

**The Enigma of Class in Aotearoa New Zealand:** Review of Chris Wilkes, *Reinventing Capitalism in New Zealand*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle, 2019.

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Michael Burawoy, in a recent memorable testimonial to his friend and colleague Erik Olin Wright, reflects that Wright's life epitomised the shifting balance between sociology and Marxism that ebbed and flowed in tune with changes in the political context of the time (2020:485). He also notes that Wright, despite an unwavering adherence to the value of Marx and a belief that some versions of Marxism portended a better future for humankind, became increasingly prepared to engage with those members of the sociological discipline, primarily in the USA but also worldwide, who were willing to engage in productive dialogue (see, for example, Wright, 1997 and 2009). This stance was evident to a degree in Wright's cross-national empirical project in the 1980s, which drew upon researchers from a variety of political and theoretical persuasions to examine the class structure of their societies, although, as this book attests, his allegiance to classical Marxian conceptions of class were more to the fore at this juncture.

Chris Wilkes was the lead researcher in the New Zealand survey that formed part of Wright's ambitious venture and this book is a long-delayed reappraisal of this study (earlier reported in Wilkes et al, 1985) and a reflection on some of its historical but not future ramifications. Since Wilkes, whilst arguing, rightly, that the survey needed to be placed within a more expansive historical framework notes that, with just a few asides, he will not discuss any research, commentary and events that postdates the research undertaken in 1984. This strategy presents the reader and reviewers, especially ones who are familiar with many of Wright's prolific writings and the local and international Marxist and sociological genres he worked within, with a quandary. How does one accommodate the fact, which Wilkes only partly acknowledges, at least for Wright, that he and many other scholars who are evaluated within *Reinventing Capitalism in New Zealand* have modified or moved beyond their then perspectives and interests? Moreover much recent scholarship that the author ignores has added new insights about Wilkes' pre-1984 period and the questions he poses about it?

In his introduction, the author avers that his prime aim is to provide what he sees, on reflection, as the theoretical and empirical deficiencies of Wright's project by adding an historical account of the processes and structures that promoted a reinvention of class society in New Zealand and to engage in what proves to be a lively, if very uneven and combative discussion of exegetical, theoretical, and empirical disputes within and beyond Marxism. Aided by an often appealing blend of autobiographical and literary allusions, Wilkes suggests that New Zealand's distinctive history as a British settler society has

promoted several familiar and intriguing questions about class or its absence, many of which relate to constant comparisons between the colony and its metropolis. The problem, as he strongly argues, is that most of the attempts to analyse this have major shortcomings. Neo-Weberian sociologists, and yes, I am a chief suspect so my conflict of interest should be noted, and what are called 'end of ideology' historians (Sinclair and Oliver, for example) are given very short shrift for, in Wilkes' view, as there has been either completely misconceiving of class analysis or denying the existence of classes. Some Marxists, notably Bedggood, while commended for at least having their heart in the right place, are castigated for their dogmatism and determinism. Wright, in turn, is heavily chastised for his 'ahistoricism, super-structuralism and failure to account for social practice' (p.49).

For the author, Wrights' static, synchronic mapping of the class structure must be complemented by a dynamic diachronic analysis of the sources of class society. Thus, his over-concern with reductionist problems of class classification must be replaced by an analysis more sensitive to agents and their actions with a greater appreciation of the intersections between class, gender, 'race' and ethnicity and a stronger emphasis on 'subjectivity, lived experience and daily life' (p.56). This prompts Wilkes to shift towards Bourdieu, albeit in cursory fashion, especially in his concluding chapter. Hence, one might have thought he would display a greater empathy, certainly evident in Wright's later writings to non-Marxist approaches, but this is conspicuously lacking in the repeated jousting with alternative perspectives that often seem far closer to the author's position than he cares to admit. Unsurprisingly, Wilkes relies on selective Australasian Marxist sources to construct his historical analysis but also draws copiously on the empirical work of other historians, sociologists, and social commentators. There is, however, a frustrating lack of engagement with much scholarly work on his period, both within and beyond Marxism. This all makes for a very animated nostalgic return for protagonists of the time reading these swingeing assertions, which often border on caricature (of course I would say that) but begs caution for readers unaware of these shortcomings.

Far more interesting are the chapters where Wilkes provides an analysis of the origins of New Zealand colonialism, the onset of the Lib/Lab period, and the move towards what the author (with Mike O'Brien, 1993) has described elsewhere as the Fordist period of Labour predominance, which surprisingly is hardly mentioned here. Before returning to the debate, and that may be too kind a word, on the 'Modern Class Structure', which takes us to the 1980s. In these chapters (4, 5 and 6), whose key findings are summarised and (compared to Wilkes et al, 1985 extended) in the lengthy concluding section of the book, the author develops an argument that classes were an integral part of settler capitalism but the close links between local and international capital and labour were tempered by a variety of contextual features in colonial Aotearoa that meant the British class structure was not reconstructed *tout court*. Local and migrant lived experiences in the Pacific and intimate international connections with Empire added layers of complexity that created and sustained myths of classlessness that coexisted with political and economic hierarchical relations within and beyond the settler population that was most visible along ethnic and gender lines.

Based on a useful comparison of local and regional differences that typified New Zealand between 1840 and 1890 the author stresses that society was highly fluid, yet the capitalist

processes of property and labour exploitation were evident, especially if in classical Marxian fashion you suggest that most migrants in this period did not acquire *real* property since nominal domestic housing and land are discounted as constituting the basis for economic and political power and dominance. While those 'gentry' that did acquire such assets and control were, at least regionally, demonstrably superordinate to a class-fragmented Pakeha and an increasingly landless Maori proletariat (p.350). But this is a designation that oversimplifies a complex set of iwi and hapu economies and their political interactions with settlers before their move into the capitalist workforce in greater numbers after this period. These core contradictions are further explored in the pivotal Lib/Lab period where the politics of the IC&A Act, for example, are seen as typifying a greater coalescence of class interests in a period of transition that culminated in the election of the first Labour Government in 1935. For Wilkes, a national class structure is starting to form between 1891 and 1911 and there are signs of a discernible labour movement combining around major questions about State intervention and workplace relations, although the fact that many workers were voluntarily or involuntarily excluded from this juridical and political mechanism is underplayed. And more could have been said about local and offshore liberalisms (with emphasis on a small 'l'), debates about the role of the State, and the semi-peripherality of New Zealand's international location and linkages (see, for example, Boreham et al, 1989, whose work is drawn from the Wright project).

When Wilkes reaches his 'phase of consolidation' (from 1935 to 1984) we are presented with detailed appraisals of the survey findings in respective chapters on Property, Control and Labour. These contain a profusion of tables drawn from individually structured questionnaires and helpful biographical vignettes based on the coding of open-ended responses. Readers are recommended to go back to earlier published reports for methodological detail about sample locations and size (see Wilkes et al, 1985) but it would have been useful if this book had a brief Appendix that could be referred to, especially given virtually all tables are based on percentages with no 'Ns' supplied. There is no indication as to whether the data has been appropriately weighted to better align with census proportions. In most cases, the sample size seems to merit this type of analysis and very occasionally the author notes one should be cautious about cell numbers but their mainly marked absence throughout is unexplained and so makes it difficult to reappraise with any precision. This is unfortunate because the data and its analysis deserve closer scrutiny than can be relayed here. Baldly, however, Wilkes concludes that a clear class hierarchy is exhibited using property, wealth, and occupational figures, although ownership and employment status are not used consistently in analyses. Yet the tables show that most of his respondents display little recognition of these divisions, particularly in their frequently anomalous perceived self-designated positions within them. For example, the common tendency to call oneself middle class or to deny having a class identity. What explains the contradiction between strong evidence of a stratified difference and these (mis)perceptions?

Much of the answer is supplied in the author's discussion and critique of Wright's class classification. There is a useful analysis of petty-bourgeois and middle-class persons and the fine distinctions between the latter and the self-employed in the Control section. These form a sizeable proportion of his respondents, as, paradoxically, do those who are located within Wright's contradictory class locations, which seem to form almost half of the sample

(Wilkes, 1985:12). Other reasons are relayed in the Labour chapter where the author argues for three fractions within the working class – namely semi-autonomous, paid, and domestic workers. These display a quantitative and qualitative array of what the coders designated as radical, liberal, pragmatic, and conservative attitudes that relate to their residential location and housing (almost two-thirds of workers owned their own homes), education, social patterns, intergenerational mobility, forms of association, voting preferences and, generally low, levels of political activism. As a result, Wilkes concludes, in a lengthy extension of his analysis in the closing section of the book, the economic and political class positions and interests as defined by the researcher are complicated by gender and ethnic affiliations and a ‘host of other issues’. This leads him to move towards Bourdieu’s rich corpus of ideas in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) with a tantalisingly brief description of field theory and the way this shows how ‘social relations work together to construct the social space in which inequality is constructed for individuals’ (p.387, italics in the original). He also trenchantly reaffirms that Wright’s ‘massive methodological error’ imposes an ahistorical *a priori* set of class categories onto the ‘buzzing confusion of evidence’ (ibid) revealed in the study. Indeed, he now recognises that one of the key problems in Wright’s classification is its inattention to the mobility of individuals in and out of class boxes over time. Ironically, therefore, given Wilkes’s wavering commitment to Marxist theories of political-economic exploitation and property, his rejection of many aspects of Wright’s class classification, and his eventual Bourdieusian leanings (whose claims to have moved beyond the classical origins of sociology and Marxism are much debated, see, for example, Brubaker, 1985), I find much of the author’s reasoning not entirely dissimilar to mine. But this view is partly based on recent literature (see, for example, Pearson, 2013:81-4, plus this special issue more generally), which Wilkes chooses to avoid. Consequently, on balance, *Reinventing Capitalism in New Zealand* may deserve the attention of local historical and sociological aficionados, but it is a decidedly imperfect guide for the uninitiated. Mainly because the enigma of class in Aotearoa New Zealand is compounded by the enigmatic nature of this book.

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