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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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Chapter 3

Chartism

The fact that the existence of Chartism as a coherent national movement compelled every stratum and grouping within the working class to take a definite stand in words and/or actions on the issues raised by the Charter, facilitates an evaluation of the labor aristocracy during the period from the mid-1830s through the 1840s. For their part, adherents of the Charter publicly applauded or condemned the labor aristocracy for what they perceived as friendly or hostile acts toward their movement.

The London Working Men's Association, founded in 1836 by and for members of the working class (1) whom J.S. Mill regarded as the "most respectable and well-conducted men" among that class, (2) formed the organizational spark of the Chartist movement. While the Working Men's Association itself has been referred to as a "labor aristocracy" providing political leadership, (3) the 3,000 workers in attendance at the meeting in London in February of 1837 at which the Charter was publicly formulated have been characterized as "the elite of the London working class." (4)

The peculiar role of the London artisans may be traced back to the fact that London in the 1830s was "probably the only English city in which there was a considerable body of highly skilled artisans, for there alone was there a large wealthy and leisured class whose wants could find employment for skilled handicraft." (5) Ernest Jones, the left-wing Chartist leader, denounced this class of artisans for having been withdrawn from productive labor and thus demoralized. In this way there arose "an aristocracy of labour out of the higher paid trades" who looked "down on the less fortunate--class is thus established within class, each having its separate interests, jealousies and objects; and an oligarchy is empowered to divide and rule." (6) To be sure, Jones did not concern himself with the variegated nature of the London artisanate, which included "masses of slop tailors, poverty-stricken chamber-master shoemakers and miserable fancy cabinet-makers," who were neither craftsmen, nor independent nor educated.

In addition there was a sort of customary hierarchy among the trades, those with higher status usually receiving higher earnings. These trades at the top formed a kind of "aristocracy." Such were compositors, engineers, calico printers, shipwrights, coachmakers, bookbinders, coopers, and many upholsterers. These were aloof from labour movements because of social snobbery, higher earnings and more secure protection from their trade societies. The real basis of artisan radicalism lay among trades lower down in the hierarchy, especially shoemakers, tailors, plasterers, carpenters and stonemasons, all of which were on the same status level. . . . (7)

These skilled artisans took great pains to strengthen their trade unions which enabled them to maintain their socio-economic status. But it was precisely the developed consciousness of their successes in these areas that made them "resentful of their exclusion from full political rights." (8) Yet the basis of labor aristocratic achievements required a defense of the general political-economic framework that made trade unionism viable. Hence trades that remained aloof from inter-trade union cooperation--such as printing, engineering, shipbuilding, book-binding and cooperage--contributed few members to the Chartist movement; rather, they tended to restrict their support for Chartism to times during which all organized labor faced a political threat in the form of legislation. (9)

Both in London and in other parts of Britain obvious differences in interests existed between the labor aristocracy and other working class strata giving their allegiance to the Charter. The labor aristocracy, which played a considerable part in the movement until 1842, supported it on the basis of "steady political conviction" rather than as a result of recurrent economic pressure. The tradition within which the aristocracy of labor unfolded its political activity plainly set it apart from other groups.

The labour aristocrats had assets which enabled them to develop a mature political awareness well in advance of the mass of the working force. They had time to read and study. Through their trade unions they had long acquired the habit of association, and their position on the social ladder facilitated a traffic in ideas between themselves and the radical lower class of tradesmen, attorneys, dissenting ministers and small masters. (10)

Although little proof has been adduced in support of the assertion that the respectable artisan in the political unions of the 1830s leaned more toward the side of the bourgeoisie than to

that of "his class comrades from the factories," (11) it seems plausible that labor aristocrats were at least in part motivated by considerations other than those that were imposed upon the burgeoning class of industrial (especially textile) workers. Those who, on the other hand, worked at home on hand looms in direct competition with machine industry, received wages less than one-eighth of those of workers in large-scale industry who treated the former as "pariahs." In desperate need of state intervention, these domestic workers entered the Chartist movement in large numbers. (12)

Given this constellation of intra-working class forces, the years of the most intense Chartist activity (1837-1842) were characterized by a mutually ambivalent relationship between labor aristocratic trade unions and the Chartists. Although there were unambiguous examples of rapprochement created by friendly gestures by trade unions (13) reciprocated by enthusiastic recognition on the part of Chartist leaders, (14) dissension was easily provoked. Thus at the Chartist convention in Birmingham in 1839, which took up the issue of a general strike, a delegate was able to claim that unanimity could be found only among the worst-paid workers; charging that the working class, like the bourgeoisie and the nobility, had its own aristocracy, he argued that those earning thirty shillings per week were unconcerned with those earning fifteen shillings who, in turn, remained indifferent to the problems of those earning but five or six shillings weekly. (15) The fact that this was not an isolated voice expressing the view that only the most oppressed and resolute would participate in a general strike, (16) makes it plausible that Chartist activists had had prior experience with the political consequences of differential working and living conditions within the working class.

Yet the severe depression of 1836-1842 (17) and the decline in living standards, which also affected the better-paid artisans, (18) meant that purely trade unionistic attempts to maintain standards by influencing supply and demand on the labor market had proved ineffective. (19) Nevertheless, "the manifest absurdity of persuading starving men to remain on strike until the whole political machinery of the country had been altered, must have quickly become apparent to the shrewder Trade Unionists." (20) Chartism failed, consequently, to "capture" the trade union movement, thus falling short of the achievement at the height of the Owenite agitation in 1833-1834. (21)

It has also been argued that, with the improvement in economic conditions in the 1840s, Chartism lost its momentum and began to decline. (22) Yet such an explanation, as applied

to labor aristocrats, contradicts the aforementioned thesis according to which labor aristocratic attachment to Chartism was based on a theoretical-political understanding which was relatively unaffected by economic fluctuations. Alternatively, Helévy has contended that once Chartist agitation had been directed against the workhouse and the trade unions had received assurances that they no longer needed to fear persecution by the state, the unions withdrew from the movement, turning it into "an insurrection of the canaille." (23)

It is true that during the upswing of 1842-1845 (24) and especially after the successful obstruction in 1844 of a Parliamentary bill designed to expand the powers of justices of the peace in adjudicating disputes between masters and servants (25) some trades began to turn away from Chartism. The claim that, "The Trades Unions of London, embodying the élite of the operatives, always stood aloof from the agitation," (26) may have retained some validity with regard to the highest echelons of the labor aristocracy, but scarcely applied to the broader category of organized artisans. The occupational composition of the nominees to the General Council of the National Chartist Association in 1841 (27) and that of the registered members of the Chartist National Land Company in 1847 (28) illustrate the significant participation of skilled tradesmen in the Chartist movement of the 1840s. Moreover, numerous strikes, in the building trades for example, in the early and mid-1840s, (29) underline the stage of integration of the two movements.

With the revival of Chartism during the depressed years of 1846-1848, the skilled trades undertook to close ranks with other sectors of the working class. The National Association of United Trades, which was formed in 1845, proved to be the chief vehicle of this cooperation. Although the Webbs stressed the moderate nature of the policies pursued by this organization, (30) the mere fact that several trade unions had urged their members to join (31) impressed the Chartist leadership.

For the first time in the history of the working classes, the aristocratic and the poorer sections of the array of industry, have cordially held out the hand of mutual help and friendship to each other. The starved, oppressed and suffering handloom weavers, and the still more miserable slave of competition, the frame-work knitter, had sat down side by side with the joiner, the mechanic, and the engraver. (32)

Other instances may be adduced of aristocratic trade unions' having narrowed the traditional gulf between themselves and

the lower orders. In connection with the conviction of nine members of the Journeymen Steam-Engine and Machine Makers and Millwrights' Friendly Society in 1846, growing out of action by the union against systematic overtime and the piece master system, William Newton, an officer of the union, commented on the effects of the aid offered his union by other trades: "They (the members) had been called the aristocracy of the trades, and thought too proud to join with carpenters, plasterers, stockings, and weavers, but he disclaimed the imputation. (Loud cheers.)" (33) Newton conceded that engineers had previously been insufficiently acquainted with the idea of association since they had been able to defend themselves; but they would have to begin helping their poorer brethren. (34) Newton's speech reveals that certain of the more secure labor aristocratic organizations remained aloof not only from the "residuum," but from the purely trade movements of skilled building tradesmen as well. (35)

The later 1840s also witnessed denunciations of labor aristocrats for their continued sectionalism. Writing in a periodical edited by Feargus O'Connor and Ernest Jones, one author accused the trade unions of "narrow-minded conceit": "The distinguishing feature of the present movement is the struggle of the democracy against the aristocracy of its own class." (36) William Peel, the general secretary of the National Association of United Trades, complained in 1852 that in the years 1845-1847 his organization had not been joined by

what are usually designated the "skilled trades," who were presumed to possess superior intelligence and superior resources. But, alack! there exists, unfortunately, an aristocracy of labour as well as of title and rank, and equally tenacious of dignity; and those higher class of British workmen declined fellowship in the same movement with their less favoured brethren. (37)

Peel's retrospective condemnation of the aristocracy of labor was colored by and ultimately merged with the strictures Ernest Jones was meting out during these years. (38)

The behavior of labor aristocrats during the Chartist finale--the demonstration in London on April 10, 1848 at which time the third petition, containing almost six million signatures, was submitted to Parliament--generated considerable animosity among those who continued to uphold Chartist traditions. Writing three years after the fact, Ernest Jones contended that if three million of seven million male adults were enfranchised, the majority would be composed of special constables of April 10, 1848--namely, middle class professions, clerks, shopkeepers,

foremen and aristocrats of labor. (39) Although there is no reason to assume that Jones was deliberately falsifying history, the available evidence does not corroborate his claim. The reports in The Times on the days preceding and following April 10, 1848 made no reference to recruitment of special constables among the ranks of artisans. Statements made before the House of Commons on March 13, 1848 by Gladstone, Labouchere and Grey concerning the swearing in of the special constables singled out the coalwhippers of London--a group of poorly paid, underemployed, unskilled laborers who unloaded coal from ships. (40) In point of fact, skilled workmen appear to have been heavily underrepresented among the 170,000 volunteers who were enrolled to safeguard public order on April 10, 1848. Their absence from the ranks of the demonstrators, (41) however, symbolized the class-straddling role which they performed during the Chartist period as a whole and constituted the closest approximation to "classical" labor aristocratic behavior exhibited by organized artisans during these years. (42)

The maturation of British capitalism during the 1830s and 1840s subordinated ever larger numbers of workers to manifestly capitalist relations of production. This common experience of wage labor generated, in spite of countertendencies toward intra-working class stratification, a politically more unified proletariat which found a partial and temporary expression in Chartism. At the same time, the mobilization of theretofore unorganized laborers crystallized out an antagonism to the better-situated stratum of skilled trade unionists that had largely remained latent in the pre-Chartist period. The fact that both sectors could cooperate to the end of realizing the democratic demands of the Charter helped mask the partial conflict of interests between them. This clash referred, on the one hand, to the means to which desperation drove each sector, and, on the other, to the differing degrees to which each could rely on trade unionistic practices. As long as anti-capitalist and socialist principles did not guide the labor movement, (43) the latter continued to be considerably influenced by the relatively autonomous effects of differential branch capital accumulation on the division of labor and on the conditions of various strata. (44)

Since the major aspects of labor aristocratic behavior and attitudes uncovered for this period derived from the sphere of intra-working class relations, they point to the fact that the phenomenon under review was not one of the aspirations of one sector of the working class to leap over class barriers,

but rather that of the resistance of a stratum formerly associated with petty bourgeois elements (45) to falling victim to the degradation that was engulfing many unskilled manual laborers. The embitterment accompanying the attempts by this stratum to preserve socio-economic distance between itself and the lower strata was revealed most distinctly in the struggle against unlimited apprenticeship and the use of "cheap men." (46) In this confrontation, however, the skilled were arrayed not with but against employers since the latter benefited from the substitution of lower for higher "priced" workers. (47)

If this situation brought skilled trade unionists into a zero-sum confrontation with their unskilled and unorganized replacements, it also precipitated a conflict with employers, who were perceived as the subjective agents of deteriorating conditions. The numerous strikes conducted over these issues bore witness to the intensity of the antagonism. Under these circumstances, capitalists were more likely to seek to exploit the division of interests between unskilled and skilled workers by allying themselves with the former than with the latter, as the opponents of the labor aristocracy would have had it. (48) The alliances which the upper stratum of artisans entered into with the radical petty bourgeoisie for political reasons not only did not flow from economic cooperation--they were blocked by opposition to trade unions and strikes by parts of the employing class. (49)

The 1830s and 1840s represented, then, a period in which labor aristocrats reacted in a complex fashion to the forces they experienced. The Chartist movement itself documented the cooperation that democratic traditions, hard times and common resistance to governmental oppression forged among various strata of the working class. The influx of laborers from agricultural to industrial pursuits in an urban environment and the concomitant broadening and deepening of the experience of capitalist industrial wage labor contributed to this closing of ranks. (50) Nevertheless, past and present patterns as well as future perspectives of well-being remained disparate enough to cause a relative socio-political autonomization of the labor aristocracy vis a vis worse-situated manual laborers. (51) This autonomy was, however, even more sharply accentuated over against the employing class as economic agents and political participants.

Still unrecognized as fully legitimate negotiators on behalf of the aggregate class or even of sectoralized segments of sellers of the commodity labor power, skilled trade unionists, far from being treated as the favored "palace slaves" of the

bourgeoisie, were still engaged in a struggle that transcended what Gladstone, two decades later, characterized as "a natural mode of what we may call self-defence in the friendly strife which must always go on between the capitalist and the labourer." (52)