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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 6

## Some Preliminary Results: An Alternative Theoretical Perspective

The deficiencies and insufficiencies of Marx's and Engels' conception of the labor aristocracy manifested themselves even more acutely in the two decades between Engels' death and World War I. In the dominant form that Lenin gave to it, the new view of the labor aristocracy was relieved of its internal theoretical tensions (i.e., inconsistencies) at the expense of a definite superficialization. The ambiguous legacy that Marx and Engels had left in the form of the aforementioned hiatus between economic prediction and voluntaristic reality was eliminated by discarding all economic theory on the level of the influence of national capital accumulation on the structure of the working class. (1) Consequently, imperialist profits on the one hand and an even more extreme version of voluntarism and corruption on the other hand became the sole relevant variables. (2)

This approach, by virtue of its redefinition of Engels' concept of monopoly to include "(e)very cartel, trust, syndicate," (3) claimed to account not only for the preservation of the source of foreign superprofits and hence of the labor aristocracy in Britain, but also for the possibility of the rise of a labor aristocracy in Germany, France and the United States (4) as well as in such peripheral nations as Denmark. (5) Yet complete reliance on "imperialist superprofits" as the economic basis of the labor aristocracy divorced from any attempt to make the mechanism underlying the redistribution of "crumbs" plausible (6) offered a weak foundation for a theory of political action. This was so much more the case in light of the quasi-psychological and quasi-moral notions that were grafted on to this economic basis. (7)

This superficialization of Marx's and in particular of Engels' conception of the labor aristocracy within the Leninist tradition exerted an increasingly deleterious influence on politics and theorizing precisely because the scattered views of Marx and Engels were elevated to the status of a theory that actually guided Party tactics. Indeed, this theory soon gained a near-monopoly status so that the working class was perceived in

dichotomous terms--a small corrupt upper stratum versus the masses made incorruptible by poverty. (8) The fact, moreover, that the mechanisms that were alleged to generate and to perpetuate the labor aristocracy were never set forth let alone empirically tested (9) stemmed from and in turn consolidated a hypothesis-turned-dogma.

In contradistinction to the positions adumbrated above, that emerging here de-emphasizes the whole set of variables relating to corruption--that is, strategies formulated by ruling classes or individual employers in order to influence certain strata of the working class; similarly, policies explicitly orienting trade unions toward alliances with employers or with the capitalist class are not regarded as crucially important. Although such conscious class collaborationist tendencies surely existed and even flourished, they are by themselves too general--by virtue of being common to all class societies--to be of heuristic value in understanding the course of class conflict in Europe and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (10) Exclusive emphasis on the subjective motivations of class agents obscures the underlying societal development that rendered such collaboration possible and, at times, successful.

Attention will also be shifted away from foreign-generated profits as a source, if not of corruption, then at least of differentials among working class strata. The theoretical and empirical arguments already marshaled against the use of this variable retain their validity for the period after 1890 as well. The emergence, moreover, of national labor aristocracies in countries that did not appropriate a significant volume of "imperialist superprofits" (11) or in ones that in no straightforward way could be designated as exploiters of less developed countries (12) is taken as *prima facie* evidence that this source did not represent a necessary condition of the rise of a favored proletarian stratum.

Instead, the approach developed here focuses on those processes that brought into being decisively heterogeneous interests among various working class strata; by "decisive" is meant a heterogeneity strong enough to cause these strata to pursue their goals separately--indeed, at times even antagonistically--rather than jointly. The formation of a labor aristocracy represented one partial, subordinate aspect of this general phenomenon of the absence of working class commonality. Concentration on this stratum is, therefore, a heuristic device for making the entire issue of the lack of material, political and organizational proletarian homogeneity accessible to analysis.

Given the outstanding part played by the labor aristocracy within the trade union movement, however, this laboring sector has acquired a theoretical interest out of proportion to its numbers.

At issue, then, are those societal forces that were powerful enough to overcome other forces that, according to Marx's working hypothesis, "should" have created the foundation upon which anti-capitalist working class unity was to be molded. Even if Marx's reasoning were rejected, that is, if it were, for example, assumed that some variant of social-democratic integration of the working class into capitalist society were the "normal form" of proletarian political participation, (13) the factors underlying this positive or "negative integration" (14) would still have to be elucidated. In this sense, Marx's theorizing would remain the discursive point of departure.

Since the major force of Marx's theory of working class homogenization turns on an analysis of the forms of capital accumulation and their influence on the conditions, states of consciousness and actions of the working class, criticisms of various theories of the labor aristocracy for being based on the technological criterion of skill are unwarranted. (15) To argue that relations of production--and not technological change--are decisive for class relations is, in this context, tantamount to emptying the argument of substance, especially if by the term "relations of production" is meant the global setting of capitalist exploitation. If the rigidity of this invariant global interpretation is removed, however, then it becomes clear that more than mere nuances distinguish the relations of production and of class that obtain, for example, in a steel plant, owned by a publicly held corporation that operates ten other plants employing 100,000 workers, and those in a carpentry firm owned by a working carpenter who employs three carpenters earning three-fifths of the "capitalist's" combined "earned and unearned income." (16) As the relationship between relations of production and technological change revealed by this illustration indicates, the categories of "skilled" and "unskilled," which are often perceived as underlying the privileged and non-privileged strata respectively, are in effect abbreviations or code names for much more comprehensive sets of societal relations.

In its cruder variants, the theory of the labor aristocracy seeks to set the limit, as it were, above which attempts to relieve exploitation at the source are no longer triggered. Yet this approach is clearly insufficient because better-situated workers have often participated in revolutionary movements whereas low paid workers have often joined counter-revolution-

ary movements en masse. (17) Consequently, more specific conditions remain to be enumerated with regard to the transformation of potential class conflict into actual anti-capitalist action. A relatively high standard of living and the relatively secure perspective of the maintenance of that standard associated with trade unionism of the skilled have, in other words, been empirically necessary but not sufficient conditions for the rise of a labor aristocracy. They have not been sufficient for the obvious reason that, unless the forms of capital accumulation assumed by any particular branch have been such as to render the retention of entrenched skills reconcilable with competitive branch profitability, firms have been forced to revolutionize the skill structure and, where necessary, to combat the unions resisting the transformation.

But just as the enjoyment of relatively good working and living conditions has not guaranteed that any body of workers perceived itself as able to fend for itself independently of other working class strata, so the existence of such self-imagined labor aristocrats has not per se implied that individual capitalists solicited or even welcomed this elite despite the fact that the very fractionating of the working class symbolized by the labor aristocracy may, in certain countries and during certain periods, have been in the long-term interest of the capitalist class. (18) Indeed, often employers may have seen little advantage at all in acquiescing in the "greedy" demands of one group of workers in exchange for the latter's exclusion of unskilled workers from their organizations. Such compliance by employers depended in individual instances on such factors as the share of the skilled in total firm-level employment and the likelihood, cet. par., of the self-organization of the remainder of the work force--i.e., on how splintered this sector was by occupational, racial, ethnic, generational, sexual, linguistic, religious and other traits.

But isolated instances of some type of labor aristocratic relationship between an upper stratum of workers and their direct employers would not have sufficed to invest this sector of the working class with any decisive influence on the class structure as a whole; and only if the constellation of class forces had been restructured to ease the strains of class conflict--from the standpoint of the ruling classes--in the course of facilitating the maintenance of existing property relations, would the phenomenon of a labor aristocracy have merited the attention that generations of contemporary supporters and detractors have devoted to it.

A labor aristocracy could have exerted societally relevant effects of the magnitude indicated primarily on two different

levels--within the trade union movement as a whole and within the national political system. To the extent that unions of the skilled obtained hegemonic control over the labor movement in many capitalist countries during the nineteenth century, considerable scope was created for mobilizing and channeling resources on behalf of the unorganized. But, once again, a decision on the part of labor aristocrats and/or their leaders not to make such an organizational effort a major priority need not have been solicited, encouraged or even suggested by the bourgeoisie. As long as economic conditions were expansive enough to provide for rising labor aristocratic standards without leading to a deterioration of standards among the remainder of the working class that would have compelled the latter to organize itself at all costs, the unions of the skilled would have experienced little socio-economic incentive to seek a widening of their ranks.

Incorporation of the national political system into an international comparative analysis of labor aristocracies underscores the importance of national-historical peculiarities in comprehending class alignments. For explicit political attempts on the part of ruling classes to favor and to solicit support, in turn, from a stratum of the working class presupposed, at a minimum, an elaborated structure of formal, and a modicum of substantive, democracy for the non-ruling classes. This criterion made Britain and the United States, for example, potential centers for the creation of a labor aristocracy; Germany, with its constitutionally prescribed exclusion of the non-propertied classes from the authoritative institutions of political power, (19) offered a significantly less favorable framework within which nationally uniform privileges could be bestowed on a segment of the working class; in France, the century-long tradition of violent revolution--combined with a relatively well entrenched petty bourgeois agricultural sector--created a socio-political environment that made class collaboration appear less desirable and plausible to the relevant classes than was the case, for example, in Britain, the United States or the Scandinavian countries.

The remaining chapters represent an attempt to sketch the essential national characteristics promoting and/or undermining the rise of a labor aristocracy in the major European capitalist societies prior to World War I.