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Book Review of Capitalist Networks and Social Power in Australia and New Zealand

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Book Review
**Capitalist Networks and Social Power in Australia
and New Zealand**

by
Georgina Murray
(Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 252 pages.

Reviewed by Basak Ozarl
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In this book, Georgina Murray, a Marxist historian, examines the validity of the popular myth that modern liberal democracies are ruled by intellectual elites with support from a media with an inherent liberal bias. She argues that, on the contrary, in Australia and New Zealand, there exists a ruling class – networks of power – that is based on economic dominance and financial interests. Her book also challenges the belief that ‘the old type of power and wealth relationship has gone, anyone can be wealthy if they try hard enough.’ Murray shows the evidence of a ruling class, which still holds wealth and power and continues to influence the national agenda in its favor. Murray provides rich data in support of her argument using public records, interviews and various other primary and secondary sources. She examines the history of the Australian and New Zealand ruling classes by dividing them into four key time periods. She then looks at billionaires in Australia and investigates their class backgrounds, religious affiliations and their relationship with the state. She says that it’s a common myth that the ancestors of wealthy Australians today were convicts, and her research shows that since the beginning of European colonization, a privileged class has existed and the wealthy today are likely to be descended from this class.

Also in New Zealand, the ruling classes have generally elite social origins, but it seems that they also have indirect control over the country through their monopoly of the media and the power of finance.

The book analyzes the significant role and effectiveness of think

~91~

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tanks in Australia and New Zealand. Murray explains that most of them have a right-wing bias and that they have the power to change our language in the process, by using popular culture and thereby making key ruling class 'truths' everyone's truth. She highlights their conservative agenda regarding unemployment, income distribution, social rights, health care, social attitudes and other key issues.

The position of women in the ruling class is also examined in this book and it points out that women are systematically being kept out of the top business hierarchy. Murray highlights that as everywhere, in Australia and New Zealand, gender exploitation is the product of the advance of capitalist interests.

Consequently, the book says the ruling class in Australia and New Zealand holds most of the economic and political power and its position is supported in various ways by the state. She emphasizes that the constituents of this class have a common interest in obtaining more profit from labor, and economic liberalism is the best ideology suited for this purpose. Murray shows through her analysis of GDP growth over the last 50 years that global economic growth alone is not sufficient, but requires a degree of wealth redistribution. She shows that long economic declines are likely to lead to cyclical crises and global free market capitalism is not working as well for companies as it once was, and does not work for poor countries at all.

Consequently Murray says that the majority of the ruling class in Australia & New Zealand is predominantly Protestant, white, and male and that the Australian ruling class has enjoyed its corporate positions with extremely high salary packages. This class is educated in elite institutions, networks in elite clubs and has access to important governmental and non-governmental organizations. With the help of these networks and institutions, this class acquires wealth from labor of workers. She investigates how capitalism produces ruthless individualism and greedy personalities, by asking why an Australian executives' income is 74 times higher than the average Australian's wage. Finally, Murray argues that a 'classless society' in Australia and New Zealand has never existed since the establishment of these colonies, because class privilege is a main feature of capitalism.

Murray's book provides a well-researched and convincing picture of the capitalist society in Australia and New Zealand and its elites, and shows how they continue to be in a position of power through their

~92~

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economic dominance.

~93~

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