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Reviews

Tipping Point for Advanced Capitalism: Class, Class Consciousness and Activism in the “Knowledge Economy,”

David S. Meyer

Tipping Point for Advanced Capitalism: Class, Class Consciousness and Activism in the “Knowledge Economy,” by D. W. Livingstone. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing, 2023. 354 pp. \$34.00 paper. ISBN: 9781773636405.

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“We are living in the most dangerous time for the human species since our origins,” D. W. Livingstone begins auspiciously, “. . . a critical juncture when an unstoppable change takes place” (p. 4). Of course, we’ve heard this before, repeatedly, for nearly 200 years. The development of modern capitalism has impoverished workers to benefit a relatively small contingent of capitalists, and as the workers catch on, they will make a new world. All that’s solid, at some point, melts into air, and the new world will be better.

But an immiserated working class didn’t develop into a class for itself quite as quickly as earlier theorists predicted. It’s not so much that social theorists since the nineteenth century were wrong, but rather that the world became far more complicated than they imagined. The moment when heightened contradictions gave birth to a new world was continually pushed back. For the past fifty years or so, Livingstone has produced rigorous empirical research on the development of class and its translation to political consciousness, and vigorous social theory on how things might be otherwise. Influenced by events and other research, Livingstone has been attentive to factors that other class analysts have neglected, notably, race, gender, and the environment. *Tipping Point for Advanced Capitalism: Class, Class Consciousness and Activism in the “Knowledge Economy”* synthesizes, summarizes, and extends the body of work Livingstone and his colleagues have produced to address the current moment, seeking to provide a way forward. It’s an extremely useful introduction to empirical class analysis for the novice, and a helpful, encouraging, and well-informed argument for others who have been steeped in Marxist theory.

Class still matters, Livingstone explains, but not in a simple mechanistic way. Contingencies abound, and the choices that elites and activists make matter in setting the terms and stakes of subsequent political battles. Marshaling more than a half-century of empirical data from rich countries, particularly Canada, Livingstone shows not only the growth and decline of working and middle classes, but also the development of some kind of attendant class consciousness.

Livingstone set the book up to walk a reader through a complicated and coherent argument about the past and future, providing empirical data to support his historical arguments, and providing a foundation for a set of optimistic and urgent agendas for the future. Thus, the book starts by offering Livingstone's approach to understanding classes in advanced capitalism and an overview of how citizens think about the economic system that both frustrates them and enables them to unite and make a future.

A helpful introduction summarizes the way forward, offering readers the chance to focus on the pieces of greatest interest in the moment. Throughout, Livingstone demonstrates a concern not only for the economic realities of contemporary class formation, but also for how people outside the academy understand those realities. He describes what's been happening and what people think is happening. News flash: it's not the same.

Recognizing that class consciousness turned out to be far more complicated than Marx proclaims, Livingstone shows that workers of the world, or at least the wealthy western world, don't necessarily embrace a hegemonic bourgeois ideology, but neither do they share a recognition of common class interests that might be serviced through political action. The development of global capitalism since the early 1970s reduced the numbers of industrial workers while increasing the size of a class of knowledge workers. The appearance of what Livingstone describes as "oppositional consciousness" in various classes varies across countries and over time. A political way forward will depend on navigating alliances among very differently situated workers—and things could get worse.

After thoroughly reviewing the scholarly literatures and empirical data on class and class consciousness, Livingstone takes a step forward, offers the broad outlines of his vision of a better future, and notes reasons to believe that such a world *could* emerge. This time, he insists, things are different. Livingstone's vision includes the development of a kind of economic democracy, in which people have substantial input in decisions that affect their lives, and in which concern for environmental protection is not constrained by market incentives.

Livingstone's optimism is rooted in increasing awareness—across classes—of common interests in protecting the planet and addressing climate change, and increased awareness of economic exploitation and inequality. He finds stronger support for such values in contemporary surveys than he's seen since he commenced this work long ago. Livingstone argues that substantial mass movements are needed to confront and ultimately constrain the new global robber barons, and he sees those movements developing around the world. Even if the Arab Spring, and the world-wide Occupy style movements of 2011 haven't yet produced the results activists imagined, those people spilled out into other campaigns for justice and equity, like Black Lives Matter and revived labor movements. And across progressive movements, he sees the potential for powerful alliances that can affect the political battle. Victory is far from certain; global capital will fight back, but a new world is possible.

Tipping Point for Advanced Capitalism provides a useful roadmap through decades of research on class and a vision for employing that understanding to make a different future.