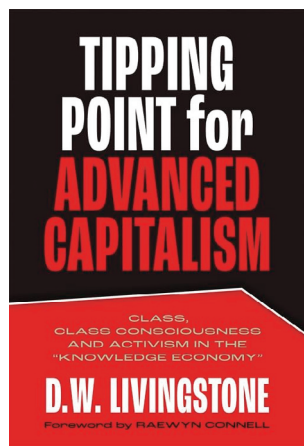


Book Review / Compte-rendu

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Tipping Point for Advanced Capitalism: Class, Class Consciousness and Activism in the “Knowledge Economy.” By D.W. Livingstone. Fernwood Publishing, 368 pp., 2023. ISBN 9781773636405.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent spread of global neoliberalism, engaging in class analysis based on classic Marxist concepts of exploitation and the labour theory of value progressively fell out of fashion in the social sciences. As capitalist social relations spread and deepened worldwide under the leadership of the United States, the social sciences, particularly in the advanced capitalist regions, increasingly fixated on an understanding of class based on income differentials and occupational stratification, mixed with identity-based analyses, focused on issues of gender, race, and sexuality, for example. In the cases where scholarship highlighted continuing dynamics of wealth inequality, it nevertheless appeared that class had taken a backseat, being understood, for better or worse, as one of several factors in a complex web of power. Indeed, it can be said that a great part of the social scientific scholarship in the last three decades largely took for granted the victory of capitalism, focusing on the system’s more superficial features and excesses and how to ameliorate them.

D.W. Livingstone’s new landmark book, *Tipping Point for Advanced Capitalism*, very much goes against the grain of mainstream scholarship, arguing for the continued relevance of a class analysis that is built on classical political economic concepts. Notably, by taking this path, Livingstone does not ignore many of the major changes brought forth by globalization that to some has made classical class analysis irrelevant. Key changes he focuses on are the decades-long decline of the industrial workforce and the rise of “knowledge workers,” the subjective changes in the working class, the growing importance of climate change, and new patterns of social mobility. In addressing these changes, Livingstone attempts to answer the central questions of his inquiry, namely how class relations evolved through globalization and what conditions may exist for the transformation of capitalist social relations.

At the heart of Livingstone’s central research questions lies a long-standing Marxian concern with the apparent ambiguity in the consciousness of modern working classes. As Livingstone notes in Chapter 2, citing Goldthorpe et al.’s (1969) study, British auto workers in the 1960s began to identify themselves more as middle class rather than working class and were found to be concerned with

consumption issues rather than labour relations. However, soon after the study was published, militant labour action broke out in precisely those same workplaces. Indeed, this subjective/objective relationship has been a long-standing concern for Marxists, including Marx himself, who in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) made the well-known distinction between “class in itself,” the objective conditions and interests shared by the common positionality of workers, and “class for itself,” a united collective consciousness that can actively organize and struggle against capital. Utilizing time series surveys, statistical data, and interviews, Livingstone addresses this identity ambiguity of modern working classes and argues that the class contradiction has evolved since the 1960s, placing the “knowledge worker” at its centre. As Livingstone argues, “Advanced capitalist countries are now ‘knowledge societies’ with much larger proportions of well-qualified people than their narrow ‘knowledge economies’ are able to utilise” (p. 147).

Chapter 4 expands on this concept of “knowledge societies.” Data on employment and class structure in G7 and Nordic countries summarize the estimates of general class distribution of the employed labour force, comparing the numbers from 1992 to 2016. The data indicates that there has been a gradual decrease in industrial workers with a simultaneous increase of professional employees between these years. Through his research, Livingstone finds that, “Professional employees—the core ‘knowledge workers’—have become a substantial part of the non-managerial hired labour force in emergent ‘knowledge economies,’ and they increasingly share deteriorating working conditions and pro-labour attitudes with other workers” (p. 7). This in turn, Livingstone emphasizes, has had a powerful impact on the class consciousness of the working classes in these countries, that is, the way workers think of themselves in regard to class relations as well as the extent to which they are inclined to act in accordance with their class interests. Livingstone defines three basic levels of contemporary analysis of class consciousness: class identity, oppositional class consciousness, and hegemonic (or revolutionary) class consciousness. Through these concepts, he suggests that there is a “much greater potential for mobilizing such dispositions for alternatives to capitalism than previously considered” (p. 224).

In addition, Livingstone’s Canadian time series data, supplemented by International Labor Organization data on employment status and occupations in G7 and Nordic countries, show that employer classes remained very small, while middle managers grew along with professional employees, and non-managerial employees remained the majority in all countries. He uses this evidence to argue that classes are still present and that class divides are sharpening with the passing of time, demonstrating the continued relevance of a “Marxist model of current employment class structure grounded in production relations between owners and hired labour” (p. 100). He identifies the major classes in contemporary production relations, namely owners, non-managerial workers, and managerial employees. The same data show that despite a “substantial movement out of class of origin” (p.141), the “basic employment class distribution between owners of the means of production and non-managerial workers has otherwise changed only gradually over the past few generations” (p. 147). Furthermore, data on intergenerational class mobility in the employed labour force in Canada demonstrate that owners are over twice as likely to have an owner-parent than managers and non-managers. The central point Livingstone is trying to make through these findings is that despite an increase in social mobility, class differences continue to structure labour relations.

The evolution of the class structure, as the author argues in Chapters 5 and 6, is supported by the existence and development of key ideological pillars: individualism, materialism, and separation of economic and political power. Along with the general notions that the technological advances that come with capitalism increase overall welfare and improve social rights, Livingstone argues that these ideological tenets have become intertwined with contemporary neoliberal thought. As a result, he points out two major contradictions that, according to him, prevent any significant reforms to neoliberalism. First is that “inherent austerity pressures on social demand and consumer purchasing capacity diminish economic growth and sustained profits,” and second is the “fixation on money market profits willfully ignores ecological limits to growth of capital” (p. 165). These contradictions are essential for Livingstone because they point to the potential of the non-managerial classes to envision a new post-capitalist society.

Livingstone then analyses class consciousness per se and connections with class positionality. His primary findings demonstrate that “identifying as middle class has not prevented development of pro-labour oppositional class consciousness among non-managerial workers,” and that “pro-labour oppositional and revolutionary consciousness are more widespread among non-managerial workers than previously recognized and may be increasing” (p. 200). In addition, he finds that “excepting corporate capitalists, pro-capital oppositional consciousness is much less widespread and may be decreasing in most classes” (p. 228). Finally, Livingstone discusses the way in which class groups have distinct attitudes on specific political issues such as ending poverty and global warming. From this data, he gathers that employers and upper managers with hegemonic consciousness show much less support for action on these issues while non-managerial employees with revolutionary consciousness are much more likely to support them. Furthermore, he writes that “if these increasingly progressive views have not yet been translated into many actual policies, this should not be used to deny the existence of highly class-conscious workers or their potential to influence future social movements and public policies” (p. 270).

The growth of class consciousness demonstrated in the data leads the author to suggest that we are living in a time with a *potential* for “progressive transformation” (p. 276) of the capitalist system. This transformation would need to include three main ingredients: critique and protest, an alternative model, and strategic agency. Livingstone claims that transition from advanced capitalism to “whatever succeeds it” will be a global phenomenon with a finite timeline (p. 279). He argues that post-capitalist alternatives offer governments more options to deal with persistent social, political and economic problems, and that the COVID-19 pandemic, rise of social media, and “culture of protest” point in this direction. In short, the author believes that advanced capitalist regions are, as the title of the book suggests, indeed reaching a “tipping point,” as both objective contradictions and class consciousness are sharpening.

In conclusion, the book’s key strengths are providing a historically sensitive and empirically rich account of the evolution of class relations in advanced capitalist regions, providing a compelling argument that the class relation has not gone away, but rather has mutated into a battle centred increasingly on progressively dissatisfied knowledge workers and the private ownership of digital capital. Indeed, after reading this book, it would be hard to argue that globalization has made class differences obsolete. Most compelling perhaps is the evidence the author provides on how different

class positions do indeed have sharply contrasting views on a number of key issues, including unions, corporate profits, and climate change. At this level, there really is no doubt that class matters. Elites tend to defend their interests and workers tend to defend theirs. In addition, Livingstone debunks the popularly held myth that growing middle class identification means non-managerial workers no longer identify with class interests. Livingstone makes the compelling case that middle-class identification and progressive class consciousness can and do coincide.

There are some areas where Livingstone's work could be strengthened. First, at times Livingstone appears to assume that because the non-managerial classes tend to show class consciousness on a variety of issues, there exists at least a predisposition or degree of readiness to engage in class struggle. It would seem to us just as possible that critical perspectives on corporate profits, poverty, and climate change might never materialize into union drives, strikes, or participation in demonstrations, for example. This possibility is what makes Livingstone's notion of a likely tipping point in capitalism less convincing. Perhaps one way to address this possibility might be to craft surveys and interview questions that attempt to acquire knowledge of how class-conscious views do or do not materialize in the lives of the research participants. It would be useful to know, for example, if someone who shows sympathy for issues of poverty actually engages in activities such as participating in soup kitchens, donation drives, discussion groups, just to name a few possibilities. This line of questioning would be consistent with the Marxian commitment to praxis, that is, the dynamic relationship between thought and action.

Related to the above, it appears necessary to ask several questions: is it possible that contradictions in the capitalist system could be at least temporarily "resolved" via a new long wave of accumulation, similar to the 1990s digital boom? Could recent advancements in biotechnology and artificial intelligence provide the context for an extended period of expanded reproduction in the coming years? Undoubtedly, capitalism will not exist forever, but time and time again the system has proven capable of overcoming major crises, with the capitalist state playing a key role. The COVID-19 pandemic is one such recent example in which state capacities were massively expanded to revive the key pillars of neoliberalism. In other words, the pandemic, rather than representing a tipping point toward a more democratic and cooperative economy, ended up supporting the further centralization of capital. These dynamics are of course ongoing, and much is in the balance. Livingstone's work certainly provides a crucial point of reference for attempting to answer some of the most important questions in contemporary capitalist society.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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