

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ANDREW SAYER, *The Moral Significance of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 247 p. + index.

Andrew Sayer has created a critical reflection of social class that is infused with moral urgency. In *The Moral Significance of Class*, Sayer highlights the social inequalities that shape people's life-chances and who they become because of "the accident" of social class (1).

Sayer is Professor of social theory and political economy in the department of sociology, Lancaster University (U.K.) and his thought-provoking scholarship is theoretically rigorous and well informed by philosophy. He begins by critiquing positivist social science research for its exclusion of values that account for lay normativity. Human beings experience their lives around things "they care about," what is "good" – our sense of morality (6-11). This is significant because it emphasizes human beings' capacity to both "suffer and flourish" (11). Most class analyses tend towards deterministic assessments of class. Sayer presents human beings as more than the "mere internalisation of social influences" (35). Human beings are represented as social beings who deeply "desire recognition and self-respect" (35).

Andrew Sayer begins by acknowledging the theoretical influence of Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinctions* (1984): "If there was ever an example of the power of naming in social science, *Distinction* provides it through concepts such as 'cultural capital' and 'habitus,' articulating hidden structures and experiences of domination" (16). Another influence acknowledged is Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759): "social action is influenced by an ongoing mutual and self-monitoring of conduct...not only in confronting serious moral dilemmas but in the most ordinary situations, such as conversation, where we have to evaluate how we are being treated and how we are treating the other" (45). Experiences of domination and power relations embedded in mutual evaluations are elaborated to demonstrate powerfully that "all social relations have a moral dimension to them" (167).

The book is organized in nine chapters focusing on habitus and ethical dispositions (chapter 2), recognition and distribution (chapter 3), class (chapter 4) morality and social struggles (chapters 5 and 6), and respect and shame (chapters 7 and 8). Graduate students and students in upper-level undergraduate courses would benefit from this thoughtful work. With

this organization and systematic analysis, Sayer begins an engaging journey to reveal the immorality of social class.

Andrew Sayer critiques Bourdieu's work as being unnecessarily overdeterministic. Sayer works to extend Bourdieu's research by rescuing individual reflexivity. Sayer's attention to discourses and the way they structure people's "commitments" integrates personal and social levels of analysis in a convincing way. People's commitments to themselves indicate their personal character; their commitments socially result in "how much time people give others" (81). These aspects of our social and inner worlds are also elaborated through his carefully argued distinctions between use-value and internal goods, and exchange-value and external goods. The idea of use-values and internal goods addresses the practices of being educated, developing friendships and skills, while exchange-value and external goods depend on competition and markets in a capitalist system. In a capitalist economy, education that is achieved by all is ultimately devalued by the market and even finer distinctions are made to demonstrate superior "merit" – a Master's degree over a Bachelor's degree (credentialism), a publication in a "highly rated" journal over another, etc. These identity-neutral mechanisms – that create the illusion of applying to all evenly and masking the advantages of class – are exposed to reveal the distortions of the market and class.

Sayer's ability to move between material and symbolic domination and its consequences for respect and shame, that is, a deep integration of social structures and an individual's inner world, is his strength. Human beings experience shame and empathy and desire recognition and self-respect. Class distinctions negate these fundamental human needs structurally (in identity-neutral ways) while blaming the individual for this "lack." This has consequences for our well-being – our capacity to suffer or flourish. His critique of capitalism includes its socio-spatial segregation of classes that denies and obscures class inequalities. Capitalism's ideology and selective interpretations, that is, its double standards, are effectively highlighted. For example, the current individualized negative normative evaluations of those on state welfare while, at the same time, "affluent people who live off the labour of others are rarely seen as undeserving" (204). In this way Sayer demonstrates how power relations and social class effectively also structure moral stigma and privilege.

Sayer is most effective in his scathing and passionate analysis of class. Capitalism's individualized illusion of meritocracy and denial of social advantage or class-structured, unearned access to society's resources is well argued. This class-based cheating is revealed in detail. The disproportionate use of society's resources by the rich is boldly questioned. According to Sayer. "To question their wealth is partly to question their disproportionate dependence on the labour of others, and hence whether society can afford the rich" (228).

Andrew Sayer's book *The Moral Significance of Class* is an important contribution to the sociological literature on inequality. He questions the

morality of allowing inequality to exert such unjust consequences on human capacity and well-being. He passionately argues, “Newborns are unquestionably of equal moral worth, equally needy, equally deserving of a good life, yet class inequalities quickly ensure that their life-chances are decidedly unequal” (232). While these insights are not new, they are timely and remind us of the need to keep these issues in the forefront in the face of current neo-conservative rhetoric and denial. While such interpretations can be said to be “obvious,” our current society operates in contrary ways that blatantly denies these fundamental human needs. As a result, Sayer calls on his readers to bypass the terminology of social exclusion, to dismantle the illusion of a level playing field and to confront “the injustice of class inequalities openly” (232). He urges social scientists to address and critique the moral justifications of social inequalities. He concludes by hoping that he has made a case for an ethical politics of social change which has the emancipation of all people as its goal. This he has certainly achieved – with careful arguments, conviction and passion.

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