

Classes in Australia, in themselves and for themselves¹

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In Australia, the existence and relevance of social classes is contested. This paper addresses the question of class by employing Marx's distinction between classes in themselves and classes for themselves. The difference was a question of organisation and consciousness.

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into worker. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.²

The section below discusses classes in themselves. The following one considers the much trickier issue of classes for themselves. The question of working class consciousness is addressed in the concluding section.

Classes in themselves

Workers are those who are forced to sell (or in the case of the unemployed, to *try* to sell) their ability to work to an employer, by their lack of alternative effective means of making a living. At work, they have little, if any control over their own labour or that of others, and are constrained to act under the direction of their employers, supervisors, forepeople, managers, in sum 'the boss' in one guise or another. The objective situation of the working class gives it interests as against the capitalist class. These Lukács labelled the 'imputed' class consciousness of the working class, which may or may not be recognised and acted on by any workers.³

To maintain or increase rates of profit, bosses try to roll back the wages and conditions and workplace influence of workers. If they don't keep their costs down, compared with those of their competitors, they will go under. Employers' capacity to hold down working class living standards is limited by the level of competition amongst themselves for particular kinds of labour and the concerted actions of workers and, ultimately, the costs of reproducing labour power. In order to defend, let alone improve their conditions of life, workers are compelled to resist.

Conservatives try to pretend that the constrained choices in capitalist markets, including labour markets, are an index of freedom. In government, the media and academia they portray workers, including those with the most tenuous employment on contracts, as entrepreneurs and deny the relevance of class as a concept. Quite apart from the constraints on people's behaviour in markets, notably the money and other resources at their disposal, the argument that markets secure liberty is wrong for another more profound reason. Workplaces are dictatorships where workers have to do pretty much what they are told. The differences between employment under the enlightened despotisms of 'nice bosses' and the anguish that 'nasty bosses' generate don't affect the fundamental experience of working class life: that others—not workers themselves—control the labour process and the products that result from it.

There may be debates about trends in real income and patterns in the distribution of income and wealth. But issues of class relations and exploitation, in the Marxist sense, are quite clear, despite

1 Parts of this paper draw on chapters by Rick Kuhn, Sam Pietsch and Diane Fieldes in Rick Kuhn (ed.) *Class and struggle in Australia* Pearson, Frenchs Forest 2005.

2 Karl Marx *The poverty of philosophy* chapter 2, part 5, 1847.

3 Georg Lukács *History and class consciousness* Merlin, London 1968 (1923) pp. 51-52.

the limitations of and biases in the major sources of empirical data, notably the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Particularly for those with any doubts about the benefits and desirability of the established order, the existence of classes in themselves is hardly an issue.

The technique, developed by Diane Fieldes and me, of rendering ABS data into a very conservative estimate of the size of the Australian working class shows that workers make up the vast majority of the labour force.

In 2001, 84 per cent of the employed labour force was wage and salary earners.⁴ If we exclude the occupational status categories of managers, administrators and professionals, but not teachers and nurses, from this group the result is 5 378 554 workers. They are almost two thirds of the employed labour force. That is an underestimate, as it excludes many 'employed professionals', like most journalists or social workers, who are skilled white collar workers. Also left out are those in the 'self-employed' group, like many construction workers and outworkers in electronics and clothing. Legally contractors, in practice their level of control over their own labour is no greater than that of other workers. The Australian working class also includes retired workers, discouraged job seekers, people working in the home and dependents;⁵ in all about thirteen million people.⁶

The high concentration of wealth and income in Australia is a consequence of a class structure in which the capitalist class is a small minority with economic and social power. Thus only five per cent of Australian families in 1998 owned 76 per cent of all shares and similar investments.⁷ People's educations, experience with law enforcement agencies and health also depend to a large degree on class. In the case of health, this is not simply a consequence of higher incomes allowing better diets, exercise and access to health care. There is a direct correlation between the level of control we have at work, through stress levels to our overall health.⁸

Classes for themselves

While the existence of class as distinct, objective groups in society is relatively straightforward, it is more difficult to identify them as social actors. This is especially the case for the working class, but there are also problems when it comes to the capitalist class. One issue is the volatility of class consciousness, which can change with a rapidity simply impossible for the objective determinants of class.

The core of the capitalist class, which is involved in the control of workers (in the public and private sectors) display, through its actions, awareness of its class interests. Members of this section of the ruling class are concerned to sustain their own organisations (profits and/or budgets) by extracting as much labour as possible from those they employ and preside over mechanisms of supervision, discipline and control. Beyond the admiration of social order, discipline and stability that this entails, however, the capitalist class often has no a coherent awareness either of its own nature or a shared consciousness of its extra-economic interests.

There are certainly occasions when the ruling class consciousness of members of the capitalist class whose primary roles are in the state is out in the open. In 1998, Peter Reith, then the Minister for

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Census of population and housing: selected education and labour force characteristics Australia 2001*, catalogue 2017.0.

5 Data on the various categories are available in Australian Bureau of Statistics *Year book Australia 2004*, catalogue 13101.0.

6 See Diane Fieldes 'From exploitation to resistance and revolt: the working class' in Kuhn *Class and struggle in Australia* p. 57.

7 Simon Kelly *Trends in Australian wealth-new estimates for the 1990s* presented to the 30th Annual Conference of Economists University of Western Australia 26 September 2001, www.natsem.canberra.edu.au/pubs/cp01/2001_008/cp2001_008.pdf, accessed 28 September 2004.

8 Michael Marmot *The status syndrome: how social standing affects our health and longevity* Holt, New York 2004. Marmot denies the relevance of his researches to Marxist class analysis, by attributing a crude definition of class to it.

Workplace Relations told a business forum that ‘we [Liberals] are on the side of making profits. We’re on the side of people owning private capital.’⁹ Similarly, at an extremely expensive charity dinner in 2000 George Bush observed ‘This is an impressive crowd—the haves and the have-mores. Some people call you the elites; I call you my base.’¹⁰ But in general, while acting as a class for itself, the capitalist class also denies its own existence.

The most prominent figures and political representatives of the capitalist class dissolve the indigestible sludge of their own needs into the more palatable broth of national interest. So, after winning the 2001 elections John Howard said

There is something special about being an Australian... That Australian spirit, that capacity, that mateship that allows us to pull together in times of challenge and times of adversity that is something very special... [T]he things that unite us are infinitely greater and more enduring than the things that divide us.¹¹

For ‘bourgeois thought, as Lukács put it, ‘the starting point and... goal are always if not always consciously, an apologia for the existing order.’ While (because!) the ruling class consciousness serves ruling class interests it is a false consciousness that misrepresents reality.¹² This also helps explain why the consciousness of the bourgeois class and even its practical political leaderships are often not coherent or systematic.

The nature of bourgeois class power is also important here. Capitalists who control production do not necessarily, or often, play a direct role in the management of the capitalist state. Most of the time, the organisation and logic of capitalist production and the resources of those who control it ensure that states and those in charge of them—senior politicians and public servants—act in the interests capital accumulation. To the extent that the bourgeoisie maintains a level of ideological and political coherence exists, the state (governments and the research, policy and public relations areas of public services) and specialist institutions (think tanks, elements in the media and academia) play as much of a role as business organisations, like the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Australian Industry. Bourgeois self-consciousness and self-organisation is not generally a prerequisite for public policies that favour capital accumulation and social stability.

Many features of capitalist societies undermine working class consciousness. The structure of capitalist production itself (the fetishism of commodities) conceals class relations and interests. Various parts of the state propagate ideologies inimical to class consciousness; not just governments but also judiciaries, education and health systems. Then there is the mass media.

On the other hand, working class consciousness is also shaped by the objective features of capitalist society which define working class interests. Crucially, the contradictory class interests of capital and labour give rise to class struggle.

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

9 *Australian Financial Review* 12 September 1998, p. 4.

10 CBS News ‘Bush And Gore Do New York’ 20 October 2000, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/10/18/politics/main242210.shtml, accessed 27 January 2006.

11 John Howard ‘Election night speech’, Sydney, 10 November 2001, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/10052/20031121/www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/2001/speech1326.htm>, accessed 28 September 2004.

12 Lukács *History and class consciousness* p. 48.

sickies, turn up for work drunk or stoned, add a few minutes to breaks, or just reduce the authority of supervisors by taking the piss.

Because individual workers lack power compared to individual bosses, to be effective their struggle usually has to be collective. If one employee dawdles, stops working or protests, she or he can easily be replaced or ignored. Group of workers that strike, demonstrate, go slow or occupy their workplaces exert far more pressure on their bosses. Organised class struggles, in response to the working class's objective situation, however, give rise to collective consciousness and it becomes a class for itself. Like class struggle, class consciousness is not an on/off switch, its level varies. The ebb and flow of class conflict and the impact of specific events give rise to fluctuations in class consciousness.

In contrast to the contemporary bourgeoisie, the longer term interests of the working class—in socialism—can only be realised if it is aware of them and takes deliberate action in their pursuit. The bourgeoisie has ceased to be a revolutionary class. Its interests are fundamentally conservative: the maintenance of the capitalist status quo. To achieve its interests, the working class has to be, in Lukács's terms, an historical subject, that is self-aware.¹³ At this level, class consciousness is not only awareness that capitalism is defined by contradictory class interests but also of the working class's potential power.

The state of investigations into class today has parallels with those in Marx's time.

Much research has been carried out to trace the different historical phases that the bourgeoisie has passed through, from the commune up to its constitution as a class.

But when it is a question of making a precise study of strikes, combinations and other forms in which the proletarians carry out before our eyes their organization as a class, some are seized with real fear and others display a *transcendental* disdain.¹⁴

The activities of some members of the capitalist class (not just Kylie Minogue, Russell Crowe and Nicole Kidman, but also those with direct economic and political power) are subjected to minute scrutiny and discussion on the front pages of newspapers and headline TV news, not to mention the financial pages and in myriad social scientific, scholarly outpourings. What workers do is seldom reported. The tedium of following orders and complying with the initiatives of social superiors is hardly ever newsworthy. Workers' struggles, when they seriously disrupt production do draw some attention. But governments and the mainstream in the media and academia interpret them as section behaviour (which, most of the time, they are) rather than as class behaviours (which, at the same time, they always are). Compare the perfunctory reports of about industrial action with the detailed daily accounts of the bourgeoisie's financial doings in special statistical sections of the quality press.

Indices of working class consciousness

There are, however, a variety of indicators of and methods for determining the level of working class self-awareness. Class resentments are expressed in overt industrial conflicts, as well as in a range of covert forms. The most systematic collection of data on class conflict relates to industrial disputes, especially strikes. Industrial disputes remain at historically low levels.¹⁵ This indicates that confidence in the working class's ability to change the world is not widespread. But other kinds of conflict suggest that there is very widespread consciousness of class in the form of inequality and the divergent interests of different social groups. Hence the unprecedented demonstrations in 2003,

13 Lukács *History and class consciousness* pp. 2-3, 8, 149 et seq. John Rees provides a valuable and accessible account of Lukács's contribution, *The algebra of revolution: the dialectic and the classical Marxist tradition* Routledge, London 1998, pp. 202-261.

14 Marx *Poverty of philosophy* loc. cit.

15 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Industrial disputes*, Australia March quarter 2004, catalogue 6321.0.55.001; Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian labour market statistics* July 2004, catalogue 6105.0.

on an absolutely unprecedented scale, against the invasion of Iraq; the ‘bridge walks’ of May 2000 in support of reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians and against government policy.

The movements against the Kennett Government in Victoria, during the mid 1990s; the ‘Parliament House riot’, when police prevented a significant but determined minority at a union rally from visiting their elected representatives in August 1996;¹⁶ and the huge protests on 15 November 2005 against the Howard Government’s proposed industrial relations laws, in particular, show an awareness of the working class’s distinctive collective interests. The large picket line mobilisations during the 1998 waterfront dispute were a particularly overt form of industrial conflict.¹⁷

Membership of class organisations, especially trade unions but decreasingly the Labor Party, are also indices of working class consciousness. Since the mid 1970s, trade union membership in Australia has fallen dramatically and union density has declined more rapidly than anywhere else in the developed world. From 55 per cent in the mid 1970s density fell to 48 per cent in 1982, to 23 per cent in 2002, the fastest rate of decline in the industrialised world. In August 2004, membership was 1 842 100 union density was still 23 per cent.¹⁸ As Diane Fieldes puts it ‘The fall in union density was less a symptom of the disappearance of class than a consequence of capitalists’ victories in the class struggle.’¹⁹

Another form of evidence for class consciousness, opinion polls and surveys, confirms this conclusion. Half of those interviewed in surveys commissioned by NSW Labor Council agreed with the statement ‘I’d rather be in a trade union’.²⁰ Most opinion polls, however, are undertaken by or for organisations—especially government and the mass media—that are unsympathetic to the working class. This shapes the questions that they pose. The categories into which pollsters divide people are generally far from those of Marxist class analysis, using distinctions between blue and white collar work or arbitrary income boundaries that are at best very indirectly related to relations of production. Voting behaviour is a particularly imprecise kind of opinion poll, whose implications for levels of class consciousness have to be interpreted with special caution.

Some surveys, to the extent that their questions are consistent and repeated over time, can, however, reveal shifts in the extent of class consciousness in the society as a whole. The data below indicate that, despite low levels of class struggle and declining union density, there has not been a decline in some aspects of working class consciousness; on the contrary. Several indicators of perceptions of social power, support for greater fairness, particularly for oppressed groups, have tended to increase.²¹

16 Luke Deer ‘The Parliament House riot of 1996’ <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/riot.htm>

17 Tom Bramble *War on the waterfront*, Defend Our Unions Committee, Brisbane 1998.

18 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Employee earnings, benefits and trade union membership, Australia* August 2004, catalogue 6310.0.

19 Fieldes ‘From exploitation to resistance’ op. cit. p. 63.

20 Sue Bearfield ‘Australian employees’ attitudes towards unions’, ACIRRT Working Paper 82, Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Teaching, University of Sydney, March 2003.

21 Tom Bramble ‘Contradictions in Australia’s “Miracle Economy”’ *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 54, December 2004 pp. 5-31, also available at <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/contradictions.htm>.

Australian Social Attitudes, 1987-2003

Issue	Per cent agreeing			
	1987	1996	2001	2003
Big business has too much power	50.9	64.6	71.6	59.6*
Trade unions have too much power	70.5	61.8	47.6	43.9*
Australia would be better off without trade unions (ACIRRT)		25.0	17.0	
Stricter laws should be introduced to regulate trade union activity	74.2	58.9	49.0	
Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary people	45.7	47.1	55.8	43.7
Favour spending more on social services as against tax cuts	15.0	16.8	30.0	48.0
Favour tax cuts as against spending more on social services	66.0	57.1	42.0	27.9
High taxes make people less willing to work hard	79.9	74.0	59.4	
Women should be able to obtain an abortion easily when they want one	38.6	53.5	57.6	81.1
Not enough movement towards EEO for women	19.5	31.7	37.9	
Land rights for Aborigines have gone too far	59.0	60.6	49.8	
Government help for Aborigines has gone too far		55.3	47.2	
Cut back the migrant intake**	49.9	63.0	34.9	37.0
Equal opportunities for migrants have gone too far		44.2	34.5	

* 2003: "Big business/ trade unions should have less power"

** 1987 figure derived from "no more migrants allowed in", plus "only those from UK and Northern Europe", plus "no Asians"; 1996 and 2001 = "the number of migrants has gone too far"; 2003 = "the number of immigrants should be reduced".

Sources: *Australian Election Surveys* (1987-2001); *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (2003); ACIRRT Working Paper, no. 82, 'Australian employees attitudes to trade unions', Sydney University, March 2003.

The Howard government has won elections on a racist basis, hacked into the welfare state and undermining workers' legal rights. But, except in the short-term, it has not been so successful in persuading more people to embrace world outlook.

Class consciousness is uneven, not only amongst people whose classes are different, not only amongst those in the same class, but even in the heads of individuals quite contradictory ideas can coexist. Opinion polls have a limited capacity to capture such unevenness.

Quite precise instruments for the measurement of working class consciousness have, however, existed in the past. They consisted of large networks of influential informants in many workplaces (and social movements), capable of evaluating shifts in their co-workers' (and fellow activists') attitudes and providing data to a centre which, in a democratic process, used it to formulate policies for the activity of the members of the network. They were the mass Communist Parties that existed in a range of countries before the degeneration of the Communist movement, under the influence of Stalinism. Hopefully those interested in the scientific assessment of class consciousness will contribute to the reconstruction of such an instrument in Australia. After all, the point of understanding class relations and consciousness is, at least from a Marxist perspective, that it helps us in efforts to change the world.