Caste, Class, and Race

The book *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* by the Trinidadian born, US-based scholar Oliver Cromwell Cox is a major work of sociological theory and secondary analysis. It is hard to do justice to a book of over six hundred pages of meticulous scholarship. It stands out as a landmark of sociological analysis that defies intellectual categorisation and exists alongside Weber’s *Economy and Society* as a classic of the field, sadly neglected compared to the latter, but ultimately surpassing it in terms of its analysis of the concepts of caste, class and race. Published in 1948 it was written in response to an emerging interest in (white) sociology in understanding race in the US through the lens of ‘caste’, as was proposed by Gunnar Myrdal in his *American Dilemma* (1944). While other Black academics—including those who worked with Myrdal, such as Ralph Bunche—preferred the language of class analysis to Myrdal’s preferred language of caste, it was left to Cox to provide a detailed examination of caste, class and race that went beyond rebuttal to provide a systematic sociological examination of the different systems of caste, class and race and the intersections among them.

Cox begins by demonstrating that caste in India is not a racialized system; it is a system based on ‘function’, not ‘blood’. And, in contrast to slavery, it is based on consensus, not coercion. Indeed, it is the mark of the quality of the analysis, that Louis Dumont in his study of the Indian Caste system, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (1970), exempts Cox from the strictures directed
at others writers of applying ‘Western’ understandings to a system ‘alien’ to its categories and, indeed, follows arguments first set out by Cox. According to Cox, there is no dynamic of change within a caste system deriving from discontent of subordinated castes, sub-castes, or unscheduled groups; the dynamic of caste is reproductive of the system of caste and it is exogenous factors that create the likelihood of change. It is for precisely these reasons that Cox believes the application of the language of class to race relations in the USA was misconceived. It represents a poor understanding of caste and a poor understanding of race and it was politically inept in terms of its proposed solution to the ‘American dilemma’, namely that the values inherent to the ‘American creed’ would remove the stain of racism. For Cox, the racialized system of the US was precisely the product of the intersection of class relations and democracy; the values inherent in democracy could not be expected to disrupt racialized hierarchy since they were integral to its constitution. The puzzle to explain is how a system based on a principle of equality can create racialized hierarchy and it is no solution to this puzzle to have recourse to caste – a coherent system based on the principle of inequality.

The chapters on class in the book may perhaps look less original to a modern eye well-tutored in Marxism, than they would have been to Cox’s contemporaries, yet they contain the same brilliant originality as his account of caste. His explanation of the constitution of the capitalist mode of production in class relations might seem standard fare, but a closer reading shows that something else is at work. In order, to demonstrate how race and class intersect as a problem of democracy, Cox breaks the Weberian conceptual association of social class and status groups as being alike in the sense that each is constituted as a collectivity. This is the same mistake he finds in the treatment of caste (and, of course,
the association of caste, status and social class is precisely
to be found in Weber). For Cox, the crucial characteristic of
a social class system is that it is ‘individualistic’ and it
is this that facilitates political mobilisation that occurs in
democracy. ‘Political class’ is a radical self-identification
and it doesn’t follow directly from a lower social class
position, but from association in the pursuit of political
ends. In this way, Cox reveals a sympathy with American
pragmatism that goes back to du Bois. From a sociological
perspective, it re-configures the Weberian trinity of ‘class’,
‘status’ and ‘party’ and does so through an engagement with
race (itself largely missing from Weber).

In the course of the book, Cox also manages
to deliver the most stinging attack on the
dominant mode of analysis of ‘class
stratification’ in sociology. This is where
the sociologist defines ‘objective
class/occupational positions’ according to
some set of criteria, assigns populations to
these classes (or aggregates), and then
considers their ‘subjective’ responses to
membership in these common aggregate groups.

It remains the standard sociological approach, whether these
aggregates are called classes (whether using neo-Marxist or
neo-Weberian conceptualisations) or some other term
(‘occupational groups’, etc). As Cox suggests, variation
within supposedly discrete aggregates is potentially as
considerable as that which divides groups, since the
indicators that are used to construct the aggregates are
distributed continuously (more or less income; more or less
authority in the workplace etc). The real substance of class,
for Cox, lies in the associations that are formed among
people; that is in class solidarities, constructed through
action. ‘Class’ is constructed in action and association, not
from the *a priori* definitions of sociologists.

The current crisis in US race relations suggests that Cox’s pessimism about the unfolding of the ‘American Creed’, was not misplaced. Democracy and racial hierarchy are no less entwined than when Cox wrote and his study goes a very substantial part of the way toward explaining why that is so.

**Essential Reading**


**Further Reading:**


**Questions:**

Why does Cox think that caste and class are antithetical systems?

Why does Cox think that caste is a deficient way of describing racial hierarchies that derive from the intersection of class and democracy?
How does standard class analysis in sociology fail to address the dynamics of class?

Submitted by John Holmwood