

Social class

Patrick Ainley evaluates two recent studies.

Erik Olin Wright (2015) *Understanding Class*. London: Verso. 260 pages. £14.99 pbk. ISBN: 978-1-78168-945-5

Mike Savage (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*. London: Penguin Random House. 449 pages. £6.29 pbk. ISBN: 978-0-241-00422-7.

Introduction

This review adds to the recent discussion about social class in *PSE*. One view was that there are growing inequalities in society but there is no longer a ruling class. Another was that in the growing gap between top and bottom, the post-war class pyramid has gone 'pear-shaped' as the division of labour and knowledge between a non-manual middle class and a manual working class has been eroded by new technology to leave a new middle-working/working-middle class. From this new middle it was suggested there is general downward social mobility into a so-called 'underclass' status. Not all living on benefits, as presented in the media, these workers are churning in and out of unskilled, temporary and insecure mainly service jobs. They thus put constant pressure on the wages and conditions of those more securely employed, functioning as today's version of Marx's Reserve Army of Labour which has ratcheted up in recession. Alternatively, the growing numbers of 'the working poor' can be seen as a whole new class that Guy Standing calls *The Precariat*, many of whom are young, including students in and out of employment. Certainly, whatever is going on, education and training are heavily implicated.

Contradictory class locations?

Erik Olin Wright is a US sociologist known for developing the *moratorium* idea that lengthening education (which happened first in the USA) effectively removes young people from the labour market and consequently any allocation by occupation that could situate them in a class. The English sociologist Ken Roberts added that this may be the reason for weakening class consciousness among the young. On the other hand, whereas previously everyone was gentled along in primary and comprehensive schools until they were divided into sheep or goats for O-levels or CSEs and then the majority goats kicked up around 13, today relentless testing from an early age gives everyone clear signals of their place in the scheme of things. Discuss!

Wright also tried to integrate Marx with Weber who had argued that, as well as Marx's class divisions based on ownership or non-ownership of capital, there were also groups with different 'marketable skills' in the labour market. Weber's was therefore a more fluid and adaptable description than the two Marxist classes of capitalists and proletarians. However, Wright proclaims in the preface to this book that 'My own approach to class is firmly embedded in the Marxist tradition' and he looks back over a long career to 'clarify and appropriate what is valuable rather than simply discrediting the ideas of rival approaches . . . to try to systematically integrate those insights into a broader framework.' Whether he is successful or not can be judged from his conclusions.

First, however, he describes the various sociological approaches with which he engages,

including a chapter on what he calls 'The Ambiguities of Class in Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*'. He then contrasts them with his own view of the USA today, disagreeing with those proposing the death of class in favour of individualised consumerism but also with Standing's notion of the precariat as a new class.

Instead, Wright finds 'An extremely rich capitalist and corporate managerial class, living at extraordinarily high consumption standards, with relatively weak constraints on their exercise of economic power.' Beneath them 'a large and relatively stable middle class anchored in an expansive and flexible system of higher education . . . but whose security and future prosperity is now uncertain'. They share a standard of living and security with a working class once quite highly unionised 'but which now largely lacks these protections'. Beneath them 'a poor and precarious segment of the working class' and 'a marginalized and impoverished section of the population'. 'The US class structure is [thus] the most polarised at the bottom among developed capitalist countries with an 'interaction of race and class in which the working poor and the marginalized population are disproportionately made up of racial minorities' (pp. 16-17).

So what is to be done?

In an 'era of stagnation and crisis', when the social-democratic post-war decades can be recognised as 'a happy historical anomaly in which conditions were favourable for the positive class compromise that underwrote economic security and modest prosperity for most people in developed capitalist countries' (p. 241), Wright looks for 'Strategies that try to create conditions for positive class compromise' (p. 240), since 'an exit from capitalism is not an option in the present historical period' (p. 239). However, he considers it is possible to redirect dominant finance capital from speculation to productive investment by 're-establishing the capacity of the state to effectively regulate finance and hold it democratically accountable . . . partially impeding the global flow of capital' (p. 244) with a Tobin tax on financial transactions.

To achieve this requires 'mobilizing sufficiently strong and resilient political forces' (p. 245). This will be helped by strengthening non-capitalist alternatives such as worker co-operatives via employee-majority stock ownership as a transitional form between a conventional capitalist firm and a fully democratic worker co-op. The social economy of 'economic activities organized by communities of various kinds on non-profit organizations for the satisfaction of

needs rather than for exchange and profit' should also be developed 'to fill gaps caused by the retreat of the welfare state' (248).

'Another way of strengthening non-capitalist elements with a capitalist economy is by expanding the ways in which popular organizations are involved in allocating capital', what Wright calls 'Solidarity Finance' (p. 249) – 'decentralized institutional devices that direct investment to those economic activities . . . complementary to regional economic development strategies organized by the state . . . expanding the space for non-capitalist alternatives within capitalist economies' (p. 250), as opposed to phoney government initiatives such as the UK's 'Northern powerhouses' which are merely means to further privatise local government services.

Together with an international Keynesianism focused in the UK's case on changing the governance of the EU – not leaving it!, this is a general outline, prefigured in proposals for a green economy, for a resolution to the crisis of social-democracy of which Corbynism is a symptom.

By contrast

With Mike Savage, you do not get much more than a contribution to the public debate on social class that his Great British Class Survey (completed by 161,000 self-selected Radio 4 listeners in 2011) greatly confused by 'elaborating a new sociological model . . . proclaiming the existence of seven new classes' (p. 5). At the top, a wealthy elite 4 per cent that is much larger than the more usually accepted 'top 1 per cent' – or even 0.1 per cent, internationalised finance-capitalist ruling class. At the bottom, a precariat, not defined in the way that Standing does, nor as an 'under-class' or Reserve Army of Labour, but making up 15 per cent of the population, though fewer than 1 per cent of the GBCS's respondents.

In between the two classes of elite snobs and precarious jobs, as it could be more crudely put, 'the dividing line between middle and working class has little purchase today' and in its place there are 'a more fragmented set of groups' (p. 180). These range through an embattled 'established middle class' (25 per cent), challenged by a rising 'technical middle class' (6 per cent) and 'new affluent workers' (15 per cent), taking over from a just about surviving 'traditional working class' (14 per cent), alongside 'emerging service workers' (19 per cent). These percentages are listed hierarchically in table 5.2 on p. 174, though it is explained elsewhere that they jostle one another, more like Weber's competing economic groups.

'In a nutshell, this is the new landscape of social

class in the twenty-first century' (p. 181)! How did such a 'Great British Class Fiasco', as it has been called in the pages of *Sociology*, arise? Moreover, one which has taken such effort and expense, building up an entire industry in Mike's progress from York to Manchester Universities, on to the London School of Economics, where he now sustains what is presented as the new orthodoxy of 'a multidimensional approach to class' (p. 401).

This draws upon the French sociologist of education, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (the cultural privilege that money can buy but which presents itself as an apparently natural 'effortless achievement'), combined with social capital (networking, basically) together with economic (money) capital. Savage instances Bourdieu's use of 'cultural capital' in his book *Distinction* where Bourdieu compared industrial capitalists (factory owners *etc*) with intellectuals (professors *etc*), to show in diagrams how the taste of the former for 'Bohemian Rhapsody' contrasts with the latter who prefer obscure modern composer Pierre Boulez. Since they are French, the same logic extends to their tastes in wines and food!

But Savage does not follow Bourdieu as he thinks he does by including cultural capital questions in his GBCS, such as which newspaper you read or whether you prefer opera to heavy metal *etc*, so as to define the seven new classes he claims to have found. By contrast, Bourdieu's respondents were already defined by their wealth and occupation and he showed that, while the capitalists were high in economic capital, their cultural and social capital, ie how many influential people they knew *etc*, could be low. Contrariwise, the intellectuals, though low in money capital, were high on cultural capital.

This showed the importance of education and the 'trick' it plays in teaching everyone the same National Curriculum (as there was also in France at that time) but with unequal results because those with the cultural capital (acquired from their more expensive and extensive upbringing and schooling) will do better in school than those who lack the 'background' to engage successfully with education. (This explains why Michael Gove went wrong in supposing that inflicting a grammar-school education upon all state pupils would provide equal opportunities for everyone to be unequal.) Thus, Bourdieu writes in his 1964 book on students that 'The university preaches only to the converted'.

Bourdieu thereby validated the original nineteenth century use of the 'cultural capital' concept to explain why, after the Restoration of the monarchy in France, the descendants of those who had lost their inheritance of land and titles under the Revolution were able to rise so easily to the top of the new society.

Savage with his 'multidimensional approach' gives equal weight to cultural and social as well as to economic capital in constituting his scale of seven classes from the elite at the top to the precariat at the bottom but with no necessary connection between them. Certainly not a causative one of exploitation that Wright defines as 'the acquisition of economic benefits from those who are dominated' (p. 9) and which he sees giving rise to class struggle so as 'to see the formation of class actors contesting for power as the central axis of class analysis' (p. 97).

However, Savage's new orthodoxy appeals to education researchers. At least, they can claim to increase some pupils'/students' chances of upward social mobility (characteristically referred to throughout Savage's book merely as 'social mobility' without specifying its direction), whose lack of real capital can be compensated for by boosting their cultural capital, if not extending their range of acquaintance to diversify their social capital. Hence, girls into engineering, visits to the opera for those on free school meals, black youth on work placements in top City banks, *etc, etc*. So 'educationalists' claim they are at least making the system a bit more 'fair' and are dedicated to 'social justice'.

Yet, as Ken Roberts (unmentioned by Savage) concluded in his masterwork on *Class in Modern Britain*, 'the best way to change mobility flows is to change the structure of opportunities itself' and yet 'virtually all policy-makers and many sociologists continue to act as if modest interventions in education and training will bring about significant redistribution of life-chances'. Roberts is also very good on the ruling class (less than one per cent) whom he characterises as 'the smallest . . . best organised . . . and most class conscious' class, as he describes their aristocratically encrusted and celebrity-strewn social calendar. 'There is no fence', he emphasises, between this upper class and those managers and professionals who accept 'a service relationship' to them. All this is lost to Savage who even muddles his 'elite' with an 'aristocracy' that most historians agree had married out to industrial capitalists by the mid-nineteenth century.

References

Roberts, K. (2001) *Class in Modern Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat, The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.