

## Book Review

**Erik Olin Wright (2015) *Understanding Class*. London: Verso.  
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*Reviewed by Felix Nickel, University of Kassel, Germany*

In light of the collapse of socialism in the former Soviet Union and the increasing complexity of today's globalised capitalist societies, scholars have already declared the "death of class". However, recent years have seen developments that can be closely connected to the notion of class. The adverse outcomes of neo-liberalism, the rise of the politics of austerity and the accompanying pauperisation of huge parts of societies have led to a debate about increasing social inequality, precarisation and social polarisation. Different social and political movements around the world, like Occupy Wall Street, the 15-M Movement and the Arab Spring, have put these issues prominently on the political agenda. Interestingly, although connected to these matters, the notion of class plays a rather marginal role in these discussions. This might be partly due to the fact that class is still very much seen to be related to orthodox Marxism and its political as well as scholarly battle against liberal perspectives.

As one of the most prominent and influential scholars within the field of class analysis, the Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright has argued for a long time that class is far from being dead, and sees it instead as a relevant and apt concept for explaining different social phenomena. In his newest contribution, *Understanding Class*, Wright pursues this aim through three agendas.

First, albeit staying distinctively Marxist in his theorisation and analysis, Wright's work aims to update and extend the classical Marxist notion of class in order to make it applicable to current-day capitalist societies. Moving beyond the classical demarcations between Marxist and non-Marxist theory by developing an integrative theoretical framework is one of the stated aims of *Understanding Class*. Second, Wright wants to show how contemporary scholars have used class as an explanatory category; he explores if and how their reasoning can inform Marxian class analysis. Third, Wright aims to show how class conflict and compromise can be empirically studied nowadays.

Those familiar with the author's earlier work will know most of the material compiled in this book, as nine out of twelve chapters have been published elsewhere between 1996 and 2009. The chapters are organised in three parts and an introductory chapter. Part one focusses on different frameworks of class analysis, which are then interrogated and criticised from a Marxist point of view. The second part of the book – "Class in the Twenty-first Century" – accesses the works of three other authors (among them Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*) as well as the wider debate about the alleged "death of class". The book concludes by turning to the issues of class conflict and class compromise, thereby connecting the theoretical and empirical levels.

Wright starts his book with a move towards an integrated class model. Instead of pitting the class definitions of social stratification approaches, Weberian accounts and Marxian class analysis

against each other in a “battle of paradigms”, the author claims that these approaches focus on different class mechanisms that operate on distinct levels of analysis. Marxism is valuable, but

does not constitute a full blown ‘paradigm’ capable of comprehensively explaining all things social ... under a unified framework. It also does not have a monopoly on the capacity to identify real mechanisms, and thus in practice sociological research by Marxists should combine distinctive Marxist-identified mechanisms with whatever other causal processes seem pertinent to the tasks at hand (p. 2).

According to Wright, the class definition of social stratification approaches is particularly apt for unveiling how individuals are sorted into different positions within a class structure on the basis of the individual attributes they acquire (e.g. education). Its strength thus lies in its ability to capture class processes at the micro level. A Weberian notion of class, on the other hand, is mostly occupied with the phenomenon of opportunity-hoarding, focusing on processes of social closure and leading to the exclusion of big parts of society from economically and politically privileged positions. Wright claims that such a perspective is best at analysing distributive conflicts over resources relevant for (labour) market relations determining class positions. Albeit private ownership of the means of production is addressed in Weberian approaches, Wright sees Marxian perspectives as being best at capturing the underlying fundamental class division in capitalist societies that are built on relations of domination and exploitation. In order to integrate a power dimension, the author proposes a recursive “dynamic macro-micro model” linking struggles within the three identified class mechanisms to the general balance of power (p. 14).

The problem with his integrative model is that it is very abstract. Even after acknowledging that the task of developing an integrative model cannot be done in one essay, Wright’s conceptualisation of power relations remains rather simplistic and leaves a lot of questions unanswered. First, it remains unclear how and by whom power is exerted. Second, although calling for an integrative model that functions from a micro to a macro level, Wright sees power relations only as the outcome in the realm of production and distribution. Class-relevant attributes of individuals are totally left out as sources for the exercise of and conflict over power relations. Moreover, this micro-level would also require including the role of racial, gendered or other forms of power that work directly through the construction of subjectivities and intersect with the category of class. Thus Wright misses out an important source of conflict, one which is relevant for both social closure and social stratification.

The second part of the book examines the wider debate about the alleged “death of class”. Here Wright critically interrogates the approach of Gursky and Weeden, who focus on “micro-classes” formed along occupational categories. He argues that, although not always directly visible, the class categories on the macro-level regain importance in times of crisis and are thus still relevant for class analysis. His comment on Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, whose analysis he praises for his “extraordinary dataset” (p. 138), is an important intervention as he rightly argues that in order to come to the root of the problem of inequality and to inform emancipatory struggles, a class perspective is needed.

The most impressive contribution is situated in the last part of the book. In Chapter 11 Wright presents a theoretical model that tries to capture the relationship between working-class power, capitalist class interest and class compromise. In a classic Marxist analytical manner, Wright applies

game theory in order to show that the emergence of different forms of class compromise depend on the game being played. The move from one game to another – and with it from one form of class compromise to another – depends on the associational power of workers. The space for class compromise is seen as both determined by systemic boundaries of capitalism and by the historically grown institutional context of class conflict (structure of the welfare state, labour laws, etc.). Wright claims that the differences within these institutional contexts combined with working-class associational power explain why the forms of class compromise vary both in time and between countries. Using graphic modelling of interest curves, Wright makes a convincing argument and moves beyond simplistic Marxian class struggle arguments.

However, one of the major complexities that Wright talks about in the first two parts of the book is excluded from the third part – namely, the contradictory class positions of the middle-class and working-class fractions who also profit from existing relations of exclusion and exploitation. He admits himself that excluding these makes the class configuration of his model “unrealistic” (p. 189). His excuse that the high level of abstraction is still useful to clarify processes in the real world seems fragile. Nevertheless, it is clear that the task of including these complexities is enormous and Wright’s theoretical model of class compromise can be seen as a good starting point.

This chapter is also especially interesting for those active in the labour movement, as it offers a framework that is able to accommodate national institutional particularities of labour movements, and offers an innovative way to analyse options for class compromise. Conceptualising the relationship between institutional setting, associational power and the interests of workers and capitalists can also inform trade unions and their strategies.

Looking at the whole book and coming back to Wright’s initial aims, one can say that the character of the book as a compendium of different texts is both a strength and a weakness of *Understanding Class*. On the one hand, many different aspects are presented, which makes the book an excellent introduction for students interested in the conceptualisation of class. However, the book does not achieve its initial aim, which is to develop an integrative framework of class analysis, as it remains unclear how these different bits and pieces can be bound together. The chapters are not really connected with each other, and one might easily miss the golden thread that guides the reader through the book. In this regard, it would have been a good idea to provide a concluding chapter that connects the different chapters with each other and synthesises the different arguments made in the chapters.

Regardless of its flaws *Understanding Class* offers a valuable introduction to and overview of the debate about class from a Marxian standpoint. The book is thus recommended to both scholars and students of social sciences who are interested in the notion of class. The last part of the book especially can provide new perspectives on class struggle for the labour movement in times where new strategies to counter capitalist expansion are urgently needed.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Felix Nickel is currently finishing his Masters degree in Global Political Economy at the University of Kassel. His research interests include global labour studies and labour revitalisation studies as well as theories and empirical research on digital capitalism. He also serves as a freelance lecturer on labour struggles in the global garment industry for the German Clean Clothes Campaign. [Email: [felix.nickel@posteo.de](mailto:felix.nickel@posteo.de)]