European labor aristocracies : trade unionism, the hierarchy of skill, and the stratification of the manual working class before the First World War / Marc Linder.
Linder, Marc.
Frankfurt : Campus, 1985.

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c Linder

European Labor Aristocracies

Trade Unionism, the Hierarchy of Skill, and the Stratification of the Manuel Working Class before the First World War

The notion of a labor aristocracy has been in circulation for more than 150 years. A term of opprobrium and praise in different political circles, it has never been the object of rigorous scrutiny. This study seeks to locate the concept within the various traditions of class analysis.

First, the book uncovers the roots of the discussion of labor aristocracy in the political and socio-economic conditions prevailing in England in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. It shows how this pre-Marxist intellectual background was filtered through the political economy of Marx and Engels.

Second, on the basis of a critical analysis of the immanent contradictions of this dominant Marxist tradition, it undertakes a comprehensive empirical analysis of numerous indicators of the presence of a labor aristocracy in the major industrial societies of Europe before World War I.

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Marc Linder was educated in the United States and West Germany. He received a Ph. D. in politics from Princeton University and a J. D. from Harvard Law School. He has taught economics and political science in the United States, West Germany, Denmark, and Mexico. Author of several books in the areas of political economy and jurisprudence, he is currently an attorney in the migrant farmworker division of Texas Rural Legal Aid in the Rio Grande Valley.

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Marc Linder

European Labor Aristocracies

Trade Unionism, the Hierarchy of Skill, and the Stratification of the Manual Working Class before the First World War

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Linder, Marc:
European labor aristocracies : trade unionism,
the hierarchy of skill, and the stratification of the
manual working class before the first World War /
Marc Linder. – Frankfurt/Main ; New York :
Campus Verlag, 1985.
ISBN 3-593-33457-7

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And even today the book, as the current scientific mode of production teaches, is an obsolete mediation between two different card filing systems. For everything that is essential is found in the card file of the researcher who wrote it, and the scholar who studies in it assimilates it to his own card index.

Walter Benjamin, Einbahnstrasse

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Preface

> You know that in our industry it is entirely different from the cotton industry, and the steel industry in this respect. Our employers are not capitalists in the sense that these large organizations are. We meet our employers every day, call them Tom, Dick and Harry; we meet them from time to time when we have a little trouble. They understand our troubles and we understand theirs. You know we have a lot of members in our trades union movement in the building industry who get up and preach about capitalism and all that kind of thing, and who would have us at one another's throats with our employers, who say we have nothing in common with them. Gentlemen, we have everything in common with them. ... (1)

This study originated in 1970 in connection with an investigation into the background and motivation of demonstrations conducted in May of that year on Wall Street by members of building trades unions in ostensible solidarity with President Nixon and the American invasion of Cambodia. (2) Further research indicated that a political-economic conjunctural logic did, ultimately, lie behind this seemingly un-class conscious behavior. In order to determine whether the peculiarities of construction work had generated such tactics in the past, a full-scale history of the American construction industry and building trades unions was written; in order to test the resulting working hypotheses in a different socio-political context, briefer histories were assembled for numerous European countries.

At this point an "epistemological rupture" occurred: with construction workers relegated to the role of one exemplar of a species, the problem orientation shifted to the basic theoretical issues underlying the alleged separatist political ideologies and actions of the better-situated strata of the working class throughout the capitalist era. Since the prevailing theoretical constructs proved, however, almost wholly devoid of mediated empirical studies, (3) detailed historical illustrations became necessary both to judge the reality-content of existing theories and to help formulate more adequate explanations.

A companion volume devoted to the United States is in preparation.

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Public thanks are due the staffs of the following libraries for having made their resources accessible: McGill University; Aarhus University, Arbejderbevaegelsensbibliotek, Danmarks Statistik, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Roskilde University; Frankfurt University, Free University of Berlin, Württembergische Landesbibliothek; British Library, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Edinburgh University, National Library of Scotland; Colegio de Mexico; Chalmers Tekniska Högskola; Balch Institute, University of Baltimore, Boston College, Brandeis University, Brookings Institution, Bryn Mawr College, University of California at Berkeley, University of California at Los Angeles, University of California at Santa Barbara, Catholic University, University of Chicago, City College of New York, City University of New York, Clark University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Duke University, Eleutherian Mills, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, Fordham University, Gettysburg College, Harvard University, Haverford College, Hoover Institution, Hunter College, University of Illinois, Indiana University, Institute for Advanced Study, Jewish Labor Committee, Johns Hopkins University, University of Kansas, Library Company, Library of Congress, Lincoln University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Middlebury College, University of New Hampshire, University of New Mexico, New York Public Library, New York State School of Industrial Relations, Northwestern University, University of Oregon, University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University, Princeton University, Rice University, Rutgers University (New Brunswick), University of Southern California, Stanford University, Swarthmore College, Tamiment Institute, Temple University, University of Texas at Austin, United States Department of Labor, Vassar College, University of Virginia, University of Washington, Wesleyan University, Williams College, University of Wisconsin, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Yale University.

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