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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 4

# The Transition from the Age of the Chartists to the Age of Capital: The Radical Left-Wing Naturalization of the Notion of an Aristocracy of Labor (1)

As a means of examining the transition from the preclassical labor aristocracy of the first half of the nineteenth century to the formation of the classical labor aristocracy during the second half of that century, it is useful to scrutinize the views of a left-wing leader of the period, Ernest Jones. As a key figure in the Chartist movement of the 1840s and a chief organizer of moribund Chartism of the 1850s, he was a significant contemporary participant-observer during this transition. Moreover, as one of Marx and Engels' closest British political friends, he contributed to their knowledge of labor politics while his own theoretical approach was shaped by theirs. Although Jones did not coin the term "labor aristocracy," (2) his repeated explication of it helped gain it a place among left-wing, especially Marxist, shibboleths. In fact, no author prior to Lenin recurred so frequently to this notion as Jones.

For Jones the essence of the labor aristocracy lay not so much in superior living and working conditions as in the existence of trade unions per se; it was not the latter's exclusionary abuses that formed the crux of the matter, but rather their normal, ideal-type, functions. And although Jones's failure to arouse the poor probably intensified his bitterness toward the labor aristocracy, (3) his fulminations against trade unionists were basically motivated by his conviction that their shortsightedness was bound to injure them materially in the near future and had already weakened the democratic and socialist movements by having destroyed working class unity.

Trade unionism had, according to Jones, been founded--and continued to be based--on the fallacy that workers were able, by means of combination, to maintain a fixed standard of wages. Such an approach did not, however, touch on the causes of declining wages, which could be summarized under the rubric: The supply of labor must run ahead of the demand for it. This course of events could, in Jones's view, be avoided if the number of masters wanting men increased or if the num-

ber of men wanting masters decreased. Trade unions, however, exerted no influence on these two factors. By pointing to a series of counteracting factors, Jones implicitly sought to meet the possible objection that an increase in the demand for labor could absorb the unemployed. (4) This theoretical possibility was thwarted by the increasing mechanization of industry and agriculture and the ensuing refinement of the division of labor; these processes resulted not only in a relative diminution in the number of workers per unit of capital, but also brought about deskilling, which eliminated premiums on training and weakened traditional craft power. Jones also adduced such factors as the increasing employment of women and children and the intensification of labor (which enabled capitalists to avoid hiring additional workers by obtaining more work from the existing stock) as elements fostering the growth of unemployment. With regard to the issue of diminishing the number of men wanting masters, Jones believed that capitalists could defeat cooperative efforts by causing the supply of labor to increase more rapidly than cooperatives could absorb it. (5)

Jones was manifestly describing the causes and effects of what was to gain fame in Capital as the reserve army of the unemployed. (6) Yet Marx, who was a reader of and contributor to Notes to the People, which was edited by Jones, did not subscribe to the latter's conception of trade unionism as Sisyphean labor. (7) Marx, who took a long view of the development of anti-capitalist consciousness, (8) recognized that as long as capitalism prevailed, unions were necessary both as defensive organs of the marketers of labor power (9) and as promoters and galvanizers of class consciousness. (10)

Jones's judgment on trade unions resulted in part from an exaggerated notion of how quickly the logic of capital accumulation would seize the previously unrevolutionized crafts and subject the better-situated workers to the processes of dequalification and immiseration that other artisans had experienced. (11) Jones underestimated the tenacity with which artisans could cling to privileged positions in various branches; similarly, he viewed the process of homogenization of the working class (and even of the petty bourgeoisie) too optimistically. Moreover, his unilinearly cataclysmic conception of capitalism allowed no room for the periodic creation of new laboring elites. Rather, he believed that

the aristocracy of labour is being fast driven down into the ranks of the wage-slave--the small retail shopkeeper and the small farmer are fast disappearing beneath the dull level of hired labour--while the class below this again is widening with fearful celerity. (12)

Predicting a levelling down of the wage hierarchy, Jones urged that it was in the "vital interest" of the labor aristocracy "to prevent reductions in the wages of the ranks beneath" it. (13) As a result of his underestimation of the conservative technological forces at work in some branches (14) or of the non-unilinear nature of technological change as well as of the adaptive policies of unions in others, (15) Jones failed to perceive the long-term necessity of trade unions under capitalism.

It was in particular the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the foremost national union of mid-nineteenth century Britain, that inspired Jones with contempt for the labor aristocracy. This union, which had amalgamated in 1851, became involved in a strike-lockout in 1852 following the rejection by employers of demands for the abolition of systematic overtime and of the piece-master system as well as that for the exclusion of unskilled workers from self-acting machines. (16) Although the Webbs suggested that the London Executive of the union had refused to support this latter demand, (17) it was the policy of the Engineers to pay, from the subscription provided by other unions and the public, seven shillings a week to skilled non-members and only three shillings a week to laborers. William Newton, a member of the Executive, justified this structure on the basis of the higher standard of living to which the skilled had become accustomed. (18) But a scholar with full access to the union's archives observed two decades later that the skilled non-members were granted more because, as the more dangerous competitors, they had to be treated more generously lest they ally themselves with the employers. (19) Jones was outraged: "That's brotherhood, is it? That's opposing class-legislation, is it?" (20) The system of benefits apparently led to a certain degree of disaffection within the ranks of the unskilled. (21)

Although the Amalgamated Society of Engineers was forced to send its members back to work on the employers' terms, it was not, as Jones fancied, destroyed. Jones's view was, nevertheless, vindicated in the sense that the character of the union was crucially modified by this experience, which consolidated the narrow, exclusionary, craft-protective approach of the early nineteenth century. (22) This process of change was exemplified by the decision of the Engineers to expunge its rules seeking to abolish overtime and piece-work. (23) The conciliatory and pacific attitude, which was to become the characteristic of this model New Model union, was illustrated by the following resolution which the Executive Council adopted unanimously.

That in the opinion of this meeting, the resistance of Labour against Capital is not calculated to enhance the condition of the labourers. We therefore advise that all our future operations should be directed to promoting the system of self-employment in associative workshops as the best means of effectually regulating the conditions of labour. (24)

Generalizing from the pattern set by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Webbs argued that "the contemporary trade movements either did not observe or failed to realise the tendency of this attempt to retain or reconstruct an aristocracy of skilled workmen." (25) But the claim that a conscious attempt was made to (re-)establish an aristocracy of labor does not follow from the developments under review. For if the term was meant in the sense of a stratum, enjoying superior conditions, such an aristocracy had existed continuously throughout the nineteenth century and thus did not require reconstruction. If, on the other hand, the Webbs had in mind a relation of dominance within the working class, it would still have to be shown how the labor aristocracy intended to exert its leadership over other working class strata. In view of the consensus of scholarly opinion to the effect that the Engineers stood aloof from general political movements, (26) there is no reason to assume that labor aristocrats aspired to the status of collective representative of the working class vis a vis other classes and the state. (27) Nor would it have been accurate to include among the characteristics of the emerging labor aristocracy the displacement of unskilled workers from the forefront of economic struggles; for the Engineers received considerable moral and financial support from this sector of the working class. (28)

The only substantial support for the Webbs' view lies in the sphere of capital-labor relations; for here the Engineers' conciliatory policy could be interpreted as an attempt to come to terms with capital at the expense of the rest of the working class. Although seemingly plausible, such an interpretation encounters important counter-evidence. Resistance by employers to conciliation constitutes the weightiest counter-argument. To begin with, many employers regarded the dispute of 1852 "as a challenge to capitalism, particularly the freedom of employers as property owners to do what they liked with 'their' workshops." (29) Moreover, many large engineering firms refused to recognize the Amalgamated Society of Engineers for many years. (30)

This is not to say that numerous employers did not, in the ensuing years, pursue a paternalistic course toward workers,

whose organization they resisted; such paternalism may also have intentionally nurtured divisions within the work force. But classical labor aristocratic relations between capital and labor, although they may have made their first appearance in the early 1860s, could, primarily for two reasons, not have flourished until the later 1860s or 1870s. (31) First, the cumulative prosperity rendering such a constellation of forces possible and desirable to the subjective agents concerned, did not evolve until this later period; and second, state-mediated recognition of the role of trade unions did not assert itself until that time.

Since Jones looked upon aristocratic aspirations as fruitless, thwarted as they were constantly by the forces of production, he was unconcerned with such a hypothetical reconstruction. (32) Jones seems at times to have believed that the labor aristocracy had already swung over to the side of the working class at large. Thus in 1851 he was persuaded that the skilled artisan and common handicraftsman with superior wages "belong assuredly to the working classes--and, though, certainly forming the aristocracy of labour, are as widely distinct from the veritable middle class, as they are from the pauper." (33) In contrast with this plausible analysis of working class stratification, from which Jones was able to conclude that, "The privileged classes can no longer reckon on the support of the majority" of the labor aristocracy, (34) the following year he contended that the bill, proposed by Lord John Russell, to reduce the qualification of borough voters from an annual rent of ten pounds sterling to five would, by doubling the power and influence of the labor aristocracy, mean that "the veritable working order will be the loser by the measure" since the labor aristocracy "would side, as it ever has sided, with the oppressor. . . ." (35) Jones pointed out that even under the new bill household suffrage would still exclude "the navvie, bricklayer, mason, costermonger, mechanic and artizan, who may not have constant permanent employment, and thus shift from town to town as the tide of work ebbs from spot to spot." (36)

Jones's final and perhaps most damning charge against aristocratic (and, in fact, all) trade unions was one that had been uttered before (37) and that continued to be echoed by left-wing critics.

Why! the Trades' Union has been the greatest upholder (unintentionally) of the present system. It has made working-men uphold it and defend it, by teaching them to believe that their wages could be kept up without a political

change. It has been one of the most anti-democratic institutions of the modern time,--it has taught them to look at the capitalist as a thing of nature; at wage slavery as a thing of right. ... (38)

Resuming the theme in a similar vein, Jones denied that unions functioned as a palliative, but claimed that even if they did so function, they would be harmful because "they make the evil just bearable--whereas, if it were not bearable, it would be blown sky high at once." For Jones, the advocates of trade unionism were "the POLITICAL OPIUM-EATERS" of the day. (39)

This type of impatience with the chief defensive organ of the working class has traditionally been associated with periods of revolutionary turmoil when the opportunity has been perceived of removing the conditions that render trade unions necessary. Yet the 1850s were not such a period, especially when compared to the preceding decades. Jones's views on trade unionism must, then, be seen as the outgrowth of a lack of understanding of contemporary political trends by Jones and/or as a remnant of an earlier movement that tended to see capitalism as a temporary aberration that could be overcome quickly rather than as a necessary stage of social development. (40)

In light of this clearly non-Marxist and even anti-Marxist conception of trade unions, (41) it is surprising that Engels judged Jones's propagandistic abilities so enthusiastically. (42) One explanation lies in their common desire to mobilize the working class to transcend trade strikes. Thus Marx predicted in 1853 that a continuing depression would transform a series of strikes for higher wages into a defensive struggle against wage reductions that would encompass the political level; the trade unions created during the strike would then be of inestimable value. (43) He cited approvingly Jones's Chartist agitation, which stressed that the success of the labor movement and an enduring improvement in working and living conditions ultimately depended on gaining control of legislation. (44) Marx valued this political approach especially in England, where the struggle for universal suffrage would, in Marx's view, become a socialist achievement to a much greater degree than in Europe since the majority status of the proletariat would provide it with political power. (45)

Marx and Engels' support for Jones may also have derived from the former's overoptimistic estimation of anti-capitalist trends in the British working class. Marx's articles in the New-York Daily Tribune were replete with references to the "war" that was raging in England's factory districts. Marx was

of the opinion that these strikes had "revolutionized" the industrial proletariat; once food prices has risen and wages declined, "the political consequences" would manifest themselves. (46) Marx maintained that for the first time the lower strata of the unskilled had initiated the strikes, whereas in the past the skilled factory workers such as engineers and cotton spinners had been in the forefront of industrial conflicts, which then took hold of the lower strata and, finally, of the artisans. (47)

Although several "fierce" conflicts broke out during the mid-1850s, they were "years of steadily expanding trade" and "a blank" for labor historians. (48) According to the Webbs, "with the exception of the building trades, Trade Unionism assumed ... a peaceful attitude." (49) In particular, the Operative Stone Masons engaged in several strikes for higher wages and shorter hours. (50) A correspondent to Jones's People's Paper praised the masons as the staunchest of any workers for trade purposes, but was "sorry to say politics, to the majority of them, are a dead letter. They have got the mistaken notion, so peculiar to high-paid trades, that they can keep wages up by the means of strikes." (51) Since this notion did not, as far as many masons and other artisans were concerned, prove to be so "mistaken" as this correspondent and Jones imagined, it is comprehensible why labor historians and practitioners in the tradition of the Webbs assessed such movements and unions on a completely different plane from the political one on which Marx operated.

Yet the issues involved are not clear-cut. Although there is evidence to the effect that artisans at the end of the 1840s and during the 1850s developed a disinclination to become personally involved in political activity, (52) the material assembled by Henry Mayhew in the years 1849 to 1851 revealed an entirely different picture of the political participation of working class strata in London.

In passing from the skilled operative of the west-end to the unskilled workman of the eastern quarter of London, the moral and intellectual change is so great, that it seems as if we were in a new land, and among another race. The artisans are almost to a man red-hot politicians. They are sufficiently educated and thoughtful to have a sense of their importance in the State. It is true that they may entertain exaggerated notions of their natural rank and position in the social scale, but at least they have read, and reflected, and argued upon the subject. ... They begin to view their class, not as a mere isolated body of workmen,

but as an integral portion of the nation, contributing their quota to the general welfare. ...

The unskilled labourers are a different class of people. As yet they are as unpolitical as footmen, and instead of entertaining violent democratic opinions, they appear to have no opinions whatever; or, if they do possess any, they rather lead towards the maintenance of "things as they are," than towards the ascendancy of the working people. (53)

Conditions in London were, however, owing to the absence of a factory proletariat and to the large number of outworkers, casualized unskilled laborers and lumpenproletarians, not representative of Britain at large. (54) Moreover, the type of political attitudes noted by Mayhew performed a peculiarly integrative function instead of expressing an oppositional spirit among the labor aristocracy. The foregoing considerations merely confirm that no stratum of the working class manifested consistently organized resistance to capitalism as a social formation during the 1850s.

Marx himself was constrained to concede this latter point in connection with Jones's abandonment of several parts of the Charter in an attempt to forge an alliance with the radical bourgeoisie. (55) Marx tried to explain Jones's behavior by referring to the unfavorable political "tone" prevailing at that time in the English working class. (56) This incident also motivated Marx and Engels to introduce into the discussion of the labor aristocracy a topos that became prominent in the subsequent Marxist tradition. "Jones has decidedly sold himself (but at the lowest possible price) to the Bright coterie." (57) To be sure, the denunciation of venality was still only metaphorical; this restriction was removed by the 1870s, but even in the 1850s Engels was prepared to expand the indictment. He conjectured privately that Jones's compromising was bound up with the circumstance

that the English proletariat is in fact becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations seems finally to want to reach the point at which it will possess a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat in addition to the bourgeoisie. For a nation that exploits the whole world, this is to be sure in some measure justified. Only a couple of really bad years can help, and since the discoveries of gold they are not easy to bring about. By the way, I must say that it isn't clear to me at all how the mass of overproduced (commodities), which the crisis gave rise to, has been absorbed. (58)

Engels alluded to four themes that came to occupy a crucial position in the controversy surrounding the labor aristocracy: 1. the English proletariat as a whole had achieved a privileged status vis a vis that of other nations; 2. this status derived from England's internationally dominant industrial role, which apparently permitted the English proletariat to participate in the gains accruing from the world market; 3. the political and social consciousness of the proletariat could be jolted only by an economic depression; and 4. (implicitly) if such a depression did not materialize, the tendency toward working class embourgeoisement would be strengthened.

The first two points appear to have been Engels' original contributions: he was the first to have postulated the existence of a "special form of the labor aristocracy" comprising an entire national working class, (59) and to have pointed to England's world market position as its source. Although the third point, which Marx also stressed, implies the fourth, Engels appears to have been the first to have coupled misery and revolution so tightly; (60) in so doing, he rendered a version of Marxist theory vulnerable to the criticism that fairly steadily rising real wages could undermine the revolutionary potential of the working class over long periods of time. (61) Moreover, given the fact that real wages stagnated during the 1850s while capitalist incomes grew quickly, (62) Engels' own reasoning should have led to the conclusion that the labor movement should have assumed more radical forms of expression during the 1850s.

The tentativeness of these new hypotheses was shown by the fact that Engels made no attempt to seek differentiations within the working class. If this omission derived from the empirical circumstance that the gap between labor aristocrats and other proletarian strata was not widening and/or that domestic intra-working class stratification was receding in importance vis a vis the increasing differentiation between the British working class and other national working classes, then the set of hypotheses would have to be rejected as having no explanatory value with regard to the directions taken by the labor movement in the period from 1848 to 1858. (63)

In summary, then, neither Jones nor Marx and Engels presented theoretical or empirical arguments that convincingly demonstrated the ascendancy of the aristocracy of labor to working class hegemony; they did not even marshal evidence supporting the claim that a significant gap was emerging between the labor aristocracy and the remainder of the working class. (64) Engels' major innovation--the domestic social stratificational

consequences of Britain's world market dominance--proved adequate to postulating a nationally favored working class, but did not yet specify mechanisms that could explain differential intra-working class effects.

In the end, therefore, the theoretical legacy of these socialist discussions of the labor aristocracy became an ambiguous one. On the one hand, it consolidated an earlier, pre-"scientific socialist," tradition, which had focused on the debilitating effects a labor aristocracy could and did have on the political progress of the working class. On the other hand, however, Jones and his mentors failed to develop an appropriate framework for analyzing the socio-economic and hence political perspectives of a privileged stratum. They were for this reason unable to formulate a strategy for unifying the working class in Britain as long as they proceeded from the false assumption that the labor aristocracy was bound to disappear in the course of the next cyclical waves of capital accumulation.

Following his break with Marx and Engels, Jones began to accept the former's views on trade unions. In connection with the strike-lockout in the London building trades in 1859 Jones defended the wage and hours demands of the skilled artisans. While taking a cynical, circulation sphere-approach of characterizing these demands as being, like other dealings in property, "a fair common business-like transaction," he rejected the masters' suggestion that building workers, as highly paid tradesmen, should compare their lot with that of woolcombers.

No! Compare it with your own, you rich employers, grown wealthy out of the labour of your men! Because the woolcomber starves, it is no reason why the carpenter should be worse off, but it is a reason why the woolcomber should fare better. The test, whether a working man receives wages enough, is not the minimum paid to labour of any kind but the true test is the profits of the employer. (65)

Jones thus effected a shift from his overwhelming reliance on moral categories of intra-working class solidarity to class-unifying economic ones of wages and profits. No longer was the skilled worker being agitated to accept his decline to the level of the worst-paid; on the contrary, he was being urged to establish the principle of relative as well as real wage bargaining. (66) In this sense Jones anticipated Marx's own insight according to which high wages alone were no indicator of socio-economic improvement since wage labor expressed a whole range of human degradation, brutalization and ignorance. (67) This convergence of views was perhaps one reason

that Engels, three days after Jones's death, told Marx that Jones had been "among the politicians the only educated Englishman who au fond" had sided with them completely. (68)