

An Accidental Utopia? Social Mobility and the Foundations of an Egalitarian Society, 1880-1940

Review Number: 1196

Publish date: Sunday, 1 January, 2012

Author: Erik Olssen

Clyde Griffen

Frank Jones

ISBN: 9781877372643

Date of Publication: 2010

Price: £24.50

Pages: 300pp.

Publisher: University of Otago Press

Place of Publication: Dunedin

Reviewer: Jim McAloon

The Caversham Project has been a long-running and detailed historical investigation of work and community, social structure, class and gender in the southern suburbs of Dunedin, New Zealand. With a strong, indeed rigorous, quantitative basis the project has generated an impressive list of books, essays and working papers over the last 20 years. *An Accidental Utopia?* is described by the authors as the final instalment, and they note that its subject, social mobility, was the issue around which the project was initially conceived.

The relationship of social mobility – or, perhaps more precisely, occupational mobility – to class, or class consciousness, or the relevance of class in a given society is an enduring sociological debate. The very form of the preceding sentence indicates the extent to which the issues, and even the definitional ground, are contested. What does class mean? Is class only salient where classes are conscious of themselves (Marx's class for itself) or is it still useful to speak of classes in some objective sense (Marx's class in itself)? Olssen, Griffen and Jones prefer to describe the latter as strata (occupationally defined) and reserve 'class' for self-conscious groups: not an indefensible position by any means but one that may be debated. Many scholars have followed Stephan Thernstrom's account of Boston in arguing that high levels of transience and occupational mobility tend to weaken class consciousness; in New Zealand this argument is often referenced to a short but influential 1969 essay by W. H. Oliver.⁽¹⁾ Olssen, for his part, has long been associated with the opposite view, emphasizing the continuing importance of class in New Zealand's political development.

Neither the substantive nor the methodological issues are unique to New Zealand, of course – with one exception; where scholars elsewhere may use census manuscripts, these are destroyed in New Zealand. In the absence of that key source, and with street directories inevitably partial in their coverage, the Caversham work has relied on electoral rolls, supplemented by marriage records. Electoral rolls are not perfect either (particularly in usually describing women by marital rather than occupational status), but universal suffrage prevailed in New Zealand from 1893 and the rolls are, therefore, unusually comprehensive.

Methodologically, a key question is the usefulness of case studies. Can a detailed regional study serve as a

way of looking at issues nationally? Goldthorpe and Erikson, in Britain, have been sceptical of case studies as they are unrepresentative; the present book points out that it is precisely the regional differences that may be important and argues too that historians are increasingly recognising the importance of place as well as time. In the authors' view, indeed, place joins class, race and gender as 'mutually constitutive' (p. 18), a theme sketched out and worthy of further thought.

Class, though, is in some senses the focus of this book, and particularly the relationship between class and mobility. A nine-level model, derived from Goldthorpe, had been elaborated in an earlier publication.⁽²⁾ The same model appears here, as one would expect, although now the nine levels are described as strata, and aggregated into three classes, upper-middle, middle and working. As the authors note, models of class need to 'balance ... theoretical power and specificity with empirical requirements' (p. 27). Yet most models of class which have enjoyed wide circulation in the last thirty or forty years have been devised in and for societies much more industrial than New Zealand. Olssen and his colleagues have, in successive publications, maintained a distinctive category for the self-employed, reflecting their continued prominence in New Zealand society. Perhaps because of the origin of these models in urban and industrialised societies or perhaps because of the urban focus of the Caversham study, the model of class deployed here is rather weak on rural occupations. While it is not my intention to criticise this fine work of urban history for not addressing rural themes, as the authors themselves note, rural occupations accounted for a third of the male workforce over the six decades with which they are concerned. In New Zealand, as perhaps in other settler societies, the rhetoric of opportunity was as much rural as urban, and there were other New Zealand utopias than Caversham.

The relationship of marriage to mobility is important, and complex. 'In Britain the marriage market was central to women's and not irrelevant to men's social mobility, and migration did not change that' (p. 47). The authors find that in the great majority of marriages, partners crossed the boundaries in a nine-class model but if one aggregates these nine into the three groups, then there was significant mobility into the upper middle class, but that exogamy did not prevail by much in the middle class and over sixty per cent of working class marriages did not cross class boundaries. Although most scholars would agree with the authors that colonial society was more fluid than the old world, the upper-middle-class pattern may be influenced by factors distinctive to Dunedin. As the book notes, secondary education provided opportunities for social mixing in Dunedin, because there were no elite private schools as there were in Christchurch. Whether such schools reinforced endogamy in the upper class is as yet unknown. It is, as the authors say, strange to ignore male marital mobility; there is a common stereotype of marrying the boss's daughter and moving into management or ownership of a family firm. Measurement of this matter as of other mobility issues using marriage records, however, is problematic because one is comparing the occupational status of two generations – the couple's fathers with the bridegroom – and occupational status is strongly influenced by age. Another issue around marriage, family and class is the unit of measurement: individuals, or imputing the husband's class position to the entire household. There are sensible reasons for taking the latter position, as these authors do following Goldthorpe. The best justification is that on marriage women customarily left paid work, but even Goldthorpe conceded that women could change class position by moving from their father's family to their husband's. *Accidental Utopia?* also argues that women's individual class position is important not least because women increasingly worked for money before marriage (not to mention the paid work many did after marriage, which is elusive in the official sources). On this whole issue, Erik Olin Wright's terminology of contradictory class locations might be useful; Wright gives the example of a woman who, working as a secretary, is married to the owner of a substantial business.

More general issues of mobility are discussed, with some sophisticated statistical analysis, in the fourth chapter. I could wish 'stratum event' was defined a bit better but one gets the point. A key argument is that disaggregation is essential, as the potential for mobility varied considerably between occupations, some being much more likely to lead to self-employment, and young men (and women) made such choices on the basis of risk or security. This chapter also demonstrates the permeable boundaries between skilled workers and the lower middle class, and the continuum between small and large employers, the former sometimes becoming the latter by incremental growth. There are some excellent discussions of occupational change and

middle-class recruitment, such as the process by which clerks could become accountants through mathematical ability. Internal labour markets were also important, with firms rewarding long service by status improvement, and in family firms the usual practice was for sons to begin as apprentices. All this combined into a powerfully egalitarian culture, at work and outside work. Nor was technologically-driven change in the semi-skilled occupations all negative; joiners' skills could be diminished by door-making machines, but foundry labourers could become welders.

Perhaps a little awkwardly, a further discussion of intergenerational mobility, based on marriage records, does not immediately follow this chapter. The authors recapitulate the problems with such sources, but they are the best available, and show that compared to their fathers, bridegrooms' mobility was divided into roughly equal proportions of improved occupational status, stability and diminished status (the latter being particularly complicated by the relationship between age and status). There was considerable variation; two thirds of self-employed and small employer bridegrooms had fathers in the same stratum; the figure was between 40 and 50 per cent for both unskilled and large employers, but only a fifth of professional and an eighth of semi-professional grooms had fathers in similar position. It seems, though, that the sons of upper-middle class fathers remained in such occupations or became professionals, reflecting 'the intergenerational transmission of advantage' (p. 153); egalitarianism had its limits. One important finding is that while Irish Catholics were unskilled or self-employed in the immigrant generation, their children 'were occupationally mobile with a vengeance' (p. 158), moving into skilled trades and white collar occupations, so that the Irish Catholic occupational structure quickly approached the norm.

Mobility chances were also, unsurprisingly, affected by the state of the colonial economy. Thus the decade from 1902 was one of openness and opportunity; recession and war between 1911 and 1921 meant much less movement. The authors confirm that the 1920s (1921–8) were generally a time of possibility as the conservative Reform government sought to ensure social stability by encouraging what would later be called a property-owning democracy. The Depression decade (1928–38) saw opportunity rapidly closed off. The occupational structure, the domination of the handcraft trades, and the relatively strong possibility of achieving self-employment (in good times at least) all combined to shape a powerful consensus on economic and social policy, a consensus including the ideas of fair play, a wage-earners' welfare state, and government responsibility for economic management. All this has been lucidly discussed under the label of social liberalism by a number of authors, including, with an Australasian emphasis, Marian Sawer. Reinforced here is the argument advanced by Olssen in his 1995 *Building the New World* (3), that the thousands of immigrants who populated New Zealand in the 1860s and 1870s were democrats by conviction, profoundly committed to the openness of opportunity and an egalitarian respectability.

An Accidental Utopia? also dwells upon the distinctive features of society and politics in South Dunedin. With fewer Scots and more English and Irish than the rest of the city, fewer Presbyterians and more Baptists, Methodists and Roman Catholics, old world allegiances were diluted and a class-based politics emerged, with first Liberal then Labour dominating parliamentary representation. Here, perhaps, a little too much distinctiveness is claimed. Granting that Dunedin was a key site in the political reconstitutions of 1890 and 1893 – respectively the victory of a reforming Liberal party in New Zealand's first one man-one vote election, and the enactment of universal suffrage, detailed investigation of other New Zealand cities might qualify the authors' suggestion that in South Dunedin 'for a time, some communities become society's vanguard' (p. 224). While this book emphasizes the role of three Dunedin Lib-Lab members on the Parliamentary Labour Bills Committee, the author of the industrial arbitration system and Minister of Labour (the first in the Empire) was the Christchurch radical lawyer and journalist, William Pember Reeves. Similarly, it is suggested that the 'sizeable concentration of Catholics in southern Dunedin' (p. 227) was instrumental after 1919 in pushing the Labour Party away from revolutionary nostrums of nationalisation and towards the reformism of *Rerum Novarum*. But this is to forget that in the 1919 election Christchurch accounted for three of Labour's eight parliamentary seats and two of the key Christchurch Labour MPs, who were ministers after 1935, were practicing Catholics. Perhaps the most important figure in Labour's policy development after 1925 was the Wellington-based Anglican and Christian Socialist, Walter Nash. Labour's reformism had many intellectual sources, while, as this book notes, many of the skilled tradesmen of South

Dunedin stayed with the Liberals until that party proved incapable of dealing with the Depression.

What, finally, did class mean in South Dunedin? Inherited and imported ideas about class ‘became unsettled’ in the new world (p. 245) and the terminology was contested (but where is it not?) Class in urban New Zealand was ‘a complex equation ... combining features peculiar to industrial capitalism, but modified by New Zealand’s small towns and the dominance of the handicraft sector, itself a product in large part of the small product markets made inevitable by a small and scattered population’ (p. 217). The language of class was supplemented by other, related, terminologies. In New Zealand English, at least, one still speaks of ‘tradies’ when referring to skilled tradespeople and when a builder or electrician is about his daily work he is ‘on the tools’ (and a partner in a large electrical contracting business may still spend the occasional day on the tools). The world so meticulously described in this book has not disappeared yet; aptitude to one’s trade, practical ability, and manual work are still esteemed. The equality which was valued in popular culture, however, had significant limits. If the large employers of South Dunedin could still relate to others in that community on the basis of a shared background in the skilled trades and, indeed, continuing technical expertise, we need to remember that even these large manufacturers did not occupy the upper levels of New Zealand wealth. The biggest fortunes, as we know, were held by merchants and pastoral landowners, not as a rule part of the southern Dunedin community anyway. And, as this book and some of Olssen’s other writings have made clear, there was a disreputable stratum of the itinerant and feckless who represented a moral warning of the consequences of dissipation.

South Dunedin was, therefore, a more open society than Britain, and by extension the same is true of the rest of settler New Zealand; marriage was relatively open, so were occupational choices, and the upper and middle classes constantly refreshed themselves. The strength of this book is its rigorous demonstration of the truth of these propositions, which have been suspected and guessed at by a number of historians of New Zealand and of other settler societies. Was it, though, a utopia? As the authors suggest, the very success of this society ‘undoubtedly contributed to the formation of an increasingly self-satisfied society. The Great Depression came as a momentous shock’ (p. 188). From that shock, the social contract had to be comprehensively renegotiated, but that is another story.

Notes

1. W. H. Oliver, ‘Reeves, Sinclair, and the social pattern’, in *The Feel of Truth: Essays in New Zealand and Pacific History*, ed. Peter Munz (Wellington, 1969).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Erik Olssen and Maureen Hickey, *Class and Occupation: The New Zealand Reality* (Dunedin, 2005).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Erik Olssen, *Building the New World: Work, Politics and Society in Caversham, 1880s–1920s* (Auckland, 1995).[Back to \(3\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1196>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/7853>