Book Reviews

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN AUSTRALIA, by Chris Chamberlain. Sydney, George Allen and Unwin, 1983. 174 pp, $10.95 (paper), $22.95 (cloth).

Chris Chamberlain has written a lively and audacious book; a lively account of the images of society held by 220 people living in Melbourne; an audacious attempt to use this somewhat limited evidence to challenge the orthodoxy of consciousness formation held, he avers, by most Australian academics.

Chamberlain distinguishes three accounts of the 'sources and character of class imagery' (p.ix). Hegemonic theory assumes widespread penetration of the dominant ideology and false consciousness among the working class which explains their lack of revolutionary fervour. Quasi-hegemonic theory suggests that people rely on media messages for general principles and abstract assumptions while direct experience shapes other elements of ideology, often in conflict with dominant ideas. Working class consciousness is more inconsistent than that of the middle class, implying 'widespread cerebral deficiency' (p.10). Quiescence is due to pragmatic acceptance rather than false consciousness. Structural theory emphasizes the role of direct experience and structural location in sifting and interpreting media messages.

Most commentators favour the hegemonic thesis; Chamberlain sets out the evidence for the structural thesis. To test the hypothesis, dominant ideology, class and class consciousness require operationalisation.

He notes the unlikelihood of *one* dominant ideology (p. 12-15; p. 123-6) and yet distinguishes its main elements as a commitment to capitalism (large profits are good, wage demands are bad and ownership confers exclusive legitimate control); a commitment to liberal democracy (voting is meaningful choice making and direct action is legitimate but unnecessary); a belief in the right of trade unions to exist but that they should limit themselves to arbitration; a conception of Australia as a meritocratic society. Newspaper illustrations do not demonstrate why these are the major elements of ideology and they are not as coherent as Abercrombie et al's (1980, Chapter 5) list drawn from sociological studies.

The elements of ideology are used to develop an interview schedule which took respondents one to three hours to complete. The results represent the operationalisation of class consciousness.

Realising the thorny problem of class definition, Chamberlain retreats to an avowedly idiosyncratic approach (p.x). The ruling class 'own' the system; the upper middle class 'run' it; the working class 'obey' (carry out the orders of) the upper middle class; the middle class have some autonomy and authority (p.x). Chamberlain merges power as a result of control over workers, skills, political position or a small amount of capital in his identification.

The hegemonic theory is supported if 70% of the working class support the core themes of ruling culture (p.29). Chamberlain tabulates the answers to 60-odd questions of which 33 directly test elements of the dominant culture. In

26 instances more than 30% of working class respondents failed to support the dominant position. However, only in two cases ('private enterprise is good' – Table 3.15; 'workers should not have a share of large profits' – Table 3.17) did 70% of the upper and upper middle class support the dominant ideological position. This calls into question whether Chamberlain has actually identified elements of the ruling culture, when no class is particularly duped by them.

Chamberlain tests quasi-hegemonic theory by whether the working class or other classes are more confused. He suggests that 51 to 63% of the working class rejected ruling ideas while a wider percentage of 33 to 69% of upper and middle class respondents did so, indicating the latter group is more inconsistent. A more direct measure would be achieved by mapping the inconsistencies in each individual's ideological terrain and assessing whether these occurred more frequently among working class respondents.

Chamberlain's analysis of structural theory is more sensitive. It reveals alienation from all classes in relation to the political system (as Wolfe, (1977, 343) suggests), but a failure among most to take the (logical?) step of endorsing direct action. Most respondents endorsed property rights but when the working class say unions have too much power, they mean union officials – arguably a reflection of their direct experience rather than endorsement of the dominant ideology.

Again it seems a more concise test of the thesis is available. The relationship between experience – 10% of respondents had been involved in direct protest; 20% were union members, 38% have experience of business ownership – and related attitudes – to demonstrations, unions, private property – should assess whether experience mediates consciousness. The indirect measure of class, which *assumes* more unionists and protestors are working class, is less satisfactory.

Chamberlain concludes that Australia's working class are not dupes of hegemony, they have their own critical and consistent ideology. Why then has there been no revolution? Because of the high living standards, occupational fragmentation and upward social mobility. However, there is considerable evidence from Chamberlain's data that the major reason is the pragmatic acceptance offered by quasi-hegemonic theory. Over 80% of the working class thought class divisions were inevitable; 67% thought it was pointless to take part in demonstrations; 20% thought property inheritance was inevitable. A vast majority held the dominant ideology's attitude of ridicule towards alternatives like nationalisation and workers control. The ideology mongers may not have convinced workers of Australia's classlessness or that strikers are just 'commie troublemakers' but one wonders whether that was really intended. What they have done, as Chamberlain affirms (p.15, p.19), is convinced Australians either that this system is better than others or that the working class are powerless to change it. The subordinate class may not accept ruling class hegemony in their thoughts but their actions are compliant. Is that not enough?

Chamberlain's conclusion is a panegyric to Popperian falsificationism. While I feel that Chamberlain has often simplified (in order to measure) the complexities of ideological formation, he must be lauded for providing the

first 'detailed empirical research to investigate the extent to which ruling ideas penetrate into working class consciousness' in Australia (p.43). Critics abound; empirical studies are few – the imbalance should be redressed.

References

Abercrombie, Nicholas et al., (1980), *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, London, George Allen and Unwin.
Wolfe, Alan (1977), *The Limits of Legitimacy*, New York, Free Press.

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THE END OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY? by David Lane, London & Sydney, George Allen and Unwin, 1982. 176 pp. $34.95 (cloth), $10.95 (paper).

David Lane's book is a new and greatly revised version of his earlier volume with the same title, published by Penguin in 1971. Apart from the new data in this later work, there is an important shift in perspective, summed up in a change of sub-titles. The earlier book was sub-titled *Stratification Under State Socialism*; its successor is called *Class, Status and Power under State Socialism*. The shift is justified at length in chapter 5, entitled 'Class, Cleavage and Control', to which I shall return at the end of this review.

The first thing to be said is that this is an excellent introduction to the subject, written by an acknowledged expert, whose command of the data would be matched by few people, and whose grasp of the theoretical issues is equally sure. It is relatively short, but nevertheless packed with information. In striving for a balanced presentation, however, Lane's book goes too far. It lacks the passion of writers like Djilas or Konrad and Szelenyi, and its carefully balanced quality would not commend it to people with experience of the repressive nature of the Soviet system. Despite the new sub-title, the book is only marginally about power in the Soviet Union, and it conveys little sense of the extent to which inequalities of power contribute to the general texture of social inequality. This is underlined by the small amount of attention to the role of ideology in Soviet society and politics. Lane examines the conventional Stalinist view that class contraditions have been eliminated because of the 'complete harmony between the forces of production and the productive relations of socialism'. Nothing could be more ideological than this proposition, which identifies anyone who is disturbed by 'contradictions' in the Soviet Union as an enemy of the regime. As is well known, Stalin attempted to overcome some of the theoretical problems created by this emphasis on 'absolute harmony' by introducting the idea of 'non-antagonistic' contradictions. Lane has no difficulty in disposing of this notion. However, he rationalises its use by suggesting that certain aspects of Soviet society are 'dysfunctional to the attainment of goals that are defined by the political elites' (p.30). This is simply humbug, as Lane must know. Indeed, he is well aware of discrimination, repression, and abuse of power,