

1-1-2008

The Politics of Rising Expectations: Middle Class Experiences of Economic Restructuring in India and Australia

Timothy J. Scrase
Australian Catholic University, tims@uow.edu.au

John Robinson
University of Wollongong, jlr46@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scrase, Timothy J. and Robinson, John, The Politics of Rising Expectations: Middle Class Experiences of Economic Restructuring in India and Australia 2008, 216-237.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/817>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

The Politics of Rising Expectations: Middle Class Experiences of Economic Restructuring in India and Australia

TIMOTHY J. SCRASE AND JOHN ROBINSON

The intensification of globalisation has marked the ascendancy of neo-liberal paradigms in development thinking. Its impact in the Asia-Pacific region, in both developed and developing states, has brought about significant social and cultural change. Over the last decade economically advanced countries such as Australia and developing countries such as India have both vigorously pursued policies of economic liberalisation. The governments of these nations, despite their respectively disparate economic/developmental positions, have mirrored one another in their unswerving faith in liberalisation policies as the solution to the overall improvement of the population's standard of living. As the result, India and Australia, along with others in the Asia Pacific region, have forged ahead with their particular liberal prescriptions for economic reform. While the outcomes from this reform have been as varied as the nations involved, in some significant examples, parallels have emerged, not least of which have been the apparent growth of the, now 'interested', middle class built on the benefits that have been said to have accrued from the liberal structural reforms to the economy.

In light of the above, this paper sets-out to compare and contrast middle class experiences of economic change and restructuring in India and Australia¹. In the case of the former, research is based on fieldwork in West Bengal with the lower middle classes and which consists of in-depth interviews with both the critics and supporters of privatisation, deregulation and globalisation². This is contrasted with interviews conducted with members of the 'aspirational' class—a cohort of largely middle class, conservative voters in Western Sydney³. The Indian research reveals that opinions about the supposed benefits of reforms, and broader societal changes brought about by the globalized media and culture vary according to age and gender. Whereas an optimistic outlook exemplifies the views of young people, the older generations generally

defend the state and are suspicious of private capital. While remaining critical of liberalisation, many of our informants nevertheless espouse the government rhetoric of work place restructuring and global competitiveness. On the whole, though, cosmopolitanism and globalism are things they welcome, yet most do not want to lose the secure safety-net provided by the state. In comparison, the research from Australia investigates the propagation of 'mainstream ideals' through the valorisation of particular socio-economic attributes of the so-called 'aspirational class', and the impact this has on the shaping of fiscal policy under the current Howard-led, Liberal coalition government. Rather than addressing the fallout from economic and technological changes from the early 1990s onwards, Howard focused attention on his particular construction of the crisis of disenfranchisement of ordinary Australians (Howard's 'battlers'). This was a crisis to which he could set his *solutions* and thus institute the politics of reassurance of the sovereignty of the mainstream (or, as some have termed it: the 'silent majority'). On the whole, the interviews reveal great support generally for the conservative values and ideologies of the Howard government, yet there remains some hesitancy as to the personal value of fiscal and tax reforms, and ignorance of more general political processes that underlie the reform process. Overall, this paper aims to highlight the complexities and contradictions of the economic reform process, and uncovers the extent to which reforms are essentially an ideological battleground as much as they are about fundamental economic and industrial change.

Conceptual Framework

In the Indian context, according to a number of authors, neo-liberal approaches have become the new orthodoxy in development⁴. The resurrection and hegemony of market driven approaches identify state intervention as inefficient and counterproductive and thereby call for developing countries to privatise state owned enterprises, adopt a range of stabilisation measures to address balance of payment crises, and limit public expenditure. The deleterious effects of these policies on Asia's poor⁵ and the positive consequences for the 'new rich'⁶ are amply evident. And indeed, in the Australian scenario, the debate over the benefits of the advancing neo-liberal reforms have produced a similarly polarised discussion among the competing analytical positions, although on different contextual ground: while addressing fundamentally similarly framed political and economic issues as India, the debate is occurring on the terrain of a developed economy.⁷

However, beyond these dichotomous analyses, the ways local communities, classes and specific cultural groups confront, challenge or acquiesce to advancing neo-liberal policy platforms in economic and social arenas remains relatively unexplored. In Australia, this analytical vacuum has

been apparent in the manner that interpretations have generally been confined to either side of the argument, i.e., one is either in support of, or vehemently against, neo-liberal economic reforms. Likewise, in the Indian scenario, the competing narratives of the supporters of the reforms⁸ and their critics⁹ overlook experiences of those who don't fit neatly into the extremes of the social spectrum. Thus, it is the intention of this paper to make some contribution in this area.

As the neo-liberal reforms progress, supported as they are by vigorous rhetorical campaigns by business and government, increasing numbers of people find themselves being inexorably drawn towards the seductive discourses of the marketplace, and whether intentionally or not, have begun to replicate the language and/or the practices of neo-liberal 'life'. Thus, in contrast to the mainly strictly polarised accounts of contemporary neo-liberal developments, the research among the respective groups addressed in the two case studies explore the complexities and contradictions of a segment within the middle classes who have become cautiously interested in the proclaimed 'rewards' of the New Economic Policies yet are simultaneously skeptical of whether any personal benefits will accrue. These are people, in both instances, who are confused by old Keynesian/state-interventionist policies and, while hopeful, they nevertheless remain uncertain of the veracity of the claims of neo-liberalism.

Discourses of Global Efficiency and Sound Economic Management: the Dynamics of a New Neo-liberal Middle Class Work Culture

In the Indian setting, the question that arose in the interviews was: 'How is it that some workers reproduced ideologies of work efficiency, often in the face of, and in conjunction with, countervailing life-long thinking and practices?' In answering this question we found that the notions of efficiency, privatisation and deregulation (the buzz words of the neo-liberally *inspired* workplace) were rapidly gaining particular currency as the central motifs of the everyday language and practice of workers. This language and related practices were becoming competitive with other 'known' models of operation, and were often indicative of new sets of expectations. Obviously, the discourses, and their 'ways of being', have developed a life of their own such that they have become significantly responsible for developing new understandings of how individuals should govern themselves.

In a theoretical sense, analysts have identified a number of themes of this apparent transformation of consciousness. David Harvey, among others, suggests that the promotion of the work ethic, the nobility of efficiency, productivity, and so on, have been enabled through both persuasive socialisation and coercive maintenance¹⁰. In this view the State takes a proactive role in social production. Thus, the inculcation of the population with

particular ideologies of the workplace are seen in terms of a power bloc formed between the owners of capital and the political class. The fundamental principle involved in the dissemination of capitalist logic, such as the deployment of ideals of 'efficiency' and 'flexibility', provides the security and maintenance of the economic system. However this was not merely an ideological imposition, but legitimised through the articulation of a common value system, despite it being the values of the dominant classes.¹¹

The exemplification of such a hegemonic project involving state activism in the promotion of capitalist relations of production and the construction of the *appropriate* workforce can be found in Stuart Hall's analysis of the Thatcherite project¹². Hall claimed that the Thatcher Government constructed a disciplinary programme to foster capitalist production around ostensibly common objectives, with, in effect, ordinary workers paradoxically consenting to their own exploitation. While profoundly contradictory this governmental programme was nevertheless able to construct "... unity out of difference"¹³. 'Common-sense' was remade, wherein the terminology of the market was 'normalised' and incorporated into a broader package comprising order, family values and respectability—a package that thus formed the everyday conception of what constituted the 'national identity', and as such, the 'proper' moral perspective. This was the development of a "practical material-ideological force" that has a language which maps out social reality clearly and unambiguously¹⁴. The result: the elevation of a common (or national) wisdom and morality centred on notions of efficiency, flexibility, nationalism and so forth.

According to Branislav Gosovic, a type of global intellectual hegemony (GIH) has become a central characteristic of neo-liberal globalisation of the 1990s.¹⁵ This is perpetuated through the frequent use of particular terminology and clichés that legitimise this paradigm, imbuing it with positive qualities. In the language of GIH, neo-liberal globalisation is presented as new, modern, scientific, results orientated and inevitable. Public institutions are represented negatively as inefficient, in contrast to private institutions¹⁶. He further adds that individuals, particularly those who are in the service of governments, may have their own reasons for not speaking out against neo-liberalism, including their desire to keep their job and obtain promotions¹⁷. The eminent French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, discusses the insecurities that have become normative under globalisation: growing unemployment and casualisation of the workforce has constrained workers and broken any meaningful resistance¹⁸. Out of fear, workers strive to become the *most* efficient, flexible and productive worker in an organisation. These forces are universal in their effect and "... the awareness of it never goes away: it is present at every moment in everyone's mind"¹⁹. People feel that they are replaceable; as a result there is a definite sense that people come to regard

work as a privilege, "...a fragile threatened privilege", and most certainly not a right²⁰.

Another aspect of this phenomenon has been the growing prominence of a political rationality that is geared towards increased personal responsibility. Here, the strategy of replacing old-fashioned regulatory techniques with techniques of self-regulation conceived by Foucaultian scholars²¹ may be relevant. Moreover, as Beck suggests, the ideal individual worker will take responsibility for his part in the creation of an efficient and responsible enterprise: any failure is their personal responsibility²². The benefit being that individuals can feel a sense of control because they are (ostensibly) "...not passive reflections of circumstances, but active shapers of their own lives"²³.

The Indian Experience: Analysing the Lower Middle Classes

Over the past decade or so much has been said about the growth of the Indian middle class as a consequence of the globalisation of the economy²⁴. There is a great deal of interest in the lifestyles and consumption patterns of India's 'new middle class', especially as consumption helps to redefine status for this group²⁵. Indian middle-class responses to globalisation of the economy are contradictory, however; while they welcome aspects of cultural globalism embodied in the media, they remain highly critical of the uninterrupted entry of foreign capital²⁶. Furthermore, there are problems of combining the lower and upper levels of the middle classes in Asia. For example, policy shifts in development, that openly support structural adjustment, have resulted in the differentiation of the Indian middle classes²⁷. Thus, just as it has been noted in research on the middle class and social change in other parts of Asia, these groups should be regarded as class fractions rather than a single unified class²⁸.

We are therefore concerned with studying a class *fraction*—that is, the lower middle-class. For the purposes of this study, the lower middle class in Bengal have been defined in terms of both a particular economic bracket and a cultural milieu. Their mean household income is just under Rs. 10,000 per month²⁹. In cultural terms, this group forms part of the Bengali *bhadralok*; a multivalent term that predominantly means 'respectable people'. The *bhadralok*, over the past two-centuries have been distinguished by their refined behaviour and cultivated taste, but not necessarily substantial wealth and power: a change from their traditional position as a reasonably well-off, educated and cultured status group. The *bhadralok* are now a heterogeneous group and often indigent. They still privilege education for their children and attempt to maintain a veneer of their erstwhile esteemed social status by engaging in writing, music and the arts, but the economic reality of the present has meant that the penchant for cultural pursuit (the traditional status maintainer) is disappearing. Instead, conspicuous consumption has increasingly become an important determinant of status. It is important to note that the

downward mobility of the *bhadralok* began several decades ago following the partition of Bengal and is not specifically due to globalisation.

The self-ascription of informants was often couched in terms of being lower middle class. Indeed, their use of the Bengali term *nimno moddhotto* (lower middle class) suggested the same classification. In a striking contrast to the real poor, other terms used were 'ordinary folk', or 'common folk', or simply, 'those dependent on a salary'. The image of a salary earner is powerful in Bengali culture, which both suggests a distinction from menial wage work as well as earnings from trading. However, it also disguises the real incomes of those civil servants who supplement their total household income by taking bribes. During our fieldwork no one claimed that they were poor, despite their lack of material wealth. On the contrary, there were subtle attempts to distance themselves from the poor.

Our respondents were employed as clerks, lower level professionals and administrators, and in sales and service. However, sociological attempts to operationalise class derived from occupational categories and income only partially explain the position of our informants: as suggested earlier these groups are best understood as class fractions. Suffice to say that neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist accounts shed some light on the social location of a marginal middle class consisting of non-manual wage earners and low-grade technicians. Ultimately however, we do not claim that any of these definitions are completely adequate in analysing class relations in Bengal³⁰.

Methodology

The narratives of our informants are derived from participant observation and in-depth interviews in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and in Siliguri in North Bengal. This research is ethnographic and qualitative in nature. Despite almost a decade of radical economic reform, there remains little in the way of micro-level sociological research documenting the direct, and indirect, effects of this process of economic reforms for communities and local groups. On the whole, most studies highlight a range of macro political-economic transformations taking place in India³¹. With few exceptions there is a paucity of ethnographic research on the social consequences of changing economic relations³². Moreover, it is through the ethnographic method that the respondents' paradoxical views towards liberalization can be revealed.

Fieldwork was conducted over a four-year period (1998-2002) in Calcutta and Siliguri. Using a *snowballing* method, a total 120 people were interviewed (60 per city). Among the respondents there were twenty key informants, most of whom we had known from our earlier research in the late 1980s. Women constituted 48 per cent of our sample, while men, 52 per cent. The overwhelming majority (85%) were employed in the formal or organized sector of the labour force, while 15 per cent were working in the so-called *informal*

sector. While most people worked in the public sector, among the formal sector workforce, about a quarter was employed by the private sector, including transnational companies such as Philips. It is important to note however, that none of our respondents had obtained employment in occupations that have consequently emerged from liberalisation. The mean household size was 4.7 persons, with only seven per cent of households having more than seven residents. The types of families were roughly divided between joint and nuclear families.

Findings

Mutually suspicious views existed among public and private sector employees. Public-sector workers equated the private sector with insecurity and exploitation while some within the formal private sector assumed that their counterparts within the public sector lacked work discipline. Such perceptions were rarely grounded in experience or knowledge of the other side. While some private sector respondents' views were largely shaped by media discourses, the public sector workers' critiques were mainly centred on the practices of small firms that lack the protection of government employment. Beyond these extremes were a number of differing positions: the generational divide, public sector workers' own assertions of the need to be more efficient, and the critical consciousness of highly politicised workers. The latter's worldviews were informed by class analysis and subsequently presented a critique of the ethos of market citizenship which asserts that a broader recognition of the disadvantages stemming from privatisation and deregulation—disadvantages not just personal, but also to others. These conflicting sentiments are explored below.

Privatization and Deregulation

An overwhelming majority of respondents disputed privatisation could bring many benefits to people in West Bengal. This related to their attitudes towards the nature of the private sector. A number of people (17%) argued that privatisation would lead to job losses and contribute to growing unemployment. Furthermore, a belief in the advantages of privatisation of state enterprises is largely confined to those in managerial, professional and high-tech positions.

Respondents repeatedly emphasised the safety nets offered in government employment. Not only was private enterprise characterised by insecurity; it was inherently driven by a profit motive. Conversely, government organisations were identified as being more humane. They often compared the callous attitude of the private sector with the compassionate nature of the state. Although it was young people who most readily embraced privatisation and positive views of the private sector, however, when confronted by some of its

deleterious effects they became trenchant critics. As a young police woman noted,

In private organisations you can sack an employee according to the proprietor's whim. It may have nothing to do with the performance of the employee. In government jobs unless you have done anything illegal, you cannot be got rid of like that.

*(Woman Aged 51, Lower Division Clerk,
Reserve Bank of India)*

They overwork you in a private firm according to their whim. In government service you get promoted according to merit. In private enterprise, if they like you, they'll promote you.

(Male Aged 34, Library Clerk)

Asserting that IMF clauses on adjustment were farcical, some key informants argued that economic liberalisation was a policy choice engineered entirely by powerful classes and the incumbent government would implement them anyway, in an undemocratic fashion. However, others countered this by pointing out that the Government had excluded citizens from the process and that the reforms had not been implemented according to the original plans. These conflicting perspectives were primarily determined by respondent's respective location in public and private sectors. Those supportive of liberalisation, mainly formal private sector workers, felt that the ethos of hard work and efficiency inherent in the private sector should prevail among government employees. The advocates of liberalist reforms included workers from large private corporations, private school teachers and a handful of highly qualified civil servants—and young people in general. Their opinions were predominantly negative on government employees, particularly their tendencies towards laziness. Typically they were from genteel social backgrounds who had either never worked nor were inclined to public sector employment. Points amply illustrated in excerpts taken from an interview with a tertiary educated single woman in mid-30s.

Tapati³³, a freelance project worker with an average estimated annual income of Rs. 48,000—of which she saves Rs. 4000 per month. The family income is over Rs. 25,000 per month. However, this was not always the case. During her early 20s the family faced disaster, losing the head of the family to untimely death. As the eldest child it was imperative to find employment. As she explained, "...my mother said to me, 'try to find a job—something in the technical area, perhaps. The other children are still studying. You've got to do something'..."

All was not as it seemed amongst the private sector employees: while they dismissed their public sector counterparts for lacking the appropriate

resolve, many were well aware of their own exploitative conditions. Some were embittered by the shabby treatment they received from their own firms, and despite their outward praise of their firms, during formal interviews, some spoke confidentially about pending insecurities, particularly in transnational corporations that were experiencing global down-turns. Contradictory attitudes towards the public sector also prevailed among teachers in private schools, who while continually asserting the superiority of their institution over government schools also were anxious to downplay their own job insecurities.

There were, of course, those who were fully supportive of the public sector. They were of the belief that the criticisms that were often levelled by their private sector counterparts were, in the main, unwarranted and erroneous. The following comment from one who had shifted from private sector to public sector challenged the commonly held views:

...there is a usual assumption that in the government sector there is no work culture, but if you look around here everyone is deeply involved in their work. You won't even find this kind of commitment within a private firm. No I'll never want privatisation.

As public sector employees they defended their sector's continued existence. And while some respondents acknowledged the deficiencies of their government departments, they were dismissive of the critiques of inefficiency and the absence of work culture. Instead, they asserted that the shortcomings were trivial and we should not obsessively focus on them. More significantly they challenged the bogey of privatisation. One informant surmised, "...If this place is privatised there is no guarantee that it would be more efficient or that people would work more." In general, they were emphatic that government departments should not be judged according to the private sector performances since some key institutions and utilities cannot be privatised.

The failure to attract foreign investment is one of the key arguments used by neo-liberals to promote the need for reform. Indeed, such promotions have led to intense public debates on investment and infrastructure. Our respondents remained unconvinced that transnational corporations will do anything positive concerning investment which will benefit Indians, and were generally suspicious of privatisation and foreign investment. While some respondents' views reflect anti-colonial in attitudes, especially among the older generation, there has been nevertheless a considerable shift in views. Many of the respondents reflected this reality when they argued that though inherently just and rational, bureaucratic procedures of the state might be cumbersome compared with the speed of private enterprise. Even those opposed to privatisation on ideological grounds nevertheless urged government organisations to become more efficient.

Summary of Indian Interview Data

It would be incorrect to assume that our informants espouse the business and government neo-liberal rhetoric because they are deceived by ideology. Clearly they use themes of competition and deregulation in complex ways whereby they neither reject nor accept them. In other words, our respondents do not subscribe to neo-liberal ideologies in a uniform and coherent way. A number of people have internalised the state's rhetoric of global efficiency. The influences of the changing nature of policy orientation in West Bengal are crucial to understanding the responses of people in this study. Whilst remaining critical of liberalisation, many of our informants espouse the government rhetoric of work place restructuring and global competitiveness. The particular world views and lived experiences of the lower middle class show at one level an antipathy toward liberalisation and globalisation and yet, on another, they express a desire for India, and Indians, to move forward and compete in an increasingly globalised, cosmopolitan world. Indeed, as Sridharan has written:

The post-1991 liberalisation, however, has been sustained, even if the pace of change has been slower than many advocates of reform might have liked. Indeed, unlike many other countries that have undertaken programmes of economic liberalisation, India has introduced reform very gradually. At times the pace of change has been downright glacial, with India's trade and capital regimes remaining among the more restrictive in the world. This can perhaps be explained by, among other factors, the growth of the broadest middle class since the 1980s. This has had the contradictory effect of leading to a support base for liberalisation while at the same the sheer weight of public employees and publicly subsidised agriculturists in this economic category have served to constrain the progress of certain types of economic reforms³⁴.

Thus, economic liberalisation is by no means an accepted dogma. In various ways there is evidence of fundamental dissatisfaction, frustration and mistrust with the process.

The Australian Scenario: The Advance of Neo-liberalism in Economic Understandings

The evidence indicating the degree of acceptance or otherwise of neo-liberal economic policies by the Australian middle class has been mixed, however, as a host of facts demonstrate, it appears to have nevertheless made successful inroads in shaping generally favourable sentiments among not only the middle class but a significant proportion of the Australian population. That this is

indeed the case is demonstrated most effectively in the political arena—where neo-liberal economic reform has been a bi-partisan project for several decades. The political parties capable of forming government in Australia have, over the last twenty-years, fundamentally agreed with the economically liberalist agenda and as such, both major parties have pursued it relentlessly³⁵. They have agreed because it is electorally appropriate, and therefore ‘safe’, for them to do so, especially as it has become the normative, and thus expected, discourse of the electoral marketplace—the *lingua franca* of contemporary political contests.

This bi-partisanship towards the adoption of neoliberal solutions to perceived economic and social ills, and as the means for the establishment of the basis of a multitude of benefits and ongoing prosperity, is significant in itself. The arguments of governments, and therefore the understandings of the electorate, have moved beyond questions concerning whether or not there is a problem with the state’s retreat from service provision and nation building, to being concerned with the actual nature and manner of the state’s role in facilitating the conditions for economic reform. As Brodie explains, “...state power has been redeployed from social welfare concerns and economic management to the enforcement of the market model in virtually all aspects of life”³⁶. And, in most respects, as continuing election results have indicated, the Australian people have taken this on board. That is not to say that there is not a significant body of dissent, simply that the politics of recent years has ensured that dissent in regard to most issues, and particularly in the economic domain, has been segregated, diluted and conflated to an anti-Australian discourse³⁷.

Some analysts have presented data that has suggested that significant sections of the population, particularly among what he has described as ‘middle Australia’, are experiencing the ‘dark side’ of economic reform—where, for example, family life has been placed under increasing strain and difficulty owing to the increased demands of the new economic order³⁸. However, there is also evidence to suggest that this indeed may be not as universal as is being suggested. Other research suggests that ‘reform fatigue’ is perhaps an issue among what may be considered as the traditional middle class constituency: professionals, managers, financial and other technical service workers, and so on, but not among many of the aspiring classes. For instance, Clive Hamilton claims that the lower middle class, or those being addressed by my research, namely the emergent middle classes, or aspiring working class individuals and groups, are seemingly supportive of recent economic developments, to the extent that they want to be included in the economic rewards³⁹. That is, they are demanding access to the expanding array of novel consumer goods, upgraded housing, private education and health services, etc, that have long been the prerogative of the traditional middle and upper classes.

In Hamilton’s paper, *Over consumption in Australia: the rise of the middle class battler*, he agrees with Pusey’s findings which point to growing family strain from increased work hours, growing indebtedness, etc. He nevertheless also found that this was not a disincentive for many, from a number of different socio-economic positions, to pursue the consumerist and upward social and economic mobility goals held out as benefits in the discourses of neo-liberalism as propagated by business organisations and the political parties. The point being, that despite apparent negative effects of pursuing these goals, such as overworking and increased indebtedness, there has been an increasing trend amongst groups of Australians to believe that increased wealth and consumer goods are possible for everyone if they work hard. Which is in itself a significant shift over the last couple of decades in the expectations of many Australians. As Hamilton says,

Once Australians were known for their willingness to balance work and family life, but the desire for greater consumption, along with labour market reforms, has put an end to that. Although most parents recognise that excessive work harms children, many seem unable to scale down their levels of desire to spend more time at home⁴⁰.

And indeed, with Hamilton’s analysis in mind, we come to understand the circumstances of the subject group of the research. That is, the so-called ‘aspirational class’: those from once self-identifying working class backgrounds who, according to media and political reports, have incorporated the discourses of the market to the degree that they find themselves with what Hamilton identifies in his generic description of the attitude of the times, with “...inflated expectations”⁴¹. Thus, on the face of many indications, these people have abandoned past relationships with Keynesian collectivism as manifest in the strong and involved state, and see their economic and social salvation as existing in the individualist policies of the present political and economic orthodoxy.

The Research Subjects: The Aspirational Class

The point to make at the outset, and it is indeed a most salient factor, is that the subjects of this research, the aspirational class, came to public prominence not by any systematic research or social analysis but instead were the product of the media punditry seeking to explain particular party preferential shifts in critical electorates in increasingly hard fought elections. Thus, it is indeed difficult to be definitive in any authentic sense beyond that which has been propagated in the media as their defining characteristics.

Perhaps, the best way to understand this group is in terms of an *idea*—an idea coined and propagated by the media, and nurtured and employed by parliamentarians as a political mechanism; an idea that was therefore

strategically used to illustrate and thus present a particular set of attitudes and political beliefs which, as it happened, was out of the neo-liberal mould. The central theme of the idea that was propagated was of a way of thinking that equates with change: change of mind, of attitude and expectation, and thus, a change of behaviour. And indeed, as the media reported and the politicians endorsed, a central component of this change was identified as a desire amongst this group to adopt the precepts inherent in the discourses of neo-liberalism in their economic and social behaviours, and as such perceive of themselves as an upwardly mobile group of consumers and entrepreneurs. Adding to this sense were the constant interjections in the social discussion of prominent politicians, such as the Prime Minister John Howard, regaling the nation with his belief that we were indeed becoming the "greatest share-owning democracy on the planet."

This group, according to the media and political reports, who had once been regarded (in terms of their familial backgrounds) as working class, and indeed would have once regarded itself as working class, now were looking beyond what this entailed in the past popular imagination. The title of 'working class' allegedly no longer held any material, or indeed romantic allure, for them that perhaps it once would have, but instead it now equated with a stigma: thus it appeared that not being working class anymore was the best way to remove this. This conjunction of media and political constructions is exemplified in Raymond Williams' description of the desire of many in the West in recent decades to shed any tie to a working class past:

'Working class' for many people, is simply a memory of poverty, bad housing and exposure, while 'middle class' is a name for money to spend, better housing, and a more furnished and controllable life...the strong sense of 'working' = 'lower' class, with inferiorities and deprivations to which nobody in his senses wants to return⁴².

In a very short time, following their appearance in the media in the late 1990s, the concept of the aspirational class became a widely known component of the political vocabulary employed by political and social commentators. As such, a particularistic detailed profile quickly developed within the media's presentation to denote a supposedly homogenous group with recognisable characteristics and behaviours. Along with the material profile came an address: the outer rapidly expanding suburbs of the major eastern coast cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. However it was the inhabitants of outer suburban Sydney that exemplified this alleged group, principally because this was the site of the electorates that included these fringe suburbs, where significant political shifts to the right were occurring. These once Labor-voting working class electorates were changing orientation to the socially conservative and economically liberal policies of the Liberal National Coalition

Government. The profiles were completed with the identification of the *economies* of their nominated habitats. That is, sites that were experiencing rapid economic growth: in housing estates, service industries (service and technology industries) and industrial development (small manufacturing and warehousing).

The description of the aspirational class have been varied, a product of the sheer number of interpretations. Some such as political scientist Nick Economou (2001) described them as "... upper middle class...[who were] interested in the national debate and...want answers to policy-specific issues"⁴³. Whereas others have defined them as 'lower middle class', or indeed, have described them as *hard pressed families* "... living on a financial knife edge as the result of huge mortgages due to Sydney's astronomical land and housing values"⁴⁴. Clearly, many and varied views: a scenario that does little to develop the group beyond the conceptual. However, it is in the analyses offered by politicians that one sees the real essence of the aspirational class as an ideology encapsulated.

Former Labor leader Mark Latham, said by some to be the author of the term 'aspirational class', describes them as shareholders and owners. As he reflected on his former, outer Western Sydney electorate of Werriwa,

The big thing that has changed in the outer suburbs is ownership, small business ownership, share ownership, skills and opportunity. These are working class aspirants who are looking...to better themselves and their families.... I represent an aspirational electorate. An electorate where ownership matters...they're moving into asset accumulation and home ownership.⁴⁵

On the government side of politics, the Liberal Party's local member (Ross Cameron) for the electorate of Parramatta, a middle range Western Sydney electorate, took a remarkable similar view to that of his political opponent in his descriptions of the aspirational class. Following the Conservative Coalition's victory in the 2001 Federal Election he ascribed the win to the local identity with aspirationalism⁴⁶. The media reflected this, as seen comments by a local Parramatta reporter, who stated that:

... I think that the Liberals had a theory that the area was becoming what they call 'aspirational class'. First homebuyers, small business operators who aspire to, I guess, becoming more wealthy. We did speak to some small business operators and one person said, "I aspire to pay my own way and look after myself". And that was very much the mantra that Ross Cameron was reinforcing⁴⁷.

The Method

Owing to the diffuse nature (as seen in the array of aspirational interpretations) of the putative subject group, the research clearly had to be confined to themes germane to the media-propagated constructions of the aspirational class. As such,

small interview samples (10) within each of the three electorates (Werriwa, Macarthur and Parramatta), with a broader comparative sample taken from the wider Sydney metropolitan area (also 10 respondents) were regarded as appropriate to the task of eliciting a confirmation or otherwise of the attitudes concerning economically liberal policy prescriptions⁴⁸. Thus, each respondent underwent a lengthy 'discussion' of salient contemporary issues, which in turn were analysed in terms of their display of particular thematic strands (such as this theme of the penetration of economic rationalism into their lives). The only variables under consideration for the selection of the interviewees were those of location within the particular electorates and being active economic participants. No specific categories such as gender, age and or ethnic background were established for the analysis.

The questions asked involved issues concerning contemporary developments in economic policy and how these issues were understood. That is: the importance of economics in their lives; what were the key economic questions and how they should best be managed; governmental management of the economy; opinions on economic reforms; globalisation and national economic policy sovereignty; sources of belief in economics, and, hopes and fears (if they existed) about the directions that economic policy was heading.

The Settings

As stated above, the broad setting for the fieldwork among those deemed aspirational took place in their home suburbs in the mid to far west of Sydney: specifically in the electorates of Werriwa, Macarthur and Parramatta. Macarthur was actually described by the Australian Electoral Commission as 'semi-rural', Werriwa as 'outer suburban', while Parramatta was described as 'middle-suburban'. The three electorates have been for many years sites of tight electoral battles which has seen them change party hands on a number of occasions. Although, today two of the electorates are Labor, while only Macarthur is held by the Government (Parramatta having recently changed hands in the 2004 election). However, regardless of their particular party brand, they are all sites that have been identified as aspirational in countless media articles, and attributed, by the media and politicians, with large populations of aspirational voters. It could thus be said that their varied political affiliations are a testament to the earlier point of the lack of any significant ideological differentiation between the major political parties—making elections for these seats a contest of personalities rather than competitive ideological contests. While they were ostensibly diverse, with their differing political party affiliations and the geographical separation of Parramatta from the other two, they nevertheless had the key factor of having been labelled aspirational, and furthermore, they were each sites of vigorous economic development—something that was continuing despite a slowdown in other parts of Sydney.

As such, ideal sites, in terms of alleged transformation of attitude from Keynesianism to Monetarism.

The Findings

The main point to emerge from the study was that while there was no uniformity of view, there nevertheless was a general predisposition towards favouring the possibilities inherent in the neo-liberal discourses. That is, while each respondent offered varying interpretations of the specific questions they remained either generally upbeat, or untroubled, by contemporary economic policies and economic management (as they did or did not understand it). Yet interestingly, in the main, most were unable to offer what would be regarded as a coherent set of understandings of the past and present state of economic reforms—at least, in anything approaching a comprehensive sense. Surprisingly, in terms of the media profile that had been constructed around them as astute observers of the 'economy', they had minimal technical knowledge of the economy's operations; only a partial awareness of the range of reforms that had been undertaken in recent years; and were only marginally interested in the range of extant economic policy matters.⁴⁹ What appeared to garner interest were specific issues such as interest rates (the majority were mortgages) and the 'costs' of consumer goods. Thus, economic issues *per se* were predominantly understood in personal terms (or in what might be described as personal cost-benefit-analyses); however, they were all generally in agreement that the economy was being reasonably well managed without really being able to explain the details of how this management was appropriate to the times and the social conditions.

For example: in a typical response, when asked '*whether or not the pace and style of economic reform made them angry, pleased or uninterested*', one respondent said:

... I have not followed the reform process that closely and therefore I do not know much about it, but from what I am aware of, I do not feel overwhelmed by it (34-year old female public servant)

In another answer to the same question, another said:

... I am not aware of many of these things as having occurred so it is a bit hard for me to answer that question (32-year old single full time mother of three; recently separated).

In a similar vein, when asked of the '*most pressing reform issues that needed to be addressed by government*'. One respondent, in a somewhat typical fashion, told me that "... Much of it is a bit over my head... it leaves me a bit flat" (40 year female old retail worker). Further, one respondent suggested that reforms: "... we have been told a lot of rubbish about economic reforms",

however, he went on to praise the record of economic management of the government, "... I think that Peter Costello has been a good Treasurer and has managed the economy well" (39-year old male self-employed computer technician).

Similar observances on similar questions were found among those from the broader Sydney comparative cohort—surprisingly, from those who may have been considered to have differing opinions, coming as they did from traditional ideologically left-oriented constituencies. One 45 year old male 'consultant' said in answer to the above-mentioned question on 'whether or not economic reforms had pleased, displeased etc:

It is hard to say what the years of reforms have actually done, I guess I have been ambivalent...[however, more specifically, he added]...yet, it seems to have served me individually in that I have been able to work outside many of the constraining structures to establish a work style that suits me and allows for diversity and change, to work as an independent-free-flowing consultant.

The above-mentioned *faith* in the current economic policy directions was prevalent among a noticeable majority of the respondents from both the aspirational settings and the broader Sydney metropolitan comparative sample. There were, of course, examples of those who were unhappy with the current economic policy orthodoxy (approximately 20 per cent of all respondents), and there were subjects who were ambivalent about economic issues generally (10 per cent). However, these two groups, like virtually all the rest of the respondents, do not offer an alternative philosophy for governing economic policy matters when presented with the opportunity to do so.

For example: in the sense of the majority of respondents, when asked 'whether or not they believed that the economy served us or that we now served it, and how this should be addressed if it was a problem', a respondent summarised the general mood and inclination of the respondents (in the way they gave little thought to the broader scenario and focused on personal interpretations), when he said that:

The economy and the demands of the market certainly have taken on a life of their own, and that is not hard to understand—although I would say that it is not something that I or perhaps anybody else thinks about much. With this in mind, I believe that we should just do what we need to survive, that is, the everyday things we do in the economy.
(45 year old male, self-employed truck driver)

In a more specific sense the responses generated from the fieldwork interviews amongst those reputed to be aspirational confirmed the belief that there was certainly an appreciation of the basic themes of neo-liberalism,

especially as manifest in the political rhetoric of government—if not any detailed understanding. Most attributed their reasonable ("although, they could always be better") circumstances to the current management that has been very much oriented towards neo-liberalist prescriptions. In fact, most seemed to agree with the proposition that the nation was being 'soundly' economically managed. They knew that unemployment was low, inflation was low, and importantly for the majority, interest rates were at an historical low—these were *the* evidence and the substance of sound economic management. Their assessments were personal and extremely pragmatic and as such overrode any consideration of either wider or specific 'cause and effect' issues of current economic policy settings. But, they nevertheless expressed their views in the discourse of the market: 'we need to be more efficient'; 'we need to work harder'; 'we need to reduce the influence of trade unions'; 'implement lower taxes on income', etc. Sentiments such as these comprised the responses of a clear majority of the interviews. However, when asked about the possible threat posed by significant issues, such as the Current Account Deficit (which is at an historic high), and which could have been construed as 'bad' economic management, they either were not aware of it or did not see it in terms of it being a problem for them. It was therefore, an individualistic assessment that was made on one side of the economic policy questions: a scenario that indeed can only be seen as an exemplification of the permeation of neo-liberal inspiration of thoughts, speech and practices of many Australians.

Conclusion

From both the Indian and Australian interviews there was a clear demonstration that things were certainly changing in terms of the increasing influence of neo-liberalist ideologies and prescriptions. It was evident that despite some variations in the data that was specifically context related, the neo-liberal policies was indeed making significant inroads into the thinking, and thus the discourse and practices, of middle class people in both India and Australia.

Expectedly, the Australian data was more uniform, in a comparative sense with that from India, due to two clear factors: population size and its distribution, and the state of economic development. However, these points in themselves perhaps make the finding that there has been a significant penetration of neo-liberalism in both contexts in a somewhat similar scale, all the more convincing. That is, considering India's massive population imbalance with Australia, and thus with its cultural diversity, the fact that evidence was found there that indicated the presence of neo-liberalist thought in the behaviours and responses of people, albeit in not a uniform and predominant fashion, was powerful in itself. While a large population base might itself suggest that 'some' evidence of this presence *would* inevitably be found—simply by sheer statistical probability—that evidence of some change was

found and was evident across such a cross-section of the population was strong confirmation that this was more than just a statistical 'possibility'. In both traditional settings where old practices and emotional attachments remained strong, and in more contemporary scenarios in the public sector, there were slight cracks in the facade of long-held views. It was not so much evidence that could be regarded as an epiphany, but evidence that consideration and questioning was occurring. In Australia, with its much smaller population and with a dominant cultural perspective holding sway in the political arena, and thus amongst a significant proportion of the population, the evidence was much more apparent that the cracks had become gaping holes.

Thus, whether in the workplace in West Bengal, or in the investment options and general level of satisfaction with the predominantly neo-liberal economic management of the Australian economy, neo-liberalism has made a significant impact on the lives of citizens. Whether it is an actual change of practices and thinking, or in the beginnings of the process of questioning of older and more traditional modes of operation, such as Keynesian state-interventionist policy prescriptions, changes were afoot, and as such, were being surrounded by an ever growing sense, and indeed repertoire, of expectations— particularly amongst those, who until recently, had very moderate expectations of a vastly different socio-economic environment.

End Notes

1. The Indian section of the paper was prepared by Tim Scrase; the Australian research written by John Robinson. Both authors wrote the concluding sections.
2. Indian field research was jointly carried-out with Dr. Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase (University of Wollongong) and was partially funded by an Australian Research Council small grant; Charles Sturt University; and the University of Wollongong.
3. Australian field research was partially funded by the Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong.
4. See: John Brohman, Universalism, Eurocentrism, and Ideological bias in Development Studies: From Modernisation to Neo-liberalism, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1995, pp. 121-140; Alexandro Portes, Neoliberalism and the Sociology of Development: Emerging Trends and Unanticipated Facts, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 23, No. 22, 1997, pp. 229-59; Branislav Gosovic (2000), Global Intellectual Hegemony and the International Development Agenda, *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 52, pp. 447-56.
5. Timothy J. Scrase and T.J.M. Holden Scott Baum, eds., *Globalization, Culture, and Inequality in Asia* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2003).
6. Richard Robison and David Goodman, eds., *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonalds and Middle Class Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1996).
7. As far as this is understood in the terms of the contemporary definitions of 'developed', and 'developing'.

8. J. Bhagavati, *India in Transition: Freeing the Economy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); I.J. Ahluwalia and M.D. Little, eds., *India's Economic Reforms and Development: Essays for Manmohan Singh* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
9. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh, *The Market that Failed: A Decade of Economic Reforms in India* (New Delhi: Left World Books, 2002); Anjan Chakrabarti and Stephen Cullenberg, *Transition and Development in India* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
10. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
11. Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci, in Tony Bennett et al. eds., *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader* (London: The Open University Press, 1981), p. 230.
12. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988).
13. Hall, *Hard Road*, p. 166.
14. Hall, *Hard Road*, p. 143.
15. Branislav Gosovic (2000), "Global Intellectual Hegemony and the International Development Agenda", *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 52, pp. 447-456.
16. Gosovic, GIH, pp. 450; 453.
17. Gosovic, GIH, p. 452.
18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against The New Myths of Our Time* (Cambridge Polity Press, 1998).
19. Bourdieu, *Acts*, p. 82.
20. Bourdieu, *Acts*, p. 82.
21. Neo-liberalism had led to a model of rational economic action which functions to legitimise and reduce governmental regulation. The government itself becomes a sort of enterprise whose position is to universalise competition and create market shaped systems of action. Neo-liberalism does not locate the rational principle for regulating and diminishing the interference of government in a natural freedom. It instead places it in the context of an artificially arranged liberty that is with the economic rational individual in the form of entrepreneurial and competitive behaviour (See: Thomas Lenke, The Birth Of Bio-Politics: Michel Foucault's Lecture at the *College De France* On Neo Liberal Governmentality, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 30, 2001, pp. 109-207).
22. Ulrich Beck, Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World: Individualisation, Globalisation and Politics, in Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens, eds., *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism* (London: Jonathon Cape, 2000), pp. 164-74.
23. Beck, *Living Your Own Life*, p. 167.
24. Satish Deshpande, After Culture: Renewed Agendas for the Political Economy of India, *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (July), 1998, pp. 147-169; V.G. Kulkarni, "The Middle Class Bulge, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 156, No. 2, 1993, pp. 44-6; Salim Lakha, "The State, Globalization, and the Indian Middle-Class Identity," in Michael Pinches, ed., *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 251-274.

25. Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, Public Modernity in India, in Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, eds., *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 1-20; Timothy J. Scrase, Television, the Middle Classes and the Transformation of Cultural Identities in West Bengal, India, *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, vol. 64, No. 4, 2002, pp. 323-342; Margit van Wessel, Talking About Consumption: How an Indian Middle Class Dissociates from Middle Class Life, *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2004, pp. 93-116.
26. Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase, Paradoxes of Globalization, Liberalization and Gender Equality: The Worldviews of the Lower Middle Classes in West Bengal, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2003, pp. 544-66.
27. Satish Deshpande, After Culture: Renewed Agendas for the Political Economy of India, *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 10, No. 2, July 1998, pp. 147-69.
28. Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens, *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia*, (London: Routledge), p. 15.
29. The approximate exchange rate at the time of fieldwork was Indian Rupees (Rs.) 40.00 = US\$1.00. Thus, their monthly household income ranges from US\$50-200. This concurs with research delineating the 1998-2000 income levels of the middle classes in India reported in E. Sridharan, The Growth and Sectoral Composition of India's Middle Class: Its Impact on the Politics of Economic Liberalization, *India Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2004, pp. 405-428.
30. It has been argued that in West Bengal that "... class stratification is imbedded to a great extent within the hierarchy of castes" (Surajit Sinha and R. Bhattacharya, *Bhadralok and Chotolok in a Rural Area of West Bengal*, *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 18, 1969, p. 56). More significantly, a complex interlinkage of economic position, status and caste relations and the dynamics of political power shape the formation of social classes in West Bengal.
31. Dipankar Bhattacharya, Political Economy of Reforms, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 23, 1999, pp. 1408-10; R. Nagaraj, What has happened since 1991? Assessment of India's Economic Reforms, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, Nos. 44/45, 1997, pp. 2869-79; Fumiko Oshikawa, *South Asia Under the Economic Reforms* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1999); Jorgen Dige Pedersen, Explaining Economic Liberalization in India: State and Society Perspectives, *World Development*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2000, pp. 265-282. Stuart Corbridge and John Harris, *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).
32. Lakha, Middle Class Identity; van Wessel, Talking About Consumption.
33. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.
34. Sridharan, *The Growth and Sectoral Composition*, pp. 424-25.
35. In fact, the traditional party of labour (the ALP) has perhaps been more vigorous and technocratic in its approach than the traditional party of capital (Liberal party).
36. Cited in Carol Johnson, *Governing Change: From Keating to Howard* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), p. 100.
37. Which in an era of the "War on Terror", immigration problems, etc., has achieved a widespread purchase.
38. Michael Pusey, *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
39. Clive Hamilton, *Over Consumption in Australia. The Rise of the Middle-class Battler*, (Discussion Paper Number no. 49; Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2002).
40. Hamilton, Over consumption in Australia, p. viii.
41. Hamilton, Over consumption in Australia, p. viii.
42. Raymond Williams *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1985), p. 60.
43. Nick Economou, *Aston by-election Draws to a Close*, (Transcript of Interview, *7.30 Report 10/7/2001*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, www.abc.net.au/7.30/; accessed 15/7/05).
44. Mike Head, Australian Election Reveals the Decay of Parliamentary politics, (www.wsws.org/articles/2001/nov2001/aust-n14.shtml; accessed 15/7/05); p. 5.
45. Mark Latham, *Latham Rejoins Labor Front Bench*, (Transcript of Interview, *7.30 Report 23/11/2001*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, www.abc.net.au/7.30/; accessed 15/7/05).
46. Geraldine Doogue, *Parramatta Election Panel*, (Transcripts of radio programme: *Life Matters 06/11/01*, Radio National, Australian Broadcasting Corporation; www.abc.net.au/rn/lifematters; accessed 28/7/05).
47. Ross Cameron, R. Stewart, J. Smith, and A. Soltau, *Parramatta signals Labor Loss*, (Transcripts of radio programme: *PM, 12/11/01*, Radio National, Australian Broadcasting Corporation; www.abc.net.au/pm; accessed 28/7/05).
48. This 'change of attitude on economic reform' aspect of the study was but one component of a far broader series of research issues aimed at constructing a more generalised worldview: with accompanying issues concerning politics, class, ideology, taxation and fiscal policy, and political philosophy.
49. Indeed, this was the case in the comparative cohort which included areas that had publicly acknowledged traditions of leftist ideological beliefs.