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LENIN AND THE "ARISTOCRACY OF LABOR"

The following brief essay is a contribution to the discussion of Lenin's thought, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of his birth. The subject is one which can be appropriately treated by a British Marxist, since the concept of an "aristocracy of labor" is one which Lenin clearly derived from the history of British nineteenth-century capitalism. His concrete references to the "aristocracy of labor" as a stratum of the working class appear to be exclusively drawn from Britain (though in his study notes on imperialism he also remarks upon similar phenomena in the "white" parts of the British Empire). The term itself is almost certainly derived from a passage by Engels written in 1885 and reprinted in the introduction to the 1892 edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* which speaks of the great English trade unions as forming "an aristocracy among the working class."

The actual phrase may be attributable to Engels, but the concept was familiar in English politico-social debate, particularly in the 1880s. It was generally accepted that the working class in Britain at this period contained a favored stratum—a minority but a numerically large one—which was most usually identified with the "artisans" (i.e., the skilled employed craftsmen and workers) and more especially with those organized in trade unions or other working-class organizations. This is the sense in which foreign observers also used the term, e.g., Schulze-Gaevernitz, whom Lenin quotes with approval on this point in the celebrated eighth chapter of *Imperialism*. This conventional identification was not entirely valid, but, like the general use of the concept of an upper working-class stratum, reflected

an evident social reality. Neither Marx nor Engels nor Lenin "invented" a labor aristocracy. It existed only too visibly in Britain of the second half of the nineteenth century. Moreover, if it existed anywhere else, it was clearly much less visible or significant. Lenin assumed that, until the period of imperialism, it existed nowhere else.

The novelty of Engels's argument lay elsewhere. He held that this aristocracy of labor was made possible by the industrial world monopoly of Britain, and would therefore disappear or be pushed closer to the rest of the proletariat with the ending of this monopoly. Lenin followed Engels on this point, and indeed in the years immediately preceding 1914, when the British labor movement was becoming radicalized, tended to stress the second half of Engels's argument, e.g., in his articles "English Debates on a Liberal Workers' Policy" (1912), "The British Labor Movement" (1912), and "In England, the Pitiful Results of Opportunism" (1913). While not doubting for a moment that the labor aristocracy was the basis of the opportunism and "Liberal-Laborism" of the British movement, Lenin did not appear as yet to emphasize the international implications of the argument. For instance, he apparently did not use it in his analysis of the social roots of revisionism (see "Marxism and Revisionism," 1908, and "Differences in the European Labor Movement," 1910). Here he argued rather that revisionism, like anarcho-syndicalism, was due to the constant creation on the margins of developing capitalism of certain middle strata—small workshops, domestic workers, etc.—which are in turn constantly cast into the ranks of the proletariat, so that petty-bourgeois tendencies inevitably infiltrate into proletarian parties.

The line of thought which he derived from his recognition of the labor aristocracy was at this stage somewhat different; and it is to be noted that he maintained it, in part at least, to the end of his political life. Here it is perhaps relevant to observe that Lenin drew his knowledge of the phenomenon not only from the writings of Marx and Engels, who commented frequently on the British labor movement, and from his personal acquaintance with Marxists in England (which he

visited six times between 1902 and 1911), but also from the fullest and best-informed work on the "aristocratic" trade unions of the nineteenth century, Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Industrial Democracy*. This important book he knew intimately, having translated it in his Siberian exile. It provided him, incidentally, with an immediate understanding of the links between the British Fabians and Bernstein: "The original source of a number of Bernstein's contentions and ideas," he wrote in September 1899 to a correspondent, "is in the latest books written by the Webbs." Lenin continued to quote information drawn from the Webbs many years later, and specifically refers to *Industrial Democracy* in the course of his argument in *What Is To Be Done?*

Two propositions may be derived in part, or mainly, from the experience of the British labor aristocracy. The first was "that the subservience to the spontaneity of the labor movement, belittling of the role of 'the conscious element,' of the role of Social Democracy, means, whether one likes it or not, the growth of influence of bourgeois ideology among the workers." The second was that a purely trade unionist struggle "is necessarily a struggle according to trade, because conditions of labor differ very much in different trades, and consequently the fight to improve these conditions can only be conducted in respect to each trade." (*What Is To Be Done?* The second argument is supported by direct reference to the Webbs.)

The first of these propositions appears to be based on the view that, under capitalism, bourgeois ideology is hegemonic, unless deliberately counteracted by "the conscious element." This important observation leads us far beyond the mere question of the labor aristocracy, and we need not pursue it further here. The second proposition is more closely linked to the aristocracy of labor. It argues that, given the "law of uneven development" within capitalism—i.e., the diversity of conditions in different industries, regions, etc., of the same economy—a purely "economist" labor movement must tend to fragment the working class into "selfish" ("petty bourgeois") segments each pursuing its interest, if necessary in alliance with its own

employers, at the expense of the rest. (Lenin several times quoted the case of the "Birmingham Alliances" of the 1890s, attempts at a joint union-management bloc to maintain prices in various metal trades. He derived this information almost certainly also from the Webbs.) Consequently such a purely "economist" movement must tend to disrupt the unity and political consciousness of the proletariat and to weaken or counteract its revolutionary role.

This argument is also very general. We can regard the aristocracy of labor as a special case of this general model. It arises when the economic circumstances of capitalism make it possible to grant significant concessions to the proletariat, within which certain strata manage, by means of their special scarcity, skill, strategic position, organizational strength, etc., to establish notably better conditions for themselves than the rest. Hence there may be historic situations, as in late nineteenth-century England, when the aristocracy of labor can almost be identified with the effective trade union movement, as Lenin sometimes came close to suggesting.

But if the argument is in principle more general, there can be no doubt that what was in Lenin's mind when he used it was the aristocracy of labor. Time and again we find him using phrases such as the following: "the petty bourgeois craft spirit which prevails among this aristocracy of labor" ("The Session of the International Socialist Bureau," 1908); "the English trade unions, insular, aristocratic, philistinely selfish"; "the English pride themselves on their 'practicalness' and their dislike of general principles; this is an expression of the craft spirit in the labor movement" ("English Debates on a Liberal Workers' Policy," 1912); and "this aristocracy of labor . . . isolated itself from the mass of the proletariat in close, selfish, craft unions" ("Harry Quelch," 1913). Moreover, much later, and in a carefully considered programmatic statement—in fact, in his "Preliminary Draft Theses on the Agrarian Question for the Second Congress of the Communist International" (1920)—the connection is made with the greatest clarity:

The industrial workers cannot fulfill their world-historical mission of emancipating mankind from the yoke of capital and from wars if these workers concern themselves exclusively with

their narrow craft, narrow trade interests, and smugly confine themselves to care and concern for improving their own, sometimes tolerable, petty bourgeois conditions. This is exactly what happens in many advanced countries to the "labor aristocracy" which serves as the base of the alleged Socialist parties of the Second International.

This quotation, combining the earlier and the later ideas of Lenin about the aristocracy of labor, leads us naturally from the one to the other. These later writings are familiar to all Marxists. They date in the main from the period 1914-1917, and form part of Lenin's attempt to provide a coherent Marxist explanation for the outbreak of the war and especially the simultaneous and traumatic collapse of the Second International and most of its constituent parties. They are stated most fully in the eighth chapter of *Imperialism*, and the article "Imperialism and the Split in the Socialist Movement," written a little later (autumn 1916) and complementing it.

The argument of *Imperialism* is well-known, though the glosses of "Imperialism and the Split" are not so widely known. Broadly speaking, it runs as follows. Thanks to the peculiar position of British capitalism—"vast colonial possessions and a monopolist position in the world markets"—the British working class tended already in the mid-nineteenth century to be divided into a favored minority of labor aristocrats and a much larger lower stratum. The upper stratum "becomes bourgeois," while at the same time "a section of the proletariat allows itself to be led by people who are bought by the bourgeoisie, or at least are in their pay." In the epoch of imperialism what was once a purely British phenomenon is now found in all the imperialist powers. Hence opportunism, degenerating into social chauvinism, characterized all the leading parties of the Second International. However, "opportunism cannot now triumph in the working-class movement of any country for decades as it did in England," because world monopoly has now to be shared between a number of competing countries. Thus imperialism, while generalizing the phenomenon of the aristocracy of labor, also provides the conditions for its disappearance.

The relatively cursory passages of *Imperialism* are expanded into a rather fuller argument in "Imperialism and the Split."

The existence of a labor aristocracy is explained by the superprofits of monopoly, which allows the capitalists "to devote a part (and not a small one at that!) to bribe *their own workers*, to create something like an alliance . . . between the workers of a given nation and their capitalists *against* the other countries." This "bribery" operates through trusts, the financial oligarchy, high prices, etc. (i.e., something like joint monopolies between a given capitalism and its workers). The amount of the potential bribe is substantial—Lenin estimated it as perhaps one hundred million francs out of a billion—and so, under certain circumstances, is the stratum which benefits from it. However, "the question as to how this little sop is distributed among labor ministers, 'labor representatives' . . . labor members of war industrial committees, labor officials, workers organized in narrow craft unions, office employees, etc., etc., is a secondary question." The remainder of the argument, with exceptions to be noted below, amplifies but does not substantially alter the argument of *Imperialism*.

It is essential to recall that Lenin's analysis was attempting to explain a specific historic situation—the collapse of the Second International—and to buttress specific political conclusions which he drew from it. He argued, first, that since opportunism and social chauvinism represented only a minority of the proletariat, revolutionaries must "go down *lower and deeper*, to the real masses"; and second, that the "bourgeois labor parties" were now irrevocably sold to the bourgeoisie, and would neither disappear before the revolution nor in some way "return" to the revolutionary proletariat, though they might "swear by the name of Marx" wherever Marxism was popular among the workers. Hence revolutionaries must reject a factitious unity between the revolutionary proletarian and the opportunist philistine trend within the labor movement. In brief, the international movement had to be split, so that a Communist labor movement could replace a Social Democratic one.

These conclusions applied to a specific historical situation, but the analysis supporting them was more general. Since it was part of a specific political polemic as well as a broader analysis, some of the ambiguities of Lenin's argument about

imperialism and the labor aristocracy are not to be scrutinized too closely. As we have seen, he himself pushed certain aspects of it aside as "secondary." Nevertheless, the argument is in certain respects unclear or ambiguous. Most of its difficulties arise out of Lenin's insistence that the corrupted sector of the working class is and can only be a minority, or even, as he sometimes suggests polemically, a tiny minority, as against the masses who are not "infected with 'bourgeois respectability'" and to whom the Marxists must appeal, for "this is the essence of Marxian tactics."

In the first place, it is evident that the corrupted minority could be, even on Lenin's assumptions, a numerically large sector of the working class and an even larger one of the organized labor movement. Even if it only amounted to 20 percent of the proletariat, like the labor organizations in late nineteenth-century England or in 1914 Germany (the illustration is Lenin's), it could not be simply written off politically, and Lenin was too realistic to do so. Hence a certain hesitation in his formulations. It was not the labor aristocracy as such, but only "a stratum" of it which had deserted economically to the bourgeoisie ("Imperialism and the Split"). It is not clear which stratum. The only types of workers specifically mentioned are the functionaries, politicians, etc., of the reformist labor movements. These are indeed minorities—tiny minorities—corrupted and sometimes frankly sold to the bourgeoisie, but the question why they command the support of their followers is not discussed.

In the second place, the position of the mass of the workers is left in some ambiguity. It is clear that the mechanism of exploiting a monopoly of markets, which Lenin regards as the basis of "opportunism," functions in ways which cannot confine its benefits to one stratum only of the working class. There is good reason to suppose that the "something like an alliance" "between the workers of the given nation and their capitalists *against* the other countries" (and which Lenin illustrates by the Webbs' "Birmingham Alliances") implies some benefits for *all* workers, though obviously much larger ones for the well organized and strategically strong labor aristocrats among them. It is indeed true that the world monopoly of nineteenth-cen-

ture British capitalism may have provided the lower proletarian strata with no significant benefits, while it provided the labor aristocracy with substantial ones. But this was because there was, under the conditions of competitive, liberal, "laissez-faire" capitalism and inflation, *no* mechanism other than the market (including the collective bargaining of the few proletarian groups capable of applying it), for distributing the benefits of world monopoly to the British workers.

But under the conditions of imperialism and monopoly capitalism this was no longer so. Trusts, price maintenance, "alliances," etc., did provide a means of distributing concessions more generally to the workers affected. Moreover, the role of the state was changing, as Lenin was aware. "Lloyd Georgeism" (which he discussed most perceptively in "Imperialism and the Split") aimed at "securing fairly substantial sops for the obedient workers, in the shape of social reforms (insurance, etc.)." It is evident that such reforms were likely to benefit the "non-aristocratic" workers relatively more than the already comfortably situated "aristocrats."

Finally, Lenin's theory of imperialism argues that the "handful of the richest, privileged nations" turned into "parasites on the body of the rest of mankind," i.e., into collective exploiters, and suggests a division of the world into "exploiting" and "proletarian" nations. Could the benefits of such a collective exploitation be confined entirely to a privileged layer of the metropolitan proletariat? Lenin was keenly aware that the original Roman proletariat was a collectively parasitic class. Writing about the Stuttgart Congress of the International in 1907, he observed:

The class of those who own nothing but do not labor either is incapable of overthrowing the exploiters. Only the proletarian class, which maintains the whole of society, has the power to bring about a successful social revolution. And now we see that, as the result of a far-reaching colonial policy the European proletariat has *partly* reached a situation where it is *not* its work that maintains the whole of society but that of the people of the colonies who are practically enslaved. . . . In certain countries these circumstances create the material and economic basis for infecting the proletariat of one country or another with colonial chauvinism. Of course this

may perhaps be only a temporary phenomenon, but one must nevertheless clearly recognize the evil and understand its causes. . . .

"Marx frequently referred to a very significant saying of Sismondi's to the effect that the proletarians of the ancient world lived at the expense of society whereas modern society lives at the expense of the proletarian." (1907) Nine years later, in the context of a later discussion, "Imperialism and the Split" still recalls that "the Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society."

Lenin's analysis of the social roots of reformism is often presented as if it dealt *only* with the formation of a labor aristocracy. It is of course undeniable that Lenin stressed this aspect of his analysis far more than any other and, for purposes of political argument, almost to the exclusion of any other. It is also clear that he hesitated to follow up other parts of his analysis, which seemed to have no bearing on the political point he was at that time overwhelmingly concerned to make. However, a close reading of his writings shows that he did consider other aspects of the problem, and that he was aware of some of the difficulties of an excessively one-sided "labor aristocratic" approach. Today, when it is possible to separate what is of permanent relevance in Lenin's argument from what reflects the limits of his information or the requirements of a specific political situation, we are in a position to see his writings in historical perspective.

If we try to judge his work on the "aristocracy of labor" in such a perspective, we may well conclude that his writings of 1914-1916 are somewhat less satisfactory than the profound line of thought which he pursued consistently from *What Is To Be Done?* to the *Preliminary Draft Theses on the Agrarian Question* of 1920. In fact, though much of the analysis of a "labor aristocracy" is applicable to the period of imperialism, the classic nineteenth-century (British) model of it, which formed the basis of Lenin's thinking on the subject was ceasing to provide an adequate guide to the reformism of, at least, the British labor movement by 1914, though as a stratum of the working class it was probably at its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

On the other hand the more general argument about the dangers of "spontaneity" and "selfish" economism in the trade-union movement, though illustrated by the historic example of the late nineteenth-century British labor aristocracy, retains all its force. It is indeed one of the most fundamental and permanently illuminating contributions of Lenin to Marxism.