

The Debate on Classes



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Preface

In this volume the reader will find the debate provoked by the publication of Erik Olin Wright's already influential *Classes* (Verso, 1985), together with Wright's sustained reconceptualization prompted by this discussion.

Classes was distinguished by its clarity of exposition, its orientation to research and its concern for the wider relevance of sociological theory and findings to politics, philosophy and history. These qualities will also be found in the present collection. Readers who have not read *Classes*, or who would like to refresh their memory of it, will find its principal theses summarized in Chapter 1.

Political parties, trade unions, or campaigning organizations all need a map of the society in which they operate, and few matters are less contestable today than the persistence of social differentiation and inequality. What allies may be sought by those seeking social transformation and what interests are at stake when the prevailing pattern of social relations is challenged? The contributors to *The Debate on Classes* are concerned with these issues as well as with the adequacy of present sociological models.

Wright's original work drew on Marxist and Weberian ideas to link class theory to historical development and to the different interests, outlook and potential of the various major social classes. One of Wright's most original perceptions has been the insistence that individuals do not necessarily fit into only one social class and that there is in fact a series of 'contradictory class locations' in which some find themselves at the intersection of different class positions. This fruitful idea is retained by Wright in the bold reformulation to be found in Chapter 8 of this volume.

The Debate on Classes is an example of a scholarly—and political—controversy in which there is also a willingness to re-examine pre-conceptions and to submit argument to empirical tests.