

Reviews

Cahill, Kevin, and Lene Johannessen, eds. *Considering Class: Essays on the Discourse of the American Dream*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007. ISBN 978-3-8258-0259-2. \$40.95 hardcover.

In the foreword to the anthology *Considering Class*, the editors Kevin Cahill and Lene Johannessen remark on the peculiar hold of the idea of American “exceptionalism.” All nations, they write, emerge with their own unique narratives of their birth and their histories, but it has been common to understand that this exceptionalism is anything but exceptional. In the US, however, this is not so; exceptionalism is seen as being truly exceptional and this is what makes the US close to unique.

American exceptionalism is directly related to class—or rather its absence. There is a “riddle” in the social and political American landscape: the absence of a working class, of strong labor organizations, and of class-based thought and discourse. This riddle provides both the reason and the point of departure for the collection. The focus, consequently, is on the “(dys)functional position of class in American socio-political and cultural reality and imagination” (2). The spread implied in the phrase indicates the scope of the book. The editors point to some historical and cultural causes for the exclusion of class as a viable social and political category (the protestant view that wealth shows the success of the individual, for instance), but it is the task of the individual contributions to provide more substantial explorations and analyses of class in American social life and culture.

And this they do, even if, as the editors caution, what is offered are “partial answers” to the role of class. Marina Moskowitz, in an essay that appropriately begins the anthology, traces the waning of a socio-economic definition of “class” in favour of a more culturally based definition which included dreams and aspirations to the 1920s—a development which gives clues to the desire, by now well-known in many post-industrial countries, for a large majority of the population to identify with the middle-class (it

might be noted that the work which began recasting the idea of class was on academics' imitation of middle class consumer behavior economically speaking above them). Omar Swartz, in contrast, sees the absence of class in more Chomskian terms, and argues that it is the result of an exclusion of the working class in "normative political representation" (22). In a detailed discussion, he analyzes an 1895 court case that led to army suppression of a rail-road workers' strike, but is less convincing on his overall claim that the case gave a precedent for powerful industrialists like Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, and Getty to exploit at will. Cadambi and Daniel's explicitly transnational approach to working-class formation is suggestive and takes 19th-century Cuban cigar makers and Indian migrant agricultural workers to illustrate how social position and different cultural baggage create a dynamic tension in the formation of a national identity. Their effort, while leaving some questions unanswered is promising.

One section of the anthology deals with the "discourse of class," as it is expressed in literary or cultural texts. Rosalie Murphy Baum, by way of a reading of two working-class pieces of fiction—Frank Norris' "A Deal in Wheat" (1902) and K. C. Constantine's *Grievance* (2000)—makes a case for including working-class studies, and texts like these, in academic study rather than cherishing an outsider and 'oppositional' approach. Myers and Routh—in a text that is a surprising companion piece to Swartz'—analyze "minor" presidential speeches for their class audience bias and conclude that class, far from being absent, is at the heart of American presidential speech-making through its address to the upper, decision-making class. And Masood Raja, in an effort to "insert" class into the literary discussion of Doctorow's *Ragtime*, takes issue with McHale and Hutcheon for their failure to critique the "redemptive myth of the marketplace" in the novel.

In following sections, Tom Nesbit outlines the capacity of a class perspective in adult education to go against normative middle-class education and relate the educational system to the "world of work" (142), and Irvin Peckham writes theoretically and autobiographically about the trajectory of working class academics into the middle-class territory of the university in a text that straddles genres just as he has straddled social universes.

From the above, it should be clear that *Considering Class* is a disparate collection of texts. Its five sections indeed deliver "partial answers" rather than coherent theory or systematic analysis. Its aim is the role of class in the individual case, whether the historical event or contemporary lived experience, and this is the strength of the book. The essays capture class in

action, as it were, without falling into mires of endless theoretical preamble or anxiously dissolve its fundamental category.

Erik Falk

Stockholm University

Wasser, Henry. *Higher Education in America and the United States: A Diverse Collection of Essays*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007. xv+128 pp. ISBN 0-7618-3779-5. \$24.95.

Henry Wasser is somewhat of a senior statesman of higher education, based in New York at City University, where he was chair of the Faculty Senate before assuming his current emeritus position as Research Scholar of Comparative Higher Education. He is among those American social scientists who have paid considerable attention to Scandinavia. Wasser's *pays de préférence* is Norway, where he served as Fulbright professor 1962-64, but he has lectured in Sweden as well and has a broad understanding of Nordic university affairs.

In this volume Wasser has collected a range of papers dating from the last twenty odd years, many of them presented at international academic congresses. They span several classical and topical issues in higher education: management, leadership, funding, commercialization, regional colleges, most subjects covered in a comparative spirit, with examples largely from the Anglo-American world and northern Europe, less so from southern Europe and from the rest of the world hardly any. Some of the essays are distinctly local. One, very interesting, deals with the "role of the public university trustee" with his own CUNY as case in point. Another, equally informative (for the specialist, that is) is "Economic Impact of Staten Island Community College," complete with surprisingly huge (considering the very local circumstances) loads of statistics and tables.

There is an element of spleen and reminiscing nostalgia in these essays. Wasser moves in a classical landscape of Ivy League universities and colleges and in this garden of paradise several new and threatening species are since some time making their dangerous inroads. We know them by now. Managerialism and heavy-handed leadership infringe on the sovereignty of faculty and the professoriate. In combination with increasing commercialization and privatization these trends are reshaping, to the worse, says Wasser, an institution that once stood for independent judgment and the free