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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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Part I The Labor Aristocracy in Britain

Capital and Labour seem
By our Maker joined;
Are they not like giant twins
In the world of mind?
Up the hill of progress bright
March we on in tether.
Making difficulties light.
Pulling all together.
So shall we in concord joined
Shew to wondering mankind
Capital and Labour
Are our oars to pull the boat,
Are our wings to soar aloft,
In our high endeavour? (1)

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Chapter 2 Early Socialism and Trade Unionism (1820s and 1830s)

The decade beginning with the mid-1820s witnessed a new stage in the development of the consciousness and of the organizations of the British working class. The rise of political reform, cooperative, socialist and general—indeed revolutionary—trade union movements reflected and reinforced this transformation. (1) The internal struggles accompanying the political and economic constitution of the proletariat as an effective class force represented the first nationally significant instances of the politicization of the socio-economic stratification of manual workers.

One of the most condemnatory indictments of the labor aristocracy and at the same time perhaps the earliest precise semantic reference stems from the Ricardian utopian socialist, William Thompson. (2) In his book, Labour Rewarded, written in 1826 and published the following year, Thompson founded his accusation on a topos that has remained a mainstay of anti-labor aristocratic criticism until the present day--namely, that of exclusionary trade societies, which drew their power from a system of unnecessarily rigid and extended apprenticeship. (3) Thompson saw little correlation between wage levels and skill (4) because he regarded differences in skill as comparatively minor and subsidiary to other factors.

Whether one class of laborers is better paid than another, as weavers than agriculturists or hatters, is a mere matter of chance and change, depending on the fluctuations of the market, and on corporation or other exclusions of force, legal or not legal, restraining the freedom of competition. (5)

Although the effective skill-content separating various "classes" may have been largely fictitious, the institutions protecting and inflating such differentials

give a factitious elevation to the remuneration of particular classes of laborers; while the great mass of the industrious remain at that competitive point of remuneration which enables the laborers to live out their average round of



years, and to leave behind them a new race to continue the routine of unattractive, unrequited, toil. Those classes of trades or subdivisions of classes which are the best remunerated ... are the mere <u>aristocracy</u> of trades, possessing no superior utility, skill or good disposition, with no more pretensions to superior merit than any other aristocracies, but frequently partaking of the vices of all aristocracies, full of unsocial antipathies to those less remunerated than themselves. ... (6)

The quasi-hereditary procedures for transmitting its privileges to the next generation constituted one of the most invidious aristocratic attributes of this class of labor inasmuch as

unequal remuneration renders it the interest of those possessed of skill in any department of industry to conceal from all others the mode of acquiring the peculiar manner of operating, which, improved by habit, becomes skill. Those who are skilled having families ... will teach their children alone. ... (7)

As long as the labor aristocracy rested on secure technological foundations, the gulf between it and the rest of the working class was unlikely to become politically or socially explosive. But as education spread, trades' mysteries lost their status, legal compulsory apprenticeship was abolished (8) and machinery displaced skilled labor, common laborers and their children were enabled to acquire the skills required by industry. (9) Once industrialization had reached this stage, trade unions had to decide whether they would

resort to <u>force</u>, law-supported as to apprenticeships, or illegal as <u>to intimidation</u> ... to put down the competition of the great majority of the Industrious, and thus erect a bloody--for force will lead to blood, and without blood no aristocracy can be supported--aristocracy of Industry. (10)

The scenario that Thompson evoked for the case that the aristocracy of labor preferred resistance, while appearing historically unrealistic in the light of the experience of the past century and a half, seems peculiarly suited to the mind of an Irish landlord who chose to analyze this stratum of workers analogously to that of the British nobility. Thompson predicted that,

The unskilled laborers would every where form a league with the capitalists; and being the majority in point of physical strength, and having, moreover, justice and the legally armed bands of the country on their side, they



would by the underbidding of their labor defeat every where all the efforts of Trades-Unions. ... (11)

Thompson's analysis proved valid, however, in the sense that over time labor aristocratic positions in various trades were eroded. Even during this period some labor aristocrats underwent a rapid and dramatic process of absolute economic immiseration. (12) But these were relatively autonomous economic processes as the agents of which capitalist employers functioned; there do not appear to have occurred any successful (or unsuccessful) revolts by "'plantation slaves'" against "'palace slaves,'" (13) let alone ones in which the bourgeoisie and the armed forces supported the former. The fact that the ruin of certain sectors of the labor aristocracy did not mean the disappearance of this stratum as a whole--which was periodically replenished by the creation of new categories of skilled workers--constituted an even more cogent refutation of Thompson's claims.

The weakness of Thompson's approach was rooted in his misconception of the course of capitalist industrialization, on the one hand, and of the political behavior of working class strata, on the other. It is implausible--in regard to the first issue--that labor aristocrats, merely by means of the institutional methods outlined by Thompson, but against the grain of capital accumulation and in spite of underbidding on the labor market by the unskilled and of determined resistance on the part of employers, could have maintained a technologically obsolete position in the long run. (14) And in point of fact, the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century appear to have been characterized by more accretions to than deductions from the skilled trades. (15) Inthose instances, in which trade unions of the skilled engaged in isolated sectional struggles for the preservation of technologically superfluous occupational roles, they were generally defeated. (16) Bourgeois and socialist attacks on trade unions overlapped precisely in such cases of "aristocratic tyranny", which collided with the rights of property on the one hand and working class solidarity on the other.

Thompson's analysis of potential class collaboration was based on a conception of the labor aristocracy as a combative and essentially retrogressively disruptive force within capitalist society. As such, it incurred the hostility of the bourgeoisie and of the other strata of the proletariat. Thus alliances between any two of these three groupings would, in accordance with the logic of Thompson's argument, have been tactical ones with the "enemy's enemy" rather than ones founded on positive common interests. Given his timebound misconception of the unilinearity



of capitalist industrialization and his exclusive concentration on a certain type of waning labor aristocracy, Thompson could establish no basis for collaboration between such a working class stratum and the industrial bourgeoisie. It is, nevertheless, worth reflecting on the factors that precluded such cooperation.

During the 1820s and 1830s trade unions were not treated by the bourgeoisie as possible instruments for the introduction of notions of class conciliation into the minds of the proletariat; instead, they were fought and smashed, their members jailed, transported and executed. (17) Although labor aristocrats may have been regarded as distinct from other working class strata, they were not yet welcomed as respectable labor businessmen, committed to private property and the free market. Preferable perhaps to certain violence-prone groups that were undergoing rapid de-skilling and deteriorating conditions, they were none the less perceived as attempting to exercise a more systematic and insidious control by interfering with day-to-day operations of private profit-making production facilities. Trade unions still constituted an alien force.

The rather solid front which the working class maintained during the struggle for universal male suffrage left little room for a policy designed to divide that class by conferring the right to vote on a part of it. Once it had secured Parliamentary reform for its own benefit, the bourgeoisie no longer found it necessary to compensate any of its erstwhile working class political allies. (18)

Although the middle classes do not appear to have attempted to play various strata of the working class off against one another during this period, some anti-working class authors and socialists believed that labor aristocrats were being recruited for special purposes. One of the most notable of these contemporary sources was the anonymous pamphlet entitled, On Combinations of Trades. Using as his point of departure the claim that "the interests of low and high-priced labour ... are far more conflicting than those which divide the classes living in the enjoyment of various degrees of comfort," (19) the author asserted that "the single benefit of upholding a class of highly-paid artizans ... outweighs all" "serious evils resulting from trades' unions. ..."

In every civilized society ... the importance of this class of men has been recognised. Whilst compulsory labour existed, they interposed between the patricians and the slaves, but in free countries they are called upon to discharge higher duties. In forming the connecting link between wealth and poverty, they serve to stimulate the latter, and indeed



their existence furnishes almost the only motive to exertion to the English working classes. (20)

In embryonic form the aspects alluded to by the anonymous author represented a component of the attributes of the classical labor aristocracy; yet this particular type of labor aristocracy was peculiar to a period in which the working class and its sales organs, the trade unions, had not yet been firmly institutionalized as responsible economic agents. At this point the labor aristocracy still symbolized an ideological intermediate station on the road out of wage labor into economic "independence," whereas in subsequent years the social advancement of this stratum qua stratum of and in the working class became a subjective motivating factor. (21) The function ascribed to the labor aristocracy during the pre-Chartist period was not so much one of having divided the loyalties of the working class as having created an escape mechanism. In the event, the author of On Combinations of Trades was disappointed by the efficacy of the mechanism which he praised; for although he deemed it more rational for the skilled to seek alliances with the classes above them--with whom they did not compete--, they persisted in attempting to join forces with the very strata beneath them that were capable of underbidding them when trades were open. (22)

Socialist organs also recognized the possibility that skilled workers might ally themselves with the bourgeoisie. A particularly striking example occurred in the building trades in which, however, the situation was complicated by a struggle between large and small capitals. The Pioneer, the trade unionist organ of the Builders' Union, warned editorially that "many of the skillful and more intelligent workmen have forsaken their order, and persevered in gaining a footing among the middle classes." (23) The socialist Poor Man's Guardian devoted several articles to refuting the notion that building operatives were better advised to work for small masters than for the then burgeoning class of larger general contractors. It endeavored to destroy the myths surrounding the relations between small masters and workmen (24) by claiming that small masters all wanted to become large capitalists; since their small capitals placed them in an inferior competitive position, they wanted to "excite a hatred of the large capitalists" in order to monopolize the labor force. The existence of such a conspiracy seemed demonstrated to the journal by a remark of a master plumber to the effect that he hoped that the operatives would rather work at four shillings a day for the small masters than at six shillings for the "gormandisers." (25) A week earlier the journal had observed that one of the advantages of being



employed by large contractors was that there were fewer of them. (26)

Behind the facade of malicious rejoicing at the prospective demise of petty-bourgeois elements (27) lurked an apparent fear that relatively well-situated artisans might seek limited political reforms together with their employers. (28) To the extent that early English labor aristocratic artisans gave evidence of harboring class collaborationist tendencies, these have been traced back to the fact that the comparatively slow tempo of the industrial revolution in England allowed craftsmen and their small employers to resist the entry of large-scale industry more successfully. (29)

Further support for this position was provided by a contemporary account of the socially stabilizing influence of the political unions as a consequence of their members' having been "drawn from the class of respectable tradesmen, and of the mechanics and artizans in populous cities"; for

surely, no one will have the hardihood to assert that such men can have the remotest interest in hurrying their country into the vortex of revolution. Has the trader any motive for bringing on a state of things which all deprive him of his all ...? Has the mechanic who earns his 25s. 30s. or 35s. a week, any interest in inflaming the passions of angry and ignorant men, who will burn the manufactory to which he carries his labour; or ruin the manufacturer from whom he received his wages? Yet these are the men who have united together, in the hope of carrying such measures as will enable them to participate more largely in the rich resources which the skill of their hands has raised. ... (30)

Contemporaries began to comment upon still another aspect of the labor aristocracy during this period—the relations of the skilled to (their) laborers in the same trades. Alexander Somerville recounted that, "The masons were intolerable tyrants to their labourers." After having witnessed a mason strike a laborer gratuitously—ironically enough after a group of masons had been declaiming against tyranny and aristocracy—Somerville, who objected to the physical and moral abuse inflicted on the laborers, was told that "the privileges of masons were not to be questioned by labourers." (31) There is also some evidence that, in spite of the absence of systems of co-exploitation of laborers by skilled trade unionists in the building trades, the latter were able to enforce their high wages in part because contractors managed to maintain their profits by lowering the wages of the unskilled. (32)



Although employers tended to regard themselves as the chief victims of the "tyranny" of trade unionism, (33) others preferred to emphasize the detrimental effects on working class groups. Archibald Alison, sheriff of Lanarkshire during the events surrounding the conspiracy trial of the Glasgow cotton spinners in 1837-1838, provided a particularly vivid account of a trade union-enforced dual labor market. According to his testimony before a Parliamentary committee, membership in every trade was restricted to close relatives so that others were driven into trades in which no combinations or prohibitions were possible; there they were employed as day laborers, masons' laborers, porters and hand-loom weavers. "The tendency in practice clearly is to establish a monopoly of skilled against the efforts of unskilled industry, and to fence in the monopoly of skilled labour by a power of intimidation to which the working classes find it impossible to make any resistance." (34) After having affirmed that trade unionism represented "a complete system of castes," Alison became involved in the following exchange with M.P. O'Connell:

Thus making a species of aristocratic class amongst the labouring population?—Exactly; I have long been convinced that the system is just a system of the aristocracy of skilled labour against the general mass of unskilled labour ...; for the real sufferers are not the masters so much as the other workmen who are excluded. (35)

Contemporaries also commented on labor aristocratic relations in such traditional trades as carriage making (36) and printing. (37)

Other contemporaries doubted whether labor aristocrats could in fact preserve their privileged positions by means of strikes. Thus a commission studying the "State of Protection of Manufacturing Industry" in connection with the establishment of a constabulary questioned "the soundness of an opinion that has been expressed that strikes are of service in sustaining skilled labourers, or an 'aristocracy' of skilled labourers." It was the commissioners' view that those workers had the most to gain from strikes who were able to block, by virtue of their industrial position, a greater number of workers, some of whom might have been more skilled than the strikers. (38) The commission believed that such strikes would ultimately lead to the introduction of laborsaving machinery. (39)

The foregoing survey has avoided the issue of developing quantitative criteria for demarcating a labor aristocracy. Yet the economic distance between labor aristocrats and the rest



of the working class must have been larger and growing more rapidly during a period which even "revisionist" social and economic historians acknowledge to have been one of increasing immiseration for significant sectors of the proletariat than during the second half of the nineteenth century. (40) Considerable social distance also obtained between labor aristocrats and other proletarian strata; artisans often viewed the unskilled sectors of the manual working class with contempt. (41) In these respects working class solidarity was still subordinate to intraclass divisions. The very fact, for example, that Luddite croppers in direct conflict with machinery, on the one hand, (42) and London artisans producing luxury commodities by means of centuries-old techniques, on the other, belonged to such disparate spheres of societal life meant that long-term political and economic cooperation between them was by no means selfexplanatory. The emergence rather than the absence of such a coalition impressed contemporaries. This cleavage within the working class was created by the uneven quantitative and qualitative development of capital accumulation in various branches and regions; the transition from pre-industrial forms of labor to industrial capitalist forms left a unique imprint on each trade and occupation. In the context of this fundamental restructuring of British society, policies implemented by the ruling classes made a decidedly subsidiary contribution to further differentiation within the working class. (43)

While living under--and neither forgetting nor allowing others to forget the--quite different conditions from those of their "classmates," (44) labor aristocrats do not appear to have opposed the latter's interests insofar as they were directed toward the reconstruction of society. Despite frequently conflicting claims at the points of production, employment and income distribution--claims which labor aristocrats did not scruple at asserting regardless of the possible consequences for the unskilled--, the labor aristocracy often assumed a role of leadership in the formation of radical and socialist movements. (45) Autonomy rather than opposition characterized its relationship to the working class at large.

Such were the possibilities in a period when craftsmen could still dream of production cooperatives and when artisans who desired to become independent, self-employed masters could still be integrated into the same movement with factory operatives who sought to share in common the newly emergent mass means of social production. (46) As long as both movements were guided by anti-capitalist attitudes, the former could be shielded from the socio-economic antagonisms that were beginning to fissure the working class. (47)

