

Recent Findings of Research in Economic and Social History

In an incisive review of controversial literature on differences within the working class, R. J. Morris addresses key questions about the labour aristocracy. What role did this group play in the change from conflict to conciliation in the class relationships of mid-Victorian Britain? Was it the bargaining strength of skilled men that won them their economic advantages? Or was it the result of bribes by employers and the collaboration of this working-class élite with them?

The Labour Aristocracy in the British Class Struggle

The labour aristocracy were a section of the 19th century working class who were relatively better paid, more secure, better treated at work and more able to control the organisation of their work. They led a distinctive 'respectable' life style. Contemporaries and historians used and use this concept to help to describe the inequalities of wealth and power in 19th century industrial society. They used the term to help them account for change over time in that wider set of relationships called social class. The concept was important for several reasons. It drew attention to the complexity, inequality and differences **within** the British working class. This privileged stratum played an important part in explaining the social peace of 1850s and 1860s which followed the violent and fundamental challenges to authority in the previous 50 years, the challenges of Paineite radicalism, Owenism, violent and illegal trades unionism and Chartism. These accounts suggest that skilled workers benefited from the economic prosperity which free trade and the domination of world trade brought to the British economy. These benefits encouraged skilled workers to accept capitalist relationships and to restrict their political efforts to securing limited gains within the existing social and economic system. Thus the Owenite producer co-operatives of the 1830s were succeeded by retail co-operative stores which accepted the logic of the market system and distributed their profits to customer members. The old chartists lost their independence in the new liberal party, amalgamated under Gladstone with the urban middle class and aristocratic whigs. Both trades unions and employers alike sought to replace conflict with arbitration and conciliation involving unions operating within the law.

Class collaboration ?

Bargaining strength and bribery were emphasised by different accounts of this change [1]. Engels, who was one of the first to write about this issue, felt that the privileges of

the skilled men were due to their superior bargaining power. He recognised that these benefits had to be defended by conflict but concluded that the result was to divide the wage-earning classes in a way which diverted them from the revolutionary role which he and Marx had envisaged at mid century. Lenin on the other hand believed that the employers and owners of capital had used the super profits gained from the imperialist domination of world markets to bribe their own workers and thus ensure an alliance between the owners of capital and the labour aristocracy against, first the less skilled, and then against other countries. Early 20th century socialists saw the labour aristocracy as a skilled group 'isolated ... from the mass of the proletariat in close, selfish, craft unions'. (Harry Quelch, 1913.) These bribes and alliances ultimately helped socialists explain why the working people of Europe went to war against each other in 1914 in support of the imperial and industrial power of their leaders. The Labour aristocracy has not been the exclusive property of Marxist and socialist writers. It has been closely associated with a pattern of behaviour called 'respectability' which was central to class, workplace, family and gender relationships.

In 1954, Eric Hobsbawm [2] outlined six factors which helped to identify a labour aristocracy: the level and regularity of a worker's earnings, their degree of social security, the nature and degree of their control of the work process, their relationships with other social classes, their general standard of living and the prospects of social

R. J. Morris is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Edinburgh. He is author of *Class and Class Consciousness during the Industrial Revolution, 1790-1850* and co-author of *The Atlas of Industrialising Britain, 1780-1914*. He is currently editing *Computing and History Today* for the recently formed Association for History and Computing.

advancement for themselves and their families. By the 1860s, just over 10% of the British labour force earned over 28/- (£1.40) a week. This 10% was almost without exception composed of adult males. They included rapidly growing groups of skilled wage labour like the engineers, shipwrights and iron puddlers. They included older trades like printers, glass bottle makers and coachmakers. They included parts of trades like tailoring and bootmaking in which an aristocracy of labour survived by specialising in skilled high quality work.

Other groups had a more debateable place in this elite such as coal hewers, adult male spinners, masons and other building trades. The labour aristocracy played an increasingly important part as a social and economic group after mid century because during the decades surrounding 1850, wage labour dominated more and more of the relationships between labour and capital, steadily replacing sub-contracting, independent craftsmen, domestic production and the workshop production of small masters. Fewer skilled men could look forward to a natural life time progression from apprentice, to journeyman, to master. They now looked to trades unions like the Associated Society of Engineers to defend their prosperity.

This picture of class collaboration, whether brought about by bribery or bargaining strength, was considerably elaborated by three major case studies made during the 1970s.

Bribery and cultural assault by employers

In a detailed study of the cotton spinning and engineering town of Oldham between the 1790s and 1860s, John Foster identified a powerful working class revolutionary movement which in the late 1830s and the 1840s came to dominate key elements of local government through exclusive dealing and an alliance with radical members of the middle classes [3]. Poor law and police policy and the choice of parliamentary representatives were used in ways which challenged the dominant ideology of employer authority within a profit-seeking cash economy. The economic and authority structure of industrial society was challenged not only by violent trades union action but by sustained ideological criticism. The potential of this working-class power was dissipated in the 1850s by a process he called 'liberalisation'. He set out to demonstrate that 'Oldham's bourgeoisie consciously used its industrial power (and the economic and psychological reality of empire) to split the labour force and bribe its upper layers into political acquiescence'. [3 p.204]

There were two major elements in this process. First, the labour force in three leading industries was re-structured in a way which produced a privileged section which in turn helped sustain the authority of the employers. After the defeat of the engineers strike in 1852, the craft autonomy of the engineers was replaced by a piecemeal system, within which a larger part of the simpler preparatory work was done by boys under 18. In cotton spinning the adult male spinner was transformed into a pacemaker. There was no clear split in the coal industry, although the introduction of the checkweighman and the sliding scale agreements in the 1860s suggested a reduction in the direct conflict between labour and employer.

The second element in the change was a massive assault upon the cultural institutions of working people. Sunday schools emphasised religious rather than secular education; the friendly societies were increasingly brought under state control through the Register General of Friendly Societies; the magistrates used the licensing system to control the public house; the working-class meeting place, and a wide range of middle-class sponsored cultural agencies, like mechanics institutions, were offered to working people.

These cultural agencies all emphasised the virtues of the work ethic, savings, education, and religion within the market economy. Broader issues arising from this aspect of the debate are discussed by Michael Thompson in REFRESH, no.5, autumn 1987.

In those days, the stonemasons, like the miners, were the aristocrats of labour. On the occasion of the marriage of my father and mother, they were driven to church in a four in hand with a postillion rider in front. As a symbol of affluence, my father wore a suit of white moleskins, whilst my mother wore a brand new Paisley shawl. The wedding supper was held in the public hall to which special invitations were issued to a large circle of friends.

From: Tom Bell, *Pioneering Days*, London, 1941, p. 14.

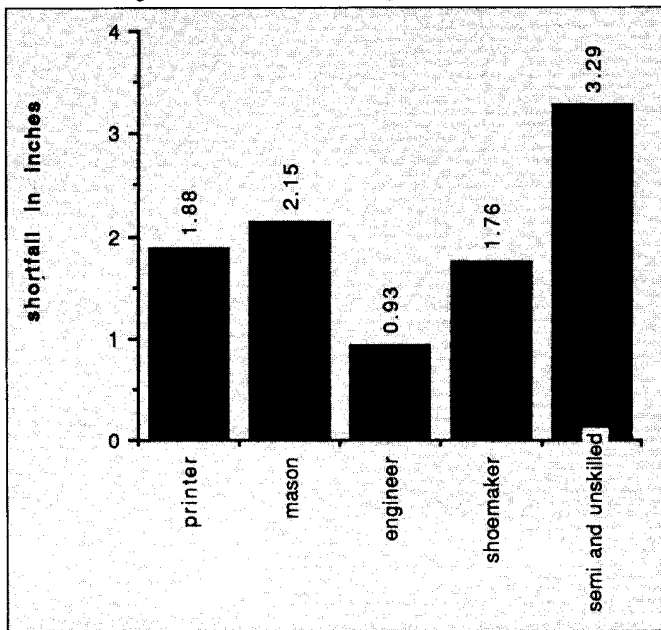
Factory paternalism

Subsequent work has modified much of this. Studies of places like Preston, where the size of factories was much larger than Oldham, have shown that the industrial trades unions of the cotton spinners played a major part in institutionalising conflict. The increased willingness of many employers to work with the trades unions did not prevent often bitter and prolonged strikes but it did provide a framework within which conflict was limited and equally important detached from politics. Secondly an important study of Blackburn and other Lancashire mill towns [4] showed that authority at work in the cotton mills was identified not with an isolated strata of the working class but with age and gender. This hierarchy was linked to the values of the 'respectable working class' and their life-time expectations of moving from doffer to piecer to spinner, or in the case of women through the weaving shed to marriage. Assumptions about the authority of men over women, of adults over teenagers, were used to support the authority of the employers. Lastly it was clear that the Lancashire mill owners approached labour as a whole, recreating a structure of paternalism within the mill communities as industrial technology stabilised in the 1850s. The link between owner and labour was reinforced by political identities like Gladstonian Liberalism and Orange Toryism. The link was reinforced by small doles, tied cottages, the provision of community resources like parks and adult education and above all by factory celebrations of the life cycle events of the owner's own family. This section of the literature showed clearly that the development of a labour aristocracy as an isolated strata of the working class was not the only source of the increasing stability of class relationships after 1850.

A well-paid elite

Two studies of Edinburgh and of 'Kentish' London examined communities where the existence of an upper strata of the working class was much clearer. The years 1850-1880 saw the creation of an elite of relatively well paid and secure skilled men employed in the engineering, shipbuilding, munitions and building industries of Greenwich, Deptford and Woolwich [5]. In Edinburgh the level and regularity of the earnings of printers, engineers, masons and even shoemakers stood above those of the unskilled labourers. The Edinburgh evidence showed that this had clear results in terms of the rent paid for housing, the number from each occupation who ended up in the poor house and even the heights of their children [6].

Fig. 1. Height of children as shortfall from the average at Broughton School Edinburgh 1904.



Source: Based on figures in Gray [6], p.97.

The heights of the children reflected long term contrasts in the standard of living of their families. They were measured in 1904 by the Charity Organisation Society and expressed in terms of their shortfall compared to the height of all children of their age at Broughton School, which served the families of shopkeepers and clerks as well as the artisans and labourers (see figure 1). Both studies tested the claim that the labour aristocracy were 'isolated' from the rest of the working class by looking at the degree to which the different socio-economic groups married with each other. The Edinburgh figures compared the occupation of the groom with that of the father of the bride. The London figures took the occupation of the father of both bride and groom (given the evidence for life time upward mobility this might have been expected to reduce the overlap between skilled and unskilled).

The results showed several features of the British class structure (see figures 2 and 3). Skilled men and their sons were much more likely to marry into the families of other skilled men than into the families of the unskilled. The relationship was one of probability. The labour aristocracy was no exclusive caste.

Indeed the London figures suggest that the non-manual middle classes were more likely to marry amongst themselves (despite being a smaller group) than were the skilled working class. The status divisions within the working class were important for marriage patterns, but not as important as the division between social classes.

Cultural and economic independence

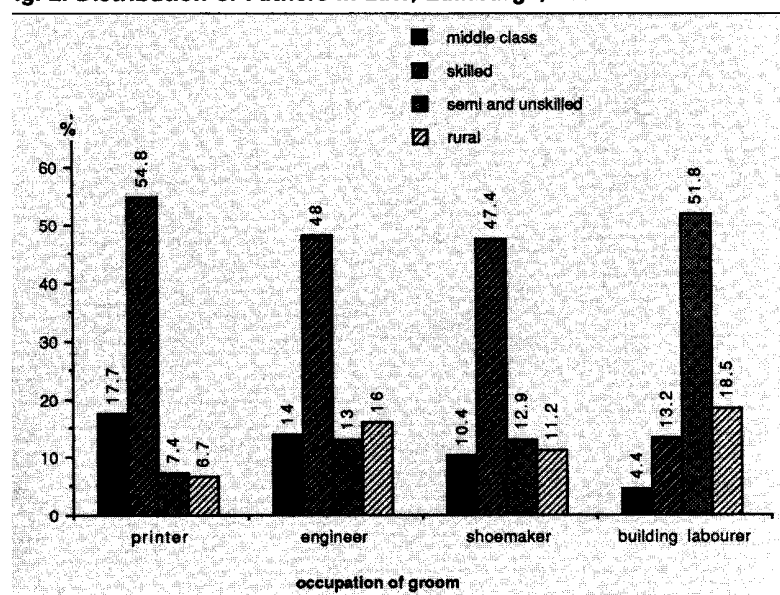
Both these studies found cultural evidence which suggested that the notion of 'collaboration' between the labour aristocracy and the owners of capital was by no means clear or simple. The culture of Edinburgh's labour aristocracy showed no sharp break with the craft traditions of earlier decades. The artisans of the post 1850 generation were still bound together by a workshop sub culture of friendly societies, drinking customs and craft pride. This was displayed in the

street processions. These spectacular banners which celebrated not only their leaders but the details of their labour process were something which has survived into the modern trades union movement. The Edinburgh masons, printers and engineers used all the institutions of the labour aristocracy, retail co-operatives, savings banks, and perhaps a literary society, a chapel and one of the artisan companies of the Volunteers. The Volunteer movement of the 1860s was a sort of territorial army sponsored by the state and closely associated with the growing patriotism of mid century. All these organisations asserted values of fierce independence, thrift, sobriety (though not always in its extreme form, teetotalism), orderly conduct and a rigid family morality.

There was little evidence of bribes or collaboration in London or Edinburgh. The artisan's dominant value was still independence. The labour aristocrat's dominant social experience from the printing workshops of Edinburgh, and the shipyards of London to building sites in all parts of Britain was of persistent attempts by employers to reduce privileges by the sub division of labour, by technological change, by hiring labour on a casual or job and finish basis, and by the introduction of women and boys to dilute the labour force. The labour aristocrat survived where organisation and market power gave strength in wage bargaining. There was a continuing and bitter struggle over workplace authority. The labour aristocrat defended his control of the workprocess through strikes, by control of apprenticeship and by control of time discipline. For the ironmoulder in the west of Scotland, '... it was a union rule to take a rest of 15 minutes to cool down' after each casting had been completed.

So called middle-class patterns of behaviour often had very different meanings when practised by these skilled men. Education helped the artisan keep up with technological change, especially important for the printers. Savings meant that the artisan could resist pressures for downgrading during times of sickness or trade depression. More important, savings made wage earners a more formidable strike threat during wage bargaining. The labour aristocracy plundered middle-class culture for products to mold into their own traditions. Values of respectability and self help brought a congruence and sympathy between the views and behaviour of large sections of middle and skilled working class. These values were self generated. The 'independent' nature of the skilled man's politics meant that the social stability achieved by the

fig. 2. Distribution of Fathers in Law, Edinburgh, 1865-1869.



Source: Based on figures in Gray [6], p.112.

congruence of middle class and skilled working class cultures contained within it the sources of its own instability. This showed very clearly in Kentish London where the artisans marched cheerfully into the Gladstonian liberal party of the 1860s but this party then failed to deliver radical measures and failed to admit these politically aware artisans to decision-making positions in local parties. Expectation raised by the sympathy of values were disappointed. These disappointed expectations were one

element in the very different contribution which these same labour aristocratic skilled men made to political, social and economic relationships in the early 20th century.

Changing political values

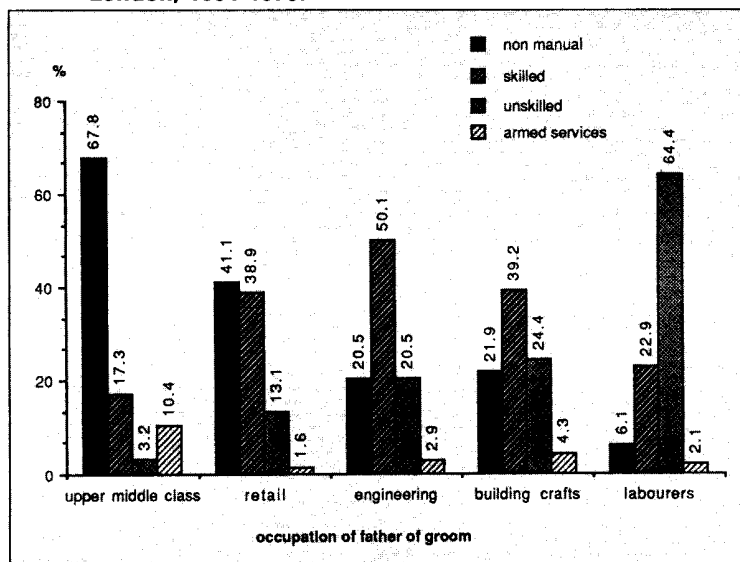
This instability emerged clearly between 1880 and 1920. By the 1890s, the economic and technological conditions which had created the labour aristocracy were changing, notably for the engineers [7]. New semi-automatic

ability to control the labour process. New methods of management, called 'Taylorism' after its American origins, with its time and motion studies and resulting speed ups, together with an increased sub division of labour were equally threatening. The ASE (Associated Society of Engineers) saw the main purpose of the turret lathe, the universal drilling machine and the grinding machine as the reduction of '... the number of highly skilled men, that is the fitters'. These and similar changes in other trades threatened the moral economy of the skilled man, especially his ability to earn a 'family wage'. The family wage enabled the skilled man to keep his wife at home, creating that clean, neat and comfortable house which they prized so much. It enabled him to put his sons to apprenticeships and his daughters into respectable jobs instead of forcing them out to work at an early age to counter family poverty. As these pressures grew a small number of these men emerged from their advanced liberal politics, democratic, fiercely moralistic and often internationalist, and joined one of the fragments which were to become the labour party of 1918. The potential for bitter conflict contained in the so called collaborationist values of the labour aristocracy reached a peak in 1915 during the Glasgow rent strike. War-time inflation forced up rents well beyond the levels which rapidly rising wages could meet. Hardest hit were the 'soldiers wives' several of whom were involved in evictions which ran counter to that mixture of family values, patriotism and sense of justice which the skilled families inherited from their parents. Women were the initial leaders in the strike because their traditional role included the

The term **artisan** in this article leads the usage which developed in the first half of the 19th century. It refers to skilled manual labour in trades which had or had just lost that independence which went with small workshop production and the possibility of life time upward mobility from journeyman to master.

management of household spending. They rapidly gained support from the engineering shop stewards who already saw 'dilution' of labour by women and unskilled boys as a threat to that economic power which had brought a rent paying 'family wage' in the first place. The government of the day solved the immediate crisis with a rent act which destroyed the ability of the economy to supply low-income housing through the free market. This was the first and one of the most significant results of the manner in which the

Fig. 3. Distribution of the occupation of fathers in law, 'Kentish' London, 1851-1875.



skilled men were questioning the free market upon which their mid century prestige had been based. These same skilled men, together with wives and daughters who joined the Women's Cooperative Guild and the Independent Labour Party, became a key element in the leadership and membership of the new Labour Party. Their values and experience were to play a major part in the subsequent history of that party.

Conclusions

Historians have gathered growing evidence that the

values of the labour aristocracy were self-generated from earlier craft and artisan traditions. They selected from and re-interpreted the cultural products offered them by higher social classes. The economic advantages which made possible their respectable, family wage life style were won and defended by bargaining strength. The congruence of labour aristocrat and middle-class values did make it easier to negotiate many of the conflicts inherent in the relationships of wage labour during the 1850s and 1860s, but the expectations raised by that congruence contained elements of later conflict and challenge to dominant authority within British industrial society. Thus the nature and experience of a labour aristocracy contributed to class and political relationships in 20th century Britain.

Reference

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