

# The theory of the labor aristocracy

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PUV 55

By Martin Nicolais

Class analysis begins with an examination of the relationships of different social groups to the means of production, that is elementary. However, in the era when the means of production stretch across national boundaries and include many different countries within their sphere, this first step is by no means simple. In order to understand the relations between classes within a given country, it is necessary to understand also the relationship of that country to other countries within the entire production sphere. An analysis of class relations requires an analysis of international relations.

There are two major wrong ways of approaching this problem. One is to deny its existence. This amounts to the assumption that the contemporary mode of expansion of means of capitalist production beyond national boundaries (or, to save words, imperialism) has not, or not yet, become significant for class analysis. Each country within the imperial sphere is treated as if it were a separate layer-cake unrelated, except incidentally, to the others. By this means it can be "demonstrated" that revolutions in "peasant countries" contradict Marxism, since the "advanced capitalist" countries were supposed to reach socialism first. It follows from this view that the Vietnamese, for example, are not Marxists, and that a U.S. soldier of working-class origin who fires at an NLF/SVN leader of bourgeois origin is attempting to eliminate a national enemy.

The other wrong way is to go to the opposite extreme and assume that imperialism has already abolished the grounds for national antagonisms within the working class. This amounts to treating the world capitalist production sphere as one single layer-cake which is seamless in the lower strata. By this means it can be "demonstrated" that struggles which are "merely" for national self-determination are contradictory to Marxism, since such efforts "divide the working class." It follows from this view that the soldier just cited is attempting to eliminate an enemy of his class.

From the standpoint of the target, the difference between these two approaches, the nationalist and the anti-nationalist, is *irrelevant*.

The distinguishing characteristic of Lenin's method of class analysis, of which his theory of the labor aristocracy is an important product, is that he places himself mentally in the situation of the people in countries oppressed by imperialism, and proceeds to answer the fundamental strategic questions, who are our friends and who are our enemies, from that standpoint. That this is possible in the twentieth century without abandoning the standpoint of industrial workers in the metropolises of imperialism is the basic point of the theory of the labor aristocracy.

Let me briefly trace the history of the labor aristocracy theory. It begins with Engels, who noted in 1858:

"The English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat alongside the bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is of course to a certain extent justifiable."

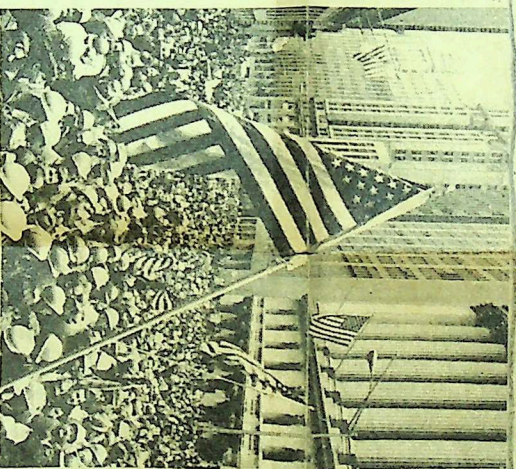
Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, neither Marx nor Engels finds compelling evidence that this aim is failing. As late as 1882, Engels writes that "there is no workers' party here, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies." Not until 1890 does he see a hopeful split beginning to emerge between the upper sections of the English working class and the "hitherto stagnant lowest strata." Two years later, the division has sharpened: Engels now distinguishes between a "small, privileged, protected minority," chiefly the members of the "old conservative trade unions," on the one hand, and the "great bulk" of workers on the other. He reviews the past three decades as follows:

"The truth is this: during the period of England's industrial monopoly, the English working class have, to a certain extent, shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out amongst them: the privileged minority pocketed most, but even the great mass had, at least, a temporary share now and then. And that is the reason why, since the dying-out of Owenism, there has been no socialism in England."

A decade later, after England's empire had already started to decline, Hobson envisions what would have happened if its triumph had continued. The entire metropolitan population, he writes, would have retired from productive labor and become converted into an idle nobility, parasites on the labor of the colonial peoples.

Lenin begins his political-economic writing at about the same time. His attitude toward the British trade unions is at first a favorable one: in 1899 he considers them in certain respects a vanguard. By late 1905, however, he has completely swung around to Engels' appraisal of them, and presents them as a clear negative example. At the 1907 Stuttgart Congress of the Second International, the connection is made between the labor aristocracy and imperialism. Lenin reports that "the European proletariat partly finds himself in a position where it is not his labor but the labor of the practically enslaved natives in the colonies, that maintains the whole of society. The British bourgeoisie, for example, derives more profit from the many millions of the population of India and other colonies than from the British workers. In certain countries this provides the material and economic basis for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism."

In 1914, when international socialism splits apart on the colonial question, the labor aristocracy theory plays the role of cutting edge in Lenin's theoretical disputes with the right (chauvinist) and center (Pacifist) tendencies within socialism. With the labor aristocracy theory, Lenin demonstrates that the split is not due to personal or subjective causes (an explanation he considered sophistry), but that it is grounded, rather, in real, objective contradictions within the working class. The right and center tendencies, he writes, were "... engendered in the course of decades by the peculiarities of the period of the development of capitalism when the comparatively peaceful and cultured existence of a stratum of privileged workers made them "bourgeois," gave them crumbs from the profits of their national capital, and isolated them from the sufferings, miseries, and revolutionary sentiments of the ruined



*Patriotism and prime pay*

This is the economic and impoverished masses. This is the economic foundation of present-day social imperialism."

Such statements, variously formulated, recur frequently during the years of the First World War. So important did Lenin consider the theory that he termed Marx and Engels' statements on the question "the pivot of the tactics in the labor movement that are dictated by the objective conditions of the imperialist epoch."

What are the general characteristics of a labor aristocracy? Since there is no guarantee that groups which formed an aristocracy a century ago still do so today, this question is important. The description given by Engels of the English trade unions in 1892 undoubtedly needs modification today, but it brings out the general principles involved. He writes that "... they are the organizations of those trades in which the labor of grown-up men predominates. ... Here the competition neither of women and children nor of machinery has so far weakened their organized strength. ... They form an aristocracy among the working class; they have succeeded in enforcing for themselves a relatively comfortable position, and they accept it as final." And this was made possible, Engels adds, by Britain's industrial and colonial monopoly. In general terms, then, a labor aristocracy is a monopoly within a monopoly. It consists of workers who benefit from structures that exclude the competition of other workers, within a capitalism structured to exclude the competition of other capitalists. Seen on a world scale, a labor aristocracy is a miniature "empire" of workers within a larger empire of capitalists. How does this come about?

Let us first look at the economic side of the question. In a "free-market" capitalist economy (or an approximation thereof) it is not possible for the wages of any particular group of workers to rise

permanently above the level of necessity. Note: this level itself may rise, improving the workers' condition, the industrial division of labor, for example, "necessitates" and creates, in time, a higher level of necessity than handicraft or peasant production. Further, the level of necessity is different for different groups of workers; e.g., miners require a more substantial diet than clerks. But, this aside, a rise above the necessary level can take place only where, and only as long as, labor is in short supply. The unhindered operation of supply and demand will soon defeat any attempt to rise permanently above necessity. Before a section of workers can permanently receive wages above the necessary level (surplus wages), capitalists must be in a position permanently to receive profits above the average level (superprofits). Capitalism must move into the monopoly stage; it must become imperialism. Only then is the ground prepared for workers to follow. This brings us to the political side of the question.

In order to win surplus wages for themselves on a permanent basis, a section of workers has to establish a stable, institutional monopoly over employment in a given section of the labor market. (To some degree, all trade unions aim in this direction, as they must, to prevent individual employers from pushing "their" workers below the necessary level. Not many unions achieve even that degree of elementary protection against the worst abuses, especially in periods of economic crisis. Even fewer achieve monopoly.) To do so they must find ways of excluding competition permanently and categorically. They require a set of exclusionary "principles." Invariably they must appropriate for their own use one or more of the numerous "principles" on which the structure of imperialist production is based. They must enter into a tacit compact with capital whereby both parties agree to accept as true, and to act on, the "principle" that, for example, members of a certain nationality, or race, or sex, culture or some other social category, are incapable of self-determination on an equal basis and may properly be kept down and out. Since usually not more than one fifth to one third of the working class is organized into any unions at all, there is reason to think that the achievement of this kind of monopolization is possible only in exceptional corners of the labor market. To the extent that it is possible, however, it implies the reproduction within the working class of the full range of national (and analogous) oppressions on which imperialism is constructed. This is the literal sense of Lenin's frequent statements that imperialism "corrupts" the working class. Consider: the workers whom Engels describes were entrenched behind a barrier composed of multiple degrees of monopoly. Their position was based on the exclusion of women and "children" (which probably means, here, minors), as well as on the exclusion (which Engels does not mention at this point) of the Irish, of immigrants, and probably various other religious, cultural, and ideological groups as well. Such a relationship to the means of production cannot in the ordinary course of events breed any other than a highly conservative, chauvinistic, and implicitly anti-working-class consciousness. Any section of the working class which relates to the means of production on the basis of even one of these degrees of monopoly is bound to become, as Lenin puts it, "infected" with something of the same spirit. Such groups are not merely "prisoners of bourgeois ideology"; they have, in Lenin's words, "deserted to the bourgeoisie."

Any section of the working class entrenched behind multiple degrees of monopoly will be fairly small and can act with great determination and militance when its own particular interests are threatened. Its strikes will be potent: it has savings, its membership is cohesive, its leadership stable and strong. When challenged, such an aristocracy reacts with vigor. It advances its own interests as the interests of the class, and the class interests as its own. It "champions the cause of the working man," calls on all workers to "unite," and presents all this, where fashionable, in the most thoroughly "Marxist," "proletarian," "revolutionary" and even, as in Lenin's day, "internationalist" rhetoric. Despite all the appearances of class struggle, such an aristocracy of labor enjoys, even in times of war, privileged access to the means of political communication and organization. It is permitted, tacitly encouraged, to play the role of "vanguard of the working class." Is this surprising? The political position, the privilege, of the labor aristocracy rests on maintaining the suppression of the particular autonomies of oppressed nationalities (and analogous groups) within the working class, while the economic position, the surplus wage, of the labor aristocracy rests on maintaining the general hegemony of the existing state sovereignty within the metropolises and over all the territories, possessions, colonies, semi-colonies, and dependencies

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# The theory of the labor aristocracy

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in the entire imperial sphere. Toward other workers the labor aristocracy is anti-nationalist; toward "competing" bourgeoisies it is nationalist; toward the internationalism represented by Lenin it is mortally opposed. It is, as Lenin called it, "the bourgeoisie's leadership of the working class."

In addition to the manifest privileges of the labor aristocracy, Engels and (less methodically) Lenin recognized two other types of privilege related to monopoly and imperialism. Engels cites a "permanent improvement" also for the English "factory hands," who benefited from maximum-hour legislation which "has restored their physical constitution and endowed them with a moral superiority. . . ." Secondly, Engels recognizes "temporary improvement even for the great mass" of workers during the period

It may seem odd to consider these types of material improvement as related to imperialism, or to classify them as privileges. The improvement in the condition of the factory workers was certainly no climb into luxury. They had been treated worse than slaves. They had been considered a cheap fuel and were literally worked to death as fast as the machinery would go. The legislation which limited their working day merely rescued them from extinction; it did not pull them above, but merely up, to the level of necessity. Nor was the temporary improvement of the mass much to boast about; it was all wiped out again in the next overproduction crisis. Why then classify these as forms of imperialist privilege? It cannot be a question merely of demonstrating that these workers, however poor their condition remained, were still much better off than workers somewhere else. There is always someone "worse off." By that logic, the non-privileged people are the dying and the dead. Revolution would then have to wait until after the Resurrection. What needs to be demonstrated, rather, is that there is between the condition of the groups being compared some systematic connection. Disagreeable as it may be, such a connection exists.

The English factory workers cited by Engels did not receive surplus wages. Spoils from the empire did not enter into their personal consumption. They rose, nevertheless, as a result of the super-profits received

by "their" capitalists from empire. The siphoning of capital out of the colonies (especially via investments) prevents or retards the advance of industrial development there; it acts as a brake on productivity and creates the pattern of labor-intensive exploitation characteristic of "underdevelopment." The same drain of capital furthers, and speeds up, the advance of industry, the improvement of productivity in the metropolis. "Uneven development" is the product of imperialist accumulation. Even here, an element of monopoly, i.e., a degree of labor aristocracy, is involved, for to raise the metropolitan industrial workers to the level of necessity, some degree of restriction against immigration is required. As Marx points out in volume I of Capital, however, it is in capital's own interest to take the measures necessary to preserve the industrial workers of the metropole from extinction by overwork. This does not exempt even the best-paid from severe hardship in crises (see Capital, vol. I, chapter 15, section 5d); yet these sufferings are acute rather than chronic. The reverse holds true in the satellites. There the population is driven and held, by the same dynamic, to a level of sub-necessity which amounts to slow, stretched-out genocide. The metropolitan industrial workers are not "accomplices" in this process. It proceeds over their heads and generally beyond their control. They are nevertheless among its beneficiaries. The advance of industrial productivity in the imperialist countries constitutes in itself a privilege; it is, so to speak, the privilege of development.

Lenin had observed this process only in the special case of England. He saw the general implications of the problems, however, when he denounced as "judicious" and as "imperialist economism" the notion that a working-class revolution in an advanced country would automatically abolish national oppression. The accumulated effects of development and underdevelopment would not vanish of their own accord. He held that definite political measures would be required to deal with the problem. Half a century later it would not be illogical to add definite economic measures as well, in the spirit of reparations.

A systematic connection also exists between imperialism and the second type of material improve-

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ment, the temporary or "cyclical." As the research of Andre Gunder Frank and others demonstrates, the phases of the accumulation cycle in metropole and colony are roughly reciprocal, rather than parallel. An accumulation "boom" in the metropolis creates chronic depression in the colony, while a crisis in the former allows the latter their only moments of development within the capitalist framework. That is a very systematic connection. Again, the workers in the imperialist countries who benefit from this process are not its "accomplices," and it is absurd to counsel them not to fight for higher wages and better conditions on the "ground" that they are "taking food out of the mouths of starving infants," etc. Such reasons do not apply. If the metropolitan workers did not take "crumbs from the feast" of imperialism, these crumbs would go to others such as metropolitan renters, or petty bourgeois strata instead. Imperialism gives no refunds.

Does this mean, nevertheless, that the industrial workers have a "material interest" in the continuation of imperialism? For several decades of the nineteenth century, this was indeed the case for the whole English working class. So unlimited and unchallenged was the British empire during this period that it cost the English workers virtually nothing. The colonial population not only financed the English privilege, they also financed their own oppression. The permanent and temporary privileges came to the English workers as a net gain. But if only for the reason that the English provoked the colonial population to political awakening, such imperialism is non-reproducible. A look at any contemporary imperialist state budget will show that the system now carries a heavy overhead; oppression is expensive, and growing more so. These costs, and the blood-tax of conscription, are a debit against the privileges of the mass of metropolitan workers. The exploitation of the colonies continues to pay the privileges of the labor aristocracy, but the cost of oppressing the colonies increasingly drives the mass of metropolitan workers themselves toward the colonial living standard. A kind of "uneven development" begins to appear within the metropolitan working class: the "gap" comes home. A triumphant imperialist-generating class, but imperialist-challenged and declining just as certainly takes those privileges—eventually even those of the aristocracy—away again.

Lenin did not believe that it was entirely possible or very worthwhile to try to calculate by statistical means the size of the various pro-imperialist sectors in any country at any given time. This is a political as well as an economic question. Not all of the privileged sectors are bound to become chauvinists entirely, nor are the non-privileged sectors necessarily untouched by imperialist ideology. The boundary lines between imperialist and internationalist politics in the metropolitan working class, Lenin held, can only be established in the process of political struggle; only the revolution will give a precise measurement. The size of the privileged sectors makes, in any case, little difference in the tactics which revolutionaries, according to Lenin, should adopt toward them, and no difference at all in basic principles. The duty of socialists remains the same whether the entire working class of a given country "shares the feast from the colonies," as in England during the maturity of Marx and Engels, or whether the privileged strata constitute only a thin layer, as in Lenin's Russia.

The labor aristocracy was not merely, for Lenin, an epithet, a rhetorical insult. To reduce it to that level is to cross over to the Kautsky of 1914 and after. It was a serious theoretical explanation, based on the method of class analysis appropriate in the imperialist epoch, of the recurrent and persistent tendencies toward imperialist chauvinism among workers in the metropolises. With this theory, Lenin sought to demonstrate—the better to combat them—that these tendencies had a definite but restricted economic and social basis. There is not space here to examine the other theoretical and practical symptoms of imperialist privilege, in addition to chauvinism, which Lenin held imputable to the same phenomenon, e.g., "economism," "opportunism," "non-factionalism," "liquidationism," and others. That would require a discussion of Lenin's entire life's work. It is enough to say here that, in Lenin's view, the conflict between these tendencies in all their varieties (with or with a socialist vocabulary) on the one hand, and Marxism on the other, would determine the future of the labor movement in the imperialist epoch. If this brief look at the theory of the labor aristocracy has helped to shed some light on the political situation today, it will have proved that the term of Lenin's relevance has not expired.

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