

Threadgold, S., Gerrard, J. (Eds.) (2022)

***Class in Australia*, Monash University Publishing.**

Review by Sarah Attfield

Class in Australia is a collection of twelve essays and two interviews that seeks to demonstrate the importance of class analysis in understanding how inequality works in Australia. The chapters are mostly written from a sociological perspective, with the majority of authors being sociologists (with the exception of some historians, political economists and authors from the field of education).

In the introduction to the collection, Threadgold and Gerrard state that ‘class inequality exists and gaps are widening’ (4). And they note that class as a method of analysis is making a ‘re-emergence’ (5), but that it is still ‘markedly absent’ from public discussions of inequality (5). The book is therefore designed to open up debate and discussion of class.

The book is structured into five sections; situating class analysis in Australia; class, labour and employment; cultural formations of class; class and education and finally, interviews. The contributors employ a variety of different approaches and methods, from survey-type chapters that look at class analysis across various time periods, to case studies and textual analysis.

There is a sense of what has come before in chapters such as Greg Noble’s ‘Contradictory Locations of Class’ that looks back on class analysis from the 1970s and asks what class models are ‘for’ (36). And this is a pertinent question, and one that several authors attempt to tackle. Class analysis is also contextualised within Australia’s colonial history with a chapter by Barry Morris that explains how the original penal colony became a capitalist society and the way in which ‘colonial class dynamics’ (40), operated in the settler-colonial society that was based on the violent dispossession of Indigenous people by the settlers. This context is important in gaining an understanding of how class in Australia shares some commonalities with the British system that it is based on, but also how the specific circumstances of colonialism in Australia further shaped the class system. This type of survey also includes the different ways that class positions have been described and defined, and Mark Western evaluates some of these methods in his chapter ‘Some Comments on Class Analysis’.

The book then turns to issues around labour, with a chapter by Hannah Forsyth on ‘Rethinking Class Through the History of Professions’. The focus here is on the rise of the middle classes in Australia and the role they have played in shaping Australian politics. This section also includes a chapter that attempts to ‘modify class theory to better address...precarity’ (94), with the authors, Tom Barnes and Jasmine Ali offering a critique of some existing scholarship on precarious workers, and presenting their own ideas based on a case study of warehouse workers. This chapter includes a small number of quotes from the workers themselves. Unemployment is also tackled in this section, with Jessica Gerrard and David Farrugia considering how notions of a work ethic have been used to paint unemployed people as lazy and ‘unproductive’ (109). Excerpts from an interview with a young unemployed woman bring this study to life.

In part three of the book, there is a turn towards culture, with a chapter on the use of the term ‘bogan’ as a derogatory method of describing working-class Australians – at least those who do not adhere to notions of respectability or ‘worthiness’ (129). And Penni Rossiter follows with a look at *Struggle Street*, which was a fly-on-the-wall reality TV show about a group of working-class people in western Sydney. Rossiter is not completely dismissive of the show and suggests that it did give some of its participants a chance to tell their own stories (and I have previously [commented](#) on this aspect too). The final chapter in this section is a discussion of class positioning in rural romance literature which, according to the authors, Barbara Pini and Laura Rodriguez Castro, tends towards a neo-liberal white, middle-class presentation of feminism (163).

Class and education is the theme of the next short section, consisting of a chapter that revisits a longitudinal study undertaken in the 1990s that followed a group of teenagers from private and public schools and demonstrated intersections of class and gender in educational settings. Intersections of class and race also feature in the following chapter by Rose Butler, Christina Ho and Eve Vincent who conducted interviews with parents of students at private and state selective schools (these schools require an academic test to gain entry). The study focuses mainly on middle-class parents and reveals white middle-class negative perceptions and judgements towards the parenting of Asian-background students who placed emphasis on their children’s academic success via entry into a selective school.

The book concludes with two interviews, one with Professor Larissa Behrendt who is an Indigenous scholar and filmmaker. Behrendt outlines the ways that class is experienced and understood by Indigenous people in Australia and speaks of the class system as ‘imported ideas’ (217) ‘forced’ (217) onto Indigenous people by the British colonists. Behrendt concludes by stating that Indigenous people must tell their own stories (222). The other interview is with Professor Raewyn Connell, a sociologist known for her work on class and masculinities in Australia. Connell notes the changes in class relations that have occurred since she began her work in the 1970s and speaks about the development of class analysis in Australia.

It is very welcome to see this interest in class analysis from an Australian perspective. It has been difficult to garner such interest in a country that likes to think of itself as egalitarian, and the chapters in the books demonstrate that this idea is indeed a myth. There is useful historical context and helpful surveys of class analysis, as well as some finer grained case studies. But overall, I would have liked to know more about the class positions of the authors. Raewyn Connell is the only contributor who directly references their own class background (as middle-class) and provides some insight into why she became interested in understanding how class works. The aims of the other authors are less clear, and from a working-class studies perspective, this book lacks the kinds of narratives that bring class issues to life. Working-class studies centres the experiences of working-class people in its scholarship and this is what I would have liked to see in this (otherwise very worthy) collection of essays.

Reviewer Bio

Sarah Attfield is a senior lecturer in communication at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. She is the co-editor of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*. Her latest publications include [Class on Screen: The Global Working Class in Contemporary Cinema](#) (2020).