



A labour of love: a review of Parry's 'Classes of Labour'

Andrew Sanchez¹

Published online: 25 April 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

This review discusses Jonathan Parry's 2020 monograph *Classes of Labour* in the context of the author's career trajectory since the 1990s. The review critiques the conceptual framework with which the book understands class relations, and notes that the breadth of the study may be daunting for some readers. However, the review characterises the book as an artisanal masterpiece that shows an ethnographer working at the very peak of their abilities.

Keywords Class · Economy · India · Industry · Labour · Work

I first met Johnny Parry in 2002 while I was an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology at the LSE. Later on, he became my doctoral supervisor. In the early 2000s, he was probably best known for his ethnographic research in the Hindu pilgrimage site of Banaras, India, where he was interested in funerary rituals (Parry 1994) and exchange (Parry 1986).¹ His interest in death and exchange had also informed two widely read volumes co-edited with Maurice Bloch (Bloch & Parry 1982, 1989). Parry's work in these areas was successful, ensuring that by the 1990s he was a perennial presence on anthropology reading lists in the English-speaking world.

Parry might have stayed with the death and exchange themes for the rest of his career. But when I met him, he had recently started publishing in a very different direction. Drawing on new fieldwork conducted in the Indian steel town of Bhilai since 1993, and by then in his 50s, Parry became an industrial ethnographer in the tradition of Michael Burawoy (Burawoy 1979), and June Nash (Nash 1979).

¹ Parry's early research on caste and kinship enjoyed a significant but smaller audience among regional specialists (Parry 1979).

✉ Andrew Sanchez
as2672@cam.ac.uk

¹ Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RF, UK

In 1999, he published two essays that cut to the core of major debates in his new field. The first was a forensic deconstruction of E.P Thompson's thesis on the relationship between industrial capitalism and time-discipline, which used ethnography about Bhilai to highlight the ethnocentric biases of Thompson's model (Parry 1999a; cf Thompson 1967). The second was essentially a discussion of the relationship between ethnicity and occupational class, told through the story of employment reservations in the Bhilai Steel Plant (Parry 1999b).² The shift in focus paid off, and *Bhilai Parry* was central to the consolidation of the anthropology of work in the UK during the 2000s.³

When I met Parry in 2002, he was teaching an undergraduate course at the LSE about industrialisation. There were lectures on most of today's Parry themes: the Thompson thesis, alienation, 'industrial development and its dangers', and others on collective action and resistance. Parry's lectures were thick with data, theory, and critical insights. He read them in a low steady tone that was completely engrossing. In the years since, many of the themes of those lectures have found their way into a steady drip-feed of articles and book chapters. Over two decades, Parry's readers acquired an increasingly comprehensive picture of Bhilai that they nonetheless had to assemble themselves. Among the global community of industrial anthropologists, the definitive 'Bhilai book' has been anticipated for a long time. That book was published in 2020 (Parry 2020). It fulfils most of the stylistic and intellectual expectations that one would have for a book based on nearly three decades of work by one of British Social Anthropology's most respected fieldworkers.

Classes of Labour is an ethnography on a daunting scale. Publishing wisdom suggests that anthropologists should write 200-page books about a fairly discrete argument, based on an ethnographic case considered over a handful of years. *Classes of Labour* is not like that. The book is more than 700 pages long; it addresses the field site between 1955 and 2014; and it draws on 36 months of fieldwork conducted from 1993 to 2014. The book is so grand in temporal and analytic scope, that entire ways of life shift during the years of the project, and the book encompasses issues as varied as marriage, suicide, childhood, labour unions, class, and urbanisation. If the aim of an ethnography is to provide an insightful and comprehensive analysis of a form of life, then *Classes of Labour* is a model ethnography.

The bulk of the book is comprised of updated material explored in Parry's earlier Bhilai publications. However, the book is a coherent and well-structured piece of work, rather than a *Greatest Hits* compilation. The organising intellectual principal of the book is that one can understand the class terrain of Indian labour through a binary distinction between the emic Hindi terms of *Naukri* (service) and *Kam* (work). *Naukri* is 'permanent and regular employment that generally provides a monthly salary and a considerable degree of legally sanctioned job security' (Parry 2020: 62). *Kam* is labour that lacks these things, and is accordingly precarious and

² Employment Reservations are affirmative action policies enacted by the Indian government, reserving a certain proportion of public sector positions for members of socially disadvantaged castes and tribes.

³ Many widely read UK scholars in that field still have a relationship to Parry as either a PhD supervisor, PhD examiner, or Postdoctoral mentor.

uncertain. Parry's assertion is that the Indian manual workforce is critically divided along the *Naukri/Kam* axis, with attendant differences in lifestyle, living standards, and political interests.

Parry's argument about the class divide of *Naukri/Kam* is supported by a wealth of ethnographic data that confirms its accuracy for understanding the Bhilai case. However, it is not clear what the implications of this conceptual framework are for understandings of class more broadly. In particular, the expansion of precarity into once secure areas of global working life would tend to suggest that the local analogue to *Naukri* in most places is an unstable class category, riven with pronounced internal tension. In many global workplaces, precarity is increasingly the lot of persons that have similar social capital to the securely employed (Sanchez 2018; Lazar and Sanchez 2019). The book does not quite grapple with this fact, which dulls the conceptual impact of the work.

Many of the 'classic' anthropological monographs tend to have more generality and brevity than *Classes of Labour*, which makes it easier for non-specialists to engage with them. However, even if it is too soon to say whether *Classes of Labour* will become a classic, it is nonetheless something close to a 'masterpiece' in the accurate artisanal sense of the term. The term 'masterpiece' has become so infused with hyperbole and conjecture that it has lost most of its useful descriptive power. Writing about fine art, the critic Robert Hughes notes that 'masterpiece' has come to erroneously mean '...an object whose aura and accumulated myth strike people blind temporarily and render their judgment timid. It refers more to myths of status than processes of comparison...' (Hughes 2001 [1984]: 397). More properly, however, the notion of a masterpiece comes to us from the practices of artisanal trade guilds. A masterpiece is a work that allows its creator to demonstrate full mastery of the professional skills of their field. It is a grand thing that shows what an expert is capable of doing, and by extension what *the profession itself* can do.⁴

Classes of Labour is the artisanal masterpiece of an ethnographer working at the peak of their abilities. To fully engage with most masterpieces, you need prior knowledge of and commitment to the professional field in which they are produced. In an age of short books and fleeting interests, *Classes of Labour* may prove too daunting for a general anthropological readership. If so it will be their loss.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

⁴ Historically, in European contexts, masterpieces were submitted for evaluation by one's professional peers as a condition of joining a trade guild.

References

- Bloch, M., and J.P. Parry, eds. 1982. *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloch, M., and J.P. Parry, eds. 1989. *Money and the Morality of Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burawoy, M. 1979. *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Hughes, R. 2001. [1984] Art & Money. In *Nothing if Not Critical*, ed. R. Hughes, 387–404. London: Harvill Panther.
- Lazar, S., and A. Sanchez. 2019. Understanding labour politics in an age of precarity. *Dialectical Anthropology* 43 (1): 3–14.
- Nash, J. 1979. *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines*. New York; Guildford: Columbia University Press.
- Parry, J.P. 1979. *Caste and Kinship in Kangra*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Parry, J.P. 1986. The Gift, the Indian Gift, and the 'Indian Gift'. *Man* 21 (3): 453–473.
- Parry, J.P. 1994. *Death in Banaras*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parry, J.P. 1999a. Lords of labour: working and shirking in Bhilai. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 33 (1-2): 107–140.
- Parry, J.P. 1999b. Two cheers for reservation: the Satnamis and the steel plant. In *Institutions and inequalities Essays in Honour of Andre Beteille*, ed. R. Guha and J.P. Parry, 128–170. New Delhi: Oxford.
- Parry, J.P. 2020. *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town*. New Delhi: Social Science Press.
- Sanchez, A. 2018. Relative precarity: decline, hope and the politics of work. In *Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism: Precarity, Class and the Neoliberal Subject*, ed. C. Hann and J.P. Parry, 218–240. Oxford; New York: Berghahn.
- Thompson, E.P. 1967. Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism. *Past and Present* 38: 56–97.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.