SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY
by John S. Western. Macmillan, Melbourne, 1983. $15.95 (paperback).

A considerable amount of research dealing with aspects of social stratification in Australia has been done over the last decade. Much of it has been produced for official enquiries, the best known being the Henderson Report on poverty. Some of it is the fruit of the private research of academic sociologists. Both the bureaucratic and the academic streams of research have been much alike — highly empirical, eschewing difficult theoretical problems in favour of data-processing. Both have usually aimed at the sort of “scientific objectivity” that comes from statistics and a supposedly value-free terminology. The consequence has been that some of the central (and, of course, controversial) issues in the study of social stratification are ignored. Paradoxically, they are buried in a welter of information.

John Western, Professor of Sociology at the University of Queensland, has attempted to synthesise this research. He has produced a book that is very useful, but which reproduces most of the weaknesses of empirical sociology in Australia. The prose is dry and unengaging, academic in the bad sense. The approach is what C. Wright Mills called “abstracted empiricism”. In reality, sociology is about people, but this is one of those books that appears to be about statistics instead. More serious than this is Western’s inability to connect theory and evidence. The data he has gathered simply piles up, without yielding a coherent argument. When he comes to present a conclusion the book collapses into the vaguest of generalities.

Western does attempt to establish a theoretical framework in his first chapter. This is intended to establish clear, generally-accepted definitions of the terms used in analysing social inequality. Western thrashes around for 30 pages without arriving at any. He points out that while there is some complexity in the writings of Karl Marx and Max Weber this is “hardly sufficient to warrant the hopeless confusion that the literature on class, status and parties currently exhibits”. In the name of scientific vigour, academic sociologists have stripped their ideas of empirical and historical content in the hope of establishing a “general” theory, and have arrived instead at the most barren abstractions. Since he is concerned with trying to further refine and clarify abstract definitions, Western does nothing to restore the lost content, and is unable to penetrate much of the fog of obscurantism produced by half a century’s grand theorising in this area. Nor is he able to link these debates to his empirical interests.

When he turns to describing the pattern of stratification in Australian society, he appeals to “self-evident facts” rather than the preceding theoretical discussion to establish the framework of analysis. The instincts of the empiricist prevail over the logic-chopping of grand theory. Although he presents no real justification for it, Western in fact adopts a pretty orthodox Weberian framework of analysis. This is hardly surprising, since he rejects Marxism (or rather, the usual hand-me-down caricature) — interestingly, using such neo-Marxist epigones as Nicos Poulantzas to discredit classical Marxism. And acceptance of orthodoxy rarely needs much justification anyway.

The second chapter of the book is devoted to an empirical discussion of the Weberian trinity — class, status and power — in...
Australia. Class is taken to refer to the broadest groupings of the occupational hierarchy, rather than groups based on property relations. In the first chapter, Western describes three main classes in Australia, an "upper middle class" — nobody, least of all orthodox sociologists being so bad-mannered as to describe the dominant class in democratically-minded Australia as simply an "upper class" — a "lower middle class" of white-collar workers and a "working class" of manual workers. When he actually examines the statistics, he adds a fourth class, "farmers and farm workers". The old middle class of small businessmen, scattered across the upper manual and service occupations, don't rate a mention as a distinct group in this scheme.

Since the myth of a classless egalitarian Australia dies hard, attempts to document the dimensions of class inequality are always useful. Western reviews the meagre statistics available in Australia on such central issues as the distribution of income and wealth, education, housing and health. By examining patterns of social mobility, he takes inequality of opportunity as well as condition into account. The overall conclusion that emerges is that class is one of the most powerful factors shaping the life-chances of Australians. Although Australia is somewhat more egalitarian than most advanced capitalist countries, it is recognisably of the same genus.

Most neo-Weberians like to emphasise the "multi-dimensional" nature of social inequalities. The hierarchies of class, status and power, at least in principle, are distinct. Logically, this is no doubt correct, but it does not take much real-world observation to notice that they normally tend to adhere to each other — wealth is always insecure unless protected by power, people that acquire power rarely stay poor for long, and both wish for deference and respect from those they exploit and dominate.

Since "status" is concerned with subjective attitudes, and patterns of deference in inter-personal behaviour, rather than the objective economic realities of class, it is particularly resistant to the sort of broad, aggregate statistical analysis favoured by Western. This is why most of the useful research on status has come out of community studies, and one reason why attempts to study it at the "macro" level so often muddle status and class. Western, to his credit, is aware of this danger, and in summarising the Australian literature, attempts to treat status separately from class.

The results do not bear out the neo-Weberian thesis of the independence of the hierarchies of class and status, at least in the Australian case. It is well known that most Australians respect success and money, and despise snobbishness. Attempts to command deference on the basis of attributes other than wealth and power are usually ridiculed as "putting on airs". This is confirmed by the academic labours summarised by Western. He concludes: "Status or prestige operates at a less fundamental level [than class], at what we might call the outer limits of privilege ... as a structural principle, class is more important than status in Australia." One could, I think, go further than this, and assert that the principal source of status in Australian society is position in the class hierarchy.

Turning to the dimension of "party", Western reviews the activities of political parties, trade unions, business lobbies, religious organisations, and other pressure groups. His conclusion is not startlingly original. These groups, he informs us, represent "cross-cutting sectional interests" and "advance or attempt to advance their members' interests". Some seek to maintain their existing advantages, others to win a larger slice of the cake.

But to leave the analysis at this point is to accept empty pluralist slogans and ignore the substance of politics. Where interest groups conflict, which one has the power to successfully impose its preference? At the level of practicality rather than formality, there is all the difference in the world between "advancing the interests of one's members" and "attempting to advance the interests of one's members". This is an issue Western does not confront. Instead of an empirical analysis of the distribution of power among the various groups he lists — no doubt something better achieved by case-studies and historical analysis than by the tabulation of statistics — he contents himself with mouldy pluralist cliches.

He thus sidesteps one of the central issues in the political sociology of advanced capitalist societies: to what extent has the distribution of resources been the product of political power as distinct from purely economic forces? Most of these societies have given rise to mass parties based on the working class, and the issue is posed most sharply when such parties come to office promising to redress the balance of advantage in favour of the working class. Can the political power of labour prevail over the entrenched power of upper class privilege in a capitalist society? With the ALP's recent
electoral victory, this question is by no means a purely academic one. But one will search a book such as Western's in vain for any attempt to deal with it.

Western examines social and economic bases of these political interest groups. Overwhelmingly, he finds that they are formed to advance economic interests, and that the most potent (though not the only) influence on party political preference is class membership. Here, unfortunately, Western contents himself with reviewing the evidence, and does not confront the views of David Kemp and others who have argued contrariwise. The main contours of political life, then, are shaped by class conflicts — or, as Western prefers to put it, the political order is "derivative" of the class order. Here is one more nail in the coffin of neo-Weberian "multi-dimensionalism".

In the next four chapters, Western is off the safe ground of the Weberian trinity, and the failings of abstracted empiricism become more evident. He reviews a mass of material, showing the differences in life-chances between man and women, Aborigines and whites, immigrants and native-born Australians, and people of different ages. On this basis he decides that gender, ethnicity and age are all sources of social inequality and independent of class, status and power. The information is useful, but the analysis worth little.

Western fails to distinguish the question of inequalities between individuals from that of inequalities between recognisable social strata: or rather, he assumes that any statistical category represents a distinct social stratum, and any differences between them are a measure of social inequality. Thus, for example, statistics reveal substantial differences in the economic situation of dependent children, working adults and the elderly retired. From this Western concludes that age is an independent base of social inequality; most would conclude that it represents different stages of a life-cycle through which all people (with the apparent exception of Cliff Richard) pass. Fundamentally, it represents a biological process, although this may be handled in different ways by different social groups. Western is unwilling to acknowledge this, for as he points out, "biological determinism" is unfashionable in liberal academic circles these days. In addition, it would require shifting the focus from simple statistical measures to the study of complex social processes.

A similar problem haunts the chapter on "gender". Compiling statistics on male-female income differentials does not determine whether these are based on inherent biological differences, on a co-operative division of labour in which men participate in the paid workforce more than women, or on the exploitation of women. Nor is the relationship of class and gender exhausted by showing that the notion of "women as a class" is nonsensical. Class situation, family structure and sex roles are inter-related in myriads of ways that Western does not even begin to consider.

Likewise, Western points out that there is a small proportion of Southern European immigrants in the professions, and an insignificant proportion of Aborigines. He concludes that these groups are "under-represented", and that this shows that ethnicity is an independent source of social inequality. But ethnicity is not independent of status — surely ethnic or racial discrimination is a classical example of status-group exclusivity? Nor is it independent of class — the lower average incomes of Aborigines and immigrants are surely connected with their concentration among the lower rungs of the class hierarchy. But there is no real attempt to investigate these interconnections, or even to control for them in making the statistical comparisons. The only conclusion we can reach from this concerns the limits of such crude statistical methods, and the apparent eagerness of some social scientists to dismiss out of hand any issue that is not amenable to easy quantification.

There is one issue central to the whole book that Western has not tackled. The concept of "equality" is a notoriously elusive one, but is central to any analysis of inequality. We may, according to the theologians, all be equal in the sight of God; but while we are on this earth we live with complex institutions, specialised tasks, and differentiated rewards, and it is in this context that the issues of social inequality have to be settled.

Should people be rewarded equally for unequal efforts? What exactly does equal effort mean where people perform quite different tasks? Should people with different needs be treated uniformly? Is income derived from ownership rather than effort the fruit of exploitation? Where is the dividing line between the reward for extra responsibility and the exploitation of the power of office? There are no easy answers to such questions. But they lie at the heart of arguments about social inequality, and the justice of economic and political institutions. To discuss these issues without addressing such questions is not being "scientifically objective": it is to evade the main point of the exercise.

Without some answer to these questions, one man's "equality" is another person's inequality. Western's approach to equality focusses not on ownership and control, or productive activity, but on consumption and living standards. He defines it simply in terms of "access to resources" — meaning income, consumer goods, legal protection, social services and the like. Where these are not equally available to everyone, irrespective of what they actually do, or need, social inequality is said to exist. Such a mechanical statistical notion of equality can guide some useful empirical research, but it cannot come to grips with any of the key problems.

This book is a convenient synthesis of the results of a large volume of research of central features of Australian social structure. But most of the research has been mediocre, and Western's own processing of it is systematic but uninspired. The central questions of social science have to be tackled with an intellectual armoury more sophisticated than a pocket calculator.