history of New Zealand*, Harmondsworth, 1959; W H Oliver, *The Story of New Zealand*, London, 1960.

not). If Sinclair made liberal use of words like ‘gentry’ and ‘oligarchy’, he was, just as much as Oliver, of the view that politics before 1890 were largely based on region and personality. Oliver, for his part, averred that the economic developments of the 1860s in Canterbury and Otago meant that ‘something like a proletariat was brought into existence’ and even though ‘they could hardly be called class-conscious... many of them were radical and egalitarian’.¹⁸ If anything, this is a firmer position than Sinclair’s concession that ‘New Zealand has not been quite without economic classes’, although one might argue that radical and egalitarian views are nothing other than an expression of proletarian class consciousness in a scarcely industrialised society.¹⁹

Sinclair later suggested that radical egalitarianism defined a new class-based politics at least in some New Zealand cities in the late 1880s, and that in using the rhetoric of class, even if inappropriately, Reeves ‘expressed the beginning of a profound change in New Zealand politics’.²⁰ This change was evident in Christchurch in 1887, where “‘class’ issues began to rival and supersede public works as the basis of political division’ and rival political organisations represented ‘something approaching a conservative-radical struggle’.²¹

The Reeves biography drew an often-cited review essay from W H Oliver, which has often been said to ‘den[y] the validity of assigning a role to class in explaining social and political change’.²² Oliver emphasized Reeves’s commitment to social mobility and criticized Sinclair’s loose use of the terminology of class. Oliver also wrongly attributed to Marx the idea that class structure was necessarily stable, polarized, and based on an industrial society, but he did not assert that class was unimportant.²³ His argument was that ‘New Zealand society has been marked by such constant mobility and such limited industrialisation and capital accumulation that nineteenth century European ideas of class require considerable modification before they become applicable here’.²⁴ Oliver went on to maintain that ‘we cannot turn up very much in the way of a feudal aristocracy’ which was certainly true, but it had seldom been seriously suggested that we could. Nor did New Zealand have ‘an entrepreneurial middle class’, which assertion might have been pardonable in 1969 given that no one had investigated the ‘middle class’ in New Zealand.²⁵ New Zealand also lacked a significant ‘industrial proletariat’, a comment which was largely true but which ignored Sinclair’s point that it was precisely where Oliver

¹⁸ Oliver, *Story of New Zealand* p. 105.

¹⁹ Sinclair, *History of New Zealand*, p. 176.

²⁰ Keith Sinclair, *William Pember Reeves: New Zealand Fabian*, Oxford, 1965, p. 69.

²¹ Sinclair, *Reeves*, p. 73.

²² W H Oliver, ‘Reeves, Sinclair, and the Social Pattern’ in Peter Munz, ed., *The Feel of Truth: essays in New Zealand and Pacific history*, Wellington, 1969; James Bennett, ‘The Contamination of Arcadia? Class, Trans-national Interactions and the Construction of Identity, 1890-1913, NZJH 33, 1 (1999) p. 21; John Martin, ‘Whither the Rural Working Class?’ NZJH 17, 1 (1983), p. 23.

²³ Oliver, ‘Reeves, Sinclair, and the Social Pattern’, pp. 163-67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p164. See my *No Idle Rich: the wealthy in Canterbury and Otago 1840-1914*, Dunedin, 2002; R C J Stone, *Makers of Fortune: A colonial business community and its fall*, Auckland, 1973.

himself had admitted a nascent proletariat that some form of class politics was evident in the late 1880s. Oliver also maintained that by deploying the language of class conflict Reeves had made himself irrelevant, which rather begs the question of how Reeves managed to keep winning elections in Christchurch.

More securely, Oliver argued that since accessible land meant high social mobility, ‘we should adjust the concept of class, if we persevere with it, in accord with two criteria; first, the short expanse from floor to ceiling, and second, the persistence of social osmosis’.²⁶ He did not say that the existence of class was thus disproven, and, crucially, noted that classes ‘can still be very important while not existing in a relationship of hostility’. He warned against ‘the uncritical acceptance of categories which needed a good deal of adaptation before they were useful in New Zealand history’.²⁷ One can only agree, but few scholars followed Oliver’s prescription; whether for or against class they continued to argue in terms of consciousness, usually proletarian.²⁸ The debate thus continued to emphasise the larger New Zealand cities, especially Christchurch and Dunedin.

This was certainly the case with two influential articles by Erik Olssen, which appeared in 1974 and 1977. Olssen took class to mean either a ‘conflict group (implying some degree of consciousness) or, at times, a sociological group with a life of its own (a sub-culture)’.²⁹ Olssen therefore represented Oliver as maintaining that a relatively wide distribution of property and ease of social mobility meant that class conflict, and therefore class, was irrelevant in New Zealand. Referring to 1890 and 1935, Olssen argued that ‘our most important political coalitions have been forged during periods of intense class-consciousness and have survived them’.³⁰ Olssen emphasized the transition from identification with craft or trade to identification with class, as ‘continuities in experience [made] it possible for the evangelists of socialism to convince most miners, timber and railway workers, and the urban working class that they should vote for a party committed to socialism’.³¹ Olssen’s treatment of class owed much to ‘American sociologists [by whom] social classes are no longer defined in terms of one variable but by income, source of income, education, occupation and residential area’. But in the end class came down to consciousness; it was ‘a useful concept if it can be shown that people of

²⁶ Oliver, ‘Reeves, Sinclair, and the Social Pattern’, p. 164.

²⁷ W H Oliver, ‘Correspondence: Class in New Zealand’, NZJH 8, 2 (1974), p. 183.

²⁸ For instance, Christopher Campbell ‘The “Working Class” and the Liberal Party in 1890’, NZJH 9, 1 (1975), esp. pp. 41, 47, who maintained that that ‘the debate turns very much upon the incidence of “upward social mobility” and its importance in forestalling the development of class antagonisms’ which in fact was simplifying Oliver’s argument excessively but which foreshadowed the way much of the discussion would go. Campbell more than most required conflict as essential for class; without adducing much evidence he maintained that the 1890s ‘call for labour reforms was not a call for class conflict’ and therefore class seemed of relatively little importance.

²⁹ Erik Olssen, ‘Social Class in 19th century New Zealand’ in David Pitt, ed., *Social class in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1977, pp. 22-23.

³⁰ Erik Olssen, ‘The “Working Class” in New Zealand’ NZJH 8, 1 (1974), p. 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

approximately similar incomes, derived in a similar manner, working in occupations of equivalent status act together in pursuit of similar ends'.³²

In his 1977 article Olssen had alluded to a number of themes which might have broadened the debate beyond the cities and the proletariat. Among them were the observation that colonial reality wrecked the Wakefield gentlemen's aspiration to create an English class structure; that Nelson provincial politics in the 1850s 'had overtones of rural class conflict'; that the pastoral and mercantile elite were certainly a class even if not as entrenched as some suggest; that the goldfields were the epitome of lower middle class individualism's 'preference for an economy of little capitalists' indeed reflecting 'pre-industrial aspirations for independence, comfort, and dignity', and of course urbanisation reinforced class identity but agricultural society was 'doubtless... characterised by complex and subtle patterns of stratification, for the most part it was dominated by independent producers and class divisions were unimportant'.³³ Few of these suggestions for research were pursued with any rapidity, however.

Shortly afterwards, Claire Toynbee took up the suggestion that class might have been important before 1890.³⁴ Toynbee's neo-Weberian view, much influenced by Anthony Giddens, postulated an upper class which owned significant property, a middle class based either on education or on ownership of smaller family-owned, self-employing property, and a lower class having only its labour power to sell. One could extend Toynbee's sources considerably, and argue with some of her occupational distinctions, but her model was at least coherent and did not require evidence of conflict or self-consciousness, and as such was a considerable advance on much else. Nor did Toynbee insist on describing the group at the top of the pyramid as 'middle class'.³⁵ She also made some important suggestions about the importance of family enterprise which subsequent research has borne out.

At the end of the 1970s, the academic consensus was that class was a factor in New Zealand history, but the discussion was couched mostly in terms of consciousness rather than structure, and class was thus seen as becoming important only from the late 1880s.³⁶ A rare, explicitly Marxist, criticism of this consensus came from John Martin, who noted that the discussion had largely been conducted in urban terms which excluded the rural working class. Against the emphasis on social mobility and class consciousness, Martin emphasised the importance of 'a reconceptualization of class so that it is defined as a structural place in the economy,

³² Ibid, pp. 47, 48.

³³ Olssen, 'Social Class in 19th century New Zealand', pp. 25-38.

³⁴ Claire Toynbee, 'Class and Social Structure in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand', NZJH, 13, 1 (1979).

³⁵ As Pearson and Thorns did in their sociological investigation: David G Pearson and David C Thorns, *Eclipse of Equality: social stratification in New Zealand*, Sydney, 1983.

³⁶ For instance, Raewyn Dalziel, 'The Politics of Settlement' in G W Rice, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 2nd edition, 1992, pp. 109-11.

in Marxist fashion'.³⁷ Thus, the polarities of 'capitalist employer and wage-earner, landowner and tenant, farmer and farm labourer must be considered even if there is social mobility and a lack of overt class conflict'.³⁸ Some at least of Martin's themes had been elaborated by Stevan Eldred-Grigg in his *A Southern Gentry*, which discussed the upper level of the colonial class structure and portrayed the wealthiest settlers as a highly-organised oligarchy. If much of Eldred-Grigg's work could be disputed, he and Martin were united in their criticism of the myths of colonial egalitarianism.³⁹ Martin's analysis, extended in a later book, was largely directed to establishing the proposition that there was a significant rural element in the colonial working class, and that social mobility was relatively difficult; he did not pay much attention to the structure and formation of other classes, whether rural or urban.⁴⁰ Despite what Martin had promised, he as much as anyone else treated class as a synonym for labour history and did not otherwise advance understanding of the class structure.

Labour historians' scholarly energy was, in any case, turning in the direction of fine-grained, nuanced studies of working class communities as well as political mobilisations. Erik Olssen and Len Richardson both published such histories in 1995. Richardson's students, at the same time, demonstrated that skilled urban workers were not lacking in class consciousness, and that the political mobilisation of those workers between 1890 and 1919 had national **consequences**.⁴¹

Olssen's Caversham study, covering the period from the 1880s to the 1920s, was of a working class largely based around the handicraft trades, working in establishments where direct relationships with the proprietor prevailed and where workers remained conscious of their status and of their own property in their skill. Olssen emphasised the relative fluidity of the class structure, at least in terms of the opportunities which tradesmen had to become small employers. Community life was dominated by the ideology of artisan democracy, which combined individualism and collectivism: 'chapel, kirk, lodge and union' were essential elements alongside self-improvement in 'enhancing the dignity of labour'.⁴² This ideology, powerfully influential in 1890s Liberalism, was derived from Paine and *The Rights of Man*,

³⁷ John Martin, 'Whither the Rural Working Class in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand?' NZJH 17, 1 (1983), p. 21.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 23.

³⁹ Stevan Eldred-Grigg, *A Southern Gentry: New Zealanders who inherited the earth*, Wellington, 1980. I have, of course, discussed Eldred-Grigg's views in some detail in my *No Idle Rich*, particularly ch. 1.

⁴⁰ John E Martin, *The Forgotten Worker: the rural wage earner in nineteenth-century New Zealand*, Wellington, 1990.

⁴¹ Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: revolutionary industrial unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-14*, Auckland, 1988; E W Plumridge, 'Labour in Christchurch 1914-1919: community and consciousness', MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1979; Melanie Nolan, 'Jack McCullough, Workers Representative on the Arbitration Court 1907-22', MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1985; Jim McAloon, 'Working Class Politics in Christchurch 1905-1914', MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1986.

⁴² Erik Olssen, *Building the New World: work, politics and society in Caversham 1880s-1920s*, Auckland: 1995, pp. 43, 101.

Chartism, and the Revolt of the Field, and was opposed to monopoly, privilege, and autocracy. Olssen's reconstruction of a working class community was meticulous, but his theoretical observations indicated a considerable enthusiasm for post-modernist approaches. While quoting E P Thompson's classic phrasing of the relationship between structure and agency, Olssen maintained that 'it is no longer clear that productive processes determine the social relations of production or that economic change is in some sense primary'. If not quite endorsing what he took to be Stedman Jones's view that 'language is prior to reality and experience [which] can be constructed only through language', Olssen certainly thought that 'industrial society did not automatically generate a working-class'.⁴³

These views aside, Olssen stressed the support Caversham voters gave the Ballance and Seddon governments; working-class political agency did not require the creation of an independent labour party.⁴⁴ Implicit in Olssen's discussion is the point that although artisan radicalism would slowly become union-based socialism, it is anachronistic to view these labour activists simply as transitional figures. These activists saw themselves, not as a prelude to the Labour Party of 1916, but as representatives of labour, charged with defending labour's rights and dignity.⁴⁵ There is much evidence from Christchurch which would support this analysis. By 1890 bootmakers, carpenters, typographers, bookbinders, tailors and tailoresses, shipwrights, boilermakers, painters, butchers, labourers, railway workers, engineers, and waterside workers were all organising in Canterbury, deploying the same themes of artisan democracy and independence.⁴⁶ The Christchurch Tailors, Tailoresses and Pressers Union exemplified the main reasons for organisation: 'Had they come out to a new land to suffer the same hardships which they had in the Old Country?'⁴⁷ The Maritime Strike was strongly defended; 2000 Christchurch unionists saw it as a battle for 'the existence of Unionism, which was the only safeguard of the artisan against the capitalist'.⁴⁸

The coalminers' experience differed fundamentally from that of urban artisans. If the latter usually maintained direct relationships with their employers in small-scale workshops, coalminers worked in some of the larger and more isolated workplaces in New Zealand, and often had to contend with remote and impersonal employers. Major mining companies, closely linked to large shipping interests, represented the most highly developed form of corporate capitalism in the colony. Miners' experience of class conflict was often much more explicit than that of Caversham artisans, but the miners like the artisans insisted on maintaining job control, 'a zone of independence in the pits, into which the arm of management could not reach'.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 5, 13-14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 158.

⁴⁵ An understanding which I owe in part to Bruce Scates, *A new Australia: citizenship, radicalism, and the first republic*, Cambridge, 1997.

⁴⁶ Olssen, *Building the New World*, p. 172; Jim McAloon, 'Radical Christchurch' in John Cookson and Graeme Dunstall, eds, *Southern Capital Christchurch: Towards a city biography 1850-2000*, Christchurch, 2000.

⁴⁷ *Lyttelton Times* (LT) 5 Jun 1889, p. 3.

⁴⁸ LT 6 September 1890, p. 6.

Enduring conflict ‘was a constant reminder of the respective positions of capital and labour. Viewed from the end of a pick, Marx’s analysis became, for a good number of miners, the basis of a proletarian science’.⁴⁹ As well as the constant struggle to maintain communities, freedom, and dignity, Richardson covered the rise and the decline of coal, noting that the miners’ ultimate political victory, nationalization, occurred just as the importance of coal declined.

Between them, Richardson and Olssen had done much to advance understanding of the lived experience of class and of the central antagonisms and continuities which shaped working class life and culture. At the end of the 1980s, however, there had appeared an analysis of settler society which was enthusiastically described as a ‘challenge to the classic “left” frameworks of class-analysis and historical analysis.... part of the world-current which is flowing against the familiar class-based categories of analysis’.⁵⁰ If Fairburn’s *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* was thus seen as anticipating the rusting away of the Iron Curtain, when a special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of History* discussed the book in 1991, Keith Sorrenson’s editorial chose to regard the whole debate as dealing with community rather than class. None of the articles in the special issue dealt with class to a significant extent; Fairburn and his critics, it seemed, were at one in dismissing its importance.

Fairburn identified and rebutted two analyses of settler society, which challenged the settlers’ own idealized view by emphasizing class.⁵¹ The hierarchical view, of Reeves via Sutch, Sinclair, and Eldred-Grigg, stressed land monopoly, deference, oppression, and insecurity, in ‘a total system of clientage’, all of which were exacerbated by very limited social mobility (John Martin’s rural New Zealand was similar).⁵² This bleak picture was not hard to criticize. Fairburn admitted an unequal distribution of wealth, but not ‘mass deprivation, blocked mobility, under-employment, over-population’. If these had been present one would have expected archaic social codes of rank and birth, and conspicuous consumption.⁵³ It could be argued that some of the Canterbury snobs did try to set up such archaic codes⁵⁴ and certainly one can find conspicuous consumption. Indeed Eldred-Grigg dwells on little else. Fairburn was on secure ground in referring to the relatively very liberal franchise from 1853, the usually small workplaces, the frequent short supply of labour, and above all the lack of plebeian deference which was complained of by

⁴⁹ Len Richardson, *Coal, Class, and Community: the United Mineworkers of New Zealand 1880-1960*, Auckland 1995, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Alan Ward, review of Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies*, NZJH 24, 1 (1990), p. 76.

⁵¹ Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: the foundations of modern New Zealand Society 1850-1890*, Auckland, 1989, ch 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ The Georgina Bowen letters are a good example. See Jim McAloon, ‘The Christchurch Elite’, in John Cookson and Graeme Dunstall, eds, *Southern Capital*, pp. 198-99.

gentlemen like Constantine Dillon in the 1840s and the Mt Somers runholder A E Peache in the 1890s.⁵⁵

Fairburn's definition of a class-divided society was fairly rigid. He emphasized three possibilities: stratification, exclusive sub-cultures, and the use of power by those subcultures to win more resources. Thus again consciousness dominated.⁵⁶ Fairburn's definition of class was entirely devoid of any sense of the emphasis on productive relationships found in both Marx and Weber, and in fact he cited no social theorists for his approach. Fairburn accepted that the great estate owners and their mercantile associates formed a class in the second (exclusive) and perhaps third (conspiratorial) sense. However, he rejected the proposition that 'the majority of the 60 to 70 per cent of the population who can broadly be called manual workers did comprise such a class' in the exclusive sense.⁵⁷ Rebutting the work of Olssen and John Angus, Fairburn maintained that the emergence of close-knit working-class communities before 1890 was fitful and rudimentary, that 'the residential differentiation necessary for the development of a working-class community does not seem to have occurred in the most likely place (Dunedin) and that without this community, only a small and highly unstable minority of urban workers were capable of being mobilized into working-class action groups from 1889 onwards'.⁵⁸

It was not clear why Dunedin should have been the most likely place, and there was much qualitative evidence from other parts of New Zealand, particularly Christchurch, which would have controverted Fairburn's observations about residential differentiation and class mobilisation.⁵⁹ Fairburn appears to set impossibly high standards if class is to be allowed a degree of explanatory force in New Zealand history. He argues that the democratic franchise worked against class mobilisation as it 'helped to divert grievances away from direct action into the ballot box'.⁶⁰ Fairburn emphasizes 'the central feature of Pakeha New Zealand – the political tranquility of wage workers – which Olssen has failed to explain...'.⁶¹ Quite apart from the fact that the ballot-box can itself be a site of class mobilisation,

⁵⁵ For Dillon, see C A Sharp, ed., *The Dillon Letters*, Wellington, 1954, p. 65. The latter neatly illustrates Fairburn's point: of one shearer/roller, Peache admitted the man's excellence but 'a regular colonial in his manner, no idea of saying "Sir" to you'. Advertising in 1894 for a gardener, Peache offered fifteen shillings a week plus keep. and wanted 'men if possible who have been in a gentleman's service before & know how to speak to a gentleman'. By 1897 Peache had recognised the victory of colonial workers: he required simply that a prospective employee must be 'civil and willing', and by 1899 further ground had been surrendered: what was wanted was simply a 'respectable' worker. A E Peache to V F Musgrave, 9 Jan 1894; to JWJ MacDonald, 28 Dec 1894, 1 Jan 1895, Peache Letters, CML. A E Peache, letterbook 7, p. 373; to Mitchell and Turner, 4 Feb 1899, Peache Letters, Canterbury Museum Library.

⁵⁶ Fairburn, *Ideal Society*, p. 116.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 124, 155.

⁵⁹ see Jim McAloon, 'Workers' Control and the Rise of Political Labour, Christchurch, 1905-1914' in John Martin and Kerry Taylor, eds, *Culture and the Labour Movement*, Palmerston North, 1992, and also 'Radical Christchurch', in Cookson and Dunstall, eds, *Southern Capital*.

⁶⁰ Fairburn, *Ideal Society*, p. 125.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

one wonders what Fairburn's litmus test for the existence of class might be: storming the Winter Palace?

Bryan Palmer has criticized some American historians for adopting 'an idealized, essentialist notion of class as the expression of an unmediated revolutionary class consciousness and, judging the American working class to come up short against this measurement, dismiss[ing] the very existence of class and the potential of a politics rooted in a class perspective'.⁶² Palmer made a similar point about the scholarship of the French Revolution 'so defining revolutionary bourgeoisie that it becomes an idealized caricature, marching to a man to the barricades with Adam Smith under its collective arm, proclaiming the Rights of Man, the doctrine of property, and the inalienable pursuit of happiness at every conscious step'.⁶³ These are extremes 'that no one who has ever actually embraced class within an interpretive framework of historical materialism has ever espoused'.⁶⁴

Bringing the argument back home, just because Henry George or Andrew Jackson were more influential than Karl Marx in New Zealand in 1890 does not mean classes did not exist. Classes could, and did, form in colonial New Zealand without displaying the extreme forms of consciousness demanded by Fairburn. In reflecting on this matter some explicitness of language would assist. We might start by thinking of a bourgeois or capitalist revolution.⁶⁵ As Henry Reynolds has written of Australia, the British invasion and resulting conflict 'was an offshoot of the bourgeois revolution... the frontier settlers have traditionally been seen as explorers, overlanders, pioneers. But they were also revolutionaries, and the landscape reflects the success of revolutionary violence.... the success of the bourgeois revolution in Australia – one of the most prolonged, complete and successful in the world'.⁶⁶

Class in New Zealand cannot be understood without an awareness of the imperial context.⁶⁷ The settler dominions were born from expanding capitalism; the capitalist agenda landed ready-made. The key elements in effecting that agenda in New Zealand were the rapid seizure of land, especially in the South Island and the

⁶² Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, p. 123.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶⁵ The terms 'bourgeois' and 'bourgeoisie' are frequently objected to as laden with excessive jargon; they have, however, the advantage of being distinctly related to capitalist social relations; see Wright, 'Varieties of Marxist Conceptions of Class Structure' *Politics and Society* vol 9, 1980 (repr in John Scott, ed, *Class: Critical Concepts* vol 4) p. 389. The term 'gentry', which Belich still insists on using in terms largely derived from Eldred-Grigg, is anachronistic. By definition a gentry is tied to the land through inheritance practices which emphasize primogeniture, and the origins of a gentry are thoroughly pre-capitalist. See James Belich, *Paradise reformed: a history of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the year 2000*, Auckland, 2001, pp. 126-33.

⁶⁶ Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, settlers and land*, Sydney, 1987, pp. 193-94.

⁶⁷ Here I cannot resist referring to Olssen's observation on the trend to write New Zealand history without reference to international context, that 'one might have expected dissent from Marxists, but there were none in History Departments', in 'Where to from here? Reflections on the twentieth-century historiography of nineteenth-century New Zealand', *NZJH* 26, 1 (1992), fn 39, p. 60.

eastern coast of the North Island, which secured the preconditions for pastoral capitalism.⁶⁸ In these circumstances the upper class comprized the movers and shakers of the colonial export economy, whether as pastoralists or as merchants and financiers, complemented by a significant element of manufacturers and of large agricultural farmers.⁶⁹ The fluidity of colonial society and the ready availability of land ensured that there was a very significant middle class of modestly-wealthy family farmers, reinforced by the plethora of comfortable country town merchants, and the self-employed urban business and manufacturing sector.⁷⁰ Wage-earners likewise were an extremely diverse group, ranging from the relatively secure artisans of the towns to the itinerant rural workers who formed the subject of Martin's work. This understanding is largely derived from South Island research, and the North Island would vary from region to region. Rural Hawkes Bay and Wairarapa were similar to Canterbury and Otago in combining pastoralism with smaller-scale agricultural farming.⁷¹ A strong mercantile element clearly existed in Auckland and Wellington, while a later frontier in much of the North Island might well have meant a larger proportion both of reasonably substantial family farmers and country town merchants in places like Wanganui and Hamilton, as well as smaller centres like Martinborough.⁷² It seems likely, however, as David Hamer has suggested in his work on colonial towns, that the self-made middle class would dominate as in the South.⁷³ Although there is much room for further research, such an outline of the colonial class structure seems to be well-founded. With such an outline in mind, it can be argued that much of what has been taken to controvert the significance of class in colonial society can equally be taken to confirm that significance.

The colonial upper class must be seen in light of its origins in the British (provincial) middle classes, that is, the bourgeoisie. In terms of bourgeois class consciousness, we might recall R. J. Morris's observation that 'it is in the nature of the middle classes to deny their own existence. They represent themselves as "the British people" or... "the inhabitants of Leeds and district".' The New Zealand equivalent was 'the settlers of' or 'the citizens of'. As Morris noted, 'The middle classes instinctively deny and refuse to examine the nature of class structure for to do so is to probe the nature of their own privilege and insecurity'.⁷⁴ The emphasis in New Zealand historiographical debates on tidy expressions of class consciousness, then, is almost guaranteed to write the colonial bourgeoisie out of it.

⁶⁸ An excellent recent discussion of the role of the state in implanting capitalist relations is John C Weaver, 'Frontiers into Assets: The Social Construction of Property in New Zealand, 1840-65', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 27, 3 (1998).

⁶⁹ See my *No Idle Rich* for a full discussion.

⁷⁰ A picture elaborated by Eldred-Grigg, *Southern Gentry*.

⁷¹ M D N Campbell, 'The evolution of Hawke's Bay landed society, 1850-1914', PhD Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1972; A G Bagnall, *Wairarapa: an historical excursion*, Masterton, 1976.

⁷² David Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals: the years of power, 1891-1912*, Auckland, 1988, ch. 5, is illuminating on these themes.

⁷³ Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals*, esp. ch. 5, and Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and perceptions of the nineteenth-century urban frontier*, New York, 1990.

⁷⁴ R J Morris, *Class, Sect, and Party: the making of the British middle class, Leeds, 1820-1850*, Manchester, 1990, p. 8.

The British middle-class ethic was one of individual effort and self-improvement. This ethic characterized both the New Zealand upper class and the New Zealand middle class, with an added dimension whereby investment in colonial economic development entitled the individual to substantial returns. In 1853 John Hall justified a land policy sympathetic to pastoralists, on the grounds that ‘as pioneers in the work of colonization, [they] are pursuing an arduous and laborious career amid many difficulties and privations, and have risked their fortunes in an hazardous enterprise, on the faith of an understanding that they would be allowed to reap an ample and even a liberal reward for their adventure and their toil’.⁷⁵ Liberal land reform policies in the 1890s were bitterly resented by their targets, not only because it was believed that the policies would cause capital flight and discourage investment, but because ‘the men who were singled out... for special taxation were the pioneers who had reclaimed the land from the wilderness, and yet after all they had done they were to be charged with an iniquitous unjust class tax’.⁷⁶

Fairburn stressed the individualism of what he called ‘colonial ideology’, which distinctively assumed that independence could be achieved ‘outside a social framework.... [it] did not depend on collaboration, mutuality, collective arrangements – with one exception, the family’ – nor did it need patronage, connections, schooling, or inherited money ‘most importantly, it did not rely upon working-class collective action or upon the mobilisation of any kind of class power’.⁷⁷ But the family was absolutely crucial to bourgeois identity and economic mobilisation. And the idea of independence outside a social framework is simply the bourgeois idea of individual self-improvement, rising on one’s own merits rather than by advantages inherited or bestowed.⁷⁸

For Fairburn goes on to discuss the way in which this ideology emphasized ‘personal qualities as opposed to socially organized ones’ – qualities such as discipline, the work ethic, ‘industry, energy, perseverance, enterprise.... people receive only as much as they deserve.... one’s place in [society] is determined by what one’s character is now. It cannot be preserved through institutional means and cannot be transferred across the generations.’⁷⁹ Although Fairburn notes Samuel Smiles’ expression of this view, he identifies it not as bourgeois ideology; but as colonial ideology - strangely, since Smiles never went near a colony.⁸⁰ Simply because bourgeois ideology refused to accept the existence of classes is no reason to

⁷⁵ LT, 27 December 1854.

⁷⁶ *Press* 14 July 1892, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Fairburn, *Ideal Society*, p. 51.

⁷⁸ Indeed Jean Garner’s biography of the ultimate colonial bourgeois, John Hall, is entitled *By His Own Merits*, Hororata, 1995. On the middle class family, the essential work is Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class 1780–1850*, London, 1987.

⁷⁹ Fairburn, *Ideal Society*, p. 51.

⁸⁰ R J Morris, ‘Samuel Smiles and the Genesis of *Self-Help*: The Retreat to a Petit Bourgeois Utopia’, *Historical Journal*, 24, 1 (1981).

take that ideology at face value. Rather than disproving class, Fairburn has given an excellent account of the class consciousness of the colonial capitalist.

Likewise Fairburn's masterless society – which he advances against notions of proletarian class consciousness – was oriented towards artisan values, and again rather than disproving class as an element in settler society Fairburn has given much evidence of its importance. It is hardly surprising that artisan values rather than proletarian socialism dominated before 1890; it would be anachronistic to expect anything else. Fairburn cites many examples which show that working people expected improvement in their circumstances either by rising out of wage-labour to independence, or 'a more comfortable life within the wage-earning structure'. These strategies were complementary, as 'wage-earning and petty enterprise [could] be conjoined in a myriad of combinations and permutations'. It was assumed that this would be a process of piecemeal improvement over time, but material independence meant social independence, which was counterposed to Old World servility. This ideology, as Olssen has shown, is classical artisan radicalism.⁸¹

The material foundation for this artisan paradise was relatively easy access to at least modest quantities of land. The availability of land was reinforced by the 'generally buoyant labour market' up to 1880, based on sheep, gold, war, and loan-funded public works.⁸² Moreover, 'little working capital was needed to make a livelihood from the land' – labour was the only major requirement.⁸³ Above all, wage-earners who owned small areas of land had a source of food that gave them, if not independence, at least a cushion – not only fruit and vegetables but chickens, eggs, and pigs. 'In sum, the colonial male wage-earner holding land was not solely reliant upon the wage-market for his material well-being; he was neither fully integrated into the labour market nor an independent producer, but something in between – a hybrid peasant/worker.'⁸⁴

One might wish to emphasize the gendered nature of this household economy, but there is much else to reinforce the view that artisans were highly visible and assertive in nineteenth century New Zealand. There was a significant radical-democratic element in early provincial politics in some parts of the colony at least, and in the particularly strong land debate.⁸⁵ Easy access to land meant not only independence from the bailiff and landlord but was also 'the major means of acquiring wealth and status'.⁸⁶ Availability of land was held variously to support both artisan radicalism's independent producers, and the possessive individualism of the aspiring bourgeoisie. From the first meetings of provincial councils, legislators appealed to the ideology of social mobility by thrift and hard work. The primacy of

⁸¹ Fairburn, *Ideal Society*, pp. 45-49; Olssen, *Building the New World*.

⁸² Fairburn, pp. 91-93.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-03.

⁸⁵ See my *Nelson: A Regional History*, ch 2-3, and Tom Brooking, *Lands for the people? the Highland clearances and the colonisation of New Zealand: a biography of John McKenzie*, Dunedin, 1996, ch 6.

⁸⁶ Brooking, *Lands for the People*, p. 80.

agricultural cultivation was something which few dared challenge, at least at the rhetorical level.

J. E. FitzGerald maintained in 1855 that ‘the limit to the encouragement which the pastoral interest should receive, may be defined by this principle – that it should never be permitted to stand in the way of the permanent settlement of the country by the Cultivator of the soil’. FitzGerald desired to see established, ‘possibly with great rapidity, a very large class of peasant Proprietors and small Farmers throughout the Province. Those who think as I do that such a class will constitute the surest basis for the durable prosperity of a Colony and the happiness of its Inhabitants, have watched that tendency with the deepest interest’.⁸⁷ Frederick Weld, in supporting provincial control of land policy, rebutted the suggestion that small farmers were incapable of seeing a wider picture, and noted the widespread political literacy ‘on farms and sheep-stations – yes, and around camp fires.... The same energy of mind that has led [the people] to build up the fortunes of this country has also led them, through years of struggle for political freedom, to study the practical bearing of political subjects.... It is not fair to presuppose corruption in Provincial Legislatures, bodies elected in the same manner and out of the same materials as ourselves’.⁸⁸

Weld had emphasized an important point. Small farmers and rural workers had formed their political views both through the enterprise of colonisation and through direct political struggle. These political struggles were particularly evident in Nelson in the 1840s and 50s, where men of modest property seem to have dominated.⁸⁹ The Nelson Constitutional Association mobilized considerable numbers in 1849 to call for manhood suffrage; its activists included men like John Perry Robinson, the ex-Birmingham woodturner, whose political experience went back to the 1832 Reform Bill and Chartist movements. It was held that there was a ‘danger... lest property should have too much capital; there is no fear of its having too little’, and that ‘the interests of all classes can only be secured by bestowing the franchise on all classes.’⁹⁰ Crowded meetings throughout the settlement discussed these proposals: at one, 300 men met for 13 hours.⁹¹ The conservatives, led by David Monro, wanted a ‘small’ property franchise extending to ‘almost all... who may be considered *bona fide* settlers.... it would become a stimulus to industrious and prudent habits’, and a high property qualification for members of the legislature.⁹²

Class conflict was particularly intense around the 1856 election, in which Monro and Robinson competed for the superintendency. Monro’s requisition was signed by 39

⁸⁷ *Journal of proceedings of the Provincial Council of Canterbury* 11, 13 Apr 1855.

⁸⁸ NZPD, 1854, 1, pp. 197-200.

⁸⁹ McAloon, *Nelson*, esp. ch 3.

⁹⁰ *Nelson Examiner*, 26 June 1847, p. 53.

⁹¹ There were two meetings in the town of Nelson, each apparently attended by 300 people. The second one, held two days after Christmas, sat for 13 hours at Albion Square.

⁹² *Nelson Examiner*, 7 December 1850, p. 162; 28 December 1850, p. 175; 11 January 1851, p. 178; 18 January 1851, pp. 186-88.

men, principally merchants and farmers and including some of the larger ones. Robinson's much larger list of supporters consisted generally of men of smaller means, including labourers as well as storekeepers, craftsmen, and small farmers.⁹³ Artisans and labourers had decided not to trust gentlemen, however liberal, but to elect one of their own. For Monro, the issue was whether 'to take American or British Institutions as our model. Are we to say with the Yankees that the people are the sole source and fountain of power: or are we to follow the English plan which recognizes the existence of another source of power, and in its practical working gives weight to intelligence and property, and does not only count heads'.⁹⁴ Affronted, he complained, 'a very large proportion of the electors are... most ignorant men, and with them one of the **dominant ideas is that they will be best served by putting in a man of their own class**'.⁹⁵ Robinson's own vision of local democracy was rooted in his English background: 'Local self-government makes freemen always to do folk-right among each other.... [It] brings law and folk-right, and the exercise of all political functions, home to every man's door, speedily, frequently, and costlessly.... Local self-government unites all classes and interests in one effort for the common weal, making every proposition to be freely and fairly discussed before all, and to be determined only after such discussion'.⁹⁶

In these controversies one can see the complex relationship between the attitudes which the settlers brought with them, the way in which those attitudes were modified in colonial circumstances, and the occupational and economic circumstances of a small and isolated colony. Gareth Stedman Jones has emphasized that political language does not simply reflect social reality but creates it. He has argued that 'historians have looked everywhere except at political discourse itself to explain changes in political behaviour'.⁹⁷ While Stedman Jones is undoubtedly correct to **emphasize the importance of political** language in its own right, and to point out that political language cannot simply be viewed as expressing 'the material situation of a particular class or social group'⁹⁸ such arguments can be taken too far. Stedman Jones stressed that 'it is not a question of replacing a social interpretation by a linguistic interpretation, but rather it is how the two relate, that must be rethought'.⁹⁹ The attitudes espoused by colonial artisan democrats could not have existed without

⁹³ It was customary for candidates for elected office to be requested to stand by a memorandum drawn up, and signed by a number of constituents, and published as an advertisement in the newspapers. For Monro's requisition, *Nelson Examiner*, 30 Aug 1856, p. 2; Robinson's, *ibid.*, 8 Oct 1856, p. 2.

⁹⁴ Monro to Stafford, 20 Oct 1857, Stafford papers folder 52, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL).

⁹⁵ Monro to Stafford, 20 Oct 1857, Stafford papers folder 52.

⁹⁶ *Nelson Examiner*, 27 Aug 1859, p. 2. I have discussed similar, if more muted, controversies in Canterbury in my 'Radical Christchurch', in Cookson and Dunstall, eds, *Southern Capital*, pp. 164-66

⁹⁷ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: studies in English working class history 1832-1982*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 21.

⁹⁸ Stedman Jones, p. 94.

⁹⁹ Stedman Jones, p. 95.

the artisan and smallholder population: class consciousness cannot exist independently of a class.¹⁰⁰

On the colonial scale, too, political controversy before 1890 reveals a greater significance for class than is often allowed. The old Reeves-Sinclair orthodoxy of a decadent and oligarchical establishment which only yielded to reform after 1890 has been replaced by an equally unsatisfactory one, which implicitly denies the significance of class structure or class consciousness in colonial politics, and explicitly discounts the genuineness of colonial democratic ideology, denying that anything much changed in 1890. Again, an unrealistic coherence of ideology is sought and, not being found, the whole concept of class is dismissed. David Hamer has noted ‘there were some “Continuous Ministry” politicians who had “Liberal” impulses and made “Liberal” reform proposals similar to those of the 1890s’. Few New Zealand politicians ever wished to be known as conservative; ‘Everybody wanted to be known as a “liberal”’ regardless of practice’.¹⁰¹ The term ‘Liberal’, however, covers every shade of political philosophy from John Locke to Thomas Paine. As Robert Stout observed in 1884, the most right-wing member of the New Zealand House of Representatives would have found a home in the British Liberal party.¹⁰² Stout’s observation does not disprove the connection between class and politics before 1890; it merely emphasizes that without a hereditary landed class in New Zealand the controversies were between what would have been part of the upper middle class in Britain on the one hand, and the more modestly endowed on the other.

Debates around the franchise in the 1860s and 1870s were a case in point.¹⁰³ Introducing manhood suffrage, Hall attempted to bolster the rights of property by dropping the £50 qualification to £25, as ‘a concession to a class of small freeholders who, in any country, are a valuable part of the population’.¹⁰⁴ Donald Reid thought that urban employees were not qualified to vote as ‘they take their cue from their employers... the rural population are more competent to take a large view of questions affecting the country’.¹⁰⁵ Even petty proprietors were now being

¹⁰⁰ Without wanting to be unduly negative, I must suggest that *Languages of Class* is a curiously small and unintegrated volume to have had such influence. If I have understood Stedman Jones’s arguments correctly, they seem sensible if hardly startling, unless the state of British labour historiography was much worse than I had imagined. The book seems to abound in straw figures being set up for demolition, and in observations which hardly seem very surprising. Why, for instance, is it surprising that Chartist rhetoric had much in common with earlier radical rhetoric (p. 173)? Political consciousness, even in movements representing a break with the past, does not appear in an ideological or historical vacuum.

¹⁰¹ Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals*, pp. 15, 18.

¹⁰² NZPD, 1884, 48, p. 29.

¹⁰³ I argue that this is so even though G A Wood has shown that manhood suffrage in 1879 was largely the rationalisation of the piecemeal accumulation of lodger, miner, ratepayer, and business licence franchises. G A Wood, ‘The 1878 Electoral Bill and Franchise Reform in Nineteenth Century New Zealand’ *Political Science* 28, 1 (1976). The chronology was also given by the Attorney-General, Frederick Whitaker, NZPD vol 33, 1879, p. 401.

¹⁰⁴ NZPD, 1879, 32, p. 222.

¹⁰⁵ NZPD, 1875, 18, pp. 609-616.

urged by major colonial capitalists to distinguish themselves from wage-earners. There were dissenting voices, such as the liberal landowner William Montgomery, who called for the abolition of property votes - 'no man shall vote otherwise than because he is a citizen' – as well as the banker Frederick Whitaker and the land-agent E C J Stevens, but they did not persuade Parliament that 'those people who possess no stake in the country have a right to the same representation as those who are tied to it'.¹⁰⁶ If the theme of justification of wealth by the effort that was claimed to have gone into its creation shaped as well as reflected class identity, as Stedman Jones might argue, these controversies – which might be described as being between the Rights of Man and the rights of property - were grounded in the experience and the interests of different classes, or at least class fractions.

Men of property also cherished the Legislative Council (the members of which were appointed for life) as a brake on the House of Representatives. As the runholder Mathew Holmes said, in a debate on the size of the Council,

public feeling in the Colony was apt to run rampant, and that instead of looking wisely, calmly and with a mature judgement, it was apt to rush into schemes detrimental to the best interest of the Colony and its inhabitants... Another reason he had for desiring to see the number of members limited was the democratic tendency of the present times. Every year witnessed more decided steps towards democracy in both the Provinces and the Colony. Universal suffrage and the [secret] ballot, with all the agitation and clap-trap which always accompanied them, were continually cropping up, and if a stop was not put to it, democracy would soon obtain the vantage-ground. By such a Bill... they would be protected from the danger of being over-awed, and be secured in their position as conservators of the public interest.¹⁰⁷

The wealthy and conservative members with which the departing Atkinson government had stacked the Council expressed similar views between 1891 and 1893. *The Press* claimed that the Council was 'being deluged with letters and petitions asking them to save the country from the tyranny of its elected representatives'.¹⁰⁸ William Rolleston, in the House, rejected the 'opinion... expressed by Ministers... that the Legislative Council is merely "a junta to override the legislation of this House"' but the sober-minded portion of the community ... consider that the Legislative Council has done excellent work in checking the hasty legislation of this Chamber.... it has been composed of men who have been some of the very best colonists of New Zealand'.¹⁰⁹ Here, too, the colonial upper class justified itself by the economic leadership which it claimed distinguished it, but that class, in the last resort, existed independently of its own rhetoric.

The bourgeois desire to deny class distinctions was also a major focus of opposition to the Ballance government. Superficially, Ballance and Atkinson shared similar

¹⁰⁶ NZPD, 1886, 55, pp. 116, 117, 119.

¹⁰⁷ NZPD, 1867, 1, p. 536. The context was a Bill to limit the number of Councillors, on the basis that a majority in the Representatives could otherwise stack the Council.

¹⁰⁸ NZPD, 1891, 74, p. 195; *Press* 6 Aug 1891, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹ NZPD, 1892, 75, p. 17.

views, especially on retrenchment and borrowing.¹¹⁰ The issue was where retrenchment would fall. Ballance's republican virtue implied a rather different programme of retrenchment from that advocated by the skinflints, and was to be ameliorated by village settlements and other devices aimed at opening land to smallholders. The fundamental difference was the recognition to be given to organized labour.¹¹¹ Ballance's supporters embraced or tolerated organized labour's political mobilisation with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Atkinsonians generally opposed it because, as Thomas Fergus said, 'there should be no attempt to set class against class in this community, and any honourable gentleman who comes [into Parliament] as the special representative of one class, ignoring all other classes in this country, is not fulfilling his just duties to the country'.¹¹²

Despite Fergus, a more evident relationship between class and politics had developed in some parts of the colony during the 1880s.¹¹³ There were consistent differences over tariff protection and public works. Liberals (inverted commas may be used if desired) favoured both. They also consistently favoured a land and income tax instead of a property tax, believing the latter disadvantaged small tradesmen and smaller farmers, whereas a land tax applied particularly to large landowners and would encourage subdivision. In June 1887 the Canterbury Electors' Association was formed to advance these views, and it was opposed by the Political Reform Association, which comprised many of the leading farmers, merchants and professionals in Canterbury.¹¹⁴ Again, class consciousness may be inferred, but there was more to class than simply the existence of that consciousness.

The 1890 election produced a government of more or less middle class Liberals - small farmers and small-town businessmen - who were forced to rely upon labour-aligned members for support.¹¹⁵ This is a class coalition, a phenomenon identified by Karl Marx in his analysis of France half a century earlier: 'The petty bourgeoisie and the workers had formed their own coalition, the so-called social-democratic party, in opposition to the coalition of the bourgeoisie.... the social demands of the

¹¹⁰ John Angus, 'City and Country: Change and Continuity: Electoral Politics and Society in Otago, 1877-1893', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 1976, p. 495.

¹¹¹ John Angus, 'City and Country', pp. 514-8. It is worth noting that the Opposition-labour alliance in Otago was, for whatever reason, stitched together by Robert Stout. I am much influenced in the following discussion by Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: renewing historical materialism*, Cambridge, 1995.

¹¹² NZPD vol 72, 1891, p. 32, vol 73, 1891, p. 481.

¹¹³ See Edmund Bohan, 'The general election of 1879 in Canterbury.' MA Thesis, Canterbury University College, 1958; A M Evans, 'A study of Canterbury politics in the early 1880's with special reference to the General Election of 1881' MA Thesis, Canterbury University College, 1959; David P. Millar, 'The General Election of 1884 in Canterbury', MA Thesis, Canterbury University College, 1960; Clive Whitehead, 'The 1887 General Election in Canterbury', MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1961.

¹¹⁴ A list is in Whitehead, 'The 1887 General Election', Appendix G.

¹¹⁵ This outline of events was suggested long ago by R T Shannon in 'The Fall of Reeves, 1893-96', in Robert Chapman and Keith Sinclair, eds, *Studies of a Small Democracy*, Auckland, 1963, and was elaborated by Len Richardson, 'Parties and Political Change' in W H Oliver and B R Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981.

proletariat lost their revolutionary point and gained a democratic twist, while the democratic claims of the petty bourgeoisie... had their socialist point emphasized. In this way arose Social-Democracy'.¹¹⁶ Substitute Liberal for Social Democrat and the parallels are obvious.

It is often forgotten that 1890 was the first New Zealand election conducted without plural votes for property. Formal democratization was swiftly completed with the enfranchisement of women in 1893. Democracy was irreversible, and coming to terms with it involved the remaking of New Zealand conservatism. As the Liberals became entrenched, the wealthy turned increasingly to pressure group politics. Over time, in the Farmers Unions and the Employers Associations as well as in parliament, conservative forces reinvented themselves around a union of large and small property, detaching the smaller farmers and storekeeper constituency from the Liberals. The central issues were land tenure and industrial arbitration; capitalist pressure groups organized successfully to assert the freehold in land tenure and to blunt trade union successes in the Arbitration Court and, later, in direct action.¹¹⁷ Farmers, resisting the unionization of farm labourers, asserted on the basis of their own frequently-cited experience that anyone in the colony who cared to work could attain independence.¹¹⁸ Thus the colonial bourgeoisie co-opted the rhetoric of the masterless society and of the lower middle class utopia, and while political language was influential in the remaking of conservatism, smaller rural property-owners abandoned the Liberals because of material interests as well as ideology.¹¹⁹

This article has emphasized class formation and class structure as well as class consciousness. Class has been understood in this article to be based in productive relationships, but it is stressed that class formation, class structure, and class consciousness are all in dynamic relationship with each other and with the fundamental relations of production. If in the last resort I have insisted on a certain objective quality to class structure, this is in order to return the debate to some fundamentals. Class remains an essential perspective through which to view New Zealand settler society. Class is not just about consciousness and conflict, and it is not just about the working class. Nor does the complexity of social reality match the simplicity of abstract models; however, an appreciation of complexity and nuance should not be taken to the extreme of denying any explanatory force for class. When overdone, such appreciation allows historians 'to be judiciously

¹¹⁶ Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in David Fernbach, ed., *Marx: Surveys from Exile*, Harmondsworth, 1973, pp. 175-76.

¹¹⁷ T W H Brooking, 'Agrarian Businessmen Organise', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 1977, pp. 280-82, 325, 329. Hamer, *The New Zealand Liberals*, pp. 288-92, and ch 8; for the Labour Party, see, as a synthesis, Erik Olssen, 'The Origins of the Labour Party: A Reconsideration' NZJH 21, 1 (1987). *Press* 2 January 1905, p. 8; 19 Jan 1905, p. 11; 1 March 1905, p. 7; 20 April 1905, p. 4; 3 May 1905, p. 3; 16 August 1906, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Evidence taken by the Conciliation Board hearing into the Agricultural and Pastoral Labourers' case: Thomas Orr Hay, Pigeon Bay, vol 1, pp. 341-51; Henry Acland, Mt Peel, vol 2, pp. 1180-94; John Talbot, Geraldine, vol 2, pp. 1313-40; B E H Tripp, vol 3, pp. 101-8; C H Ensor, Balmoral, vol 6, pp. 769-76; John Deans, Homebush, vol 6, p. 882, in Canterbury Agricultural and Pastoral Labourers' Dispute Records, Canterbury Museum.

¹¹⁹ Again, this account is substantially that of Len Richardson, 'Parties and Political Change'.

noncommittal about virtually everything'.¹²⁰ Perhaps “class” does not “explain” things in a simple and deterministic fashion, but if we accept class as a major element in social organisation and look at what was happening around the related themes of class, property, ideology, state, and politics, we might get a very good idea of some fundamental realities of colonial society.

¹²⁰ James E. Cronin, review of David Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, New Haven and London, 1998, *Journal of Social History*, 33, 3 (2000), p761.