

Book Review: Wally Secombe and D.W. Livingstone. "Down to Earth People": Beyond Class Reductionism and Postmodernism. Aurora: Garamond Press, 2000, 134 pp.

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Recently there has been much discussion and often acrimonious debate regarding the persistence of class, either as analytical category or as basis for identity, in the social transformations marking the contemporary era of 'postmodernity.' In *Down to Earth People*, Wally Secombe and D.W. Livingstone, both sociologists at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), seek to move beyond a class centric analysis of group action while maintaining a materialist analysis. While recognizing the limitations of Marxist 'class reductionism,' the authors are not prepared to say goodbye to the working class or class struggle as factors of social change as some critics of Marxism have done. Class is far from dead. As they note, class divisions are still deeply important for understanding contemporary societies. The authors prefer to develop a more integrative and comprehensive analysis of the (re)production of inequality.

This volume itself results from two research projects carried out over more than a decade in Hamilton, Ontario — the "Steelworker Families Project" and the "Hamilton Families Project" and is a reworking of the final chapter of an earlier book based upon these lengthy studies. The authors' research involved extensive interviews, discussions and surveys providing a rich diversity of information.

The book begins with a look at economic transformations of the post-war years and their attendant impacts upon working-class families.

Alternate Routes

Especially important was the disruptive shift from the Keynesian stabilization of the 1940s-1970s to neo-liberal crisis after the recession of the mid-1970s.

The steel industry in Ontario, like many others, has been hard hit by production changes of the last 20 years. The workforce at Stelco was cut by more than half between 1981 and 1992. In 1980, the authors report, local 1005 of the United Steelworkers of America was the largest union local in Canada with 13205 members. By 1996 the local claimed a membership of 5195. Significantly, the authors began their research with steelworkers at the main Stelco plant in Hamilton (Hilton Works) at the beginning of this process of change and were able to follow the severe impacts upon workers and their families.

The second chapter provides an overview of Marxist ideas of collective identity-formation as the authors set their conceptual framework. It replays the famous statement of historical materialism in *The German Ideology* regarding the relationship between being and consciousness. While acknowledging the crucial insights of materialist analysis, especially the convergence of views among people occupying similar contextual positions and the influence of social position upon self-perception, the authors suggest a few amendments, including: causes and effects of collective consciousness are reciprocal; internal relations are as important as external conflict; the importance of accessibility beyond face-to-face relations; calculative rationality is culturally specific; affiliation has emotional as well as economic foundations; and the importance of collective memory and myth.

The third chapter, comprising the largest section, includes extracts from the interviews with steelworkers in keeping with the author's view of the primacy of first-hand experience in the formation of people's perspectives. Included are profiles of two working-class couples who were interviewed in 1984 and again in 1994. Presented are their views on class consciousness, racial and ethnic consciousness, gender consciousness and generational perspectives. These interviews are not cause for much optimism for those seeking progressive signs, especially given the authors' identification of respondents as progressives. Most interesting are the reflections on class and working life. Highlighted are changes in workplace technology, the failure of worker participation schemes, longer shifts, job insecurity, scapegoating, sexual harassment and feminism.

Each of the interviews express fairly conservative goals of just "getting along" with the bosses. Interviewees hold these views not only in regard to themselves but for other workers as in the disapproval expressed over the rights of teachers to strike. Interestingly, one of the workers, who held quite negative views of management when first interviewed came to believe in the necessity of worker-management co-operation *after* he became active with his union. To their credit the authors attempt to understand rather than simply condemn workers' perspectives. For their part they are not at all optimistic that conflict will win out over co-operation in the long run.

Conservatism is also, and more forcefully, expressed in an underlying racism and a resentment of minorities which emerges in the interviews. This is reflected especially in concerns about affirmative action and in respondents' repeated references to "my country," "other people," supposed minority "crime-waves" and violence, and the notion that "Canadians [?] are becoming a minority." As the authors note, none of the respondents show much familiarity or empathy with the conditions experienced by racial or ethnic minorities. There is little sense of solidarity.

Likewise, respondents express some resentment of feminism and recent gains made by women. As the authors note, none of this is overly surprising in the absence of a more powerful and inclusive working-class movement which might generate solidarity around re-aligned interests and provide an alternative to individualist understandings. Alienation and subordination by themselves do not transform into revolutionary consciousness.

Overall, results of the authors' supplementary survey work suggest that people most typically hold a "mixed class consciousness," supporting capital on certain initiatives while supporting workers on others. While corporate executives show no signs of an oppositional working-class consciousness, 10% of workers favour an oppositional capitalist consciousness suggesting, not surprisingly, that the capitalist class has a surer sense of its class interests. Unfortunately, the authors further note that, for Ontario as a whole, capitalist consciousness is twice as pervasive as working-class consciousness. The situation does not improve much if considering unionized workers in Hamilton since they are as likely to hold mixed-class views as they are working-class positions.

The authors found, interestingly, that workers view society in a tripartite manner, including bosses, workers and the unemployed against

whom they measure their own status and security. Thus, workers tend to view themselves as stuck somewhere in the middle. (Curiously, the title is taken not from a reference to the workers but from one worker's comment that most "high class" people are "down to earth" having managed to "work their way up.")

We can no longer suppose that one single identity will become the axis of decisive social struggle as some Marxists expected although during times of conflict a particular identity may come to predominate. Subjectivity and personal interests are multiply based, conflicted and often divided, as postmodernists have insisted. However, as Seccombe and Livingstone remind us, this does not mean that people do not strive to reconcile or integrate these different or discordant identities.

The fourth chapter presents the authors' concerns with postmodern theory and their views of a possible synthesis with materialism. Seccombe and Livingstone view their work as part of an effort of progressive reconstruction, a contribution to a provisional alternative to both class reductionism and postmodernism. The authors refuse to accept any duality between material interest and cultural identity as has marked/marred recent debates between Marxists and postmodernists. Careful not to close off channels of communication, the authors seek insights from each which may inform more effective political actions and alternatives. In this an understanding of material circumstances, of political economy, is always important.

As the authors note, the "labour market flexibility" advocated by neoliberals is not a flexibility *for* workers, in terms of allowing them more control over their work, but a flexibility *of* workers, forcing them to bend to the demands of capital. Labour market flexibility *for* capital always means less flexibility for workers.

In the current era of capitalism, production has become socialized as a means of social control, as "lean production" becomes "lean living" and home and family life are forced to adapt to the rhythms, schedules and needs of work. This process has been most fully analyzed by the autonomist Marxists such as Antonio Negri in their theoretical works on "social capital" and the "socialized worker." Unfortunately Seccombe and Livingstone make no mention of autonomist theory in their work, an absence which leaves the analysis under-developed.

As Negri points out with the emergence of social capital and socialized workers there is no longer an outside to the mode of production.

Though their study focuses upon the regularly employed working class, the authors make an important point that analyses need to pay more attention to the non-secured members of the proletariat, those who exist at the periphery of the working class.

The fear and insecurity engendered by crisis capitalism is often expressed in anger and resentment of the poor and unemployed. Neo-liberal parties have manipulated these fears and found a receptive audience among the secured elements of the industrial working class.

As the authors note in their conclusion, the distinction between a narrow oppositional consciousness and a broad transformative consciousness (which so preoccupied Lenin) remains an important one. Any effective resistance to neo-liberal globalization will require strong manifestations of the latter. Workers need to forge alliances with the non-secured proletariat (poor, unemployed, homeless) for there to be any serious alternative to capital.

Unfortunately the present work concludes that few signs of a transformative class consciousness can be found within the industrial working class of Hamilton. This is perhaps reflected in the few pages which Seccombe and Livingstone give to a discussion of forms of struggle in the current situation. Indeed, this short section reads like an attempt to give some consolation over the lack of any apparent resistance.

On the whole, there is nothing overly controversial here. *Down to Earth People* provides a nice introduction to key tenets of classical Marxism, debates around identity-formation, social movement development and contemporary debates in radical theory. It will be of interest to students of working-class history, social movements and political theory.