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Richard Price

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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The Segmentation of Work and the Labour Aristocracy

Richard Price

Takao Matsumura, *The Labour Aristocracy Revisited: The Victorian Flint Glass Makers 1850-1880* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984).

ONCE A FIRMLY ESTABLISHED orthodoxy in British labour historiography, the labour aristocracy now looks set to become a historical curiosity. In its original formulation by Engels and Lenin, the concept was used to explain the essentially negative question of why twentieth-century labour movements — particularly the British — had failed to dominate decisively the course of political change. Interest in the labour aristocracy was dictated by its relevance as an explanation for reformism. But this question has now come to be regarded as both anachronistic and irrelevant. The models and assumptions that are required to explain reformism as a product of artificial sectionalist divisions or false consciousness have fallen into disrepute. To the contrary, it is now suggested, there is nothing unnatural about the main theme of reformist politics within the working class. Powerful forces stimulate class cooperation as much as class conflict and they intersect with profound divisions within the working class to make sectionalism rather than unity the normal category and characteristic of class structure.[1] Indeed, some have gone as far as to deny the value of drawing any distinction between the labour aristocracy and the rest of the working class because both were equally vulnerable to and dependent upon capitalist rela-

[1] See Alastair Reid, "Politics and Economics in the Formation of the British Working Class: A Response to H.F. Moorhouse," *Social History*, 3 (1978), 347-61; H.F. Moorhouse, "The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy," *Social History*, 3 (1978), 61-82; Patrick Joyce, "Labour, Capital and Compromise: A Response to Richard Price," *Social History*, 9 (1984), 67-76. The best general survey of the concept and controversy is Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century Britain 1850-1914* (London 1981).

Richard Price, "The Labour Aristocracy," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (Spring 1986), 267-272.

tions.[2] Thus, from being one of the most basic categories of analysis, the labour aristocracy has become one of the most problematic. How, then, are we to cope *with this confusion*? *Are we to abandon* the concept entirely? The answer to that, I want to suggest, depends upon what it is we are concerned with explaining.

The starting point of any discussion of the labour aristocracy has to be Eric Hobsbawm's famous essay, "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain."[3] Hobsbawm's main concern was to provide data that would demonstrate that the stratum was a real formation and not the invention of Lenin. He did not proceed to argue that this substantiated the Leninist position that the labour aristocracy was a corruption of the super-profits of imperialism, nor that working-class politics could be reduced to its presence. Indeed, he has recently explicitly denied this association.[4] But, whatever the sophistications of the argument, a close connection was assumed between the development of labour politics and the particular structures, values, and attitudes *that composed the labour aristocracy*. And, indeed, it still remains the case that the labour aristocracy may be seen as one element within a wider group of explanatory forces that conditioned the character of British labour politics at the end of the century.[5] Few would go so far as John Foster, however, whose *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* is the one serious attempt to validate the Leninist paradigm. Foster argued that the privileged role of the labour aristocracy derived from the reconstitution of social and authority relations that was part of the *resolution of the crises of early industrial* capitalism in the 1840s.[6] His argument is problematic largely because of its formalistic nature. But much of the recent debate on the labour aristocracy has focused too exclusively upon the concept as an explanation for politics — a straw man easy enough to refute. There has yet to be a serious reconsideration of the labour aristocracy as a function of the stratification of the working class.

The prime focus of the early work on the labour aristocracy was to suggest that the segmentation between skilled and unskilled was the major division within the mid-Victorian working class. But closer attention to the socio-economic and political relationships within the working class has demonstrated the ambiguities that surround this question. In the first place, it has been rightly argued that the labour aristocracy was not a unitary formation but was itself segmented and fluid in its composition. *This involved more than a shift in* location from the old artisan crafts to the new industrial trades; it was also a function of changing life cycles and economic opportunities. Robert Gray showed that within both old and new aristocratic trades there were distinctions between higher and lower sections in terms of wage rates and labour market vulnerabilities.[7] Furthermore, the social relationships of the respectable working class were thoroughly contradictory. The notion of respectability, for example, is very important within the context of mid-Victorian class relations, not least because of the way it helped motivate middle-class images and responses to the working class. But respectability was not an unambiguous paradigm

[2] Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics. The Culture of the Factory in Late Victorian Britain* (Brighton 1980).

[3] Eric Hobsbawm, "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Labouring Men* (London 1964), 272-315.

[4] See *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 40 (1980), 6-8.

[5] Gregor McLennan, "'The Labour Aristocracy' and 'Incorporation': Notes on Some Terms in the Social History of the Working Class," *Social History*, 6 (1981), 71-81; Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford, 1976), chaps. 9-10.

[6] John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London 1974).

[7] Reid, "Politics and Economics;" Gray, *Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh*, chap. 4.

exclusive to the upper working class and neither did the culture of respectability represent a simple absorption of middle-class values. As Crossick demonstrated in his study of London artisans, it was part of a process of negotiation and compromise over the extent to which a terrain of cooperation could be secured which would respect the independent autonomy of working-class culture. The elite of the working class was concerned to assert and carve out areas of independence in the relationships of work and culture that would preserve them from the all-embracing dominion of bourgeois values, while at the same time enabling them to cooperate with and perhaps to modify and mitigate their influences. Thus, both Crossick and Gray explained a point hinted at earlier by Pelling: that it was from this temporary compromise made in mid-century that working-class radicalism could revive in the later part of the century under the leadership of the skilled aristocrats.[8]

These studies force us to return to the point that underlay Hobsbawm's original study: the process and nature of working-class segmentation as it progressed through the early and mid-nineteenth century. And although it is hardly surprising that they have shown the question to be more complicated than originally assumed, they do not suggest the irrelevance of the notion. What they do suggest, however, is that the labour aristocracy was only one among many lines of segmentation which fractured the working class and that it was not necessarily the most important of these. Once we shift the focus of debate to this level — where, one is tempted to suggest, it should have been all along — instead of arguing about the labour aristocracy as an explanation for politics, then its relevance is both diminished and enhanced. It is diminished because it is no longer possible to speak of the aristocracy as the sole aspect of stratification worth attention. But it is enhanced because it illuminates the differentiated responses within the working class to the vulnerabilities created by economic growth. In this respect, the labour aristocracy may be seen not as a fixed group, dependent upon a certain kind of industrial technology or organization, but as encompassing those who were able to erect certain protections against the logic of market forces on the basis of the spaces provided by aspects of segmentation.

Thus, to admit the many lines of segmentation within the working class is not to dispose of the problem of the labour aristocracy; it is, rather, to drive it back to its original location in the sphere of production. A fundamental line of cleavage within the working class is between those who are able to realize some protections against market vulnerability and those who are not. In the mid-nineteenth century, this cleavage attained a particular importance and prominence because, in the absence, for example, of political democracy, it provided one of the few ways by which sections of the working class could assert their influence and self-conscious identity in society. Matsumura's book is to be welcomed because it provides a close examination of the segmentations and protections that composed labour aristocratic status. It does nothing to resolve the complexities of this segmentation for the class as a whole, being a study of a very small, and to that extent atypical, group of Victorian artisans. But the characteristic features that he identifies were not peculiar to the flint glass makers and possessed wide resonances and implications.

The mid-Victorian structuration of the flint glass makers' social relations provides one example of the wider stabilization of class relations that began in the

[8] Peter Bailey, "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working Class Respectability," *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1979); Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London, 1840-1880* (London 1978); Henry Pelling, "The Concept of the Labour Aristocracy," in *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), 37-61.

1840s and blossomed once Chartism was removed from the scene. The removal of the excise duty on glass in 1845 expanded the product market for flint glass, increased the demand for labour, and placed the makers in a strong position. But it also involved a specialization of labour which segmented the glass trade into a skilled blown process catering to the luxury market and a less skilled, pressed, process that supplied the mass market. Although both types of flint glass makers belonged to the same union, Matsumura is primarily concerned with those who worked in the small, artisanal blown glass workshops and the relationship between the two sections is never explored and explained clearly. The pressed glass section required only a five-year apprenticeship as opposed to seven years in the blown section, but precisely what the consequences of this difference were remain obscure, from Matsumura's account. If the pressed glass workers retained a craft status, was it more through the social construction of skill than because of any inherent technical attributes? What is clear, however, is the way an aristocratic position in production was a function of the way technical skill was matched by an ability to control the market situation. The extent to which the labour market could be controlled was an important condition of the ability to exercise control of the production process and a key criterion of aristocratic status. Indeed, the segmentation that came out of industrialization was largely a function of the disruption of traditional labour market regulation and stability. Many artisan trades had been fractured into a vast mass of workers unable to control labour market fluctuations and a small, privileged section that could exercise some regulation. But the location of flint glass making was dependent upon specific geological conditions and its technology was not susceptible to wide dispersion. Thus, in spite of the division between blown and pressed processes, the labour market did not expand in tandem with the product market in the 1840s and the workers were able to enforce a ratio of one apprentice to every six workers. The employers made one attempt to break free of this hold over the labour market in the celebrated conflict of 1858-9 but they failed, and thereafter the apprentice ratio actually increased to eight workers for each apprentice.

Regulation of apprenticeship conditioned the internal segmentation of labour and Matsumura's account is noteworthy as providing the only detailed study of internal mobility within the labour aristocracy. Promotion from the lower grades of takers-in, footmakers, and servitors to the top job of maker could only occur with the permission of the chair — the worker who actually shaped and made the product. The chances of promotion sharply contracted as one moved up the work hierarchy. Only 2 per cent of servitors actually became chairs in any given year at Stourbridge. In common with many other skilled trades, patrimonial influences also conditioned promotion changes. Apprentices from glass-making families were more likely to move up to a chair than those from non-glass-making families. Indeed, about three-quarters of the latter never managed to surmount the barrier between take-in and apprentice. Once apprenticed, a person was certain to become journied but it was possible to linger for a long time in the rank of servitor and thus reach a wage ceiling, just as in the same way many piecers in cotton spinning often found their promotion to minder delayed.

In spite of the local concentration of the trade, and its small, handicraft nature, Matsumura insists that the union be regarded as conforming to the "new model" because its central purpose was to monitor control of the labour market. In the 1840s union structure shifted from a local to a national organization. The early unions had used the traditional device of tramping to regulate labour supply, but this was replaced by a centralized deter-

mination of vacancies and their distribution among the unemployed. Employers were obliged to inform the local factory union secretary of labour needs and these were then passed along to the district secretary who in turn passed them to the central general secretary if there was no suitable candidate for the job. And it was a reflection of the centrality of control of labour supply to the union's power that a refusal to accept the union applicant was one issue likely to cause a strike as opposed to a silent withdrawal of labour. Given this strategy, the union could not afford to be an exclusive body, limited only to the chairs; all the journied grades were eligible for membership, and in the late 1850s about 70 per cent of all glass makers were in the union.

But, in typical labour aristocratic style, glass makers were exclusive toward other trades. They maintained a distance from the glass cutters, for example, refusing to support their struggles with employers or to assist them when they were laid off due to the makers' own strikes. They were willing to blackleg against the Yorkshire bottle makers' union even though the production processes were very similar. Apart from the specific structures that encouraged such sectionalism, this heightened exclusivity reflected the ambiguities of segmentation. On the one hand, flint glass makers were labour aristocrats precisely because they had managed to erect some protections against the vagaries of dependence upon market relations. On the other hand, these protections were conditioned upon maintaining those very segmentations in the labour market and division of labour that created labour's vulnerabilities. It was at the production process that these pressures were concentrated and sharpest because it was there that vulnerability to the forces of market capitalism were both most acute and most threatening. Exclusivity was, therefore, most apparent and important at work: thus the tightly stratified nature of job recruitment in the trade, with only a small minority of glass makers coming from non-makers' families and only 25 per cent of those remaining to be apprenticed to the trades. Outside of the production process such exclusivity possessed far less relevance and, contrary to many critics of the concept, there is no contradiction between the notion of a labour aristocracy behaving as such at work but responding in a more inclusive way on issues that did not affect segmented protectionism in production. In social and political relations apart from work, other kinds of segmentations asserted themselves and it is necessary for historians to begin to develop typologies that will enable us to understand these. The broadest and best known, of course, was the community of the skilled trades — although this, too, is by no means a self-defining category. Matsumura confirms the findings of Gray and Crossick that marriage and residence patterns followed family status rather than occupation. Similarly, in politics, they joined with other trades in the various social and political agitations of the period.[9]

Matsumura's book reinforces my suspicion that it is far too early to write off the relevance of the labour aristocracy. But it would be a mistake to read the book merely as a rehabilitation of the labour aristocracy against its critics. More fruitful would be to use it in conjunction with the main lines of criticism to help develop a more satisfactory typology of working-class segmentation: a typology that would pay due regard to the ambiguities that are integral to the concept and the discriminations that are necessary to its application. In this way we shall be able to move beyond the present unsatisfactory state of the debate. In particular, I would suggest, a basic distinction must be drawn between segmentation at work and the complicated

[9] Keith McClelland, "A Politics of the Labour Aristocracy? Skilled Workers and Radical Politics on Tyneside c. 1850-74," *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 40 (1980).

stratifications in the broader social and political spheres. It is the applications of the concept in the latter areas that have suffered most seriously from the various critiques and it is certainly the case that neither working-class politics nor the variety of stratifications, alliances, and cleavages that composed the realms of social activity may be comprehended within a simple aristocratic non-aristocratic dichotomy. This was only one among many meaningful distinctions.[10] But the closer we get to production, the more relevant the notion becomes because it marked the possibilities and limitations that allowed certain groups to erect organizational and other strategies to protect against the consequences of the labour segmentation that emerged from industrialization. Matsumura's book documents these possibilities for a very small craft which at its peak contained only about 2,000 members. What is now required is a similarly close attention to those segments of labour where the potential to contain the vagaries of industrial capitalism did not exist.

[10] Alastair Reid, "Intelligent Artisans and Aristocrats of Labour: The Essays of Thomas Wright," in Jay Winter, ed., *The Working Class in Modern British History* (Cambridge 1983), 171-86.