Steve Fraser's 'Class Matters': We ignore class to our peril

Updated: MARCH 16, 2018 — 1:17 PM EDT

Steve Fraser, author of "Class Matters."

by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer
Class Matters

*The Strange Career of an American Delusion*

By Steve Fraser

Yale University Press. 287 pp. $25

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Throughout our history, many Americans have insisted that the United States is immune to class-consciousness and class conflict. In sharp contrast to Europe, they argue, America has had no kings, nobleman, or social ranks fixed at birth. Born free, in a setting where careers are open to talent and hard work, Americans can invent and reinvent themselves.

In *Class Matters*, Steve Fraser, author of *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power*, maintains that this version of the American Dream ignores hierarchical identities, defined by markets and consumption patterns; social fissures; status anxieties; and racial exclusion. Class “will out,” he writes, “and it always has.” Class matters as well – because Americans try so hard to pretend it doesn’t.

Fraser is scarcely the first person to mount a critique of American exceptionalism. That said, his analysis is fresh and compelling, grounded in detailed accounts of six signposts of mythic memory – the settlements at Plymouth and Jamestown; the Constitutional Convention of 1787; the Statue of Liberty; the cowboy; the Cold War “kitchen debate”; and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech – that illustrate how social class has been removed from our national conversation.

Cowboys, Fraser reminds us, became icons of self-sufficient, manly American individualism, men who avoided demeaning structures of authority in industrializing America. In fact, he demonstrates, they
were black and white proletarians, cogs in a supply chain that delivered meat to urban markets in the United States and abroad. Cowboys worked long hours, for about $1 a day, and were usually laid off in the winter. They rarely came to work in fancy high-heeled boots, leather chaps, and spurs, with a bandanna around the neck, a six-shooter with a pearl studded handle on the hip, ready at the drop of a hat to serenade the heavens.

Fraser indicates as well that, initially, the Statue of Liberty was not associated with “huddled masses, yearning to be free.” Indeed, Emma Lazarus’ poem did not appear on the statue until 1903. By then, ironically, elites, who had earlier wanted nothing to do with Lady Liberty, fell in love with the statue as a symbol of a supply of low-wage labor; while some working men and women, who had pinched pennies to support Joseph Pulitzer’s fund-raising drive in the 1880s, turned their backs on the foreign hordes entering New York harbor.

Fraser knows that in the 21st century the nature of work is changing and the term proletariat may no longer be relevant. Nonetheless, he concludes, it’s as important as ever to recognize that ignoring class – and failing to deconstruct “the myth of a classless society” – is a dangerous and destructive mistake.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

**Published:** March 16, 2018 — 1:17 PM EDT
Steve Fraser's 'Class Matters': We ignore class to our peril - Philly