

MARXIST CLASS ANALYSIS: A LIVING TRADITION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOLARSHIP

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The Marxist approach to class has long been criticised within the academy. Many scholars have suggested it is no longer relevant, if indeed, it ever was, for understanding contemporary economies and societies. This article examines the recent trajectory of class analysis in Australia within the context of such criticism and changes within the capitalist economy and society that some claim make Marxist class analysis redundant. The article contends that such critiques significantly misinterpret the Marxist conception of class and miss recent developments within Marxist class analysis which attempt to account for changes within the capitalist economy. While the article takes a long-term view, plotting changes in class analysis since the 1970s, we are particularly concerned with the generation of new ideas and approaches in the last decade. Although not comprehensive, we argue that the evidence presented here is indicative of broader trends within Marxist scholarship.

The article proceeds by, firstly, reiterating some of the main criticisms of Marxist class analysis. Second, the article reiterates the basic propositions of Marxist class analysis and acknowledges some of its main limitations. Third, we trace the decline of class analysis in the last three decades. Using an empirical study of class in Australian social science journals, we find indicative evidence of a fragmentation of scholarship, with small groups of researchers continuing to produce innovative ideas about class in a context in which class has declined as a source of debate and interaction, particularly among sociologists. The article concludes that Marxist class analysis remains a living tradition in Australian scholarship and outlines novel attempts to renovate the Marxist approach to class by Australian scholars since the 1990s. We

argue that it is possible to use these insights to begin to remap contemporary capitalist societies.

Criticism of Marxist Class Analysis

Criticism of Marxist class analysis has a long history. One perennial line of attack has been to deny the coherence of class as a concept. The extreme liberal position is exemplified by the work of Mises who argues that because individuals are the basic social unit, the concept of social class is nonsensical: 'In studying the actions of individuals, we learn also everything about collectives and society. For the collective has no existence and reality but in the actions of individuals' (Mises, 1976: 81). Another influential critique of Marxist class theory comes from Weber who, while not rejecting the concept of class, argued that status and rank were often more important than class position in shaping political action and social allegiance.

More recently, class has again been under intense attack from those who question its utility as an analytical tool for understanding political economic developments during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Pakulski and Waters (1996) exemplify the range of criticisms levelled against Marxist class analysis in recent decades. They argue that Marxist class analysis has failed to account for three major changes to capitalist societies. First, they argue that Marxist class analysis does not account for 'legal-political' changes, including the rise of political elites, whereby 'political ranking displaced class division' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 45) and the growth of the welfare state, which mitigated class inequalities and rendered class identity far less salient. Second, they argue that 'market-meritocratic' changes, including the growing importance of stratification based upon differences in knowledge and skill, 'challenges the economic-productive determinism inherent in all versions of class theory' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 36). Third, they argue that the increasing salience of 'cultural-symbolic' identification, including 'ethnicity, race, gender, lifestyles and consumption' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 45) cannot be accounted for by traditional Marxist theory. All of these, they argue, necessitate a 'radical, theoretical overhaul' and 'disposing of the remnants of class theory' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 45).

While Pakulski and Waters highlight some weaknesses in classical Marxist theory, they rely upon a caricature of Marxist class theory by accusing it of ‘inherent economic reductionism’ (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 44) and describing its self-perception as ‘a universal explanatory key to economic, cultural and political relations’ (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 28). They also interpret certain tendencies within Marxist class theory as representative of Marxist class theory as whole. One sees this in the focus upon the ‘subjective’ elements of class theory – ‘[class relations] constitute the key determinants of structured social inequalities, or group interests and identities, of social orientation and conduct’ – as well as upon its normative and teleological elements: ‘[a]ctual social developments have defied both predictions of progressive class polarization and conflict and the emancipatory promise of socialist revolution’ (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 28). As we argue later, this is a rather one-dimensional reading of Marxist class theory. However, *prima facie*, such arguments should be taken seriously by scholars of class.

The Classical Marxist Conception of Class

Having outlined recent and more enduring criticisms of the Marxist concept of class, it is worth revisiting the basic propositions of Marxist class analysis. In doing so we propose to tease out whether and, to what extent, there is substance to the criticisms leveled against it. This sets the scene for our later investigation of how Marxist class analysis has fared within the Australian academy over the last three decades, when it has been subject to intense criticism, and how it has responded to these criticisms and to changes within the capitalist economy.

While class occupies a central place throughout Marx’s work, it is nowhere precisely defined. As Bottomore argues, ‘neither Marx nor Engels ever expounded it in a systematic form’ (Bottomore, 1991: 84). The section of *Capital* in which Marx intended to outline his concept of class and its relationship to his broader understanding of capital contains five introductory paragraphs followed by a note from Engels: ‘At this point the manuscript breaks off’ (in Marx, 1991: 1025-1026). Marx’s theory of class therefore needs to be inferred from his economic and political writings, albeit with the recognition that ‘[t]he class concept is inserted into the analysis ... with the utmost caution’ (Harvey, 2006: 24).

Johnston and Dolowitz (1999) propose a useful ‘dualistic’ schema for categorizing Marx’s theory of class, identifying two broad conceptions of class: a ‘voluntarist’ or ‘subjective’ conception of class, and a ‘determinist’ or ‘objective’ theory of class. Both are present in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Marx and Engels (1985: 95) write: ‘The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat’. This suggests a class does not exist until it is ‘formed’ by conscious political will and organization. It is a subjective, or voluntarist understanding of class because it views class as occurring when people form an awareness, or subjectivity, of themselves as a class, or when they voluntarily organize themselves into a class. This understanding of class underpins Marx’s concept of ‘a class for itself’ in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. 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 (Marx, 1955: Ch. 2).

This voluntarist, or subjective, conception of class stands in contrast to the objective conception of class in Marx’s work. Turning once again to *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels (1985: 87) wrote that:

[i]n proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e. capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed – a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital.

Here, class is determined by one’s position within a distinct set of social production relations: the patterned and legally codified relations between people and the rights and claims these confer over the inputs and outputs of production. It is not dependent upon any particular subjectivity or class identification.

The voluntarist, or subjective conception of class does not necessarily stand in opposition or contradiction to the ‘objective’ definition. It has been quite normal for Marxists to fuse the objective and subjective conditions of class. However, an objective approach to class need not specify any particular class identification. This allows it to obviate many criticisms of Marxist class theory by the likes of Pakulski and Waters.

Wright (2005: 28-30) argues the Marxist (objective) theory of class has five strengths that set it apart from other approaches to class analysis which are worth briefly exploring in turn. Each of these strengths emerges from those features of Marxist class analysis which distinguish it from other approaches to class: namely, that for Marxist theory class rests upon relations of exploitation and domination (Wright, 2005: 23-27).

First, Wright argues that the Marxist class analysis provides a theory ‘linking exchange and production’ (Wright, 2005: 28). The social relations that define one’s class position simultaneously define the ways one participates in exchange relations. Marx argues throughout *Capital* that because wage labourers are defined by their alienation from the means of direct production, they are reliant for their subsistence on the purchase of commodities through markets from those to whom they sell their labour-power in production (see, for example, Marx, 1992: 119). So, the situation of ‘market dependence’ (Wood, 2002: 2) that is characteristic of capitalist societies is inscribed in the nature of that system’s basic class relations between labour and capital.

The second strength of Marxist class analysis identified by Wright is that it ‘understands conflict as generated by inherent properties of [class]... relations rather than simply contingent factors’ (Wright, 2005: 28). In order to realize a profit, owners are required to exploit wage labourers – ‘like all other buyers he [the owner of capital] tries to extract the maximum possible benefit from the use-value of his commodity’ (Marx, 1990: 342). However, outside the sphere of immediate production, writes Marx, the worker ‘belongs to himself’ (Marx, 1990: 717) and therefore workers bring to the sphere of production interests other than those of the capitalist. This is illustrated in Marx’s discussion of struggles over the length of the working day in *Capital*. Capital has an immediate interest in lengthening the working day; labour in shortening it:

Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the

limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class (Marx, 1990: 344)

Conflict between labour and capital over priorities within the sphere of production is inevitable.

Marx's theory of class, according to Wright (2005: 29), is also a theory of power. Workers are afforded a degree of power to resist exploitation and thereby enforce their priorities upon capital. This is because capital is dependent upon wage labour for the production of surplus value: it is 'the capitalist's most indispensable means of production' (Marx, 1990: 718). But workers are also dependent upon the exchange of their labour power for wages, therefore binding workers to capital by 'invisible threads' (Marx, 1990: 719). This makes it costly, but not impossible, for workers to withhold their labour power as a form of resistance to capitalist priorities.

The fourth strength of Marxist class theory, according to Wright (2005: 29), is that it 'contains the rudiments of what might be termed an endogenous theory of the formation of consent'. This follows closely from the previous point. Because capitalists are dependent upon the co-operation of those from whom they extract labour effort, they cannot rely purely upon coercive methods of exploitation. Inevitably, they must also rely upon strategies that generate consent among workers. For Wright, this helps explain not only firm-level strategies, but also the development of broader ideological norms which justify exploitation to the exploited. From *Capital*, we can infer a broader point that the class relations between labour and capital help explain the actions of the state in ensuring the reproduction of labour-power by setting limits on the length of the working day, thereby reducing the physical burden of work on labourers. Marx (1990: 718) notes 'the maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital'. The institutions of the state play a crucial role in the reproduction of labour power through a diverse range of actions usually grouped under the headings of social protection or welfare. These institutions and policies create a series of entitlements and customs that are important in the formation of consent among wage labourers.

The fifth strength of Marxist class theory, according to Wright (2005: 30), is that it contains 'concepts for historical and comparative analysis'.

For Marx, the different class relations that prevail within each historical period determine that period's essential character:

What distinguishes the various economic formations of society – the distinction between for example a society based on slave-labour and a society based on wage-labour – is the form in which this surplus labour is in each case extorted from the immediate producer, the worker (Marx, 1990: 325).

As Wright (2005: 30) notes, this insight provides 'a powerful road map for comparative research' as it identifies the independent variable from which stem many of a society's systemic features. To these strengths we would add that the Marxist theory of class also contains within it a powerful theory of political change and emancipation. Wright has noted this elsewhere (Wright, 2001). While arguably all scholars of class have a shared interest in the location of people within structures of inequality, only Marxists have asked: 'What sorts of struggles have the potential to transform capitalist economic oppressions in an emancipatory direction?' (Wright 2001: 14). This is a distinctively Marxist question, distinguishing it from rival approaches to class within the social sciences.

Weaknesses and Limitations in the Marxist Theory of Class

However, there are limitations and weaknesses in Marx's theory of class. If ignored in favour of dogmatic assertions of the universal explanatory capacity of the theory, these weaknesses and limitations seriously undermine the utility of Marxist conceptions of class. We contend that acknowledging these weaknesses and limitations enables an identification of which concepts should be developed in more detail and which could be fruitfully combined with other understandings of society. Notwithstanding other potential criticisms, we identify two broad weaknesses with Marxist class analysis.

The first weakness is its dual nature. That Marx had two major conceptions of class creates a perennial problem of defining what counts as class. If the subjective conception is relied upon, the theory is vulnerable to the charge of anachronism. Advanced capitalist countries in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries exhibited a decline in class identification, thus rendering class a limited, rather than universal,

situation if defined in subjective terms (Baxter and Western, 1991; Emmison, 1991). Some concluded that there was no longer a basis for privileging class over other group identities in the formation of research projects, such as survey questions (Emmison and Western, 1991). Building upon these insights it was argued that Marxist (and Weberian) models of industrial society had systematically ignored gender issues, such as the exclusion of women from ‘work’ or the gender-based division of labour (Baxter and Western, 2001).

In addition, several scholars in the last 20 years have posed questions of identity and subjectivity more sharply due to the influence of Bourdieu’s ideas. According to this view, class has become a means of social and cultural differentiation¹. Nonetheless, the appropriation of Bourdieu’s ideas has also produced research in Australia which is consistent with Marxist claims about class inequality. For example, there have been studies of students’ perceptions of class at university (Pearce *et al.*, 2008) or the role of class and gender in nursing (Huppertz, 2006).

However, other scholars have tried to pose their research as a break with the Marxist approach. In a geographical study about changes within working and middle class communities in the NSW Hunter Valley, Holmes and Hartig (2007) reiterate the argument that class remains structurally important but has lost its relevance as an identity. While this may be partly true, their conclusion is reached by utilising Bourdieu and, also, Eder (1993), whose work offered a ‘culturalist reformulation’ of class as a break with both Weberian and Marxist approaches. This interpretation led ‘not to an emphasis on class as heroic collective agency, but towards class as implicit, as encoded in people’s sense of self-worth and in their attitudes to and awareness of others... in how they carry themselves as individuals’ (Holmes and Hartig, 2007: 56).

The ideas of Bourdieu and others are here framed as a *break* with, rather than *building upon*, old approaches. This is reflective of British sociologist Mike Savage’s reading of Bourdieu, in which class is based upon a differentiation from others rather than ‘a sense of *belonging* to a collective group’ (Savage, 2000: 115; original emphasis). Savage argues that class can only be considered an ‘individualising process’ (Savage,

1 In Australia, these ideas played a big role, alongside other theoretical influences, in a major study in the mid-1990s that linked social class to cultural choices and consumption habits (Bennett *et al.*, 1999).

2000: 101) and calls for the eradication of modes of class analysis in which the working class is archetypal (Savage, 2000: 9-13). But this draws upon a caricature of the Marxist approach. As we have argued, Marxists have seldom reduced class to a collective identity or to a set of institutions or organisations (e.g. trade unions or political parties). The study of class need not rely upon the subjective preference of individuals in relation to class. Indeed, the problem of subjectivity need not be fatal to the Marxist theory of class, particularly if one relies more upon Marx's 'mature' economic writings in *Capital*, in which the objective conception of class prevails.

The second weakness of Marx's conception of class is that it has difficulty explaining differentiation within class. This problem has become particularly acute during the last five decades as workers within advanced capitalist economies became highly stratified by income, education, skills and control over their immediate conditions of production. Where, for example, do those who sell their labour power, but who enjoy high incomes and a great deal of control and autonomy over their everyday work time, and who are responsible for the supervision of others (such as academics) fit within Marx's schema of class? Marx's own work is inconsistent in this respect. While on the one hand Marx argued that capitalist society was splitting into two hostile classes – proletariat and bourgeoisie – elsewhere he wrote of a 'middle class' (Bottomore, 1991: 85) and at the end of *Capital Volume Three* of 'the three great classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production' – capitalists, wage labourers and landlords (Marx, 1991: 1025).

This has led those in the Marxist tradition to propose a host of different conceptual solutions to the problem posed by real-world class complexity. For example the categories 'new class'; 'new working class'; 'professional managerial class' and 'contradictory class locations' were all put forward as ways of explaining changes to the complexity of class relations in advanced capitalist economies in the late twentieth century. These gaps in Marx's theory of class need not prompt an abandonment of the theory. However, they do open up for consideration the utility of other approaches to class in explaining elements of capitalist society that cannot be derived from Marxist theory. Wright (2009), for example, proposes that a Weberian focus on 'opportunity hoarding' and skill offers a useful complement to the analysis of control and exploitation that is at the heart of Marxist class theory. This is similar to an earlier argument

that used Weberian insights to address the concern that Marx's objective or 'economically-defined' conception of class did not fit with the 'representational practices of political community and solidarity' (Clegg, Boreham and Dow, 1986: 50).

Tracing the Decline of Class Analysis

Having analysed the foundational principles of Marxist class analysis, and established that it has enduring strengths, but also several weaknesses and limitations, we can now examine the more recent trajectory of Marxist class analysis. The purpose of this survey is to identify how Marxist class analysis has responded to challenges to its analytical utility mounted by its critics, and posed by changes within the capitalist economy.

Although the relevance of Marxist class analysis has been singled out by some critics, class analysis *as a whole*, including non-Marxist varieties, has declined as a debating point within the Australian social sciences in the last 30 years. An indication of this is the use of 'class' in titles of scholarly works since the 1970s. To explore this, we have analysed the frequency of the term in the titles of scholarly journal articles published from 1980-2010 listed on Australian Public Affairs - Full Text (APA-FT) online². APA-FT records articles collated from over 500 Australian journals, indexed in the Australian Public Affairs Information Service (APA-FT, 2010)³. This method is not exhaustive and undoubtedly misses some references to class within Australian scholarship. Other concepts such as 'capital', 'cultural capital' or 'capitalism' may also yield constructive findings. However, this exercise is useful because it provides an indicative picture of the trajectory of class analysis in

2 For the purposes of this exercise, the time-period is set as '1980-2009 inclusive'.

3 The criteria for this search is as follows: Journal articles with the term, 'class', were searched in the APA-FT data base. While non-Australian journals and periodicals were accepted as part of the search, at least one of the authors of the article had to be an Australian-based scholar at the time of publication for it to be included in the analysis. The journal articles did not have to be peer-reviewed, e.g. they could be an academic periodical without peer review, such as a newsletter regularly published by academics in a particular field. Nor did they have to be directly associated with an academic institution. They could be from a recognised think-tank or not-for-profit independent organisation. Journals or periodicals associated with political parties or private/for-profit organisations were excluded.

Australia during the last three decades. Despite its downside, this method can help to signpost the general decline in class analysis.

Excluding titles that referred to uses of class other than *social class*, there were 478 titles found in the search over the time-period⁴. If we disaggregate the time series into five-year periods, we see that the number of references to class increased from 1980-84 to 1985-89 then began to decline after plateauing in the late 1990s (Table 1). The share of these references in all APA-FT references followed a similar trend.

**Table 1: References to ‘Class’ in Title
by Time-Period, 1980-2009**

Time-Period	Number Of References (A)	Total Number Of All References In APA-FT (B)	Percentage A/B (%)
1980-84	65	60019	0.11
1985-89	99	70957	0.14
1990-94	84	58979	0.14
1995-99	84	59468	0.14
2000-04	79	62779	0.13
2005-09	67	64683	0.10
Total	478	376885	0.13

Source: Authors’ calculations from APA-FT data

This data also indicate that, while references to class in titles have particularly declined in the last two five-year periods, they have not completely disappeared. Further information is revealed if we look at the specific use of ‘class’ in each title (Table 2). The decline in the use of ‘class struggle’ or ‘class conflict’ is noteworthy given the importance of these terms to Marxist scholars. It is also notable that references to ‘class structure’ declined markedly after 1984. There are no references to this

4 The search found 1301 references to the term, ‘class’, over the entire period (18 April, 2010). This is greater than the number of references to the term in subject-fields (786), showing that a title-based search yields a larger sample. Out of the 1301 titles, there were 478 titles that referred exclusively to social class. 335 titles referred to meanings other than social class, e.g. ‘world class’, ‘class action’, ‘class room’, etc. 146 titles did not actually refer to class in the title on further investigation. 129 titles referred to books; 38 to conference proceedings; 169 to newspapers, magazines and other non-academic periodicals; one screenplay; and five company reports. Thus, $1301 - (335 + 146 + 129 + 38 + 169 + 1 + 5) = 478$.

term in this sample from 1995 onward. This possibly reflects a broader shrinking of Marxist scholarship in Australia. Finally, there has been a notable fall in the use of ‘class analysis’ in titles since the 1980s. There are no references to the term in this sample after 1995.

Table 2: Specific Wording of ‘Social Class’ in Title by Time-Period, 1980-2009 (%)⁵

Specific Term Used In Title	1980-84	1985-89	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04	2005-09	Total
Working class	9	20	25	20	20	22	20
Middle class	12	9	16	10	15	19	13
Ruling class	2	1	0	0	5	2	2
Class struggle /conflict	6	5	4	4	0	2	3
Class formation	3	2	1	2	0	2	2
Class structure	14	5	1	0	0	0	3
Class consciousness	0	2	1	1	1	2	1
Class relations(hips)	0	2	1	1	1	0	1
Class analysis	5	3	2	0	0	0	2
New class	3	2	1	1	0	0	1
Other	46	49	48	61	58	51	52
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

If we look at the disciplinary field in which ‘class’ is deployed, it suggests that there are some key disciplines in which class analysis has become less frequent (Table 3). Where the disciplinary basis of a title is unclear, these have been included in ‘other or not clearly defined’ in Table 3. In anthropology, the number of references has declined markedly since 1999. There were no references in the most recent period (2005-09). In sociology the number of references decreased markedly after 2004. There are two exceptions to this trend. First, the use of ‘class’

5 This figure excludes references to class in general (206 out of total 478 titles) as well as other specific uses of the term that have less than five references in total over the period, 1980-2009. This latter category includes the following terms: apparatchik class, business class, capital class, class politics, class differentiation/difference, class elite, class identity, class inequality, class location, class mobility, class polarisation, class process, class structuration, class theory, class war(fare), creative class, criminal class, high class, intelligentsia, lower class, political class, producing class, upper class.

in education studies has increased slightly; second, references in industrial relations and labour history have increased since the 1999. This trend is most influenced by the journal, *Labour History*, which has the largest number of references of any periodical over the 30-year time series (39).

Finally, the use of ‘class’ in literature or the arts has increased from zero in the first period (1980-84) to maintain a constant level of reference since 1995. A large portion of this has come from *Arena*, a magazine of leftwing and cultural commentary (21 references over the 30-year period) and *Overland*, another leftwing magazine focused on literary and cultural critique (22 references). Overall, despite the decline in references to class, these changes show that a greater proportion of references have come from scholars focussed on studies of industrial relations, labour or labour history and literary and cultural critique, particularly in the last 10 years. In contrast, the proportion of titles contributed to professional sociological and anthropological journals has declined during the same period.

Table 3: Use of ‘Social Class’ in Title by Discipline and Time-Period, 1980-2009 (%)

Discipline/field of study/subject or research area	1980-84	1985-89	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04	2005-09	Total
Anthropology	5	6	7	13	4	0	6
Education studies	6	7	7	5	8	12	7
Gender studies	6	9	8	5	4	3	6
History (incl. Australian and ancient history)	20	4	5	4	4	6	7
Industrial relations, labour studies, labour history	6	7	5	4	8	16	7
Literature and the arts (inc. poetry, drama studies, film studies, theatre)	0	9	14	13	13	13	11
Political science	8	9	7	6	5	6	7
Sociology	23	24	13	14	20	9	18
Other or not clearly defined	26	25	34	36	34	35	31
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Authors’ calculations from APA-FT data

The comparative decline in sociological studies of class seems to be related to the clusters of debate that occurred in the 1980s in relation to key or influential works (for example: Connell, 1977; Connell and Irving, 1992). In addition, a series of debates about the conceptualisation and measurement of class took place in publications such as *Search, Arena* and, especially, the *Journal of Sociology* during the 1980s. Many of the contributions to this journal were an attack on interpretations of Marxist class analysis (Jones and Davis, 1988; Jones, 1988; Graetz, 1986) while others stuck to a more traditional Marxist approach (Barbalet, 1985; Ryan, 1986). There were also attempts to renovate Marxist class analysis, such as Baxter's (1988) argument that Marxism needed to take into account competing class positions within the household.

However, the status of class as a debating point among scholars appears to have atrophied since the 1980s. There have been few recent forums in which scholars who 'do' class analysis can discuss and debate it. Nevertheless, class remains important to some scholars. Despite the decline in the frequency of class analysis in Australian scholarship, many have continued to utilise class as a conceptual framework. To some extent, class analysis in Australia has followed an international trend. This appropriation of Bourdieu's arguments about cultural attributes and class position has been a notable development within this tradition of research in Australia, particularly since the late 1990s (Bennett *et al.*, 1999; Huppatz, 2006; Pearce *et al.*, 2008).

However, many scholars have continued to utilize more traditional Marxist and Weberian approaches. Weberian approaches have been used to study the social consequences of class within a range of fields. For example, class analysis has been applied to the study of domestic violence within social work (Evans, 2005) or in health studies (Najman and Davey Smith, 2000; Pearce *et al.*, 2002). Through the Marxist lens, Australian scholars have analysed and deployed the concepts of the working class (Fieldes, 1996; Bramble, 1996; Masterman-Smith, 2000; Lavelle, 2009) and the capitalist or ruling class (Connell, 2002; Cottle and Collins, 2008; Mack, 2005; Murray, 2006). There are parts of the academy in which innovative work from a Marxist perspective continues to be undertaken.

Developments in Marxist Class Analysis

In light of many of the weaknesses and criticisms outlined in this article, scholars influenced by Marxism have participated in a process of revision and modification of class analysis since the 1980s. Despite the decline in class analysis as an arena of debate in the social sciences (as discussed earlier), class analysis remains a living tradition among groups of Australian scholars. This section looks in more detail at the innovation undertaken by Marxist scholars in Australia, some of it in response to these weaknesses. It outlines some of the unresolved tensions within Marxist research and presents some issues worth revisiting in future research.

First, scholars influenced by Marxism have generated innovative arguments about differentiation within class. Some have reiterated the argument that capitalism has generated a new middle class ‘made up of diverse groups of employees of large organisations in a hierarchy of senior supervisors, professionals and middle managers’ (Kuhn, 2004: 3). This group has emerged alongside the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ of traditional small-scale producers. This view is seen as building upon, and consistent with, Marx’s objective view of class, although the emergence of new classes with salaries or higher levels of work autonomy is regarded as ‘much less important in shaping their lives and, usually, in determining the level of their income, than their *role in production*’ (Kuhn, 2004: 3; original emphasis).

Other scholars have placed greater emphasis on these differences. For instance, some have argued that the behaviour of workers has changed due to the rise of an ‘intelligentsia’, reflecting the impact of university education upon workers (Burgmann and Milner, 1996; Milner, 2000). This approach pairs Marxist ideas about class as a structural division with Bourdieu’s ideas about education as a form of cultural capital. Others have linked structural changes within capitalist economies to the creation of new social relations. Bryan (2008) has linked the financialisation of contemporary capitalism with changes in the relations of class exploitation, arguing that a growing portion of wages have been converted into payments to capital. Wage payments in Australia are now based upon ‘competitively-driven outcomes’ rather than minimum or basic living standards, while there has been a concurrent shift from state-funded pensions to self-funded retirement through compulsory

superannuation (Bryan, 2008: 217). This analysis has implications for relations between wage labourers and actors within state and financial institutions.

In addition, there have been several studies of changes to the composition and activities of the Australian 'ruling class'. The relevance of this concept has been challenged, with Gilding (2004) suggesting that its unifying institutions, such as elite private schools or exclusive clubs based on ethnicity or religion, have lost their importance. However, others have continued to study the objective basis of class rule. One study linked environmental land management to changes in Queensland's rural class structure, suggesting that the economic and political power of large grazier capitalists has historically declined (McAllister and Geno, 2001). Others have explored the relationship between ruling classes and political activism (Cottle and Collins, 2008; Courvisanos and Millmow, 2006; Mack, 2005).

According to Cottle and Collins, Connell's notion of 'ruling class mobilisation' retains contemporary relevance. They use a case study of the Howard government's *WorkChoices* legislation, concluding that a ruling class is able to exercise political rule in an indirect way through periodic mobilisations (Cottle and Collins, 2008). The collective lobbying of the Business Council of Australia for industrial relations reform, including its influence over the drafting of *WorkChoices*, was used to illustrate this mobilisation. This emphasis on the existence of a ruling class with a cohesive set of economic interests reflects some earlier work by Marxist writers (Kuhn 1996; O'Lincoln 1996).

More recently, Kuhn has suggested that ruling class intervention in policymaking can take different forms. There have been moments in Australian history, he argues, in which ruling class figures have acted in a united way, such as the campaign against Ben Chifley's bank nationalisation or support for the Whitlam dismissal in 1975. He uses the example of racism to illustrate other moments in which there is less overt unity, suggesting that most ruling class figures were either ambivalent towards or passively supportive of some mining executives opposing Aboriginal Native Title in the 1980s and 90s or, more recently, newspaper editorials and front pages negatively portraying Muslims in the 2000s (Kuhn, 2009). Alternatively, Kuhn suggests that the views of John Howard against Asian immigration were mitigated somewhat by the

intervention of business figures who expressed concern that this might damage commercial interests.

Second, scholars influenced by Marxism have addressed problems of class identity and consciousness in new ways. Donaldson (2008; 2010) expands Marxist class analysis to understand the multiplicity of class relations in regional towns, and the role of class in the 'grey', 'kinship' and 'gift' economies. According to this view, these areas of social and economic life have been systematically ignored in traditional Marxist analysis. Underscoring the variety of research undertaken, other scholars have investigated working class culture, including the experience of working-class woman in outer-suburban areas (Masterman-Smith, 2000) and even sport (Moore, 2000) or poetry (Attfield, 2001).

Earlier, significant rethinking of class analysis was offered by Gibson-Graham (1996), who moved beyond the analysis of wage-labour and capital to grasp the many ways in which surplus labour is appropriated and distributed. Along with their American collaborators Resnick and Wolff (1987), they offered a radical reworking of class within the Marxist tradition. They attempted to theorise class difference as a 'heterogeneity of economic forms' rather than as a cleavage within capitalist society (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 11). This meant that class was not the only, or the most important, explanation for social and economic inequality. But, since class no longer held 'privilege' for explaining social and economic processes, it also suggested that Marxists could no longer validate class analysis with opposition to 'capitalism'. No doubt it is highly problematic to justify *Marxist* class analysis without reference to capitalism. Pace Wright (2001), Marxist class analysis is presupposed, in an epistemological sense, with emancipatory *anti-capitalist* politics. The Marxian mindset presupposes that something about class enables us to challenge the inequalities or injustices created by powerful economic institutions and structures, and points towards the transformation of society as a whole.

However, despite this disagreement, Gibson-Graham successfully shed light upon some important issues that Marxists need to address. Like some earlier studies of relations between gender and class, they drew attention to unequal relations within the household or to 'non-standard' forms of work, such as self-employment. Their framework has been used to generate novel historical findings (Robinson, 2003). Even a strong critic of their framework, who emphasized the link between the capitalist

economy and the lives of working class women, conceded that Gibson-Graham had drawn attention to the ‘informal, unorganised aspects of life’ often ignored by the ‘institutional emphasis’ of political economists (Masterman-Smith, 2000: 63). This suggests that it is necessary that Marxists observe and analyse a multiplicity of class-based relations, and non-class relations such as gender or race. However, in our view, this can be achieved without eschewing structural analysis of capitalism or discarding the emancipatory logic of classical Marxism.

There are different ways of approaching this. For instance, Donaldson (2008) offers one route for analysing the wide variety of class relations in contemporary society. His review of union activities in nine towns in regional NSW, Victoria and WA uncovered five broad groupings: workers reliant on wage payments (including those reliant upon the cash economy), people ‘outside’ the wage relation (pensioners, unemployed, etc), self-employed people (owner-drivers, providers of domestic and personal services, tradespeople, professionals), including those who employ others (shopkeepers, small manufacturers, publicans and other small business people), senior and middle managers of the towns’ largest businesses (councils, industries, retail chains, hospitals) and, finally, major employers, key shareholders and director of large companies who, Donaldson argues, reside in various capital cities in Australia and overseas (Donaldson 2008: 23-4). The ‘working class’, he suggests, reflects aspects of these diverse social relations rather than simply reflecting the ‘labour movement’.

This is not an exhaustive account of class diversity in regional areas. It does not, for instance, take stock of relations within the household in any direct way. More recent work by Donaldson suggests grounds for researching the ‘grey economy’ of families and small businesses, the ‘kinship’ and ‘gift’ economies, people who work from home and ‘immaterial workers’ (Donaldson, 2010). In general, this type of analysis has the advantage of drawing attention to a multiplicity of class relations that characterise contemporary capitalism, while remaining open to analysis of structural economic change. It also poses some methodological challenges to the study of class. For instance, Donaldson suggests that class analysis must incorporate time spent outside the employment relationship, such as travel time, engagement in educational and recreational facilities, and relations among networks of family members and friends (Donaldson, 2008: 26). This argument seems open enough to benefit from recent insights from Bourdieuan analysis, such

as the role of cultural pursuits in social segmentation, while also seeming capable of linking with changes to the structure of capitalism, such as changed occupational division of labour or the expansion of part-time and casual work.

This approach is also consistent with the epistemological basis of Marxist class analysis in anti-capitalist struggle. A focus on different configurations of class relations (domestic work, informal workers, the self-employed, pensioners, the unemployed, precariously-employed, *etc.*), alongside the traditional focus on employer-worker relations, would represent a strengthening of Marxist class analysis. The underlying concern of this approach is with finding the successful ingredients for labour organisation, such as social movement unionism or community-based trade unionism. The reinvigoration of Marxist class analysis may benefit the most from a more specific concern to *rejuvenate* labour movements following a long period of decline. The study of new and diverse class relations is necessary, not to pursue a break with traditional Marxism as some have suggested, but in order to inform a practice of labour movement activism that is responsive and relevant to changes in contemporary class society.

Conclusion

The article has charted recent developments in Marxist class analysis among scholars in Australia. Despite the caricatures of Marxist class analysis by some of its critics, scholars influenced by Marxism have continued to find innovative ways of applying class analysis to contemporary capitalist societies. In many cases, this has encompassed responses to limitations in the Marxist tradition. The weaknesses highlighted in this article involve the capacity of Marxism to explain subjectivity and multiple identities, as well as its capacity to incorporate differentiation within class as a consequence of capitalism's changing social and economic structure. In the latter case, scholars have studied the impact of higher education upon class structure and individual behaviour, and the transformation of class relations during an era of financialised capitalism. Other scholars have continued to produce relevant research on more traditional Marxist concerns, such as the cohesiveness, power and political influence of the Australian ruling class.

In the case of subjectivity and identity, scholars in Australia have produced research that significantly updates Marxism's relevance. In particular, Gibson-Graham offered a radical reworking of Marxist theory. Despite their attempt to sever the conceptual ties binding capitalism and class, their research drew attention to the diverse forms and conditions of labour in contemporary societies. Other scholars have adopted similar empirical insights in order to redefine the scope of class and to recast the diversity of contemporary forms as the critical challenge facing labour movements. This, in our view, represents an upgrading of class analysis that is consistent with the epistemological core of Marxism: critical analysis to identify struggles with the potential, in Wright's terms, to transform society in an emancipatory direction. If, as Donaldson suggests, there are numerous class relations that exist outside the scope of traditional analysis, then the revival of labour movements will depend to a large degree on the ability of like-minded activists and scholars to discover new ways of understanding this diversity. The scale of this task means there is much work that Marxist scholars can continue to contribute to.

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