## Senerated for guest (University of Iowa) on 2012-04-17 12:48 GMT / http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b426586

## European Labor Aristocracies

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

Campus Verlag · Frankfurt



Univ. Library, UC Santa Cruz test

## CIP-Kurztitelaufnahme der Deutschen Bibliothek

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

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Copyright © 1985 by Campus Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt Printed in West Germany



## Chapter 1 Introduction

Unskilled labor must become skilled before it can gain rights. (1)

Although capitalist societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been decisively molded by conflicts between labor and capital, cleavages within the working class have constituted a crucial element specifying the structure of national political systems. In recent years, for example, much attention has been devoted to the issue of fissures between: blue-collar and white-collar workers; the working class and the marginalized stratum of semi-permanently unemployed and welfare recipients variously characterized as the lumpenproletariat, working poor, non-working poor and underclass; public sector and private sector employees; and the old and the new working class. (2) In connection with racial, ethnic, generational, sexual and organizational divisions, working class politics have been conspicuously preoccupied with intra-class controversies in the United States. (3)

For the past one hundred and fifty years the notion of an aristocracy of labor has enjoyed widespread currency: not only in left-wing political circles, but also among journalists (4) and scholars (5) it has served as a fungible element in attempts to explain or denounce the fractionation of the working class. The overarching principle of division within a politically relevant stratification of that class has been perceived as being rooted in the formation of a stratum whose superior conditions have led it to articulate and pursue social, economic and political goals without reference to the interests of other, atomized, strata which, despite the latter's numerical preponderance, it has been able to outflank organizationally. This long conceptual tradition notwithstanding, the notion of an aristocracy of labor has not been accorded theoretical treatment adequate to the level of generalization that its use has often implied. (6)

In particular, analysis of the relations of proletarian strata to one another has not been furthered by arguments—whether tautological, definitional or conceptual in accordance with their



degree of sophisticatedness--that insist that capital, as the essential social relationship in capitalist societies, cannot be overridden by any differentiations within wage-labor in forming the basis of new class boundaries. (7) Although this valuetheoretical foundation of class antagonism (8) serves a heuristic purpose in relation to authors who posit that the chief issue is the analysis "of the strictly speaking fluid nature of the worker's whole fate" (9) or who base their stratificatory classifications on "an analytic act of violence", (10) "this most general concept of class antagonism" (11) is manifestly inadequate to the task of analyzing the class structure of a particular country at a particular point in history. If the terminological barriers raised by the question of class-imputation are eliminated by focusing attention on the factors that tend to influence the conditions of working class homogeneity, then the aforementioned value-theoretical objections become untenable. For if adherents of this position concede that the various material forms of labor (such as skilled and unskilled labor), as those in which the relationship between capital and labor appears to the agents of production, differentially shape the latter's consciousness, then it is inconsistent to contend that the stratification of the working class derived from these material forms of labor must inevitably be "completely arbitrary." (12)

The fact that the concepts used to analyze differentiation within the working class are located on a different level of abstraction from those characteristic of the relationship between capital and labor does not disqualify them as adequate scientific reflections of social reality. The denial of their validity rests upon the moral imperative that "scholarly discussion must" concentrate on those aspects of the relationship between capital and labor which "compel all wage workers" to overcome their spontaneous mutual competition. (13)

Historical research concerning the formation of national labor aristocracies must observe two methodological considerations. First, intra-national uneven development is an on-going process that continuously generates intraworking class restratification. Moreover, uneven development itself develops unevenly (14) so that one period may create the basis for an increasingly homogeneous working class whereas the next generates predominantly heterogeneous elements. By undermining the economic foundations of one version of the notion of an end of class history, such constant restratification casts doubt on the thesis of permanent embourgeoisement. (15) Second, it is crucial to scrutinize the specific political-historical nature of the "superior" working class strata; for just as the mathematical existence of a lowest one-fifth of the income



recipients of a society does not suffice as a qualitative indicator of poverty, (16) so too the highest-paid one-fifth or one-tenth of wage earners does not automatically constitute an aristocracy of labor. (17) Wage differentials, for example, similar to those prevailing in nineteenth-century Britain have been documented for earlier centuries. (18) Yet the class structure of societies prior to the rise of industrial capitalism makes it inappropriate to impute to artisans in pre-capitalist societies the political functions associated with classical labor aristocrats. (19)

The structure and distribution of skills within the manual working class is accorded overriding significance as a stratificatory principle in the historical-empirical chapters which follow. (20) Industrial capitalism itself created skilled labor and the latter's conceptual counterpart, unskilled labor, in a fourfold sense: 1. qua complicated and simple labor, respectively, they are represented and become commensurable in the commodity values produced by the aggregate labor of society; in this relation complicated labor and simple labor are qualitatively undifferentiated expressions of abstract labor; quantitatively, however, complicated labor exists as intensified or multiplied simple labor; 2. qua qualified and unqualified labor, respectively, they are forms of concrete labor, qualitatively different as technological agents in the production of useful objects; (21) 3. for the capitalist employers of skilled labor it is essential that the quantitative relationship between the value created by skilled labor and the reproductive cost of skilled labor power be no less favorable than that obtaining between unskilled labor and unskilled labor power; non-fulfillment of this condition would, ceteris paribus, manifest itself as a below-average rate of profit among capitals that are heavily reliant upon skilled labor and would result in diminished demand for and hence a (temporary) superabundance of the latter; and 4. for the owners and sellers of skilled and unskilled labor (power) differential working and living conditions derive from the introduction into the sphere of dependent labor of an attenuated version of the "principles of stratification" that regulate the unequal and hierarchical distribution of "more essential" social positions and functions on the one hand and the accompanying "rewards," "rights" and "perquisites" on the other in society at large. (22)

It is in particular this last aspect that forms the focus of interest below. The crucial task of analysis consists not so much in confirming the existence of this hierarchy of privilege within the manual working class as in setting it in relation to the overall structure of social class as it evolved during one historical period. To what degree, in other words, did the com-



mon experiences of manual working class life in the spheres of production and reproduction neutralize the divisive effects of intra-class stratification? Or, seen from a different perspective, to what degree did the privileged stratum of the working class use the economic, social and political "power and prestige" attaching to its "scarce skills" (23) to undermine the mechanisms that gave rise to the inequalities peculiar to capitalist societies in general? (24)

Parts I and II, dealing with Britain and Europe respectively, are of unequal length and subject to qualitatively different kinds of treatment. This disparity reflects the divergent historical paths taken by the aristocracy of labor in the two zones. The Continental patterns serve as virtual negative case histories illustrating the national specificity of class relations. Within each Part, too, the emphases are far from uniform. Thus chapters 2 and 3, devoted to the pre-Chartist and Chartist periods respectively, undertake to reconstruct the early history of the labor aristocracy in Britain on the basis of contemporary qualitative accounts; although no attempt is made to gauge the social structure statistically, the chapters demonstrate that the peculiarities of the prevailing political structure imparted a distinct character to the putative labor aristocracy. Chapter 4 traces the idea-historical origins of Marx's and Engels' conception of the aristocracy of labor back to the attack that the leftwing Chartist, Ernest Jones, mounted on craft unionism in the 1840s and 1850s.

Marx's and Engels' scattered references to the notion of a labor aristocracy are systematically elaborated in chapter 5 with a view to inspecting their immanent theoretical logic and historical accuracy. In this context a diverse body of empirical indicators relating to the socio-economic structure of mid-Victorian Britain is set forth. An alternative theoretical approach to the study of national labor aristocracies, which is adumbrated in chapter 6, is then developed in the remaining chapters. Chapter 7, which concludes Part I, focuses on the impact of intra-working class differentiation on the evolution of a British labor aristocracy during the quarter-century preceding the First World War.

In Part II attention is shifted to Continental Europe. Chapters 8 and 9 examine the two major industrial capitalist nations, Germany and France respectively. Sketches of labor aristocracies in several of the less advanced nations of Europe (such as Austria-Hungary, Denmark, Italy and Russia) are contained in chapter 10. Finally, chapter 11 synthesizes the new insights emerging from this study.



