

POLS30007 (Australian Politics in the Long Run)
Class in 20th-Century Australian Politics: A Research Essay

By Filip Zaleski; 1512862

2023.10.14

Word Count: 3113

APA 7th Edition

Ins.: John Murphy, James Murphy

T.A.: Arthur Moore

“Critically evaluate the proposition that 20th-century Australian political history is the story of the declining importance of class in politics.”

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
I. Class Through Marxism and The CPA.....	3
a. Early Australian Socialist Thought	3
b. ALP-CPA Conflicts.....	5
c. Money Power	6
d. Ambiguous Class Rhetoric.....	7
II. The Neoliberal Ideological Transformation	8
III. Contemporary Perspectives.....	10
Conclusion	11

Introduction

The contention that the story of 20th-century Australian politics is remarked by a declining significance of class is one of everlasting debate and examination. A Marxist definition of class is the entity formed when members of an occupational category develop consciousness of themselves as part of that distinct group and recognize the members' common interests (Connell & Irving, 1980; 4). Though the Marxist implementation of class prevalently described economic circumstances, this paper utilizes the above definition without a strict restriction to an individual's economic status.

The premise that 20th-century Australian politics is characterized by the declining importance of class is incorrect; rather, class was a dynamic feature of Australian politics which underwent a series of mechanical redefinitions under pressures of both sporadic criticism and support, all of which stem from shifting political contexts in Australia. The transformation of class reflects a nuanced interplay of political paradigms, economic shifts, and cultural changes – this paper explores the real manifestation of class and scrutinizes discourse surrounding it throughout Australia's 20th century. It follows a chronological analysis before coming to an evaluative conclusion.

I. Class Through Marxism and The CPA

Subjecting Marxism and the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) under scrutiny exposes that they played a pivotal role in the shaping of discourse on class in the country. Marxism as a formula of class consciousness resonated effectively with the CPA's electoral base for some of its existence, reflected in the fact that by 1945 around 40 percent of the unionized working class was led or influenced by communist officials (Johnston, 1981; 1). Exploring the importance of the prevalence and consequences of Marxism and its administrator – the CPA – on the Australian political stage is thus crucial in the study of class.

a. Early Australian Socialist Thought

Early Marxist analyses in Australia emerged with the end of the 19th century, with figures like James Watson, Treasurer of New South Wales, and the Australian Labor Federation criticizing the capitalist system

for perpetuating social misery, poverty, and exploitation. Such voices advocated for the nationalization of wealth and the factors of production (Kuhn, 2005; 8). W.R. Winspear's "Economic Warfare" is likely the most notable piece of Marxist class analysis circa 1915 Australia. In his work, Winspear emphasizes the importance of studying economic forces to contextualize politics and the opinions of political parties. Winspear contended 'protectionist manufacturers' and 'free trade pastoralists and importers' ought not be at the foreground of political discourse, where the 'common interest of the possessing and proprietary class' should be reviewed instead (Winspear, 1915; 34-35). Though the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was founded on a fundamentally socialist premise (McCullin, 1991; 5), initial socialist ideas faced challenges as trade unions were weakened by defeats in major strikes. Winspear conducted the first systematic study of the ALP through the lens of class, noting significant declines in the party's commitment to working class interests in the 1890s and early 1910s. This decline, according to Winspear, was partly attributed to the influence of changing lifestyles of labor politicians and party priorities. He argued that the ALP principally pursued electoral success, having to please both workers and small-scale capitalists – making the need for broad political support an impediment on delivering working-class policies (Winspear, 1915; 9-10).

Some champions of the early ALP saw the 'practical men' within the party as those appealing 'to the instinct of the Australian people' – the protagonists – as opposed to the unrealistic, and by implication, dangerous socialist ideas (Hancock, 1930; 182). The quarrel between the landless majority and the wealthy elites was, to W. K. Hancock, a historian, explained by the latter's alienation of that 'instinct of the people,' as opposed to incompatible class interests. In fact, Hancock viewed the sharp class conflicts of the 1920s as products not of attrition between social positions but of conflicting sectional interests grounded in differing ideas (Rowse, 1978; 93-96). Hancock's liberal perspective was not uncommon amongst the conservative circles of the ALP at the time. In fact, Labor's most radical programmatic statement – the 1921 Socialization Objective – was swiftly blunted to equate exploitation with reckless behavior by bosses, rather than seeing it through a prism of structural conflict (Farrel, 1981; 153).

A resurgence of working-class political spirit and socialist discourse occurred in the years leading up to World War I, driven by improved economic conditions. Various socialist organizations formed, sharing Marxist ideology and a criticism of the ALP's failed labor protectionism. The most potent of these was the appearance of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union on the Australian stage. Its members were influential in a series of industrial conflicts and strongly opposed conscription and Australian efforts in WWI; a 'capitalist war.' The 'Wobblies' were subject to vicious political repression and were outlawed in 1916 (Burgmann, 1985; 20-25).

b. ALP-CPA Conflicts

Since its birth in 1920, the CPA gradually distanced itself from the remainder of Australian politics. As noted, the ALP adopted a policy of political convenience and longevity, while the CPA found it difficult to adjust its communist dogma to the particularities of Australian political discourse throughout time. Furthermore, after Communist International's description of Australia as imperialist in 1922 and its recommendation for the CPA to combat "national and racial antagonism," the party adopted a mode of criticism toward the bulk of Australian politics (Adler, 1980; 417) – Labor's strategy of political convenience would not have allowed it to do the same.

Anti-British-imperialist sentiment within the CPA grew; its theorists and authors viewed life as not only in the imperialist era, but in the British Empire which 'dripped from every pore with blood and dirt' (Higgins, 1925a). The CPA scathed the ALP for believing 'it could purchase paradise on an instalment plan' (Higgins, 1925b) by proposing gradual improvements for the working class within the capitalist system without challenging the fundamental class relations and the domination of British imperialism that plagued Australian society. The CPA saw the ALP as a bourgeois party that betrayed the interests of workers and served as an obstacle to true socialism. In fact, the CPA distanced itself from a large proportion of militant workers by describing the Labor Party as social-fascist (Clarke, 2010). The ALP's nationalism and occasional defense of Australian capitalism were evidence of collaboration with British imperial interests

to the CPA which aimed to expose this truth and win over ALP followers to communism, though its harsh criticism of Australian socialism proved counterproductive in the long run.

True distributors of class discourse like the CPA continually rejected strategies of parliamentary politics, substituting them with revolutionary approaches based on working class struggle and internationalism. Unfortunately for this cause, the resulting political unpopularity of Marxist propagators prevented the class narrative from gaining significant traction in the Australian public forum at the start of the century.

The term ‘popular front’ refers to a trend of party politics focused on broad alliances between different political forces (such as socialists, liberals, and even some capitalists), against the threat of fascism (Kuhn, 2005; 3-4). The CPA adopted this strategy from the mid-1930s, following the directives of the Communist International which was influenced by Stalin’s foreign policy. The ‘Political Front’ was the name given to the electoral coalition that the CPA sought to build with the ALP and other progressive groups in order to challenge the conservative government and the policies of appeasement toward Nazi Germany and Japan. However, this strategy also compromised communist principles and weakened class analysis by subordinating the interests of the working class to the progressive sections of the bourgeoisie (Solidarity Online, 2020). Nonetheless, the CPA remained the most important formal expression of worker militancy, and retained a formal commitment to Marxism that enabled it to occasionally resurrect elements of Marxist class analysis when political climates and shifts in the ALP’s narrative permitted. For instance, the 1940 brochure “What is this Labor party?” reaffirmed Labor’s ‘bourgeois’ status, rejecting its nationalism and covertly-capitalist agenda in an analysis resembling W.R. Winspear’s (Kuhn, 2005; 11).

c. Money Power

‘Money Power’ theories blaming banks for the suffering of ordinary people attracted notable support during three widespread crises; the depression of the 1890s, World War I, and the depression of the 1930s. These events also represented setbacks to socialists convinced that only organized working class activity could overturn or impede capitalism, though they also represented opportunities for populists to blame social

problems on plots by financiers, and appoint new Labor champions that promised to appoint what direct working class action could not (Kuhn, 2005; 3). Banks and some powerful individuals, including members of the conservative Bruce-Page government of the 1920s, were seen as agents of ‘evil machinations of overseas money managers’; of foreign interests in any case (Kuhn, 2005; 3). Now, class discourse adjusted to specify that all producers – including employers in manufacturing and rural industries – had a common interest of opposing international interest payments (Anstey, 1917).

The most notable Australian manifestations of money power were the political mobilizations around Labor leader J.T. Lang. Notwithstanding his limited concern for money power during the 1920s, he emerged the supposed main antagonist of ‘financial dictators’ during the depression. At a time of ineffective worker revolt, Lang’s authority and militant populist rhetoric offered a desperate prospect of radical solution (Kuhn, 2005; 3).

Although the CPA initially criticized money power doctrine out of its incompatibility with the idea of class struggle as struggle against all capital altogether (instead of just finance), political desperation after ineffective labor action forced the party to adopt the argument (Kuhn, 2005; 4). In addition, the party aligned itself with Stalin in the early 1930s and began following the Kremlin’s advice to adopt a more nationalist stance. The party would henceforth blame the government’s reluctance to champion the nation’s supposed real interests on a small group of finance capitalists (Gonzales & Hallas, 1985; 142-143).

d. Ambiguous Class Rhetoric

The CPA’s adoption of money power coexisted uneasily with the rhetoric of class analysis retained from the party’s past, a rhetoric which more effectively justified the industrial struggles around which the party began effectively building working class support in the 1930s (Kuhn, 2005; 4). In 1957, Laurie Aarons developed a class analysis outlining the ambiguity of CPA’s policy since the 1930s (Aarons, 1957). The article pioneered in utilizing census and tax statistic data to construct an informed model of class in Australia, identifying four groups. A ‘big bourgeoisie’ was equated with the Marxist definition of

monopolists. The ‘upper middle class’ included somewhat smaller-scale capitalists, executives, officials, and some professionals. The ‘lower middle class’ constituted of small business people and an intermediate strata of white-collar workers, preceding the ‘working class’ itself. For Aarons, the progressive force of Australian society was the working class in conjunction with the lower middle class which made up 58 percent and 30 percent of the population respectively (together representing the majority of Australians). Interestingly, in affirming the CPA’s dialogue of ‘people versus monopoly,’ Aarons exposed his own analysis – by recognizing an upper middle class that was not formally part of neither the ‘progressive force’ nor the ‘monopolists’ (Kuhn, 2005; 12).

By the late 1940s, the role of the CPA on the nation’s political front entered a steady decline. Firstly, the party’s association with the Soviet Union became increasingly unpopular. The Asian implications of the Korean War prompted the Menzies government to attempt banning the CPA by legislation and referendum (Cain & Farrell, 1984). Secondly, the post-Stalin Kremlin’s disapproval of the consequences of Stalinist policy confused many figures within the CPA which was still under leadership of Stalinists. Disillusioned members began to leave the party; this was bolstered after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 (Benson, 1956).

II. The Neoliberal Ideological Transformation

The observation that the major upswings in class struggle during the first half of the 20th century have each produced bursts of penetration of the socialist argument about class relation and political change (Connell, 1979) can be applied to similar upswings of the late 1960s and 1970s as well (Kuhn, 2005; 12). After provocation from waves of strikes and the anti-Vietnam-war movement and associated student rebellions, the size of the far left expanded hastily. Populist, reformist, and revolutionary socialist ideas all flourished; youth newspapers moved to the left and freshly radical publications were established. The journal *Arena*, established in 1963 by dissident party communists, now overtly published its socialist and populist work. In 1966, the CPA transformed its own *Communist Review* into a more open and far-reaching *Australian Left Review* (Kuhn 2005; 12). The “Socialist Youth Alliance” of 1969 was the first Australian Trotskyist group

since the Bolshevik period that had an organizational and unapologetically-public profile unattached to the Labor party. In 1976, the *Journal of Australian Political Economy (JAPE)* was established following socialist criticism of the content of economics courses, particularly at the University of Sydney (Kuhn, 2005; 12).

The neoliberal academic awakening between the late 1960s and 1970s revitalized discourse about Australia's economy and society (Rowley, 1972). The hierarchical dynamics of the Labor party began being studied, alongside a series of intellectual investigations into areas such as the effects of Stalinism and nationalism on the Australian labor movement, discussions of the relationship(s) between class and alternate forms of oppression, and studies of the role of ideas in class society (Kuhn, 2005; 12). Nevertheless, the underground manifestation of much of revolutionary Marxist ideolog meant that the boundaries between socialist and populist ideas class analyses were often unclear in publications and media. The 'New Left' was laden with contradiction; reviving Marxist doctrines on one hand but enabling alternate radical populist ideas on the other (Kuhn, 2005; 12).

Apart from the resurging ideas of class dominance in a socialist sense, the neoliberal wave encouraged another set of ideas and structures which reinforced the notion of a proprietary and ruling class: feminism. New publications like *Scarlet Woman* or *Refractory Girl* intermingled intersectional contributions, including Marxist analyses, to the debate of women's oppression and the efforts against it (Kuhn, 2005; 13). In a 1977 edition of *Intervention*, Game and Pringle offered a curious analysis of the Whitlam government and its relationship with the women's movement (Game & Pringle, 1977). They argued that though being a social democratic rather than a feminist government, the Whitlam government sought to modernize Australian society and economy, responding to multiple demands of the women's movement. This included policies like family planning, childcare, maternity leave, and support for women's organizations. Some weaknesses were also mentioned, namely the government's failure to recognize the 'patriarchal nature of the labor market,' its reliance on bureaucratic procedures, and neglect of household issues like domestic violence (Game & Pringle, 1977).

The neoliberal editors of *Arena* developed a particular focus on the interaction between ideology and intellect, observing the increase in the politically-strategic importance of intellectual labor, and submitted that intellectual workers – as opposed to a ‘working class’ – have become the ‘subject of history’ (Kuhn, 2005; 13). This approach, sensibly, drew attention to significant changes in the nature of work. However, it represented an unconscious self-obsession from the New Left’s predominantly student and ex-student constituency; neoliberal writers mismatched their differentiation of class on intellectual grounds and the birth of a white-collar working class with the troubled notion that intellectuals could exercise independent social change (Kuhn, 2005; 14). Bob Connell’s work, for one, offers a more reliable standard to the interaction of ideology and class power. His essays dealt accurately with ideological imposition from the ruling class, the conservatizing effects of the education system of then, and the existence of a political hierarchy in Australia (Connell, 1977). Class discourse which hitherto included predominantly socioeconomic circumstances now began to recognize the political hierarchy and power within government bodies.

III. Contemporary Perspectives

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc states in the dawn of the 1990s equally collapsed the association between Stalinism and socialism, though it also demoralized a significant proportion of the New Left which still held removed illusions that these regimes were progressive (Kuhn, 2005; 14). Stable economic growth that followed the deep recession of the 1990s yielded confidence in capitalism’s capacity to improve living standards, despite the parallel population burst that raised the intensity of work for much of the workforce. A comparison of occupational structures in 1870 versus 2001 shows similarities and change. What was considered an industrial class shrank from 33 percent to 12 percent of the workforce (Breen, 2006). The ‘laboring’ class shrank from 44 percent to just 10, though the emergence of a tertiary service-based economic sector ought be considered. In 1870, the middle class occupied 18 percent of jobs – in 2001, that measured 27 percent.

The departure of the twentieth century has seen a powerful squandering of Marxism as a legitimate prism for understanding of the contemporary economy and society in Australia (Barnes & Cahill, 2013; 43). Marxism has been dubbed unfamiliar with the rise of political elitism, whereby ‘political ranking displaced class division’. Additionally, the emergence of the neoliberal welfare state has somewhat mitigated class inequalities and blunted class identity (Barnes & Cahill, 2013; 43). Some scholars continue to utilize a Marxist lens, adapting it to changes in the capital economy and liberal democracy. American sociologist Richard Sennett contends that class has declined as a signifier of collective identity as a result of the changing nature of work (Breen, 2006). Many workplaces once occupied by manual labor became computerized after the digital revolution of the 1980-90s, also becoming gendered and culturally diverse. Western workplaces now inhibit instead of encouraging work-based activities in most industries; identity is now pursued outside the workplaces in wider cultural arenas (Breen, 2006). Nevertheless, notions of class still permeate part of Western society. In Australia, a 1996 census indicated that the terms middle class and working class were still in use, and not solely by the radical left (Breen, 2006).

Conclusion

It is not controversial to state that different forms of hierarchies have existed in human society since the pre-historic origins of our species. Hierarchy as a mode of social organization has helped large numbers of humans in dispersing responsibility and creating an efficient decision-making system. Naturally, class by its definition coined after the industrial revolution is a (theoretical, at least) manifestation of hierarchy – benign or not. For that reason alone, it is plausible to suspect its existence. As this paper aims to inform, however, class in twentieth century Australian politics is a phenomenon that underwent much change; redefinition based on the political circumstances, and periods of both public popularity and aversion. It is thus improper to generalize a constant decline of the significance of class in political analysis – despite the unpopularity of class rhetoric after the second world war, the neoliberal intellectual and political revolution, as well as realizations about a ‘political class’ have kept the notion of class alive at the turn of the century.

Bibliography

- Aarons, L. (1957, December). Australian Class Structure. *Communist Review*.
- Adler, A. (Ed.). (1980). Theses on the Eastern Question. In A. Holt (Trans.), *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*. Pluto Press.
- Anstey, F. (1917). *The Kingdom of Shylock*. Labor Call Print.
- Benson, H. W. (1956). THE CP at the Crossroads; Toward Democratic Socialism or Back to Stalinism. *The New International*.
- Cain, F., & Farrell, F. (1984). Menzies War on the Communist Party, 1940-1951. In C. Ann & J. Merritt (Eds.), *Australia's First Cold War: Vol. 1: Society, Communism and Culture, 1945-53*. Allen & Unwin.
- Clarke, R. (2010). *The Australian Labor Party and the Australian left | Workers' Liberty*. [www.workersliberty.org](https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2010-11-15/australian-labor-party-and-australian-left). <https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2010-11-15/australian-labor-party-and-australian-left>
- Connell, R. W. (1977). *Ruling Class, Ruling Culture*. Cambridge University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (1979). Ruling Class, Ruling Culture, Studies of Conflict, Power and Hegemony in Australian Life. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 21(4), 509–509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002218567902100415>
- Connell, R., & Irving, T. H. (1980). *Class Structure in Australian History*. Melbourne : Longman Cheshire.
- Game, A., & Pringle, R. (1977, March 8). The Feminist Movement and the ALP. *Intervention*.
- Gonzalez, M., & Hallas, D. (1985). *The Comintern*. Nicholson.
- Higgins, E. (1925a, January). The British Empire. *The Communist*.
- Higgins, E. (1925b, February). The Australia Superior. *The Communist*.
- Johnston, C. (1981). The Communist Party and Labour Unity, 1939-1945. *Labour History*, 40(40), 77. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27508465>
- McMullin, R. (1991). *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party, 1891-1991*. Oxford University Press.
- One hundred years on—The Communist Party of Australia's radical beginnings*. (2020, October 24). Solidarity Online. <https://solidarity.net.au/radical-history/one-hundred-years-on-the-communist-party-of-australias-radical-beginnings/>

Rowley, K. (1972). The Political Economy of Australia Since the War. In *Australian Capitalism: Towards a Socialist Critique*. Penguin, Ringwood.