

HOW CLASS WORKS

POWER AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

When I tell friends that I have written a book on class, especially class in the United States, the news is received with either incredulity or cheerleading. The “posts”—liberals and postmodernists—question whether the concept is still useful and often suggest I use another term. If they acknowledge the salience of class at all in these times, most relegate it to a narrative—one of the stories Americans tell about history—or a figure of vernacular speech. The other response is gratitude that someone is (finally) going to blast the myth of American classlessness and its contemporary displacement, stratification. Stratification designates distinction without conflict. Those who replace class with strata deny that society is propelled by social struggles; for the stratification theorists, people are arranged along a social grid by occupation or income. The category is merely descriptive of status and differential opportunities for jobs and goods. Enthusiasts are frequently outraged that any intelligent social thinker can fail to observe the obvious signs of class difference, especially the ample evidence that at the political level the U.S. democratic system retains considerable deference to money and its bearers in the determination of social and economic policy. Plainly there is no longer agreement that the concept of class tells us anything about how social structure or history is constituted.

Unfortunately this book may give little comfort to those who defend the received wisdom about class and class struggles. For the unreconstructed marxist, class is a relation of social groups to ownership and control of the

means of material production, and political and social power derives from ownership of productive property. They remain convinced that the fundamental relations within capitalist society are, with slight variations, as they were two hundred years ago at the dawn of the industrial revolution. The adherents of this doctrine never tire of quoting scripture and proclaiming their faith. For them people like me are apostates. To this state of being I plead guilty. I remain loyal to the questions posed by the founders of historical materialism and to their reliance on history to provide the solutions to vexing problems of power. But it cannot be true that the answers are immutable. On this claim we end up in an infinite outpouring of blame and vituperation. Life is too short for constant fulmination.

The marginalization of class in contemporary political and theoretical conversation is rooted in real changes in the shape of world politics. First, the collapse of East European communism, African socialism, and the drift of China toward the world capitalist market leave precious few countries that proclaim themselves revolutionary societies. Observers have interpreted these dramatic events as solid evidence that marxism is wrong in its prediction that socialism will succeed capitalism, even though most of the leaders of these once-revolutionary societies had an increasingly remote relationship to marxism's philosophical basis, the precepts of historical materialism. Certainly none of them adhered, even rhetorically, to Marx's libertarian political beliefs which held that workers themselves, not the state, would control the key institutions of the economy and of political life. Marx admitted only that a state might be necessary for a short period after revolutionary power was established. The twentieth-century regimes that established themselves in the name of marxian socialism were (and are) staffed by a near-permanent bureaucracy and one-party political leadership that has no intention of relinquishing power, except if forced by circumstances. Although I reject the idea that on these grounds marxism "failed," as I have already indicated there are good reasons for believing that we need new concepts that are adequate to the conditions of historical transformations.

The traditional definition proposed by Marx and Engels in the 1840s—that, in general, relations of ownership and control of the means of material production cleaved society into two main antagonistic classes—is challenged from a number of quarters. They expected capital's domination of society to consign all intermediate classes to near oblivion. Indeed some of these predictions have proven prescient. For example, despite the persistence of myth the independent farmer has become a rarity in the United States. Agriculture is no longer marked by individual ownership, but rather

by corporate or small capitalist farms on which wage laborers perform most of the tasks; since the turn of the twentieth century individual artisans who at the dawn of the nineteenth century accounted for most manufacturing have gradually been reduced to skilled wage workers by large industrial enterprises; in most regions of the United States the small grocery store has yielded to supermarket chains, just as department stores have progressively displaced the independent retail merchant. In recent years even the medium-sized department store has fallen on tough times. Huge chains such as Walmart—now at the top of the Fortune 500 largest corporations—have relentlessly captured ever-larger market shares. These developments seemed to confirm Marx's underlying two-class theorem. But even though they fail at a 90 percent rate in the first year, small businesses constantly try to reproduce themselves. Transnational capitalism notwithstanding, the ideology of entrepreneurship is interwoven with the dreams and aspirations of wide sections of the American people.

And if the old middle class of small proprietors has suffered economic and political marginalization, the formation of a new middle class introduced complexity into the class map. As the introduction of rationalized methods of production and scientifically based technologies at the turn of the twentieth century transformed industrial production, much of the craft knowledge accumulated by skilled labor was transferred to machines, a process directed by managers and implemented by the design efficiency of engineers and technicians, perhaps the most important new social formation of advanced capitalism. The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a new class of salaried managers and trained scientific and technical intellectuals, none of whom can credibly be described as either traditional proletarians or capitalists. At least on the surface the two-class model of developed capitalism seemed to have been severely attenuated if not entirely refuted. But those who perform what I shall call immaterial labor do not, in the main, enjoy the autonomy of traditional self-employed professionals. In fact their subordination under management in large-scale enterprises has become one of the most explosive social questions of our time.

On the side of capital things have changed as well. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century the family-owned company yielded to a legal and organizational entity, the corporation, in which, some claim, shareholders retain only a very limited voice. Many writers have observed that although they are not owners of substantial productive capital the managers and professional employees now effectively control the corporate enterprise, not only on the shop floor but in all aspects of business: machine design, sales, dis-

tribution, and finance. The so-called managerial revolution announced by such writers as Thorstein Veblen, A. A. Berle, and James Burnham spurred a veritable cottage industry of writers and consultants who survive today. The concept of the managerial revolution has gone out of fashion, but its implications for class thinking remain important. Whether or not capitalism has changed its composition so that owners of capital have become bystanders, the enhanced role of very high priced employees in its operation is undeniable, although the extent of their ultimate power is contested. As the twenty-first century began, the professional-managerial class—that is, employees who, owing to credentials or to bureaucratic office, are presumed to enjoy considerable autonomy in the performance of what Marx called “the labor of management”—had become a visible, often powerful sector of American and other advanced industrial societies.¹

In recent years, however, we have seen how vulnerable top executives are, as boards of directors dismiss them after a few quarters of low profitability. That many chief executive officers (CEOs) and division heads are given a “golden parachute” (substantial severance packages including stock options) does not obviate the fact that they are routinely fired for presiding over poor profit performance; or that they may be discharged for any reason by representatives of major stockholders. The resurgent role of boards of directors, holders of large business loans, and other investors since the 1970s has undermined the force of the thesis of the separation of capital and management, but not entirely refuted it. There are historically wrought hierarchies within capital as well. What Marx called the “social division of labor” has shifted several times since the dawn of the industrial revolution. The capitalist “class” is not identical to the ruling class. The social division concerns the various domains of production and distribution, in the first place between agriculture and industry and commerce, then, within each, the relation of various industries. Once America consisted mainly of owners of relatively small productive property: farmers, artisans, and manufacturers who employed few workers; and merchants: store owners, owners of banks of modest capitalization, and wholesalers. From colonial times to the mid-nineteenth century, while there were struggles for political and economic supremacy among these groups, the main battle was against the plantation aristocracy whose slaveholding mode of production threatened agricultural and industrial expansion on the basis of free labor. To call these smallholders a ruling class would be excessive and even absurd.²

The term *ruling class* begins to have relevance during the industrial revolution of the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the family-owned

business is supplanted by large corporations, in the first place the railroad companies and then the expanding banking sector. Within the emergence and development of industrial capitalism once-dominant sectors are relegated to subordinate positions by newer formations. In 1850, America was overwhelmingly agrarian, and agricultural interests not only dominated political life at the state level but also were major forces in national politics. At the turn of the twentieth century half the country was engaged in agricultural production and in businesses and occupations related to it. Owing to the rapid pace of mechanization of farm production—a phenomenon that turned farms into industrial enterprises and drove out small producers—by the year 2000 only 5 percent of the working population was engaged in agriculture on farms and in food processing, distribution, and transportation. If so-called farm states still exercised considerable political influence it was owing more to constitutional safeguards of the power of small states (for example, equal representation in the Senate, the electoral college) than to the numerical influence of farmers. In the 1870s and 1880s the blatant, undisguised power of these corporations was not confined to the economy but also dominated politics and culture.

As always, absolute power did not remain uncontested. By the 1880s two major mass movements emerged to challenge the hegemony of the powerful private corporations: a national labor movement that took the form of several distinct and competing organizations, mainly in the old crafts, and a movement of small farmers, north and south, that formed state and national political parties to challenge the two major parties, generally understood to be representatives of big capital. Radical laborism took two primary forms: the incipient efforts to form mass labor unions, that is, unskilled as well as skilled industrial unions in the new industries like steel and garments; and the development of socialist and anarchist organizations that were relatively small but steadily grew until the outbreak of World War I. The radical agrarians, having determined that both major parties were hopelessly in the thrall of the large rail and processing corporations, formed the Peoples or Populist Party and ran a third-party candidate for president in the elections of 1888 and 1892. The new party quickly became a dominant force in several mid-western and southwestern state governments and legislatures, among them Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Nebraska.³

The efforts to unite the two wings of American radicalism stumbled on the rock of faction and sect. But they had an enduring effect on American politics. The Democratic Party and progressive Republicans joined to place limits on the freedom of big capital to dominate markets; corrupt state and

local governments were ejected from office. And during this era social legislation was enacted to protect workers from onerous factory and living conditions. That regulation was sought by some of the large corporations to rationalize their cannibalistic tendencies is undeniable, and there is no doubt that progressivism was a cautious response to the fury of popular dissent. Yet it was class movements that made possible the reforms enacted between 1900 and the New Deal. History was, in these cases, made by class struggles, even if the outcomes were incommensurable with many of the demands of the powerless.

The years 1900–40 marked a sharp turn in the relative weight of manufacturing sectors within capital: once-dominant textiles, which are closely linked to cotton and wool farming, and coal and metal mining were relegated to middle levels of economic power. These were replaced by four rising industries: steel, automobiles, electrical manufacturing, and chemicals, the most important sectors of which were oil refining and organic chemicals. With the growing role of “capital goods” in industrial production—raw materials, rails, machinery, and huge industrial plants—the role of banks and the stock market became more important because few industrial corporations were able to finance their own expansion. In the last three decades of the twentieth century another major power shift occurred: new forces, notably electronics and information/communications, appeared to challenge the economic and social weight of the industries such as steel, autos, and appliances that were once bellwethers of the economy. That technological change played a huge role in each of these shifts often masks the power struggles that go on within the capitalist class itself. Students of American power have debated whether the introduction of the new information and communications sector has shifted the locus of economic and political power in the new globalism from industrial corporations to financial institutions.

The third major challenge to the classical marxist formula is the claim that the advent of consumer society has tended to flatten class differences or, in another register, has placed social differences on a new terrain. Industrial and service workers are themselves stratified according to their access to the means of consumption, and the relation of their consumption level to their position in the occupational hierarchy may be mediated by a number of factors: for example, whether they are unionized, the position of their employer in the economy, credit policies of banks and other lending agencies. On this idea some industrial workers are better off than some professionals, such as teachers and nurses, whose incomes often do not match

those of the skilled trades. Fourth—perhaps the greatest challenge to the concept of class—is the effects of the advent of deskilling, work rationalization, technological change, and opportunities for mobility on the putative working class to the course of history. In this respect the changes in the social position of workers have contradictory effects. On the one hand even well-paid unskilled and semiskilled industrial and service workers are placed in insecure positions by their loss of recognized skill. On the other hand trade union organization has significantly mitigated deskilling. At the same time, given the rapid changes in capitalist work regimes, workers and their unions turn increasingly to the state for amelioration. Jobless insurance, social security, public education, and, in Europe and most other advanced industrial countries, national health care are cushions against market fluctuations that once rendered many destitute within weeks of unemployment or sickness.

Marx and Engels insisted that classes and class struggles constitute what they meant by history. Many writers have noted that even though trade unions and labor and socialist parties are players in the economic and political systems of advanced capitalist societies, neither the wars nor the economic crises that punctuated the twentieth century—two world wars, a major economic crisis (and many small economic ruptures that economists call recessions), countless military interventions and civil wars, and structural as well as cyclical unemployment—stirred the workers to revolt, except episodically. In fact it may be argued that the power of workers and their organizations to achieve reforms within, and not against, capitalist formations amounts to an indefinite postponement of the chances for more fundamental changes. Meanwhile even as economic inequality stalks the century and beyond, all boats have been lifted. Simply stated, even if stark poverty still afflicts a substantial portion of the population—in the United States estimates range from 10 to 20 percent—most of the population has benefited from the growth of capitalism despite the persistence of great inequalities of wealth and power.

Some even argue that workers, at least in the leading economic sectors, have, literally as well as figuratively, become stakeholders in the system even while simultaneously they are exploited under it. Union pension plans invest workers' funds in the stock and bond markets and, in some cases, distribute the fruits of these investments to employees in the form of annuities or savings accounts that supplement and frequently exceed the benefits of Social Security. Some industrial and service workers have enough money to play the market individually, and their numbers have steadily expanded

since the end of World War II. Many have been able to purchase homes and own late model cars, boats, and even second homes that they maintain for investment or income. That these amenities entail working huge quantities of overtime or holding two or three jobs only occasionally results in manifest discontent. Stakeholders normally defend the system that has given them ownership. Whether this is true of the so-called developing societies remains an issue, the answer to which depends on how one views their industrialization over the past several decades. I shall explore this apparent paradox in chapters 3 and 4.

Conceptions of social difference that deny the salience of class adopt implicitly a static, top-down view of social structure. If they retain history as a referent, they also renounce struggles over class as a, much less the, major form of structuration.⁴ Or having replaced the materiality of structure with language and text they claim narrative's materiality. But if one takes social practice rather than either social grids or stories as the point of departure for understanding how social things change there is no alternative but to adopt some concept of class and class struggle. Changes are not signified solely or even primarily by institutional expressions of social practices-cum-struggles. Class practices leave material sediments in the labor process, in institutions, in everyday life, and in vernacular speech even when the goals of the actors are not fully realized or are not manifested as overt forms of political or social conflict. And these practices often contradict actors' stated beliefs and norms. In short, we mean what we say but sometimes our actions speak in a voice different from our moral voice.

Let me briefly mention a few examples. A worker who does not believe in strikes on religious or other moral grounds finds herself on a picket line, giving full throat to grievances at a demonstration, or engages in a job action that withholds her labor. A parent opposed to abortion takes her daughter to obtain an abortion. A black nationalist joins forces with white civil rights adherents to oppose the crippling of affirmative action. In the 1950s and 1960s labor productivity in many American industrial plants lagged behind that of European factories producing the same goods. At a time of unchallenged U.S. dominance of world markets for capital, agricultural, and consumer goods some of this lag was the result of decisions of major corporations not to invest in the most up-to-date technology available, a decision that eventually reduced the viability of several major U.S. industrial sectors. In fact, American corporations engaged in extensive capital investment to rebuild European industries and expanded to developing countries as well. But equally important, wages rose faster than labor productivity, and this eco-

conomic imbalance was largely due to unprecedented worker militancy on the shop floor in the auto, steel, and other industries linked to them.

This was the era of frequent strikes and spontaneous walkouts, notably the 116-day steel strike of 1959 and an extensive series of unauthorized walkouts in the auto plants between 1954 and 1960. Between 1969 and 1972, workers, black and white, resumed combat against their employers but also against an entrenched union leadership that had become committed to labor peace and higher productivity norms. The early 1970s was also a time of worker resistance to the speedup of assembly lines in many sectors: periodic breakdowns; *de facto* sabotage that resulted in defective product, which necessitated repairs after the product had been assembled; widespread lateness and absenteeism; and determined struggles to preserve and extend restrictive work rules that limited the power of management to direct the workforce. Freed from the fear of unemployment that had afflicted an older, depression-scarred generation, young workers, many of them war veterans, were prone to lead these struggles, switch jobs when they were dissatisfied, and spend as much time as they could during working hours smoking dope or drinking.

The well-known student protests of the 1960s were by no means confined to antiwar demonstrations. The student movement began as resentment against the industrialization of university and college life. Far from offering an education, their universities were training them to take professional and technical places in the late capitalist machine. In the 1960s, students and some workers throughout the world reinvented a political counterculture but also a social counterculture that echoed the bohemian revolt against commercialism of the nineteenth century. What some writers have called "the refusal to work" spread throughout both the capitalist and state socialist world. Although the general student and workers' strike of May 1968 in France is, perhaps, emblematic of the deep dissatisfaction expressed by youth against what many intellectuals had termed postindustrial consumer society, similar movements appeared among Italian workers, German students, and, of course, American youth. In the Vietnam War era many students opted out of the draft, challenging the patriotic assumptions of their childhood. Working-class men forced to enter the armed forces became notorious for their unsoldierly conduct in and out of combat. They felt that their country had put them in harm's way for no clear reason and spent much of their military service figuring out how not to be killed. One way was to refuse orders to engage in combat or, when pressed under threat of court-martial, to kill or otherwise disable their superior officers.

Taken from the angle of practice, the revolt against late capitalist work and the culture of consumerism changed the history of the last half of the twentieth century.⁵ Throughout this period the rulers of nearly every advanced industrial society were confronted with unprecedented disturbances: at the workplace, especially among industrial workers; in the universities; and among consumers, many of whom were members of the new class who, despite their relatively secure economic position, perceived that the quality of their lives had deteriorated. Perhaps freedom from want and the fear of physical annihilation led to their firm conviction that they were entitled to a healthy environment. In different registers amid the Cold War—induced economic boom of the fifties and sixties women and blacks demanded more freedom. In their view, in the wake of unparalleled prosperity they were an oppressed and exploited class because the system had failed to deliver on the promise of equal opportunity, the liberal reply to revolutionary demands for equality. Perhaps more to the point, the accelerating entrance of women into paid work prompted some to ask whether women were a “class” burdened with a double shift: to their traditional job of unpaid household labor was added a second one that was waged.⁶ The color line, W. E. B. Du Bois’s central problem of the twentieth century, had matured into a permanent class divide. Some blacks might rise to managerial or professional employment, but, in the main, blacks were—and are—consigned to the lower rungs of production and service labor, a situation that has been exacerbated by massive deindustrialization since the 1970s; further, black rates of unemployment, poverty, and infant mortality are twice the national average.⁷

This book differs from most treatments of class and stratification in several respects. First, it proposes to define the class divide according to the line of power, which includes but is not limited to questions of ownership and control of the key means of material and immaterial production. In general, social rule is wielded by a power bloc in which the political directorate at the national level plays an important role in addition to the decisive groups of owners of capital. Depending on the specific features of any social formation the composition of the power bloc varies. For example, whether the military is part of the ruling class or which sectors of capital are included is a matter of historical specificity. Second, if power becomes the fault line of class division, the divide between workers and other social movements is a historical occurrence not rooted in bio-identities. In capitalist societies such as the United States the practice of class power is to create a huge rift between a multiplicity of social formations—on one side, wage workers, elements of

the "new class" who have been the main activists in the environmental and anti-AIDS movements, women, blacks, and other racially oppressed groups; and on the other a diverse ruling class that generally consists of the most decisive sectors of capital, the national and international political directorate, and other, more variable formations. On neither side of the power divide can one observe a single economic class formation, but rather an alliance of a multiplicity of formations, some of which are coded as social or cultural. But, as we shall see, the women's movement, for example, is also a labor movement in several meanings of the term, and the interpenetration of economic and social issues is ineluctable in the workers' ranks. Social formations struggle over class when their demands result in a fissure in society. Having succeeded—or failed—to force new arrangements, classes may mutate or disappear.

Thus, as opposed to writers for whom capitalist social relations are relatively stable over large expanses of time, I claim that classes and their struggles for power within a system of social relations have historicity. By "historicity" I mean that they come into existence under specific conditions that, almost inevitably, are superseded by new conditions and new social formations. Yet within the history of capitalism these social formations are often cleaved into antagonistic blocs; consensus rather than cleavage is the exception rather than the rule and is usually achieved, as are major technological innovations that turn the lives of many workers upside down, in war situations. Enter nationalism and patriotism. These are the tools of suppression and displacement of class antagonisms. But even as the nation as a cultural imaginary persists, it is constantly challenged both from within by social cleavages and, increasingly, from without by autonomous transnational capital, with which it is obliged to make alliances against the common enemy, the people. Third, following the insight of Adam Pzeworski, I argue that most struggles are about class formation rather than class struggles that are forever imbedded in the capitalist relations of production. I do not conclude that class formation and class struggle no longer constitute history if the outcome is not revolution and the appearance of a new mode of production. Instead, as I argue in chapters 2 and 3, class occurs when insurgent social formation(s) make demands that cleave society and engender new social and cultural relations. Needless to say, rulers may, with varying success, incorporate or integrate elements of these demands in order to thwart their class-producing consequences.⁸

Others have insisted on one or another of these propositions. I argue that class is constituted by the totality of these conditions.

1

CLASS MATTERS

PREAMBLE

One of the more visible human preoccupations is the effort to understand social relationships. In every historical period writers have speculated, theorized, and told stories about the ways we live together, why and how we fight each other, and how we survive (when we do not conquer) the perceived assaults of the external physical world. These inquiries constitute the substance of philosophy, history, literary study, the social sciences, and the arts. The myriad observations that result are typically organized through the use of concepts.

Perhaps the most commonplace of these concepts is the social or society. In their quest to meet the challenges of their environment, animals, including humans, live in groups and enter into relationships with their own and other species, associations that, as one major social thinker, Karl Marx, says, are ultimately "independent of their will." They enter into antagonistic as well as cooperative relations, even if they tend to disguise the antagonisms with a rhetoric of cooperation.¹

Western civilization is the rubric used to describe those who are descended from the intellectual and moral traditions generated by Athens and Greco-Roman city-states of the six centuries before the birth of Christ and from the religious traditions of Jews and Christians. It also demarcates European-centered societies from those of Africa and Asia. But there are serious problems with the conflation of the two traditions. Democracy and citizenship, so

powerful in the European Enlightenment, do not derive from the so-called Judeo-Christian legacy or from any monotheistic religion, since its core is to surrender human agency to a deity. In fact, religious leaders frequently deny that democracy applies to the internal organization of the church, and none of the major Western religions was in the forefront of the struggle for democracy in the Age of Revolution, which defined much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like the corporation, which reserves power for those who own its shares, most religions distinguish between the flock, which provides financial support and social legitimacy, and the priests, whose professional training and certification confer power to rule the institution. Democracy and its concomitant concept citizenship are the product of the polytheistic Athenian society, which insisted that all citizens participate in every aspect of community life (though it also denied citizenship to slaves, artisans, and women; indeed Aristotle's concept of citizenship explicitly excludes all but those who possess the leisure to participate in the affairs of state).

The conflation of Western civilization with the Judeo-Christian tradition is the doing of conservative philosophers—almost all of those who arose in the wake of the scientific enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—for whom a moral order is the primary value of any social arrangement properly termed civilized. Christians have followed Jews in emphasizing the power of the moral code, popularly termed the Ten Commandments, which according to the Old Testament God handed down to Moses after humans proved unable to govern themselves without engaging in riotous and self-destructive behavior. Henceforth people would learn to live together without killing each other on a whim or in a fit of anger; would not covet another's wife or dissolve the family bond, thereby inviting personal violence; and, perhaps most significant for economic life, would not steal another's personal property or, indeed, community property for private gain.

For many writers associated with the tradition of Western liberalism, whose key idea is the connection between freedom and the market, the chief characteristic of Western civilization, at least since the Protestant Reformation, is that it is a society of individuals. The object of human association is to achieve harmony by overcoming our differences. Accordingly, liberalism rejects the idea that hidden forces of any kind, let alone such abstractions as cooperation and class antagonism, structure our modes of life. People inevitably engage each other for the purposes of trade, friendship, and the fulfillment of household responsibilities, but, according to John Locke, the ba-

sis of social interaction is the Self, always conceived as an integral whole. As Adam Smith noted, individuals act on the basis of self-interest; the hidden hand of God will ensure order. For Thomas Hobbes, the presence of individuals who disrupt social relations in their pursuit of pecuniary gain requires the imposition of common rules of conduct. Society survives its internal fissures by imposing sanctions and restrictions that individuals obey in their self-interest.² In the society of individuals, Great Men (or Women) are the true makers of history: advances in human knowledge occur because some individual has an idea and the means of realizing it; and when those who own property vigorously pursue their own interests they promote the general welfare by employing labor, encouraging invention and cultural development, and advancing overall prosperity. That a small number of property owners is motivated by moral suasion to take responsibility for the poor and the sick is salutary but does not obviate the fact that the good is best realized when the wealthy do what they do best, accumulate wealth.³

The conceit of this book is that what has been said and done in the name of class and class struggles is not only worth knowing but still relevant for making sense of our own times, not only in the global south and east but in the United States and the developed societies of Europe. This claim contradicts the prevailing American wisdom and a growing body of European opinion as well. The story of the American exception to the European rule that classes constitute the bone and marrow of society is deeply embedded in our national identity. At the turn of the century the historian Frederick Jackson Turner and the German sociologist Werner Sombart, among others, argued that class politics had little impact on the nineteenth century and would continue to be marginal in the twentieth century.⁴ According to the conventional story, the United States had three main advantages over Europe: ample raw materials within its borders, which enabled its industries to produce and transport products more cheaply and pay relatively less for production labor; a frontier of plentiful agricultural land that acted as a safety valve against frequent economic blows to the working population, preventing the formation of working-class political parties and the development of class ideologies; and perhaps most important, the absence of a feudal tradition, which according to most historians made for a rigid class structure in England and other European countries. Never mind that many historians found that by the Civil War the frontier was largely ended and that many workers endured employment conditions that resembled feudal indenture: the belief in American exceptionalism has had great staying power in the popular mind well beyond the years that it had some material basis.