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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 9 France

The labor aristocracy has, it is generally acknowledged, played a comparatively insignificant part in France. (1) Received opinion will largely be corroborated in this chapter, which is devoted to elucidating the causes of this variant development.

A. The Period prior to the Paris Commune

As in the cases of Britain and Germany, so too with regard to France there is a period prior to which the development of capitalist relations of production and hence of the "modern" class structure was too weak to generate a proletarian stratum whose particular sectional interests could have represented a factor of aggregate societal relevance in stabilizing class rule. Consequently, references, by contemporaries or by subsequent authors, to labor aristocratic strata during such a period reveal themselves, upon closer inspection, to be literary in nature without the precise meaning of the modern concept. (2)

Determination of an appropriate terminus a quo in France is rendered more complicated by the fact that workers, particularly those in Paris, exerted a decisive influence on revolutionary political life as far back as 1789. (3) But as Marx pointed out with reference to the revolution of 1848:

The development of the industrial proletariat is in general conditioned by the development of the industrial bourgeoisie. Under its rule alone does it attain the expanded national existence that can raise its revolution to a national one, does it itself create the modern means of production which become so many means of its revolutionary liberation. ... French industry is more refined and the French bourgeoisie has developed in a more revolutionary manner than that of the rest of the continent. But the February revolution, was it not aimed directly at the aristocracy of finance? This fact



proved that the industrial bourgeoisie did not rule France. The industrial burgeoisie can rule only where modern industry shapes all property relations to suit itself, and industry can attain this force only where it has conquered the world market, for the national boundaries do not suffice for its development. But the industry of France asserts itself for the most part in the national market only by a more or less modified prohibitive system. If, therefore, the French proletariat at the moment of a revolution possesses actual power in Paris and an influence that spurs it to a charge beyond its means, in the rest of France it is crowded together at single scattered central points, almost disappearing among the superior numbers of peasants and petty bourgeoisie. The struggle against capital in its developed modern form, in its salient point, the struggle of the industrial wage worker against the industrial bourgeois, is in France a partial fact. ... Nothing more explicable, therefore, than that the Paris proletariat sought to assert its interest alongside the bourgeois interest instead of bringing it to bear as the revolutionary interest of society itself. ... (4)

The subordinate status of industrial capital and of industrial workers vis a vis the agricultural sphere was clearly reflected in the census of 1851.

Table 33. Sectoral Composition of the economically active Population in France, 1851 (in per cent) (5)

Sector	Share
Agriculture	60.8
Large (Manufacturing) Industry	5.7
Small Industry and Commerce	20.0
Liberal Professions ^a	9.6
Domestic Service	3.9
	100.0

^aIncludes those living on property incomes; state pensioners; and state employees.

Whereas more than three-fifths of the working population were engaged in agriculture, only slightly more than one-quarter



was employed in the secondary sector; here, in turn, only one-fifth of industrial workers was employed in large-scale industry. But even this sector was characterized by relatively small production units, there having been fewer than ten workers for every master. (6) Three-quarters of the approximately 1.2 million industrial workers (or almost two-thirds of the almost seven hundred thousand male wage workers in manufacturing) were employed in textiles, in which masters were outnumbered by workers by a ratio of somewhat less than fifteen to one. (7) Although some workers were obviously employed in plants or trades in which larger aggregates of wage workers were concentrated, (8) even the bulk of Parisian workers was employed in petty bourgeois enterprises during this period. (9)

Although at mid-century the industrial worker "had not as a rule become a factory hand" and still possessed "a fair chance of becoming a master," he nevertheless "had the interests and point of view of the wage earner." (10) The incipient elements of the working class could look back upon a revolutionary tradition unparalleled in Britain or Germany, (11) yet their overwhelmingly minority status within the class structure meant that the working class had not yet constituted itself objectively as a class. (12)

If the domination of industrial capital was similarly absent in mid-century Germany, (13) the decisive transformation had already occurred in Britain where in 1851 the secondary sector accounted for more than two-fifths of total employment compared to slightly more than one-fifth in the primary sector. (14) France, moreover, continued to lag behind Germany and Britain, so that whereas industrial employment had already exceeded that in agriculture in Germany by 1907, (15) this turning point did not occur in France until after World War II. (16) The relatively slow growth of industrial capitalism in France was further reflected in the declining share of world output and trade accounted for by French manufacturing industry.

The deterioration in France's position was almost as marked as that in the United Kingdom and meant that on the eve of World War I Russia had nearly supplanted France as the fourth largest industrial nation.

Given the comparatively undeveloped capitalist mode of production in France, (17) it is not surprising that most references to labor aristocratic tendencies were motivated by wage differentials that were not necessarily accompanied by differences in socio-political attitudes or behavior. (18) Thus, there is some indication that the share of the best and of the worst-paid wage workers among all Parisian wage earners in-



Table 34. Distribution of World Manufacturing among the four major producing Countries, 1870-1913 (in per cent) (19)

	United States	Germany	United Kingdom	France
1870	23.3	13.2	31.8	10.3
1881-1885	28.6	13.9	26.6	8.6
1896-1900	30.1	16.6	19.5	7.1
1906-1910	35.3	15.9	14.7	6.4
1913	35.8	15.7	14.0	6.4

Table 35. Distribution of World Trade in Manufactures among the four major trading Countries, 1883-1913 (in per cent) (20)

	United States	Germany	United Kingdom	France
1883	3.4	17.2	37.1	14.6
1890	3.9	17.2	35.8	14.5
1899	9.8	19.5	28.4	12.6
1913	11.0	23.0	25.4	10.6

creased during the Second Empire. (21) Yet the list of the best paid workers (22) or of "privileged" or "aristocratic" trades (23) reveals, when compared with those trades most active in socialist movements, (24) that by and large the better rather than the worse paid were politically active. (25)

This line of reasoning is supported by Marx's description of the strategy unfolded by the French bourgeoisie after the February Revolution had driven the army from Paris; in order to confront the proletariat militarily, the bourgeoisie was left but one expedient: "to counterpose one part of the proletarians to the other." Yet the tool of this policy was not the better paid sector of the working class, but rather the lumpenproletariat, which was recruited into the counterrevolutionary mobile guard. (26)

This is not to say that references to wage aristocrats during this period contained no socio-political connotations. (27) Indeed, examples of explicit attempts by employers to divert workers from political and social action have been documented for the period of the Second Empire. To this end employers



founded choral societies the members of which were possibly considered labor aristocrats by other workers. (28) Engels, for example, maintained that a conscious subsidiary aim of Baron Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris--the primary purpose of which was to disperse densely populated working class quarters and to render barricade fighting more difficult--was "the training of a specifically Bonapartist construction proletariat, dependent on the government." (29) Bourgeois reformers, moreover, achieved a small measure of success in their attempts to co-opt the producers' cooperative movement which, in order to adapt itself to political conditions during the Second Empire, abandoned its original socialist orientation in favor of accommodating itself to the laws of capital accumulation. If some bourgeois elements "saw it as a way of creating new property owners and thus consolidating the social order," (30) then "the most important association" (31) of this type, namely, the Association fraternelle des ouvriers maçons et tailleurs de pierre, must have appeared as a notable success since more than one-tenth of its members acquired sufficient capital to become entrepreneurs. (32)

Nevertheless, these integrative phenomena remained marginal to the fundamental class alignments of the period which were, in turn, a function of the relatively undeveloped state of French capitalism. The absence, furthermore, of a generally recognized bargaining agent on behalf of significant numbers of workers meant, in conjunction with the widespread hostility of employers and their organizations to existing trade unions, (33) that efforts at co-optation would have resembled pre-capitalist patriarchal patterns of class domination more than the "modern," quasi-spontaneous products of class collaboration. (34)

B. The Third Republic to World War I

Despite general agreement concerning the comparative insignificance of labor aristocratic strata in France, (35) varying explanations have been propounded to account for this divergent development. (36) One major strand of thought on this subject does not emphasize the formation of a labor aristocracy as such but rather the conditions which underlay the distinctive French labor movement. This view adverts to the fact that as a result of the large agrarian population and of the relatively low degree of urbanization, crafts in rural areas



and medium-szied towns were in a superior position to maintain themselves. Moreover, the preservation of the independent agrarian population and the constant increase in the number of rentiers provided the basis for a large consumption and luxury goods-producing sector which was characterized by a belowaverage organic composition of capital, thereby reinforcing the comparatively low degree of capital concentration and centralization in French industry. (37)

The main exponent of this argument considered the absence of the powerful classical sources of replenishment of the reserve army of the unemployed--namely, the proletarianization of peasants and (independent) craft workers, release of labor consequent upon an increasing organic composition of capital and minimal population growth--to have provided the background against which a comparatively strong increase in real wages could take place. (38) According to this reasoning, the combination of favorable market conditions for labor power and a national tradition of political democracy created the basis for the greater strength of manifest reformism/revisionism in France than in Germany. (39) The syndicalist program of direct action and of the general strike was, on the other hand, seen as a function of flagging capital concentration and centralization: in view of the absence of tangible signposts of the evolution of socialism within the womb of capitalism and against the background of a long-term hostile parliamentary majority of the supporters of private ownership of the means of production, class conscious workers felt strongly attracted to radical trade unionism as a form of socialist activity. (40)

Another theoretical approach, though partly complementary to the preceding one, offers a variant interpretation of some of the same forces alluded to by the latter. The proponent of this view posits that narrower wage differentials than those prevailing in Britain

militated against the growth of a labor aristocracy interested only in reforms. French economic growth was neither dynamic enough to raise demanded trades into a labor aristocracy nor catastrophic enough to ruin declining ones, but it was regular enough to maintain steady pressure on the economic position of most trades and to form a more homogeneous skilled proletariat. (41)

Having already gained, according to this view, "some degree" of control over the process of production, such skilled workers resented the "employer as a superfluous parasite" whose removal would have put an end to their exploitation. (42) Given, finally, the probability that skilled workers were, prior to World War I.



undergoing greater real and relative deprivation with respect to the deterioration of traditional working conditions than factory workers, the author of this view concludes that, for this period at least, artisans did not represent a privileged proletarian minority. (43)

The following evaluation of these sets of arguments will attempt to arrive at a more adequate analysis by eliminating the inconsistencies inherent in these approaches.

In order to quantify the gradual transformation of the French class structure, the following indicators are presented showing the composition of the industrial labor force according to the categories of employer, self-employed and employee for France and Germany. In 1882, approximately one-eighth of the German industrial work force was composed of employers, onequarter of self-employed and five-eighths of employees. By 1895, the employers and the self-employed accounted for but one-tenth and one-sixth respectively, whereas employees accounted for three-quarters of all those employed in industry, mining and construction. Finally, by 1907, the employers and the self-employed had each been reduced to one-eleventh, whereas employees represented nine-elevenths of the total. (44) In France, on the other hand, the censuses conducted in 1896, 1901 and 1906 revealed scarcely any change at all: employers constituted approximately one-tenth, the self-employed threetenths and the employees three-fifths of all those occupied in industry. (45) The wage labor-capital relationship became more widespread at an early stage in Germany and continued to encompass ever greater segments of industry whereas its scope remained more or less constant in France.

If the intensity—in contradistinction to the extensity—of the capital—labor relationship is expressed by the number of employees per establishment, then the relative backwardness of French capitalism reveals itself to be less straightforward than the foregoing data indicated. If the non-employing self—employed are omitted, (46) then the average number of persons per establishment in German industry, mining and construction rose from 5.4 in 1882 to 7.4 in 1895 and, finally, to 9.0 in 1907. (47) In France, on the other hand, the corresponding figure fluctuated about six for the three census years of 1896, 1901 and 1906. (48) Table 36 shows the composition of French and German industrial establishments according to size—classes during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Only about one-sixth of German industrial employees worked in establishments of one to five employees compared to almost one-quarter of their French counterparts; this relationship is

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Table 36. Share of Wage and Salary Workers employed in Industrial Establishments in Germany (1907) and France (1906) according to Employment Size-Classes (in per cent) (49)

	1-5 workers	6-50 workers	more than 50 workers
Germany	16.2	28.5	55.3
France	24.9	26.3	48.8

^aMining, industry and construction

similar to that obtaining for the non-employing self-employed in both countries. As the size-class increased, however, French employees were almost as concentrated as their German counterparts. In fact, a proportionally greater share of French than of German industrial workers was employed in establishments with more than 1,000 employees. In 1906, two-fifths of all French industrial workers were employed in establishments of one hundred or more workers while over one-ninth worked in establishments with more than 1,000 employees. (50) By 1906, the average number of employees per establishment exceeded 500 in the following branches (the average is indicated parenthetically): coal mining (984); tin plate (904); armanents (863); blast-furnace and steel-works (711); wool-combing (694); and plate glass (551). (51)

Thus despite the generally undeveloped state of French capitalism prior to World War I, (52) significant numbers of workers, particularly in mining, metallurgy and textiles, were subject to huge concentrations of capital and experienced their working conditions side by side with large aggregates of wage earners. (53)

Nevertheless, comparatively few French workers--regardless of their position within the division of labor or of their degree of subordination to capital--were trade unionists. (54) In 1881, approximately 60,000 trade unionists were recorded in France (55)--about 10,000 more than in Germany prior to the passage of the Antisocialist Law; by the mid-1890s French trade unionists numbered more than 400,000 but increased rather slowly so that by 1898 German trade unionists already outnumbered them. As World War I approached, French trade unionists exceeded one million but were outnumbered two and one-half to one by their German counterparts. (56) Even this aggregate figure overstates the degree of organization of French industry since about forty per cent of French trade unionists worked in agriculture, trade, commerce and the



service sector. (57) Although the members of the unions coordinated by the Confederation Générale du Travail, which was formed in 1895, had originally been concentrated in small and medium-sized establishments employing largely skilled workers, (58) by 1914 members from branches of large-scale production, such as mining, textiles and chemicals, began to bulk large within the total membership. Disaggregated by branch, the degree of organization does not appear to correlate significantly with concentration of employment or skill level on the one hand or with militancy or revolutionary policy on the other. Thus in 1914, the building trades, which represented largely skilled workers in small establishments, belonged to the revolutionary wing of trade unionism and were almost onequarter organized; (59) the metal trades, which were also considered revolutionary, were only one-eighth organized whereas the chemical industry, composed chiefly of workers in large plants, was three-elevenths organized. (60)

This apparently random distribution of characteristics assumes a different meaning when the two basically different types of French labor radicalism are examined. The older unions of the skilled, which had passed through several phases of radicalism during the nineteenth century, constituted the first type. During the Third Republic this radicalism assumed the form of trade socialism, which was based on the "professional privilege" of a stratum of urban (mainly Parisian) workers whose anti-capitalism envisioned no specified place for unskilled industrial workers. Although the latter were not excluded from the movement, little effort was expended to mobilize them, while the issue of immediate corporate seizure of control over individual establishments by local trade unions was scarcely geared to appeal to the unskilled whose immediate economic interests lay elsewhere. (61) This guild-like approach of the unions of the skilled no doubt in part prompted Marx and Engels in the 1880s to liken them to the English trade unions of the period. (62)

This relatively privileged status of the skilled was, however, under attack from progressing industrialization so that the trade unions became involved in attempts to combat the deterioration of working and living conditions associated with dequalification processes. Consequently, the struggles engaged in by the skilled assumed a different character in accordance with the progress of capital in the various branches. (63) But despite the de facto neglect of the immediate interests of the bulk of the unskilled by the trade socialists, the latter's distinctly anti-capitalist orientation (64) renders a comparison with late nineteenth century English trade unionists qua labor aristocrats

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implausible. Although the thesis according to which this stratum imposed its reformist orientation on the French labor movement as a whole bears some similarity to left-wing Social Democratic analyses in pre-World War I Germany, it remains to be seen whether the charge of aristocratic corruption associated with the latter also applies to the French artisans.

The second type of labor radicalism was to be found in the unions of the unskilled, which originated in connection with the formation of the Parti Ouvrier Français in 1882 by the Marxist Jules Guesde in opposition to the reformist "possibilist" or "opportunist" wing of French socialism. Although the Guesdists shared the Possibilists' appreciation of the importance of uneven economic development as a factor in the creation of politically and socially relevant differentiation within the working class, they drew the conclusion that the skilled urban workers should be rejected as petty bourgeois elements and that organizational efforts should be focused on that sector of the proletariat which represented the future of capitalism--namely, the unskilled industrial workers, who were concentrated in mining, textiles and metallurgy in the northern regions of France. (65) Yet there is little evidence that sharp differences persisted between these two trade union movements especially in light of the latter's relative insignificance and of the ultimate coalescence of both in revolutionary syndicalism. (66)

But despite the relative reformism of the skilled unionists, the implacable enmity shown the non-yellow unionists by the employing class and requited by the former (67) precluded the possibility of the organized artisans' performing any stabilizing function for French capital let alone that of being solicited to act as such agents. Given the considerable wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers in France, (68) there is little reason to assume that they were responsible for national labor aristocracies elsewhere but not in France. (69)

Although the gradual process of capitalist industrialization and the correspondingly long tenure of petty and non-capitalist sectors of production (70) contributed to the relatively homogeneous structure of the French working class, the comparative unity of proletarian political action can be understood only in the context of the property-owning and class structure, which militated against independent working class politics as they were possible in Britain and practiced in Germany. (71) Under these circumstances it is questionable whether the skilled unionists ever performed a reformist role equivalent to that ascribed to their German counterparts since they--paradoxically--did not "majoritize" the labor movement



to the same extent as the latter. The separate existence of Marxist-led organizations of the unskilled in France--which was lacking in Germany--meant that such unions were in a better position to combat reformist tendencies. The almost complete overlap of skilled unionists and Social Democratic trade unionists in Germany, on the other hand, meant that the former, in spite of whatever reformist tendencies they may have exhibited, bore almost the entire burden of working class socialism whereas the organized artisans shared this role in France. (72)