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Book Review

Cédric Hugrée, Etienne Pénissat and Alexis Spire (2020) *Social Class in Europe: New Inequalities in the Old World*. London: Verso. ISBN: 9781788736282. 224 pp. Paperback £16.99.

Reviewed by
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In the debates over European integration, class is often an overlooked variable. This reflects the fact that the concept has been increasingly marginalised within social sciences over the last decades. But the limited use of class in the assessment of the effects of European Union (EU) integration is also the result of a certain methodological nationalism of socio-political disciplines – that is, the tendency to employ “an approach that conflates the society with the state and national territory and takes it as the unit of analysis” (Pradella, 2014: 181). Methodological nationalism is also incentivised by the fact that statistical indicators are usually collected “at and for the national level” (Erne, 2019: 366).

In *Social Class in Europe* three sociologists bring a refreshing perspective to the debate. The authors start from the view that “in the context of financialisation of the economy and the triumph of free trade, relations between social classes are largely determined at the European level and no longer simply within a national framework” (p. 181). Therefore, they propose an analysis of class relations from a European perspective, using various EU statistical surveys.

Inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the authors define class not only in broad economic terms, but according to a multidimensional approach which considers “the combination of economic and cultural capitals that construct both the socially and economically dominated positions of certain social groups and the forms of separation, distinction and cultural boundaries between them” (p. 13). Three main social groups are then identified: the working class, the middle class and the dominant class. These three classes are of course characterised by a degree of within-group heterogeneity; in fact, in the French edition of the book the authors employ the plural to describe them (*les classes populaires; les classes moyennes; les classes supérieures*). Classes are then further operationalised through occupational status, information which is usually available in the main EU statistical surveys, albeit only for those who are in employment. Thus, for instance, unskilled white-collar workers and manual workers are assigned to the working class, while occupations like teachers and nurses are placed in the middle class. Finally, most of the intellectual and scientific professions are allocated to the dominant class, which also includes senior managers and chief executive officers (CEOs) of companies.

The authors then analyse in three separate chapters the picture emerging for each social class. The analysis highlights the similarities emerging *within* each class, regardless of the country of residence. The working class clearly emerges as the class which has been the most negatively affected by the market-driven process of European integration, and which has suffered the most throughout the Great Recession. Across the EU, those belonging to this class are the most likely

to suffer from precarious and arduous working conditions, are the least likely to own their own houses and have relatively less cultural capital as measured by access to new technologies or the mastery of a foreign language.

Although generally characterised by greater economic and cultural capital than the working class, the middle class is perhaps the most heterogeneous category that the authors must deal with. In fact, they distinguish four sub-groups of occupations within it, according to the sector to which they belong (public or private) or to the degree to which they are closer to the working or the dominant class (lower and upper middle class). The authors thus define the middle class as “an artefact, which governments regularly attempt to present as a unified and tangible reality, to create the impression that they are addressing the whole of society” (p. 67).

The dominant class encompasses “all workers who have the power to impose rules in professional, social and even political life” (p. 16). Not only do its members enjoy better access to all economic and cultural resources that the authors analyse, but they also hold greater political power as they are over-represented in political office. Members of the dominant class have benefitted the most from the process of European integration, and unsurprisingly are also the most supportive of the EU project.

Despite these similarities within classes, the picture which emerges from the book in terms of relations among and within classes in the EU is also one of core–periphery. This is the result of the uneven economic development throughout the process of European integration (Bieler, Jordan and Morton, 2019), which has been exacerbated by EU-driven austerity policies after the 2008 economic and financial crisis. In this sense, national boundaries still matter: “belonging to the working class, middle class or dominant class is not the same experience in Copenhagen as it is in Athens” (p. 116). The analysis conducted throughout the book emphasises the divergences in terms of social structure between Northern and Western EU countries, which are characterised in general by a lower share of working-class workers than Southern and Eastern European countries and where – thanks to a certain degree of resilience of the welfare state – the working class enjoys a much better situation in terms of economic and cultural capital than its Southern and Eastern counterparts. Similarly, the situation is uneven within the dominant class, where the emergent dominant class in Eastern countries is still in a subordinate position vis-à-vis its Northern and Western counterparts.

The divergence in class relations across Europe also re-emerges in Chapter 5, which investigates whether classes are mobilised at the European level – that is, whether workers belonging to a class acquire consciousness of their shared condition and begin to act accordingly. The authors find that – in contrast to the dominant class – the middle class and the working class are not mobilised at the European level, bar few exceptions. Even during the Great Recession, when it was predominantly the working class which suffered the impact of austerity policies, EU-level mobilisation remained relatively low and uneven, reflecting the diverging social structures among EU countries. This became most visible in November 2012, during the first European cross-sectoral strike promoted by the European Trade Union Confederation. Only unions from Southern European countries called for a general strike, whereas demonstrations and symbolic actions took place in other European member states (Dufresne and Pernot, 2013). This heterogeneity in participation highlights the difficulty in the transnational coordination of national union movements belonging to core and peripheral countries (Bieler and Erne, 2014).

Overall, the book offers an innovative and insightful picture of class relations from a European perspective. There are perhaps two areas which the authors could explore in the future along the lines defined by their current research. Quantitatively, it would be interesting to use

more longitudinal analysis, which would give a more dynamic perspective on the developments affecting the three main social groups. Qualitatively, the authors could engage more with the critical political economy literature, and especially the neo-Gramscian school, which has for a long time analysed the transnational construction of European classes (e.g. Van Apeldoorn, 2002; Bieler, 2005). Nevertheless, this book offers rich and interesting evidence that class is a fundamental dimension when analysing the process of European integration.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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