

The 'Working Class' in New Zealand

PROFESSOR W. H. OLIVER criticised Professor Keith Sinclair's biography of William Pember Reeves¹ on the grounds that social classes have been less important in New Zealand's history than the 'short expanse from floor to ceiling . . . [and] the persistence of social osmosis'. When men and women cannot find work they attack obstacles to upward mobility. When work is abundant and prosperity reigns issues unrelated to social class have dominated political debate, or so Oliver argues.² As he conceded (although some reviewers ignored the caveat), we lack any evidence by which most of these hypotheses could be tested. Little is known about the history of vertical and horizontal mobility, social stratification, income distribution, the importance of education as a determinant of class position, or patterns of association. When historians have wanted to comment on New Zealand's social structure they have had to infer its properties from political rhetoric.

Defined broadly the issue at stake between Oliver and Sinclair is the role of social class in producing change in New Zealand.³ It is worth distinguishing at this point between class and stratification, the latter being used to describe the system of penalties and rewards allocated to society's members according to 'the ways in which they perform its functionally important and valued roles',⁴ while class retains the meaning given it by Marx of explaining certain types of

¹ *New Zealand Fabian: William Pember Reeves*, Oxford, 1965.

² 'Reeves, Sinclair and the Social Pattern', *The Feel of Truth*, ed. Peter Munz, Wellington, 1969, pp. 163-80. In this essay I shall not discuss the relationship of issues such as Bible in Schools, prohibition, or sectarian controversy to social class although I am quite confident that relationships exist. Nor have I discussed Oliver's assumption that upward mobility erodes class loyalty, although for some brief comments on the inadequacy of this assumption see Herbert G. Cutman, 'Work, Culture, and Society in Industrialising America, 1815-1919', *American Historical Review*, LXXVIII, 4 (1973), 566-7, and Frank Parkin, *Class, Inequality and Political Order: Social Stratification in Capitalist and Communist Societies*, London, 1972, pp. 49-53.

³ Sinclair, of course, is only committed to arguing that class was important in 1888-91 whereas Oliver claims that class has never been important.

⁴ Bernard Barber, *Social Stratification: A Comparative Analysis of Structure and Process*, New York, 1957, p. 20.

change. The concept of class does not explain all change, but Ralf Dahrendorf has pointed out that the weight of evidence supports Marx's contention 'that society produces in its structure the antagonisms that lead to its modification' and that in any given situation one conflict is dominant.⁵ Most historians of capitalist societies have agreed that one of the important antagonisms producing social and political change has been class conflict and that in certain periods this conflict has dominated politics. Oliver wishes to exempt New Zealand on both counts.

Having stated the point at issue it is necessary to add that, because so few historical sources reveal the inner texture of working-class life and thought, the debate between Oliver and Sinclair has a curiously unreal quality.⁶ Perhaps Oliver is correct, the different views being functions of living in Auckland and Palmerston North. Even so, the truth must encompass both perspectives and in the following pages I want to attempt two things: first, a critique of Oliver's argument and, second, a close examination of its relevance to 1890.

Professor Oliver argued that the concept of class does not help to explain change in New Zealand because the 'short expanse from floor to ceiling, and second, the persistence of social osmosis' have eroded class distinctions. Even so, he never claims that the rhetoric of class conflict has been absent from New Zealand, only that the rhetoric has always been irrelevant to the reality of New Zealand society. This would be an important point if it could be shown that the people who used the language of class knew it to be meaningless. True, many people who opposed working-class demands, as formulated by trade unions or political parties, have denied the reality of social class in New Zealand (a denial not unrelated to the interests of a class), but equally clearly many working men and women have spoken and acted as though class described something of central importance in their society. And what people *think* is true, especially if they act upon the belief, has greater historical importance than what is later shown to have been the case.

Rightly or wrongly many working men and women have seen the social system in terms of class and have acted accordingly. The most obvious evidence is political, for our most important political coalitions have been forged during periods of intense class-consciousness and have survived them. In 1890 urban-working men voted overwhelmingly for Labour candidates or radical Liberals who were absorbed into the Liberal Party which retained working-class allegiance for some twenty to thirty years. The lynch-pin of this alliance was the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act which, Professor Oliver would have us believe, threatened the 'maintenance of the

⁵ *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, Stanford, 1959, pp. 125-6.

⁶ On the question of a working-class sub-culture see Robert P. Baker, 'Labor History, Social Science, and the Concept of the Working Class', *Labor History*, XIV, 1 (1973), 98-105.

Liberal consensus'.⁷ But this consensus could not survive. Reform rose because it helped to convince established small farmers that the Liberals threatened their property simply because allied with organised labour. Moreover, the defection of the urban working class⁸ reduced the Liberals to political impotence and ensured that they never again won power.⁹ The second New Zealand Labour Party clearly transposed into politics a deep sense of class consciousness and in the 1919 elections won a majority of the urban-working-class vote despite the radical programme offered by the Liberals. Before 1935, indeed, the working class alone supported Labour and since then has provided the party with its largest and most reliable basis of support. Until the 1950s, too, in its detailed demands, its ideological goal, and its support Labour was a class party. As most working men and women have voted together for some eighty years it is odd that Oliver should argue that the concept of class has no relevance to New Zealand's past.¹⁰

Why working men and women saw the social system in these terms and believed that only a Labour Party or industrial militance could solve their problems is another question. Maybe, as Oliver argued, the rhetoric of class had been transposed by migrants from industrial Britain. Even so it is strange that working men and women should, for over eighty years, vote as if the rhetoric was true. But too much can be made of the contrast between industrial Britain and small town-rural New Zealand. Many of the migrants in the late nineteenth century were displaced Scots crofters, Irish peasants, and English agricultural labourers whose inherited concept of class suited the new environment well. Only because of continuities in experience was it possible for the evangelists of socialism to convince most miners,

⁷ Oliver, pp. 169-70. The Act, in short, was essential to keep the working class within the consensus.

⁸ By urban I mean towns of greater than 8,000 people, and I include for convenience three class-conscious groups, miners, timber workers, and railway workers.

⁹ See Patrick O'Farrell, 'The Workers in Grey District Politics, 1865-1913: A Study in New Zealand Liberalism and Socialism', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1955; Barry S. Gustafson, 'The Advent of the New Zealand Labour Party, 1900-1919', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1961; L. E. Richardson, 'The Workers and Grey District Politics During Wartime, 1914-1918', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1968; and R. K. Newman, 'Liberal Policy and the Left Wing, 1908-1911: A Study of Middle-Class Radicalism in New Zealand', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1965.

¹⁰ Unfortunately there are few theses or published works which analyse the social base of the Labour Party or its predecessors with sophisticated statistical techniques. See E. P. Aimer, 'The Politics of a City: A Study of the Auckland Urban Area, 1899-1935', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1958; S. Cegledy, 'The Pattern of Wellington Politics, 1908-1919', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1963; R. M. Chapman, *The Political Scene, 1919-1931*, Auckland, 1969; Austin Mitchell, 'Dunedin Central', *Political Science*, XIV, 1 (1962), 27-80; R. S. Milne, 'Voting in Wellington Central, 1957', *ibid.*, X, 2 (1958), 31-64; and for an excellent statistical study John R. Barnett, 'The Evolution of the Urban Political Structure of the North Island, 1945-1966', M.A. thesis, University of Otago, 1968.

timber and railway workers, and the urban working class that they should vote for a party committed to socialism.¹¹

If urban political alignments since 1890 have rested upon social classes, and it seems indisputable, Professor Oliver's conclusion is astray.¹² But one can reject his conclusion that the concept of class is useless in explaining change in New Zealand without abandoning his view of the social structure. The major flaw in his argument is theoretical. In short, Oliver assumed that Reeves and Sinclair, in using the rhetoric of class, committed themselves, wittingly or not, to the view that New Zealand's history fitted the contours of Karl Marx's prophecy.¹³ Oliver even goes so far as to argue that when Reeves moved left in 1895 he rendered himself irrelevant to New Zealand conditions not merely in that period but in any period.¹⁴ But surely, whatever personal quirks explain Reeves's behaviour, his fate shows that by 1895 the Liberals could not easily fulfil the demands of small farmers and working men even in a period when class tensions had abated.¹⁵ Only Oliver's peculiar definition of class renders his interpretation of Reeves's fate plausible.

But class does not have to embody Marx's millenarian hopes. Thanks largely to American sociologists social classes are no longer defined in terms of one variable but by income, source of income, education, occupation and residential area. Given this definition it is quite clear that social classes have existed and still exist in New Zealand although that fact does not imply impending Armageddon. Even in Canada and the United States, which approximate the Oliver model more closely than New Zealand, it is clear that class has considerable importance if one is concerned with social structure or politics.¹⁶ Class

¹¹ Much more work could be done on the origins of immigrants but see Rollo Arnold's excellent article, 'English Rural Unionism and Taranaki Immigration, 1871-1876', *The New Zealand Journal of History*, VI, 1 (1972), 20-41.

¹² I have merely used political evidence in this essay but one could find evidence equally at odds with Oliver's conclusion in the history of trade unions. See R. C. J. Stone, 'History of Trade Unionism in New Zealand, 1913-1927', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1948, and H. Roth, *Trade Unions in New Zealand: Past and Present*, Wellington, 1973.

¹³ Oliver, p. 165, suggests some such argument.

¹⁴ Of course, Sinclair explains Reeves's fate largely in terms of the decline in class consciousness and tension which occurred between 1890 and 1895. See *New Zealand Fabian*, chs. xiv and xv.

¹⁵ In fact Reeves's exclusion from power serves well as a statement in miniature of the more spectacular defection of the working class between 1904 and 1919. His departure also quickened the dissatisfaction of union leaders with the Liberals. See *The Proceedings of the Trades and Labour Councils Conferences, 1897, 1898, 1901 and 1902*.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Class, Status and Power*, Glencoe, Ill., 1953; Leonard Reissman, *Class in American Society*, Glencoe, Ill., 1959; C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, New York, 1956; Barber, *Social Stratification*; and John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power*, Toronto, 1965. Historians, too, find the concept of class indispensable although religious, ethnic and racial divisions have been as important as class. See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, New York, 1955; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, Baton Rouge, 1951; and E. Digby Baltzell, *Philadelphia Gentlemen: The Making of a National Upper Class*, New York, 1958.

is a useful concept if it can be shown that people of approximately similar incomes, derived in a similar manner, working in occupations of equivalent status act together in pursuit of common ends.¹⁷

Given this manner of proceeding the objectives of working men and women are irrelevant in discussing whether or not class consciousness existed. That is, it is not important whether workers sought socialism or equal opportunity. Professor Oliver's claim that working men and women in the late nineteenth century were concerned only with obstacles to upward mobility, and had no grievances with capitalism or the prevailing distribution of power and wealth, is, even if it is valid, not inconsistent with the use of the concept of class. For, if most working men and women agreed on the nature of the obstacles and took action together, in politics or the market, then they acted as a social class (unless other social classes pursued the same ends for the same reasons). In brief, a working class is not necessarily committed to revolutionary goals (even for Marx),¹⁸ and its existence is not determined by ideological considerations but by empirical investigation of behaviour and belief.

The extent to which Professor Oliver manoeuvred himself into a blind alley is revealed by his insistence, necessary if his hypothesis is to be sustained, that Populists seeking wider opportunity never 'excited the least suspicion that they were socially revolutionary'.¹⁹ Populists, he would have us believe, only wanted to remove the barriers to upward social mobility and everybody recognised the reasonable nature of their demand. Certainly, if one looks closely enough at American Populists, it could be argued that some of them merely wanted to remove a few road blocks. But many of them were damning the economic system and the distribution of wealth and power. True, in large measure they inherited their categories of analysis from a pre-industrial world, but nobody mistook their intentions. They demanded sweeping changes and their opponents responded with rage, fury and, in the South, violence.²⁰ There is a vast literature on American Populists but very little of it supports Oliver's argument.

¹⁷ This is a very general statement of the situation. We know that other variables affect the degree of class consciousness, militance, and support for Leftist parties. A brief list would include communication, insecurity of income, job status, work satisfaction, rate of unemployment, sex, skill required, size of city and number employed on the job and intensity of cross-class pressures. See Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, New York, 1963, pp. 45-54, 230-78.

¹⁸ For Marx the working class only became revolutionary when objective conditions prefigured the end of capitalism when men would be freed from necessity. See C. D. H. Cole, *What Marx Really Meant*, London, 1948, and Jean Sartre, *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, Paris, 1960.

¹⁹ Oliver, p. 169.

²⁰ See C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*, New York, 1938; Chester Mc. Destler, *American Radicalism, 1865-1901*, New London, 1946; Norman Pollock, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, Boston, 1962; and Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*, Princeton, 1969.

Is Professor Oliver on firm ground, however, when he argues that working men and women in New Zealand have concerned themselves only with upward social mobility? If this is true, and there is little evidence on the point, it is surprising that they confused the entire social system with a few road blocks and had a view of the road blocks held by few other than working men (or else, surely, they would have remained loyal to the Liberals). Also, if the belief in the desirability and possibility of upward social mobility has been so deep rooted in our culture, it is surprising that nobody bothered to articulate it. There is no Horatio Alger in our popular culture, only the Shiner or Arawata Bill (or is it really Peter Jones and Ed Hillary?), and few of our politicians find profit in emphasising their upward mobility. Nor does the fiction published in labour newspapers such as *Voice of Labour* and *The Otago Workman* (not to mention the *Maoriland Worker*), reveal an interest in much other than sentimental love stories, melodramas, and social realism. If the fiction permits any generalisation, it would be that working men and women believed that capitalism had destroyed an age-old moral order.

Let us turn from these general comments, however, to scrutinise the mechanisms of social osmosis defined by Professor Oliver. He claims that the New Zealand worker has been continually declassified by arbitration, education, and available land. These three factors eroded any consciousness of class and have sustained either an individualistic outlook on life or a belief in the primacy of other affiliations to the exclusion of class attitudes or a belief in class. Of course, affiliations are of two kinds; those that generate cross-class pressures (as with a labourer who attended St. Michael's Anglican church in Christchurch), and those that intensify class consciousness (such as Sunday or trade-union cricket or, until the recent past, professional sport). We shall ignore the subtleties, however, and focus on Oliver's claims on behalf of land, education, and arbitration.

First, let us deal with arbitration.²¹ The Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act was passed in 1894 largely because of the persistence of Reeves and the unions. Unfortunately we do not really know why union leaders wanted such a law (although the influence of the Knights of Labour probably helped as arbitration was popular among unionists throughout the English-speaking world). But for middle-class radicals, like the Reverend Rutherford Waddell and William Pember Reeves, the purpose of the law was to encourage and control trade unions. They wanted to encourage unions because they thought, and the so-called 'Sweating' Commission endorsed the view, that unions could employ the selfish demands of working men and women to ensure that the industrial conditions prevalent in the old world did not take root in New Zealand. In short, confront the greed of or-

²¹ The standard account of the history of the 1894 Act and its amendments is N. S. Woods, *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1963.

ganised capital with the greed of organised labour and, through arbitration, ensure the peaceful resolution of all conflicts. The beauty of the ideal lay in the fact that it guaranteed social harmony, affirmed the supremacy of law and reason, and ensured that the Maritime Council, if it ever reappeared (and the new law made it unlikely), would be subject to control.²²

Given the conservative intent of the law why then did trade unionists accept it? The short answer is that after the Council's defeat and collapse any law that compelled employers to recognise unions was better than none. And, from this angle, the law worked to the advantage of the union movement.²³ In the ten years after 1894 many small unions were established and most of those crushed in 1890-92 were revived. But reading past Awards and cost of living figures it is hard to see how the Arbitration Act transformed blue collars into white. Indeed, the militants surely had a point when they described the law as 'Labour's Leg Iron'. But moderates too could point to past gains made possible by the law. The editor of the moderate *Voice of Labour* gave a fair assessment of the Act in 1911: 'It has forced the employers to recognise the Unions; it has standardised wages; it has abolished all the worst features of sweating, and it has secured to Unionists a certain means of securing immediate demands without all the hardships and misery of strikes.'²⁴ The Act protected workers from the 'gutter' and, other things being equal, ensured clean blue collars.

The availability of land is a more complex question. Certainly, many workers migrated to New Zealand in the hope of owning land (and one glance at our urban geography shows that they succeeded). Many also wanted to become farmers. We know little about the desire for farms, however, and we do not know for certain when this passion abated. One could examine applications for small farms carved out of great estates and the background of rural pioneers in the North Island and arrive at some conclusion as to how many of the applicants were drawn from the working class and the proportion of the working class that tried to obtain farms. By 1911, however, the *Voice of Labour*, excoriated by militants as the mouthpiece of *petit bourgeois* reform, claimed that the desire had departed from the head of every sane worker in the country. 'Man is a social animal', the editor claimed, 'and wants to get more out of life than cabbages, potatoes and corned

²² The fears of Dunedin's reputable citizens are clearly shown in the pages of the *Otago Daily Times*, 15 February 1889, p. 2, col. 9, and p. 3, cols. 1 and 2; 8 June 1889, p. 2, cols. 6-9; and 8 July, p. 3, cols. 1 and 2. See too the 'Report of the Sweating Commission', *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, 1890, H-5.

²³ See Roth, *Trade Unions in New Zealand*, Table I, pp. 167-8 and J. T. Paul's historical defence of the Act, 'Trades Unionism in Otago; Its Rise and Progress, 1881-1912', *Souvenir Catalogue: Industrial Exhibition and Art Union*, Dunedin, [1912], pp. 69-141.

²⁴ 'Arbitration Act', *Voice of Labour*, 8 December 1911, p. 3, cols. 1 and 2.

beef; he has no hankering about going into the backblocks to work for . . . a few shillings a week for 70 or 80 hours a week.²⁵

Even in 1890 it is far from clear that the enthusiasm for breaking up the great estates invariably meant a desire for land. According to the editor of the *Otago Workman*, Dunedin's only working-class newspaper, there were three reasons for breaking up the big estates. First, such a plank avoided the danger of the Labour Party's isolating itself from potential rural allies by adopting 'narrow and contracted views'. Second, it would break the power of the land monopolists whose muscle had been indispensable in defeating the Maritime Council ('Destroy the landed monopoly in this colony, and the backbone of Capitalism is effectually broken'). And third, a policy of carving the great estates into small farms would not only strengthen Labour's political hand but safely settle the landless rural workers who had recently served as strike-breakers.²⁶ This sophisticated reasoning may not have been widespread but it is significant that the editor thought his readers had to be told why the great estates should be broken up. Clearly he did not know many aspiring farmers in North East Valley or on the Flat, although he would have known of a number of capitalists holding on to estates or farms within working-class communities and forcing up land values.²⁷

At first glance it seems likely that education has been more effective than arbitration or abundant land in promoting upward social mobility. Certainly, in the eighties and nineties many articulate union leaders and many middle-class reformers wanted educational opportunities expanded. But when they spoke of education it invariably transpired that they wanted technical institutes to equip the sons of working-class families with a tradesman's skill (which hardly suggests that they thought a position on the Board of Directors of the Bank of New Zealand or Hallensteins either attainable or desirable). What many working men meant by education in the late nineteenth century appears to have been proficiency at reading, writing and arithmetic and these skills, even when adorned by a tradesman's certificate, did not guarantee upward mobility.²⁸ Besides, education beyond primary level cost a lot of money until the first Labour Government provided for free education at all stages. The complaint of the *Otago Workman* in 1890, that the educational system 'is most exclusive in its operation

²⁵ 'Compressed Politics', *Voice of Labour*, 16 February 1912, p. 3, col. 1.

²⁶ *Otago Workman*, 4 October 1890, [p. 4, cols. 1-3].

²⁷ G. M. Stedman, 'The South Dunedin Flat: A Study in Urbanisation, 1849-1965', M.A. thesis, University of Otago, 1966, presents evidence showing that the practice occurred but does not discuss the response.

²⁸ C. J. Thorn, a carpenter, called for free libraries and technical education in 1885 at the first Trades and Labour Councils' Conference but neither subject was even discussed. *Proceedings of the Trades and Labour Councils' Conference*, 1885, Dunedin, 1885, p. 8.

and anti-democratic in its results', probably remained true at least until Labour governed.²⁹

Also, ironically, although many unions enthused about public libraries, by 1911 the Librarian in Dunedin confessed that working-class people made little use of the Library. He agreed to sweeten the bait by placing in the reading room the newspapers of class consciousness (such as the *Sydney Worker* and the *New Leader of London*).³⁰ Even the Workers' Educational Association, begun with solid trade-union support, failed to attract many workers to its classes.³¹ Indeed, in Dunedin the men and women who patronised the Association's classes were socialists who hoped to qualify themselves to act as midwives for socialism.

But even if it could be proved that most working-class families saw education as the ladder of upward mobility, and even if they could motivate their children to make the sacrifices, the experience of other nations suggests that a free and universal education system does not serve as an escape hatch for those occupying the lower rungs of the social ladder. Rather, such a system helps confirm the status quo in part by eroding consciousness of class. Indeed, even in New Zealand, where the cultural differences between social classes are less marked than they are in Britain, the proportion of working-class students at University was, in 1962, no greater here than there.³² In brief, by taking his premise for a conclusion Professor Oliver has ignored the existence of a working-class culture which ensures that few escape by means of education.

The preceding discussion of mechanisms of social osmosis is not intended to suggest that nobody has ever escaped from the working class. It is possible, though I doubt it, that upward mobility has been pursued more avidly in New Zealand than in Britain, and it is certainly possible that the desire has been more easily achieved,³³ but none of this has been seen by working men and women as the whole truth about their condition or their dreams. In politics since 1890 most working men and women have identified with their roles as

²⁹ There are no studies of the occupations of the fathers of University and secondary school students through time, but the Reports of the Department of Education, published each year in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, E-1, suggest that schools in working-class areas were overcrowded.

³⁰ Otago Labour Council to Dunedin Town Clerk, 2 March 1909, J. T. Paul ms, Hocken Library.

³¹ David Hall, *New Zealand Adult Education*, London, 1970, pp. 59-60.

³² A. V. Mitchell and R. S. Adams, 'Our Students', *Comment*, 17 (October 1963), 17-22. For a discussion of the American experience, see Christopher Jencks et al., *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*, New York, 1973.

³³ In the period between the 1840s and the 1870s and in cities enjoying very rapid growth upward mobility by means of making money has doubtless been relatively easy, but even then, according to R. C. J. Stone, *Makers of Fortune: A Colonial Business Elite and its Fall*, Auckland, 1973, p. 40, 'there was nothing so helpful to an ambitious man, be he ever so thrifty and self-reliant, as to have capital to start off with'.

workers and consumers. The roles reinforced each other, as they still do, but the former isolated them politically if not socially. How many escaped could be discovered, but the literary evidence does not allow us to posit a continuous process of social osmosis.³⁴

If we formulate Professor Oliver's question in another way and ask why New Zealand workers have not been revolutionary, further light can be thrown on the general issues at stake. The most obvious point to be made is that in no known society have most of the workers been revolutionary most of the time. At a more specific level, however, the egalitarian culture that emerged in New Zealand rendered militance less necessary. To be a worker here was not to be inferior. Also, many New Zealanders have been profoundly ambivalent about pursuing upward mobility, success or excellence with too much energy.³⁵ More important, our geography, the scattered nature of our population, and the existence of many local-product markets have ensured the virtual absence of manufacturing industry on the British or American scale. Before 1940 most factories had between two and thirty employees and most workers belonged to unions with less than 100 members. Such conditions doubtless reinforced the egalitarian tradition and intensified cross-class pressures, especially among the skilled.³⁶ If we assume that the relative absence of revolutionary fervour requires explanation, then the structure of industry is likely to prove more fruitful to investigators than our faith in upward mobility.

Class, of course, has never been the only dimension of reality to impinge upon the consciousness of working men and women. Even in periods of intense class consciousness some working people identified with churches (although the inability of the protestant churches to hold the loyalty of the working class was a constant refrain among liberal clergy after 1890); many identified with a particular trade, their country of birth, a sports club or their lodge. Too little is known about patterns of association in New Zealand to allow conclusions to be drawn about the relationship between such affiliations and class consciousness. But between 1905 and 1919 most urban working men and women, not to mention groups such as miners, began to vote for a Labour Party committed to radical social transformation regardless of other loyalties. Not all did so. Workers in towns of less than 8,000 people, one-industry towns excepted, tended not to vote Labour.

³⁴ I have not discussed the low ceiling-high floor concept, but the distance may appear to be less when one belongs to the top one per cent than it would to somebody in the lower half. See Cora Vellekoop, 'Social Strata in New Zealand,' in *Social Process in New Zealand*, ed. John Forster, Auckland, 1969, pp. 233-71.

³⁵ See for some comments on the egalitarian culture, 'The Equal Society', in *New Zealand*, eds. Keith Jackson and John Harre, London, 1969; Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers', *Landfall Country*, Christchurch, 1962, pp. 330-72; and E. A. Olssen, 'The Conditions of Culture', *ibid.*, pp. 395-411.

³⁶ For a very good discussion of this question, see A. E. C. Hare, *Report on Industrial Relations in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1946, ch. vii.

Equally, many skilled workers saw themselves as a cut above the labouring class (although technological change could transform men with redundant skills into fiery militants).³⁷ But neither qualification alters the picture greatly.

Professor Oliver is not only in error in his conclusion and his view of social osmosis, but he is mistaken about the role of class consciousness in the period around 1890. In a striking sentence he summarises his argument, claiming that 'if they [the propertied] heard a tramp of boots, it was not the hobnails of a proletariat on the way to a socialist utopia, but the gumboots of cow-cookies entering a capitalist society'. It may well be the case, as others have argued, that the swing to the Liberals of so many rural seats in 1893 had a more pronounced effect on the Liberals than their alliance with the urban working class, forged in 1890, but the question is whether or not class consciousness existed in 1890. Professor Oliver's mistake can be best shown by briefly examining two pieces of evidence, the minutes of the Dunedin Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners and the files of the *Otago Workman* (the only genuinely working-class paper to have survived, although it claimed that others existed in the main cities).

The Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASC&J) was a branch of the British Society whose members had usually been carpenters or joiners in Britain.³⁸ In New Zealand the union occupied a weak position because of the great use made of all-timber dwellings, which could be built by almost anybody. This union had also grown out of a friendly society and in the 1880s did not act as a bargaining organisation but as a mutual insurance company which, in return for high fees, protected members against sickness, theft of tools, funerals and the like. In short, the ASC&J was a craft-benefit union whose members took great pride in their skill and tried to distinguish themselves from jerry builders by preserving a monopoly over certain kinds of work. The Branch had but fifty or sixty members and it existed in a local product market which reinforced particularistic attitudes. Thus, one might expect, if Professor Oliver is correct, that the ASC&J would change but little in the 1880s except to clarify its role as a craft union and fight more strenuously to clear away the barriers to social mobility.

³⁷ In the period from 1880 to 1940 most of those who sold their labour in the market did not belong to the 'working class'. In 1936, for instance, Hare estimates that slightly more than half the working population can be described as weekly-wage workers; 65,000 were engaged in agriculture; 205,000 in factories or mines; and 70,000 in shops or offices (Hare, pp. 85-87). As there were no unions for clerical workers before compulsory unionism and virtually none for shop assistants, we can safely assume that most of that group perceived themselves as white collar. Also, many agricultural labourers were doubtless the sons of farmers but even if they are included in the working class only about 74 per cent of the weekly-wage workers can be considered as potential members of a conscious working class.

³⁸ The following discussion of the ASC&J is based upon the Union's two minute books for the period 1882-92. Both are in the author's possession.

The reality contradicts Oliver's argument. There is no evidence in the minutes of any concern with the availability of land. The Branch did, however, pass a resolution endorsing a Public Library on the grounds that it would encourage self-improvement (though whether for themselves or others is unclear). Upward mobility did not preoccupy them; their entire concern was to avoid 'the gutter'. The minutes make it equally clear that in the 1880s the union's members began to lose their particularism and aloofness. In 1885, though not without discussion, the Branch sent delegates to the first Trades and Labour Councils' Conference (they did not attend in the end because they had to pay an entrance fee). Although their rules, formulated in Britain until the twentieth century, did not allow the Branch to affiliate with other unions or political parties, by mid-1890 they had struck a voluntary levy on their members to permit affiliation with the Trades and Labour Council and the Workers' Political Committee. In 1891 they so forgot their status that they tried to form a union of all building workers and, frustrated in this, established a non-benefit section with a low annual fee.

Not only did these aristocrats of Labour recognise problems and goals in common with wharf lumpers, shearers, sailors, labourers, tailoresses and bootmakers, but the class consciousness of the members is evident in the minutes. They began to use the term 'working class' in the later 1880s; they gave almost £100 to the Dunedin Strike Committee; they cooperated with the boycott of Whitcombe and Tombs; they passed remits congratulating workers in Germany and the United States for their efforts to achieve an eight hour day; and they spent almost all of their political energies as a Branch worrying not about laws to help them up the ladder of social success but lobbying for a Workmen's Lien Bill which would protect them from precipitous decline down that ladder. In other words the members of the union ignored their earlier pretensions and began to see themselves as members of something they called the 'working classes'. Solidarity among all working men replaced solidarity among members of the trade as their watchword. To put the matter bluntly they became class conscious and those particularist attitudes, which would flourish in a fluid and open social system, disappeared. Nor is this really surprising; this was the period of the Maritime Council, the London Dock strike, and class conflict in most English-speaking nations.³⁹

The *Otago Workman*⁴⁰ bears even more convincing testimony to

³⁹ A similar situation seems to have prevailed in Auckland. See John Findlay Ewen, 'A History of Trade Unionism Among the Carpenters and Joiners of the City and Suburbs of Auckland, 1873-1937', M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, n.d. [1949 or 1950].

⁴⁰ Founded by Samuel Lister in 1887 the *Otago Workman* changed name in 1900, becoming the *Otago Liberal*. In 1906 the Trades' and Labour Council bought it, appointing J. T. Paul editor, and named it *The Beacon*. In 1907 the paper collapsed. The only set of the *Workman* is held by the Otago Early Settlers' Museum. Of course, many other newspapers, such as the *Lyttelton Times*, also contain similar evidence.

the rapid growth of class consciousness in the three years before 1890. Of course, the weekly newspaper was committed to more than the rights of the working classes and the need for solidarity. The paper was also an ardent spokesman for the working-class communities of Caversham and South Dunedin. Equally, the language and metaphor used to convey the editor's views were drawn from a different world of experience, a world of experience which shaped and modified expressions of class consciousness. But from 1887 onwards the *Workman* put forward a class view of society and politics in New Zealand. The paper published news which the dailies ignored; it provided a trenchant and witty commentary on current events, and it tried to show that what working men had once seen as events of merely biographical importance, such as unemployment, were caused not by individual inadequacy but by capitalist society. Likewise, such problems could not be solved by individual action (the general belief it seems), but only by solidarity in work and politics. And the message clearly appealed because the paper prospered.⁴¹

Before investigating a few of the devices used by the *Workman's* staff to direct the prejudices and fears clearly present in working-class Dunedin to new ends, it is worth sampling some of the rhetoric that appeared in the year of the Maritime Strike. In August, 1890, the Maritime Council found itself locked in combat with Whitcombe and Tombs. According to the editor, Samuel Lister, 'the dispute is the outgrowth of a savage and relentless determination on the part of the capitalists to crush the Unions — to strike the working man just as he is gathering his strength . . . and force him back again on his knees in the old wretched and helpless attitude of degradation and despair'.⁴² A few weeks later Lister had this to say about the beginning of the Maritime Strike: 'The crisis in the struggle between Capital and Labour in Australasia has arrived, and the battle has begun. In this colony we had hoped to keep clear of it, but the over bearing tyranny and arrogance of capital has had its effect, the consequence being that federated labour has now arisen in its might determined to fight to the bitter end.'⁴³ This is scarcely the language of the upwardly mobile suffering from a temporary frustration but confident of success.

Two weeks later, the news now gloomy, Lister spelt out the meaning of the battle, blending an older millenarian tradition with the new class consciousness. The strike, Lister held, was evidence of 'the present world-wide mobilisation of the army of social discontent. Everywhere you can hear the steady tramp, tramp, tramp of the rallying

⁴¹ Indeed, by 1890 there was a large and keen market for radical papers from Britain and Australia. Although circulation figures are always suspect the editor of the *Workman* claimed to sell 5,000 copies weekly, more than any of the dailies did in a day.

⁴² 'Tigers at Bay,' *Otago Workman*, 16 August 1890, [p. 4, col. 3].

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30 August 1890, [p. 4, col. 4]. Where news items or editorials have titles I have given them, but Lister was not consistent.

hosts converging from many points, concentrating on one The Messiah of the poor and oppressed has not yet appeared. Nevertheless he will come when the hour has tolled Is it not written, "he shall give justice to the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy and shall break in pieces the oppressor?"⁴⁴ The strike transfigured labour. It destroyed, said Lister, 'the miserable distinctions of class and caste which have so long played the workers off against each other and kept them bound in the chains of wages slavery'. To hold this gain, however, Lister enjoined his readers to 'open our hearts to it [the movement] and let it enter into our very lives [because] in brotherhood alone can we find shelter'. And brotherhood, cooperation, and socialism were synonyms for the goal which, if pursued with unity, would allow workers to transcend their condition and regenerate community.⁴⁵ This was a new religion and if it suffered a setback in 1890 it survived.⁴⁶

In the years before 1890 the *Workman* had clearly indicted New Zealand society on the grounds that a small cohesive class exploited those who did the work. Its major attack was on all forms of political and social deference.⁴⁷ The Governor-General, the local business and political élites (including 'liberals' like Sir Robert Stout), the organised church, professional men and even the Royal Family were subjected to witty and biting attack.⁴⁸ 'The Chiseler', the paper's anonymous columnist, penned some hilarious descriptions of the well-to-do and the colony's leaders. The Queen, he wrote on one occasion, is stingy. Whereas most men proudly supported their families out of 'their regular fair screw and . . . overtime . . . not so our Sovereign Lady the Queen, who has a Divine Patent Right, which was stolen some two centuries ago, whereby she is empowered to fleece her loving subjects Of course it is simply absurd to expect this poor underpaid body to support her own family out of her trifling savings and screw of £64,000 per annum, which she condescends to receive for victimising poor Britons'⁴⁹

⁴⁴ 'The Mobilisation of Labour', *ibid.*, 13 September 1890, [p. 1, col. 1].

⁴⁵ 'About the Great Struggle', *ibid.*, 4 October 1890, [p. 1, col. 1].

⁴⁶ J. T. Paul wrote of the nineties, 'These were Labour's dark days, but that most precious asset — enthusiasm, was still living.' See 'Trade Unionism in Otago', p. 89.

⁴⁷ *The Sandfly*, an earlier South Dunedin paper, also vigorously attacked those once thought worthy of deference. The Hocken Library has two issues, both of 1876, on microfilm.

⁴⁸ For attacks on Stout see 'The Clutha River Gold Dredging Company', *Otago Workman*, 10 May 1890, [p. 4, cols. 1-4]; 'Chips from the Block', *ibid.*, 5 July 1890, [p. 5, cols. 1 and 2]; 2 August 1890 [p. 4, cols. 4 and 5] and 9 August 1890, [p. 5, col. 1]; and 'Sir Blatherskite and the Bank of New Zealand', 9 August 1890, [p. 4, col. 1].

⁴⁹ 'Chips From the Block', *ibid.*, 2 August 1889, [p. 4, col. 4]. Some months later 'The Chiseler', *ibid.*, 25 October 1889, [p. 5, col. 1] published a new verse for the National Anthem which a reader had submitted. 'Grandchildren not a few./With great grandchildren too./She blest has been. We've been their sureties./Paid them gratuities./Pensions and annuities/God save the Queen.'

It is tempting to quote 'The Chiseler' at great length because his column remains as fresh today as it must have been then. If Mark Twain's assessment of the political uses of wit is valid, 'The Chiseler' deserves to be rescued from undeserved obscurity. Let one more example suffice. 'I invite my readers to take a birds-eye view of the worse than Egyptian slavery our Government officials groan under . . . I refer particularly to the genus "haw! haw!" whose lot is truly deplorable. You will find them in great numbers and with great patience sauntering down to that beastly hole . . . at the ridiculously early hour of ten o'clock in the morning. Provided they arrive safe, they immediately drop into a chair . . . and lounge for an hour to recruit their wasted energies, and after a variety of yawns they tackle work and stick to it on and off like sick dogs for an hour and a half, then they lay back exhausted. After half an hour's rest, which is occupied in furbishing up their jewellery, adjusting their dishevelled hair, and counting the minutes until the common folk are done gorging, they issue forth to lunch, which occupies a solid hour. After being refreshed they meander back to slavery again, and put in an uncertain hour till 3 o'clock proclaims their freedom . . .'⁵⁰

The *Workman* also supported its class interpretation of New Zealand politics and society by publishing news ignored by the daily papers (including Dunedin's equivalent of the *Lyttelton Times*, known first as the *Evening Herald* and then as *The Globe*), and providing a consistent and coherent interpretative framework. For instance, 'the larrikins' who so worried the dailies appeared as high-spirited youths with nothing to do at night thanks to 'our social arrangements'. Not many followed Stout's course in self-improvement and those who did, the editor thought, were 'best avoided'.⁵¹ The attitudes of the well-to-do and leading citizens towards the unemployed, who allegedly enjoyed being idle, also provided a fertile source of news (often together with a succinct account of how the leading citizen had made his fortune). Similarly, a host of by-laws designed to improve the habits and morals of the working classes were attacked as class legislation.⁵² The courts, the clergy, Parliament, the public attitudes and private actions of the wealthy (and their retainers), provided Lister with ample evidence to sustain his argument that working men were oppressed together.

From 1887 until 1890, and indeed thereafter, the *Otago Workman* fostered working-class unity. The paper's political platform also reflected its commitment to the welfare of the urban working class, being much the same as the platform drafted by the principal unions but

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 December 1889, [p. 4, col. 4].

⁵¹ See 'Chips from the Block', *ibid.*, 29 November 1889, [p. 4, cols. 4 and 5]; 20 December 1889, [p. 4, cols. 4 and 5]; 3 January 1890, [p. 4, cols. 4 and 5]. In almost any issue 'Notes' by 'Publico' and the news section, 'Local and General', would substantiate the points made above.

⁵² 'Chips From the Block', *ibid.*, 27 May 1890, [p. 4, cols. 3 and 4].

different in emphasis and substance from the programme of John Ballance. The land and income tax was sought as the main source of revenue; they wanted the great estates broken up and an end to the sale of Crown lands; they demanded an end to sweating, extension of the eight hour system, passage of a Workman's Lien Act and an Employers' Liability Act, the abolition of the truck system and votes for seamen. None of this gives much support to Professor Oliver's argument, for there is no mention of education (although the unions wanted uniform school books) and the land policy, as in Victoria, was shaped more by class tension than by any desire for a farm.⁵³ Of course, in 1890 cooperation between groups was perhaps of greatest importance; but only the defeat of the Maritime Strike allowed cooperation to survive until election day, and most urban workmen cooperated as workers, not as individuals, Baptists, tradesmen, or aspiring farmers.

Dunedin was not New Zealand and 1890 was not a typical year, it might be argued; but Professor Oliver's sweeping argument makes no allowance for variations in time or space. Such variations doubtless existed, but before they can be plotted much more work must be done. We need to know more about the culture of the working class and in particular the extent to which working-class communities like Blackball, Caversham, Lyttelton and Grey Lynn had their own sub-cultures; we need to know much more about differences between skilled and unskilled, militants and neglected moderates; we need to know more about wage rates, living standards, expectations, unemployment, mobility, and voting. We also need to know how the human significance of all these variables is altered by size and function of community, region, and patterns of association. It is clear, however, that social stratification has existed in New Zealand since Europeans first arrived. It is also clear that since 1905 increasing numbers of working men and women have voted for politicians who claimed that only a Labour Party could help them. Whether workers in Napier, Palmerston North, Oamaru and Nelson were less inclined to listen to such claims than workers in Dunedin or Auckland has yet to be seen, but, even if this were the case, it would still be premature to abandon the concept of social class. Instead, we need to know what class has meant in New Zealand.

It is possible that one day we shall conclude that no working class existed between 1890 and 1940, only a congeries of distinct working classes rooted in particular national groups, industries, and communities. It will doubtless also be found that even if working-class sub-cultures existed they also belonged to a wider moral community and were affected by urbanisation, the decline of religious observance, the

⁵³ 'A National Programme', *ibid.*, 8 November 1890, [p. 1, col. 2]; and for the unions' programme see 'Notes', *ibid.*, 30 August 1890, [p. 8, col. 5]. On the land issue in Victoria see Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-1861*, Melbourne 1963, p. 133.

disintegration of the nineteenth century Englishman's world view, and the rapid growth in popularity of scientific modes of thought. But whatever the future holds in store it is hard to imagine that further discoveries will alter our present knowledge about the social bases of our politics since 1890. Within the total political structure class has been of lesser importance than sectional conflict between towns and countryside, but within the urban political structure class has been the central division, and fear of the working class has played a not inconsiderable part in holding conservative coalitions together. In short, one can imagine class as a subordinate element in the explanation of some political events or as but one of a number of useful concepts, but it seems unlikely that we shall ever discover that upward mobility and the high floor-low ceiling have exorcised class consciousness from our shores.

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