Book Review

Claire Ainsley (2018) *The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes*. Bristol: Policy Press. ISBN 9781447344186. 208 pp. Paperback £12.99

Reviewed by
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Whether Guy Standing's books on the "precariat", Didier Eribon's recollections of struggling with his working-class and gay identities, or the numerous books on the "white working class" published in the wake of Brexit and Trump, sociological discussions on social class are no longer frowned upon. While explicitly Marxist discussions on class as a social relation remain marginal, status group models and, in particular, culturalist explanations have gained in prominence in recent years. It is against this background that Claire Ainsley's book *The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes* needs to be analysed.

As the Executive Director of the British anti-poverty organisation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Ainsley draws upon rich empirical material and data to showcase the depth of Britain's economic, social and political crisis. Yet, unlike other books on social class, Ainsley uses her expertise and knowledge not only to analyse the shape of the new working class but she also takes the opportunity to advance a new policy agenda. After all, Britain remains one of the few countries in Europe where productivity has not returned to pre-2008 crisis levels and 68 per cent of working-class people agree with the statement that Britain has changed for the worse in the last twenty to thirty years (p. 16). Above all, this has created political turmoil, with the Brexit vote, the Scottish National Party's rise, and Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour Party leader in 2015, to just name a few.

Rather than re-shuffling British working-class politics, Ainsley identifies that political parties have become disconnected from the "new working class". According to her, the traditional class cleavage in politics is to be upheld yet it is mediated by age, educational degree and technology among others. Similar to the writer Michael Lind, who has recently published a book titled *The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Metropolitan Elites*, Ainsley identifies geographic location as central to the disconnect between political elites and low-income voters. It is not only the divide between city and countryside, but also between different areas within metropolitan cities that are decisive to reproducing marginalisation.

Readers of this Journal will be particularly interested in Ainsley's definition of "the new working class". For her, economic, social and cultural factors contribute to the shape of the working class. She shallowly defines the new working class as "multi-ethnic, comprised of people living off low to middle incomes, and likely to be occupied in service sector jobs like catering, social care or retail" (p. 2). While it might be useful to her daily work to conceptualise the "new working class" in this way, there are two interrelated theoretical problems which arise from such a definition. First, this definition does not treat class as a social relation. Second, it remains questionable how "new" this working class really is. After all, the decline in employment in the manufacturing sector, the end of the male-breadwinner model, the concomitant feminisation of the workforce and rise

of employment in the private services sector has been an on-going process since the early 1970s.

Throughout the book, the lack of a theoretical foundation to analyse the shape of the working class becomes apparent and translates into a political and philosophical pessimism. Postmodern ideas that the working class is more atomised and fragmented than in previous periods, or that the working class does not primarily identify with the workplace, reproduce an unrealistic and fictional account of the working class in the past. The working class never was a homogeneous social class but has always required organisation – whether that be economic, political, cultural or social – in order to move from what Karl Marx labelled "a class in itself" to "a class for itself", active in their pursuit of its own agenda. It needs to be said that in the past it was mostly skilled male labourers who had a strong occupational and workplace identity. Other sections of the working class drew upon multiple sources to construct such an identity. Yet, without such theoretical clarity, Ainsley moves back and forth between the point at which the new working class does "not have a collective identity" (8) and the point where she postulates the deep-rootedness of working-class consciousness or what she refers to as the "working class of the mind".

Despite the fact that the workplace is no longer the primary source of identification, Ainsley acknowledges the depth of the crisis of work in Britain. There is an evident lack of upward job mobility, career prospects or lifelong jobs. Beyond that there is an ever-larger percentage of the self-employed and people working on Zero-Hour Contracts. These trends have an effect on workers' family structure as well as wider society, most prominently on unionisation rates. However, Ainsley's policy proposals to create an employment rights floor, inspire a "learning revolution for adult workers" (p. 99) and a government campaign on good work do not match her analysis. For example, the popular proposal to re-introduce sectoral collective bargaining, which was fundamental to both the 2017 and 2019 Labour Party Manifestos, is simply not mentioned.

Ainsley's stronger points are in respect to how social class remains the defining issue in British politics. According to her, British political campaigns have been successful insofar as they have managed to address social class in novel ways. New Labour, for example, was able to win the 1997 General Election due to the party's appeals to the middle class, epitomised by Tony Blair's infamous statement, "We're all middle class now". Taking place after the book's initial publication, the 2019 General Election was exemplary for how the Conservative Party was able to win working-class voters.

Unlike Blue Labour and the likes of Michael Lind, Ainsley does not propose to move on to the terrain of the nation or advance a progressive patriotism. The elephant in the room, however, is the ambiguous concept of populism, which remains unaddressed yet would have helped her to connect the dots between working-class voters from political elites and the rise of new political formations such as the Scottish National Party, UKIP and later the Brexit Party.

Geared toward policy-makers and politicians, the book develops concrete policy proposals regarding questions of family, education, health, the economy, education, welfare, housing, immigration, crime and democracy. With these substantive and evidence-based proposals, she hopes to rebalance the British political system. However, the book falls flat at times as it is by no means as inspirational as the Labour Party's 2017 or 2019 Manifestos. Moreover, most of these policy proposals have been overtaken by the multiple crises of Covid-19, the environment and the economy. But even at the time of publication in 2018, it would have remained questionable whether such a balancing of British politics was even possible.

Ainsley believes that such a rebalancing is possible based on the fact that working-class voters no longer vote on issues but rather on the basis of their morals, values and identity. Drawing on moral foundation theory and YouGov data, Ainsley argues that family remains the most important issue for working-class voters. While this is something the left has ignored for a long time, she

argues that it should become the "central organising principle of government policy" (p. 154), especially because women view politics through the prism of their children. In order to win working-class voters, Ainsley proposes a policy-making led by public attitudes, which would embed policy in the lived realities of people who run and use public services. It is when she argues for a more democratically inclusive system that Ainsley is at her best. The last few years of British politics, especially, have revealed that the country's democratic institutions are neither effective nor accountable decision-making organs.

Page after page, it becomes clear that the book is written by a policy wonk for other policy wonks. Her evidence-based conclusions stand firm but they do not provide an answer on how to reconstruct a social, cultural and economic politics for the working class. Instead, the working class is simply treated as an object to be won over in an election. By solely focusing on the political sphere, the book leaves one with more questions than answers. If the new working class is to move front and centre in the coming decade, it will require more than evidence-based policy proposals to "win hearts and minds".

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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