

Labour History

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1. Sinclair and W. G. Rimmer

Suburban Melbourne, 1891-1911

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Eastern Eyes: Large Freehold Estates in South

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ay: A Further Comment

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CLASS AND POLITICS II¹

HUMPHREY MCQUEEN

When *Labour History* began in 1962, it took up what *Business Archives and History* left out. Capital and labour were not locked in dialectical contradiction: they ignored each other. This stand-off would have surprised the author of *Das Kapital*; and it did not descend from Coghlan or Fitzpatrick. Its origins lie in the nervousness of 'lefties' still in the grip of Menzies' fear campaigns. They were seeking intellectually respectable and politically safe pastures. A score of books on specifically 'labour' history topics, as well as dozens of post-graduate theses, have appeared since then. Today, the battle lines are not as sharp: the renamed *Australian Economic History Review* includes labour history while *Labour History* entered its sixteenth year with a substantive debate over the propriety of Marxists using business history texts as a source of information. And yet, so strongly entrenched is the business history/labour history barrier that even quite superficial cracks in it, like John Rickard's *Class and Politics*, astound the labour side into outlandish praise.

For a class analysis to be valid it needs two interlocking characteristics. First, classes must be seen as relationships; second, all subjective criteria must be rejected.

There is no such thing as a class by itself, and to this limited extent E. P. Thompson is correct: class is a relationship. The hard question remains: what kind of relationship? For Thompson, Rickard's mentor, classes happen 'when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the *productive relations* into which men are born—or enter involuntarily.' (Emphasis added.)² Having broached the right answer, namely, 'productive relations', Thompson thereafter avoids these and talks exclusively about the consciousness which arises from experiencing these relations. This is yet another example of admitting that something is true in order to avoid its implications. Classes are not derived from social relations of production; classes are part of those relations.

Classes are objective realities and not subjective since they are neither responses from within, nor categories imposed from without. The existence of classes does not depend on awareness by the individuals who compose them, although some such awareness is invariably present, if only in the mystified forms of theology or deference. Nor are classes convenient tools made up by historians for the purpose of broad categorisation of otherwise unmanageable bits of information. When Rickard uses class in either, or both, of these ways, it is not without its uses, but these remain subjective. For them to become objective they have to refer to things which exist independently of our knowledge of

1. John Rickard, *Class and Politics*, New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890-1910, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1976. pp. 371. \$15.95.

2. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1968, p. 9.

them. Historians who aspire to a class analysis must not merely write about what they call 'labour and capital', but must deal with the question of wage labour *versus* capital, with the classes defined objectively according to the social relations of production. This is precisely what Rickard fails to do.

Capitalism is a particular form of social productive relations. The classes which comprise capitalism are the bourgeoisie³ and the proletariat. Other classes exist *alongside* (not *between*) these two classes; for example, the traditional petty-bourgeoisie who are the self-employed. Other modes of production—slavery with the convicts, primitive communism with the Aborigines—have existed alongside the capitalist mode in Australia so that at some moments, especially in the early years of European settlement, there were at least five different classes here, plus the initially classless Aborigines who were being subjugated into capitalist, slave or even feudal modes.⁴ By 1890, the social formation in Victoria and New South Wales had been reduced to a purely capitalist one with its two essential classes of proletarians and bourgeoisie, as well as the traditional petty-bourgeoisie. Within all these, there were differentiated fractions, strata, and categories. For example, the capitalists were divided into manufacturing, rural, commercial and financial fractions, which were in turn split between national, comprador and directly Imperialist sectors.

A complicating feature in Australia remains the domination of the state apparatus here by a foreign bourgeoisie, first British and now American. The development of monopoly capitalism (Lenin's Imperialism) after about 1870 brought major changes to the ways in which the class structure and state apparatuses worked together. This is most evident in the establishment of Federation to serve Britain's economic and military interests. None the less, scholars like Rickard still attempt to discuss Australia around the turn of the century without even raising these questions. The inherent and vital complexity of any class society is easy to cope with providing historical writing is grounded in an understanding of the social relations of production. Once an investigation loses sight of those relations, class becomes a slippery dip into all manner of confusion, nonsense and inferior mathematics.

The most muddled aspect in Rickard's book is his so-called 'middle-class'. Even at a semantic level, 'middle class' begs the question: middle between what? If the answer is between an upper class and a lower class, then the silliness of such notions is revealed, even without old jokes about the prospect of upper-lower-middle classes and middle-upper-lower classes. Historians generally use the term 'middle class' to refer to something more substantial; to genuine classes, in fact. In discussions of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, middle class is usually a somewhat blurred way of talking about capitalists, or the bourgeoisie, who are seen as being middle in the sense of not being either the feudal aristocracy or serfs-cum-wage labourers. When writing about a capitalist country such as post-1840 Australia, Rickard uses 'middle-class' in an even sloppier way, this time to refer to the self-employed plus brain workers such as clerks and teachers.

In neither case is 'middle' an appropriate choice. Yet it is preferable to using 'middle class' as a blanket term for all difficult cases, that is, as

3. 'Bourgeoisie' is more accurate than 'capitalists' since 'bourgeoisie' includes the strata of non-owners who help to make the expropriation of surplus value possible.
4. Although the slave and feudal modes were confined to outback stations and missions their existence underlines the need to work from real economic relationships and not to be blinded by juridical forms.

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a means of avoiding rigorous thinking. Too often, 'middle class' expands and contracts to suit the exigencies of Rickard's thesis, so that on one page the 'middle class' are outside the ruling group and ten pages further on they are its embodiment. Or worse still, a 'middle class' can range from self-made men to the shabby genteel, and still not be embarrassed about not being in the middle of anything.

A pertinent case concerns the Maritime Officers in 1890. What class were they? Despite everything that has been written about the 1890 strike, the evidence needed to answer this question has not been presented. To decide in which class the Maritime Officers belonged it will be necessary to find out exactly what they did on the ships, in other words, where did they fit into the social relations of production? It may be that the empirical evidence needed to answer this question does not exist, though that is unlikely. What we need to find out is: were the Officers merely leading hands who worked alongside the sailors for the privilege of more responsibility and a strip of gold braid; or were they non-working foremen, that is, people who did what the shipowners would have done if they had been present, namely, ensure that the labour-power they were buying was employed to its maximum capacity? Only after this has been determined can we begin to work out if the role of the Maritime Officers was as surprising as Rickard suggests.

The same rule applies to those shearers who owned small farms. When they were shearing for wages, they were objectively proletarians, irrespective of what dreams of self-employed independence they indulged to take their minds off the stench of fly-blown sheep and the aches in their own backs. And when they went to their farms at the end of the season, they would enter into petty-bourgeois productive relations. Class is not an attribute of individuals, not a label to be attached to each person in turn. Shearer X was not a proletarian today and a petty-bourgeois tomorrow. What changed were the social relations of production which he occupied. How he *responded* to the demands of each was decided by the contingencies of each new day, and by longer-standing ideological and political practices.

Rickard is one of those who ask whether this strike or that speech was an example of the class struggle, as if the class struggle is an optional extra. The class struggle is always present in capitalism, whether at home as the quality of food to eat or as child raising; at work, as afternoon tea breaks and overtime; at play, as shorter hours and sufficient energy for sport. What varies are the manifestations of the endless struggle for the product of workers' labour power: an assembly line is secretly speeded up today; the whole plant is locked out next week. Although it was intended to poke fun at militant shop stewards, the TV series, *The Rag Trade*, could not avoid showing the constant stream of conflict which exists at every point of production in a class-based system. The proletariat does not trundle the class struggle on and off the stage of history like the dragon in *Siegfried*. It is nonsensical to write as if the class struggle in Victoria made guest appearances in 1890-91, rested until 1903 after which it retired because of small houses.

Something else is happening. Once Marxism stopped being mass psychotherapy based on the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, it refound its scientific basis in the dictum that 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. Consequently, radical students now want thesis topics on the dominant, rather than on the oppressed classes, on how the former, and their forebears, organised events such as 11 November 1975. Instead of reading *Common Cause*

Humphrey McQueen

for footnotes about strikes, they are turning to the *Banking and Insurance Review* for the details of capital formation; turning away from tape recordings of old militants and straight into the papers of W. S. Robinson. In second-hand book shops they buy Butlin's *Australia and New Zealand Bank* in preference to Hagan's story of the Printing Union.

This move to a radically inspired business history has reproduced a problem which faced labour historians in the early days, namely, those academic political biases which masquerade as scholarly standards. Marxist students either very carefully select their teachers and examiners; resort to amazing subterfuges; or they are failed, sometimes by the very people whose careers 'suffered' for being labour historians in the past. Though first-rate minds might still look down on labour history, it is no threat to their view of a world where workers are always striking over something and generally causing trouble. Capital history is different. It intrudes onto the preserves of the great mind, challenging the biographical approach to ruling class style and character with rough talk of dominant classes and state apparatuses, terms which are nothing less than seditious utterances undermining faith in our national institutions, parliament and the Governor-General.

With its own journal starting early in 1978, capital history seems assured of a future.⁵ And here lies the danger. Capital history no more equals Marxism than does labour history. What is needed is 'Wage-labour versus capital history'. If capital history is mistaken for anything other than a necessary transition in order to correct existing imbalances, there is a real danger that capital history will fall victim to the accusation that 'You've got the state apparatuses and the fractions of capital alright, but where's the bloody work-horse?'

Canberra.

5. Some published examples of capital history include the chapters by Collins and Dunn in volume one of Wheelwright and Buckley's *Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*; Rowse in *Arena*, number 44-45; as well as articles by Rowley and Cochrane in *Intervention*, numbers 1 and 6 respectively. Of course, there are other, much earlier examples of capital history, such as D. W. A. Baker's 'Origins of Robertson's Land Acts', *Historical Studies*, May 1958.