

# CLASSES IN AFRICA

One of the most important tasks which currently face serious analysts is the development of concepts adequate to the analysis of class struggle in peripheral capitalist societies. Thusfar, the attempts at location and identification of classes and class interests in the Third World have been bedevilled by either the direct application of concepts more appropriate to the developed capitalist world, or a rather eclectic and unrigorous descriptive methodology which is of little use in understanding and changing the reality of peripheralised formations. The attempts to understand class formation and class interests in the Third World have a very direct bearing on contemporary struggles, in that they determine possible class alliances - which groups have similar enough interests to ally in the struggle against an enemy with objectively antagonistic interests. This obviously leads directly to the unresolved questions of possible alliances between workers, peasants, the 'national' bourgeoisie, state functionaries, the traditional petty bourgeoisie, etc. This paper is nothing other than an attempt to clear away some of the obfuscating 'wood' in this debate, in the hope that the rejection of certain inapplicable tools of understanding will lead to the development of more adequate ones.

The most common way of looking at class formation in Africa has been through the initial category of the 'labour aristocracy'. This category has been used in a number of differing ways by various writers in assessing the revolutionary potential of the working class, or sections of that working class. A particular confusion exists ab initio, in that the term has been utilised to refer to social formations during different historical periods, and under the impact of different types and fractions of capital (merchants or productive capital, imperial or national capital, monopoly or competitive capital). These differing uses of the category must be isolated before we can begin to consider its specific applicability to Africa.

The initial formulation of the term 'labour aristocracy' was used to refer to the British working class, or a section of that class, during the second half of the nineteenth century (ie during the period of British imperial and colonial expansion). Thus, we see Engels writing to Marx in 185

"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." (1)

Sometime later, in a letter to Kautsky, Engels re-iterates the point:

"You ask me what the English workers think about colonial policy. Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general. There is no workers' party here, there are only conservatives and liberal-radicals, and the workers gaily share the feasts of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies..." (2)

It is in this tradition of imperial expansion, and 'superprofits' derived from the exploitation of cheap labour and raw materials in the colonies, that Lenin is led to describe certain sections of the working class in imperialist social formations as

"craft-union, narrow-minded, selfish, case-hardened, covetous, petty-bourgeois 'labour aristocracy', imperialist minded, imperialist bribed and imperialist corrupted..." (3)

A number of interpretations are possible of the 'classical' position, outlined above:

1 (a). that the whole of the working class in the various imperial social formations is a labour aristocracy with no revolutionary potential, in that the super-profits extracted from the satellised formations allow inflated wage rates to be paid to the 'aristocratic' working class.

(b). that this relationship is only operative regarding the upper stratum of the working class.

2 (a). that, by virtue of an international social division of labour (ie within the very structure of international capitalist production) the group which is usually referred to as the working class in the metropolitan centres is not an exploited proletariat, but is structurally determined as some intermediate group;

(b). that this relationship is only operative regarding an upper stratum of the working class.

3. that, within the structure of national production within an imperial social formation, a 'labour aristocracy' exists vis-a-vis other workers, eg. craft workers organised into craft unions as opposed to the vast mass of unorganised wage labourers in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century.

Much of the current debate on the applicability of the concept 'labour aristocracy' to a group of wage and salary earners in Africa revolves around the validity or otherwise of certain ideas put forward by Arrighi and Saul. (4) However, I suggest that the way Arrighi and Saul use the term in their writings differs from any of the formulations above, which relate to workers within an imperial social formation. Accordingly, it is important to spell out clearly and precisely what the Arrighi-Saul formulation refers to, and, by implication, how the critics of the term 'labour aristocracy' understand its application to Africa.

Unfortunately, many of the critics of Arrighi and Saul's work do not do full justice to the relative complexity of their ideas, which are at least partially located within the tendential nature of capitalist production in Africa. For example, Richard Jeffries argues that Arrighi and Saul

"suggest that only the peasantry produce any significant economic surplus, and that all urban wage earners take part in expropriating this surplus.....It is simply perverse to suggest that skilled manual workers, even if in government employment.... are essentially non-productive." (5)

This sort of summary, and the oft-repeated reference (exemplified below) to an admittedly unrigorous formulation on wage levels, do not do justice to the analysis advanced by Arrighi and Saul:

"Wage workers in the lower stratum are only marginally or partially proletarianised as, over their life cycle, they derive the bulk of the means of subsistence from their families from outside the wage economy. Wage workers in the upper stratum, generally a very small minority, receive incomes sufficiently high (say 3 - 5 times those received by wage workers in the lower stratum) to justify a total break of their links with the peasantry." (6)

More importantly, the very fact that the complexity of the Arrighi-Saul analysis is not detailed, means that the critiques of their position tend to be crude and inadequate, such as the Jeffries method of showing

(a) that the wage differential between skilled and unskilled workers in one industrial area in Ghana is not 3 or 5:1, but 2:1 (7), or  
 (b) that the difference between migrant peasant and fully proletarianised workers' income is not sufficiently large to warrant structural differentiation of the two groups. For example, certain writers in the field claim that

"The essence of the critique of the labour aristocracy thesis as applied to Africa, rests firmly on a questioning on empirical grounds of the view that income differentials between urban households and rural households are as large as often supposed."(8)

These approaches neglect the fact that the location of classes, and their relation to each other in conflict, must initially (but not only) be at the level of relations of production (ie in terms of the relationship of agents to the means of material production, and the production and appropriation of surplus in whatever form it is produced).<sup>1</sup> It is not wages which are the basic determinant of class interests, despite what a whole generation of economistic trade union leaders seem to imply.

With these brief introduction, we can turn to the original Arrighi-Saul formulations.

1). Labour aristocrats in Africa.

For Arrighi and Saul, the 'labour aristocracy' includes not only the semi-skilled or skilled wage labourers involved in production or service industry, but also the bureaucratic elites and sub-elites in Africa. This conception is clearly different from the way 'labour aristocracy' is used by both Engels and Lenin, as outlined above.

The Arrighi-Saul category has largely severed all ties with the subsistence sector (ie it is fully proletarianised, in that it is totally divorced from ownership or control of its traditional means of production, and does not partially rely on the subsistence sector for the reproduction of its labour power).

The labour aristocracy is involved in 'discretionary' consumption which "absorbs a significant proportion of the surplus produced in the money economy." (9)

Absorption of the surplus product produced in the African economy takes place in three differing ways:

- a). export of profits by 'non-indigenous' companies (including multi-nationals and foreign governments);
- b). investment in production, usually in the form of investment in capital intensive techniques;
- c). consumption by the labour aristocracy well above the consumption of goods socially recognised as necessary for the reproduction of labour power.

Arrighi and Saul do not state that all surplus appropriated is produced by the peasantry, although their implication is that at least the majority of the surplus product is appropriated from surplus produced by the peasantry (and they would, I think, include partially proletarianised migrant workers involved in the capitalist production of surplus value under the category of peasant production). This does not necessarily assert that fully proletarianised workers, part of the 'labour aristocracy' category, are not themselves involved in the production of surplus value.

Arrighi and Saul want to argue that, because there is no major land shortage in the subsistence sector, and because that sector has the ability to absorb many more family units than it presently supports, full proletarianisation in Africa is a 'voluntary process', whereby the total severance with the subsistence sector, and full reliance on unsupplemented wage labour, is freely chosen by a worker when he feels that the material rewards in urban-based production will be

higher than that of rural subsistence production.

This 'optional' proletarianisation takes place when

"the incomes derived from wage employment are high enough to make the worker uninterested in the maintenance of reciprocal obligations with the extended family in the traditional sector. More specifically, his income must be sufficiently high and reliable to allow him to support his family in the town and to save enough to insure himself against distress in periods of unemployment, sickness and in his old age. The difference between this income and the low migrant labour wage rate will normally be considerable." (10)

The structure of the post-colonial State bureaucracy tends to ensure provision of such wages and salaries. During the post-independence period very little attempt was made to alter significantly the structure of the colonial administration. The 'Africanisation' of the bureaucracy involved the assumption of the basic salary attached to posts previously held by colonial administrators, and led to a situation of vast disparity between the wages and salaries of the 'bureaucratic elites and sub-elites' and the majority of wage earners.

The vastly inflated wages and salaries paid to the bureaucracies are partially shown in the dramatic increase of government administrative expenses in Africa between the years 1959 and 1962. For example, during this period, Guinea's administrative expenses rose by 80% and Mali's by 60%. (11)

This tendency for the State bureaucracy in Africa to be involved in the wastage of the surplus produced through both inflated wages/salaries, and discretionary consumption, is paralleled by the structure of foreign investment and industrial production. The emergence of a large disparity between wages and salaries of state bureaucrats, and workers involved in non-state production, coupled with the political power of the urbanised wage labourers (partially due to their role in the struggle for national liberation), meant that a steady rise in certain wages followed.

This rise in wages tends to have important structural effects on both investment, and techniques of production. Specifically, a steady rise in wages tends to strengthen the level of capital intensity of investment.

"Capital intensity generally means that labour is a lower proportion of costs, so that the individual concern is more willing to concede wage increases (especially foreign oligopolies which can pass on cost increases to the consumer). However, this reinforces the tendency towards capital intensive (or labour saving) growth and a 'spiral process' may ensue." (12)

However, only a small selection of wage labourers benefit from this 'spiral process'. The growth rate in Africa just prior to, and since independence has been low (the period 1950-65 being about 2% per annum on average). (13) This 'wage mechanisation spiral' has resulted in a relative decrease in the number of people in wage employment, and an ever-widening gap between urban and rural incomes. A majority of wage labour in Africa is partly proletarianised migrant labour, and is unable to acquire the skills and specialisation needed to be productive when combined with capital intensive techniques. These

"peasants temporarily in wage employment, cannot gain from the wage mechanisation spiral.....since higher individual incomes are matched by a reduction in their wage employment opportunities. The higher wages and salaries, however, foster the stabilisation of the better paid section of the labour force whose high incomes justify the severance of ties with the traditional economy. Stabilisation, in turn, promotes specialisation, greater bargaining power, and further increases in the incomes of this small section of the labour force...."(14)

The basis of surplus appropriation by forms of imperialism has changed in Africa. Purchasing labour-power below its socially determined value, or lengthening the working day (which increases the surplus labour time worked, and hence increases the rate of exploitation) has, with the increasing investment of the multi-nationals, become less important than constantly revolutionising means of production (including techniques), and cheapening wage goods, and this form of maintaining a rate of exploitation, and hence profit, needs a small, skilled or semi-skilled, stabilised labour force, to which relatively high wages can be paid.

Accordingly, the nature of multi-national investment and production in Africa tends to reinforce the 'labour aristocracy' in its position of relative privilege vis-a-vis the semi-proletarianised peasantry, and peasantry proper, who jointly constitute by far the majority of producers in Africa.

It is in this context that Arrighi and Saul claim that the labour aristocracy, comprising both fully-proletarianised wage labourers and the bureaucracy, is the 'hegemonic class' in Africa, and that this 'hegemony' is tied closely to the international dominance of finance and multi-national capital.

Highly schematically, then, we may summarise the Arrighi-Saul position as follows: the labour aristocracy

1). consists of an alliance between bureaucratic elites and fully-proletarianised wage labourers;

- 2). is at least partly a result of the maintenance of the administrative wage structure of the colonial period, and the structure of investment and production under multi-national capital;
- 3). absorbs surplus produced by the peasantry, and partly proletarianised peasantry, through 'discretionary consumption' over and above subsistence consumption;
- 4). is fully proletarianised, but that this full proletarianisation is a voluntary process, undertaken only when the urban productive sector is seen to be materially more lucrative than rural, or migrant sectors;
- 5). is the hegemonic class in African social formations.

It should be noted that this position differs in a number of respects to that of Lenin or Engels, who also use the concept labour aristocracy. The two concepts refer to different strata of society, entail different explanations of how and why this stratum emerges, presuppose the dominance of different types of capital, operative in different historical periods. The only major similarity, and hence the confusion, is that to both Lenin-Engels, and Arrighi-Saul, the labour aristocracy is a group which becomes increasingly conservative, and turns its back on the naturally revolutionary potential of the working class.

One final point remains to be made in this section. Arrighi and Saul have, on occasion, been accused of a form of peasant messianism, ie that the peasantry is the social class in Africa most likely to bring about revolutionary change in society. This is based on their suggestion that, within the context of the labour aristocracy thesis, one might do well to examine closely Fanon's assessment of the peasantry as the main revolutionary force. In fact, what Arrighi and Saul say is

"considerable attention must continue to be paid to....(Fanon's) hope for significant transformation in post-colonial Africa (based) upon the peasantry's outrage at widening economic and social differentials....." (15)

Thus the conclusion postulated in some of the literature on classes in Africa - that Arrighi and Saul are totally supportive of Fanon's belief in peasants as the motor of Third World history - is clearly misplaced and exaggerated.

## 2). The Critiques of the Labour Aristocracy Thesis.

The major thrust of the criticisms of the labour aristocracy thesis in Africa has involved the empirical testing of the category against certain specific events. In particular, two case studies of the

Sekondi-Takoradi transport workers strike of 1961 in Ghana (16), are considered important by some in dismissing the concept as being of use (at least in West Africa).

The Sekondi-Takoradi strike material is used to show the basic militancy of the transport workers, and the identification of various other groups (unemployed, migrant workers, women market vendors) with the strikers. The events of the strike themselves are situated within the specific nature of the Ghanaian economy, which at this time, seems to show major differences when compared with the majority of other sub-Saharan societies.

For example, multi-national investment was considerably less than in Kenya or Uganda at this stage. Partially as a consequence of this, and partially due to relatively abundant labour supplies, wages for workers in both government and private sectors have tended to remain depressed over a long period of time. The real wage level of skilled and unskilled workers, considered together as a group, fell considerably between 1939 and 1968 (17). In addition to this, the wage differential between skilled and unskilled transport workers at the time of the strike was something less than 2:1.

In these studies of the Sekondi-Takoradi strike, it is also argued that the real income of transport workers in the area of the strike was not appreciably higher than that of the peasantry. (18) The value of this particular judgement seems doubtful, as it seems an exercise in futility to attempt to quantify, in money terms, what is produced in the subsistence sector, and then to compare it with wages received in an urban productive or service industry. Nevertheless, for the moment we will accept the assertion that there was not a major difference between urban and rural producers in the area at that time.

It should also be noted that Sekondi-Takoradi is a relatively peculiar area in Ghana. It is, possibly more than any other African city (excluding Southern Africa) a working class community, with by far the majority of inhabitants being unskilled or semi-skilled workers. The 1955 Population and Household Budget Survey estimated that about 90% of earnings in Sekondi-Takoradi came from wage labour, compared with 67% in Accra, and 22% in Kumasi (the other major industrial centre in Ghana). (19)

At the time of the strike, about 25% of the total male labour force in Sekondi-Takoradi ( $\pm$  43,000) were employed in the Railways and



and Harbours Administration, the majority of whom were classified as skilled or semi-skilled. The railway and harbour workers tended to work in the closely concentrated harbour area, or the Sekondi railway workshops, and lived in close and regular contact in the railway villages.

To summarise some of the major forces operative at the time of the strike at Sekondi-Takoradi:

- 1). Multi-national investment, with its tendency to strengthen the intensity of capital investment, was less pronounced than in most other African societies;
- 2). Labour supplies in Ghana in general were abundant, and wages for workers in productive or service, government or private sectors, were not appreciably higher than real income in the subsistence sector (this being subject to our earlier reservation regarding quantification in money terms of subsistence produce);
- 3). The wage differential between skilled and unskilled workers was not vast (less than 2:1);
- 4). The Sekondi-Takoradi area has an exceptionally high percentage of earnings through wage labour (90%);
- 5). The skilled and semi-skilled railway and harbour workers
  - a). worked and lived in physically integrated environs;
  - b). in terms of their physical living areas, there was considerable interaction between them and other less skilled workers, unemployed, lumpenproletariat elements, etc. (ie there was very limited residential segregation based on income distribution within the working class).

It was in this context that, in September 1961, the railway and harbour workers in Sekondi-Takoradi staged a seventeen day illegal strike. The immediate reason for the strike was Nkrumah's July budget, whereby

- i). all those earning approximately the wage of a skilled worker, and above, were subject to a 5% deduction as part of a compulsory saving scheme; and
- ii). a property tax would be levied on all houses categorised as larger than 'average'.

Although, during 1961, the real wages of skilled and unskilled workers were lower than those of the previous year, they were still higher than any other year since 1939 apart from the previous year. (20)

Accordingly, there were no unusual pressures of an economic nature on the skilled and unskilled workers, and although the July budget

proposals did affect many of the skilled workers, the nature of the budget did not affect semi- and unskilled workers, nor the unemployed. Jeffries suggests that it is therefore unacceptable to see the strike in terms of a 'labour aristocracy' attempting to maintain its position of relative privilege in the face of austerity measures. Indeed, from the available situational data, it does seem that an explanation at the level of narrow economism is inadequate. The militancy of the striking workers was an important factor:

"The staging of an illegal strike for seventeen days in the face of detention of leaders and threats of military intervention was clearly an intensely militant act - and the enthusiastic support they received from the unskilled workers, market women, and even some of the unemployed.....derived rather from the wider significance these economic issues assumed in the context of the politics of the national labour movement." (21)

The manner in which the strikers put forward their grievances in many ways struck at the basis of the rule of the Congress People's Party (CPP), Nkrumah's ruling governmental party. The protests against party corruption and nepotism, the lack of consultation with the majority of people on issues, the lack of a mass base, and the nature of corruption in the National Housing Corporation, whereby very limited low-cost housing was provided for unskilled workers, all suggest that the strike was an intense expression of class struggle, not merely at the level of economic structures, but at the more conscious level of the political.

It is from this Ghanaian data that certain writers have rejected the notion of 'labour aristocracy' as being applicable to African workers. What an analysis of the Sekondi-Takoradi strike does show is that the notion of an alliance between bureaucratic elites and fully proletarianised workers is open to serious doubt. If, as Arrighi and Saul would have it, this alliance is the hegemonic group in African social formations, the intensity of the conflict between state and strikers would be exceptionally difficult to explain. Even at the level of income distribution, there appears to be a considerable discrepancy between the wages/salary paid to bureaucratic elites, and the wages paid to skilled workers.

"By 1970 the differential ratio of the lowest paid to highest paid in government service was 1:39.....and the failure of wages to keep step with inflation meant that all but the most senior of skilled workers were living on, or just below, the poverty datum line." (22)

but, despite this, the Ghanaian material on the Sekondi-Takoradi strike seems to have to take account of certain exceptional features, as mentioned above, and perhaps all we can validly conclude from it, in terms of the specificity of prevailing economic and other social conditions, is that the category 'labour aristocracy'

a). does not encompass an alliance between bureaucratic elites and proletarianised workers, and

b). does not appear to have applicability to the structural relationships prevailing in a specific industrial centre in Ghana.

I shall return to the sorts of conclusions one can draw from this material below.

The material on the Lagos proletariat (23) is also fairly conclusive on the question of an alliance between proletarianised workers and the bureaucratic elites, but again little definitive data on the structural position of wage earners viv-a-vis other class fractions or strata, emerges.

Lagos also has certain specific productive conditions worth noting. It is an area where wage labour has been long established, and where the workers were actually organised into viable trade unions under colonial rule.

The legislated minimum wage rate for urban workers was, in 1971, £13 per month (£157p.a.), compared with a rural average income of £135p.a. (subject to our earlier objection to quantification of rural production in cash terms). However, the urban minimum wage rate in Lagos was quite specifically stated to be for the reproduction of the labour power of the worker only, not the family unit. This problem is compounded by Peace's rather simplistic assertion that "in my view once a worker enters the factory floor then he is 'proletarianised'". (24)

Accordingly, Peace's work does not really draw an adequate distinction between fully proletarianised workers, and migrant workers partially reproduced through subsistence production.

An examination of the 1970 Adebayo Commission, and actions flowing from its recommendations, will serve to illustrate certain points. The Commission was convened by the Nigerian Federal Government to investigate wages and salaries in view of the "intolerable suffering at or near the bottom of the wage and salary levels." (25)

After a few months of investigation, an interim cost of living allowance (cola) was awarded to all daily wage labourers, and to

various sections of salary and wage earners. This award was made explicitly for workers in the public sector, but a strong recommendation was also made that private investors and employers should implement the 'cola' award. The Federal Government ratified both recommendations, but almost immediately, the Federal Commissioner for Labour exempted all wholly or partly owned expatriate companies from the compulsory payment.

The actual details of negotiations between the unions, government and expatriate management is not relevant here. But what is important is that, after almost a week of procrastination, go-slows and isolated strikes in a few factories, this spread and escalated into widespread strikes and lockouts throughout Lagos and certain industrial estates North of Lagos (the Iketja estates).

The strikes and lock-outs, which are of more fundamental importance to the multi-nationals than limited wage increases, in that their capital intensity ensures that value added by variable capital is a limited production cost, led to a fairly general agreement by the multi-nationals that the Adebo award should be re-extended to the private sector, and the Federal Government re-instated its initial acceptance of the cola award in the private sector.

The first point to emerge from this dispute is that any attempt at suggesting a linear or uncomplex relationship between bureaucratic elites and proletarians is inadequate, unless situated in terms of the different interests of various fractions of capital, the relation of the dominant fraction to the State, etc. Clearly, one cannot simply postulate an alliance between bureaucrats and workers, and where this alliance does exist, it can never be 'hegemonic' vis-a-vis the State.

What is also interesting is the sort of conclusions Peace draws from his analysis of the Adebo strikes:

"Undeniably specific economic interests were the subject at issue....In some ways Lagos workers could be said to be acting in protection of distinct sectional interests on the lines of the labour aristocracy thesis. But such a formulation....is...misleading; it assumes that by pressing for material improvement accruing directly to themselves wage-earners are thereby depriving other groups of the same resources which would fall to them in other circumstances. But, as indicated above, wage increases successfully fought for by the proletariat are generally viewed as acting to the benefit of others in the Lagos area; the amount of money circulating there increases substantially to the advantage of the huge heterogeneous petty bourgeois category." (26) (emphasis added.)

This misconception of the nature of the 'labour aristocracy' thesis is repeated by Peace where he suggests that Arrighi and Saul are basically wrong in their suggestion that

"marginal increments in wages and salaries benefit workers alone when, in effect, such increments have repercussions throughout the urban area and promote economic and political identification between the labour force and non-wage earners." (27)

This error is directly attributable to Peace's earlier-noted misconception about the nature of proletarianisation as process, and his related inability to locate the terms of the debate accurately. The point about the labour aristocracy thesis is not that it claims that salary and wage increases do not benefit groups fulfilling distributive or circulatory functions, but that this aristocracy is seen as appropriating surplus produced by the peasantry and partly proletarianised migrant workers, and accordingly has no revolutionary potential.

The Lagos material, as interpreted by Peace, again seems to assist little in assessing the usefulness of the concept 'labour aristocracy', except inasmuch as it again points to the weakness of postulating the category as incorporating an alliance between bureaucratic elites and proletarianised workers. For the rest, the sorts of conclusions Peace reaches are not necessarily disputed - they just do not address themselves to the specific problem as articulated.

Saul, in a 1973 article (28), and largely in response to the Peace and Jeffries work on Nigeria and Ghana respectively, reconsiders the labour aristocracy thesis as originally developed by Arrighi and himself. He tentatively rejects it on two major grounds:

1). that the distinction between bureaucratic elites and workers is far greater than originally perceived, and that the encompassing term blurs these important distinctions, and

2). that, although proletarianised workers are in a relatively privileged situation as regards migrants and peasants, they may identify 'downwards' with the mass of exploited in Africa, rather than aspiring to junior elite status. This may be partially a response to the inability of capitalism in 'peripheral' areas to provide the material benefits necessary to buy off or co-opt elements of the working class. Saul, while warning against 'proletarian messianism' in assessing the revolutionary potential of the proletariat proper in Africa, ends by accepting the possibly

'progressive' role of those workers previously classified as labour aristocrats.

My comments on Saul's tentative conclusions appear later in this paper.

### 3). The Problem Identified.

We have now noted the formulation, and certain contemporary criticisms of the labour aristocracy thesis as related to Africa. The major critiques of the Arrighi-Saul postulates relate, not to its conceptualisation, but to its inability to account adequately for selected empirical material.

In particular, the difficulty at the level of empirical data in maintaining a clear distinction between the privileged and dispossessed sections of the working class, and between fully proletarianised and migrant workers, has led to a qualified rejection of the thesis. Coupled with the militancy of 'aristocratic workers' in some situations, the identification of migrants and unemployed with the demands of skilled workers, and the increasing gap (both in wages and interests) between the bureaucratic elites and the proletariat, the evidence against the existence of a labour aristocracy in Africa, as formulated by Arrighi and Saul, is strong.

But what exactly is the concept meant to clarify - what is its usefulness intended to be? Essentially, the thesis aims at telling us something about class formation in Africa, and more importantly, about the sorts of class alliances that are possible within a social formation dominated by multi-national investment, together with the operation of capitalism in a 'post-colonial' situation.

In other words, the basis of the problematic is the revolutionary or conservative potential of fully proletarianised workers, migrant workers, peasant producers and bureaucratic elites in peripheral capitalist societies, and the sorts of alliances which may emerge between those groups in the unfolding of class struggle. The real task of the concept 'labour aristocracy' is to tell us something about class location and class interests in the post-colonial formations of Africa.

It is in these terms that both the usefulness of the concept, and the validity of the critiques, must be assessed.

### 4). Fanon and the peasantry.

Perhaps the most explicit protagonist of the peasantry as the group most objectively revolutionary, was Frantz Fanon. Very clearly, Fanon rejects the working class as the bearer of a revolutionary consciousness, and argues that it is the peasantry who are destined to fulfil a revolutionary role.

"The peasantry is systematically disregarded for the most part by the propaganda put out by the Nationalist parties. And it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays." (29)

This glorification of the role of the peasantry is paralleled by a rejection of the proletariat proper -

"It cannot be too strongly stressed that in the colonised territories the proletariat is the nucleus of the colonial population which has been most pampered by the colonial regime. The embryonic proletariat of the towns is in a comparatively privileged position. In capitalist countries, the working class has nothing to lose; it is they who, in the long run, have everything to gain. In the colonial countries the working class has everything to lose; in reality it represents the fraction of the colonised nation which is necessary and irreplaceable if the colonial machine is to run smoothly.....It is these elements which constitute also the 'bourgeois' fraction of the colonised people." (30)

At the same time, Fanon is forced to accept that certain problems exist with conceptualising the peasantry as THE revolutionary group (he seems somehow to locate them outside of class relations!) In particular, the conservative nature of the peasantry, coupled with its isolated existence, makes it possible for the ruling bourgeoisie to utilise peasants for reactionary means. It is in response to this that Fanon introduces his urban revolutionary vanguard - the lumpenproletariat,

"that hord of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan, constitut(ing) one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forms of a colonised people... the gangrene ever present at the heart of colonial domination... the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed and the petty criminals, urged on from behind, throw themselves into the struggle for liberation like stout working men. These classless idlers will by militant and decisive action discover the path that leads to nationhood.....The prostitutes, too.....all hopeless dregs of humanity, all who turn in circles between suicide and madness will recover their balance, once more go forward and march proudly in the great procession of the awakened nation." (31)

The final element in Fanon's 'class' analysis of Africa which we need to detail briefly is the role of the traditional chiefs and

feudal leaders, which he sees as being maintained in their position by the colonisers, but nonetheless possessing a "moral authority over the peasants with whose help they defend the traditional society, which is a source of the strength of the nation." (32)

Although it is admitted that some of Fanon's intuitive insights are more subtle and valuable than those outlined above, we must assess his general analysis rigorously in terms of any explanatory value it may have regarding classes in Africa. His class analysis is so crude as to be all but useless, and seriously misleading. Briefly, one notes the following areas of major weakness:

- 1). The potential of a group (class) in a social formation is not based upon 'what it has to lose or gain' but on its objective position firstly within production itself, and then more completely in terms of its relationship to the structures and practices (ideological, political, legal etc) which constitute society.
- 2). The peasantry is in no ways an undifferentiated mass. Any analysis of the role of rural producers must draw distinctions between
  - a). the rural proletariat,
  - b). migrant workers,
  - c). subsistence agricultural producers 'who are also differentiated),
  - d). capitalist farmers employing wage labour.

Fanon seems to include all of the above in one composite category - the peasantry.

- 3). Fanon suggests that both the peasantry and the lumpenproletariat stand outside of class relations. In general terms, it is totally unacceptable to suggest that any social group stands outside of class relations and class conflict. The totality of relations and structures in a society place all agents into different social classes, and because they are material relations, no agent escapes them.
- 4). The suggestion that a lumpenproletariat may lead a revolution is absurd. This becomes even clearer when we discuss below what may, and may not, constitute a social force.
- 5). The basis of 'spontaneity' which seems integral to revolutionary activity for Fanon is a totally inadequate way of conceptualising the complex unfolding of class struggle, and the strategies, tactics and alliances which this presupposes.
- 6). Given that the material determination of Chiefs and traditional leaders is from within a sector of society dominated by, and subordinated to, capitalist relations, it is incorrect to attribute



anything other than a reactive and backward-looking role to the leaders of traditional society.

We accordingly find Fanon's formulations, while at least having the merit of considering the question of interests (rather than the size of the pay packet), of no assistance in assessing the question of the objective determination of proletarians in Africa.

5). The reaction to peasant messianism - worker wishfulness, or proletarian patronage.

The reaction to the glorification of the role of the peasantry is preeminently found in the writings of Jack Woddis, who puts forward an argument which supports the contention of a revolutionary proletariat. Fundamentally, Woddis argues

1). that the evidence in Africa is that the majority of workers remain "unskilled, casual, migrant low-paid labourers who could in no sense be regarded as 'pampered'".(33)

2). that, in the struggle for national independence, the role of the trade unions and workers was so great and militant as to reflect and instil a sense of revolutionary class consciousness;

3). that, since independence, the unions and workers have become more exploited and in opposition to governments unpopular with the vast majority of the people. Accordingly, the working class, if organised into a revolutionary party, is the leading revolutionary force.

Woddis' position has been summarised as follows:

"There exists within the modern economic sector in Africa an economically exploited working class. This class is socially allied with the rest of the masses. Its unions have generally proven themselves socially conscious and radical, their policies being opposed to the interests of the exploiting classes and oppressive regimes. They are the leading force for the further development of the continent." (34)

The problem with the above conceptualisation (proletarian patronage) is that it rather crudely transports Marxist categories applicable to developed capitalism, to a situation of capital's peripheral operation. The complexity of a working class which has a conventional proletarian role in production, but is within a social formation predicated upon the articulation of both capitalist and pre-capitalist forms of production, is blurred by a dogmatic insistence that analysis is about categories, not methodology.

Clearly, whatever the class situation of proletarians is in Africa, it cannot be identical to that of workers in Western Europe and North America. The very structure of the economy upon which class

formation is based, is different. This difference includes not only a specificity of the mode of operation of imperial capital in one of its forms, but also the existence of a vast number of rural producers who have not been forcibly separated from their traditional means of production. This situation necessitates careful application of the methodology of class analysis to Africa, not the imposition of categories.

6). Some general propositions.

Our survey of some of the material, both conceptual and empirical, on the labour aristocracy thesis, seems to have been of very limited value in telling us anything about classes in Africa. I want to suggest that the problem is actually a conceptual one, and that it is as pertinent to the Arrighi-Saul propositions as it is to their critics.

This incorrect conceptualisation is, I will argue, a function of inadequate statements about classes in social formations, and how they are identified.

The problem with the material which allegedly refutes the Arrighi-Saul thesis is that it is situated on the identical ideological terrain and, implicitly, accepts the same methodological criteria. This means that if the original formulation of the problem was inadequate, the critiques, operating within the same inadequate conceptualisations of the problematic, will reproduce the initial inadequacies.

This sort of methodological proposition is precisely what the important Poulantzas-Miliband debate on the state in capitalist society is about. (35) Poulantzas claims (correctly, I suggest), that by taking standard ideological propositions, and empirically refuting them, one remains within the same ideological constraints as those who put forward the initial propositions. To argue about whether the state is neutral presupposes that it is a matter of import. A redefinition of the problematic, necessarily entailing the production of a different set of concepts aimed at the production of knowledge, would rather ask questions about the nature of the capitalist state's 'bias' in favour of the bourgeoisie. (This is of course subject to the important reservation that the generation of a new problematic, not influenced by bourgeois theory, is a process, and in a way is never ended while capitalist social relations remain).

In these terms, the criticisms of the Arrighi-Saul formulation, which do nothing other than to refute their propositions empirically, are of little use in advancing our understanding of class formation in Africa.

For example, Arrighi and Saul assert that there is a vast income differential between what they want to call 'labour aristocrats', and the mass of semi-proletarianised workers, and that this separates 'labour aristocrats' from migrants in terms of class interests.

Jeffries attempts to refute this by showing that such an income differential either does not exist, or, where it does, it is not as large as Arrighi and Saul suggest. Accordingly, he suggests that the class interests of fully and partly proletarianised workers are more similar than Arrighi and Saul suggest.

but the point is that, in this example, the initial conceptualisation is incorrect. Location of classes and class interests is not done through the relative size of wages received. Wages are a juridical relationship reflective of more fundamental economic relationships, which we call relations of production (the relations men enter into in the production of commodities). These include the relationships of ownership and control over the means of material production, as well as forms of surplus production and appropriation. It is these relationships which, for example, are at the base of the distinction between workers and capitalists. Of course, these economic relationships serve as only the basis of class location. Also important are political, ideological, juridical etc. relations and structures, which go up to determine the totality of class formation. However, initial identification is at the level of relations of production.

If, as in the case of Arrighi and Saul, the initial mode of class location is incorrect, any criticisms of the conclusions reached which does not totally redefine the problematic is of limited value.

This is precisely the difficulty of dealing with the Arrighi-Saul formulation. We can recall that their basic propositions were:

- 1). the bureaucratic elite/proletarian alliance is based on mutually held relatively high salary/wage scales;
- 2). the wage structure of post-colonial states and the multi-nationals reinforces the relatively high income of bureaucratic elites and proletarians;
- 3). the labour aristocracy absorbs surplus produced by the peasantry

through its spending and consumption on goods socially defined as other than 'necessary' consumption;

4). full proletarianisation is on a 'voluntary' basis, undertaken only when wages offered exceed material rewards in the subsistence sector;

5). the labour aristocracy, by virtue of its privileged position and related access to power, is the 'hegemonic' class in post-colonial society.

All these propositions attempt to locate classes on the basis of the size of paypacket, and the debate on the issue, from Woddis to Fanon, from Jeffries to Peace, operates within that accepted conceptualisation. It is for this reason that the debate is so inconclusive and of limited strategic or analytic use.

#### 7). Classes in Africa.

I have already stated my opposition to an economistic conception of class, which locates classes only in regard to economic relations. As Poulantzas has it,

"there are bases of exploitation other than the direct and private ownership of means of production, which involve exploitation of labour.....(O)wnership is intended to convey a social relationship. That includes not only the control and appropriation of surplus....but such political, ideological, legal and other forms that accompany them." (36)

Accordingly, while any attempt at class location must begin at the level of the mode of production (in the sense of determinant economic relations), such analysis must also take into account the complexity and importance of non-economic relations as well. But, within the various African social formations, there exist not just one mode of production, but various residual modes under the dominance of capitalism. This means that the existence of 'pure' classes, as located at the abstract level of the pure mode of production, will not exist, and therefore

"class analysis for an African society must....proceed from the identification and analysis of co-existing modes of production, and from an investigation of the process of interaction or articulation between the modes." (37)

Let me assert, as a working proposition, that capitalism in its 'peripheral' or 'underdeveloped' aspect (which is one side of a transitive relationship of global capital, and not an independent or separate form) tends far less than its developed manifestation to destroy or absorb pre-capitalist forms of production. In other words, there is a complex tendential relationship of conservation-dissolution,

as opposed to a tendency of absorption applicable to developed capitalism. The reasons for this are long and complex. Suffice it to say that this is partially due to the nature of capital initially dominant in Africa (merchants capital), and the nature of its penetration into pre-capitalist forms of production. It also relates crucially to the depression of the value of labour power, whereby the value of labour power is determined at the level of the individual worker, rather than the family unit.

The nature of class location is accordingly very complex, in that one has social classes predicated both on capitalist forms of production, as well as preserved pre-capitalist production. This means that certain groups exist which have no historical existence in eg. Western Europe, except perhaps as residual categories during the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

What I want to do now is to draw some distinctions between differentiated groups within a peripheralised social formation. The first two groups are common to all capitalist formations, while the third possibly has a specificity to Third World societies. Following Poulantzas (38), one can talk of

a). social categories which are groups of agents who exist dominantly by virtue of a special relationship to the non-economic structures and practices of society. Significant examples of social categories are

- i). the bureaucracy, in terms of its relation to the State, and State apparatuses;
- ii). intellectuals, by virtue of a special overdetermined relationship to the ideological apparatuses of the social formation.

b). Class fractions, which are sections of actual classes. A class (as opposed to a category) exists as determined by economic, ideological and political relations in society, ie is a result of the total articulation of the structures and practices which constitute society. A class also only exists in relation to another class, with whom it has an antagonistic relation of conflict. Within a class, or class fraction, one may distinguish between class strata, which relate to non-fundamental indices of stratification. Conflicts between class strata are thus not basically antagonistic, whereas there are important distinguishing features between fractions.

The third and final distinction suggested may be called social strata. By these groups, I refer to collective agents which are predicated upon a combination of modes of production, or are

themselves residual classes from a dominated mode of production. One can include peasants, traditional leaders, etc. in this category, which clearly has a far more direct and pertinent applicability to peripheralised social formations, as opposed to imperial metropolises.

Within the framework of the above, I want to put forward some very tentative comments about certain social groups in Africa. These comments are nothing more than suggestive, in that the purpose of this paper has been to clear the way for a discussion on classes.

a). The labour aristocracy: I suggest that this concept has no explanatory role, and fulfils a distorting function. Fully proletarianised workers, where they occupy a relatively 'privileged' position vis-a-vis migrants are a class stratum, structurally undifferentiated from other workers in the productive process, in that they produce value, and have surplus value appropriated from them. In the case of certain service sectors, surplus labour is appropriated from workers under capitalist conditions of production.

There is accordingly no reason to doubt the potentially revolutionary interests of proletarians in Africa, and there are no structural conditions militating against the growth of revolutionary consciousness. There is also no reason to dismiss the possibility of an alliance between migrants and the proletariat proper. The term 'labour aristocracy' implies that, within the production process itself, there is something structural which differentiates the interests of 'labour aristocrats' from other workers (eg. the distinction between craft workers, and newly proletarianised industrial workers).

Although, in his article reconsidering the labour aristocracy thesis in Africa (40), John Saul seems to have come to similar conclusions, I want to emphasise that his conclusions are based upon a faulty methodology, operating within an inadequately defined problematic. If analysis is to be valid as methodology (ie applicable to more than one specific situation), then the definition of the problematic is vital. It is on these grounds that Saul's analysis is considered inadequate, although, almost by good fortune, he arrives at an adequate conclusion.

Finally, on this point, I am in no way suggesting that a discussion such as this is adequate out of the context of forms of worker consciousness in Africa. I do, however, suggest

that a structural location of classes or class fractions is necessary prior to an assessment of the specific forms of consciousness which may emerge in specific conjunctures.

b). The peasantry: They exist as an effect of the articulation of modes of production. The peasantry proper (ie small agricultural producers, producing primarily for subsistence, but also for the market) is a residual class within a dominated mode of production.

c). The bureaucracy: does not exist as a class itself, but in relation to the State apparatuses; accordingly, it can only be the effect of the State's relation to the structures and practices of society, and to other classes. A bureaucracy's functioning is not determined by its class membership, but rather by the specific nature of the state and its apparatuses.

What remains to be done, and what is not even considered above, is the question of which of these groups, either singly or in alliance with other social groups, can exist as social forces, ie have a direct influence on the events, trends and transformation of a society.

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Note: I wrote this paper in October 1976, and it bears all the problematic marks of a formal seminar paper (including a rather turgid and complex style). Typing it out now, I am aware of disagreements with many of the positions argued 17 months ago. I have, however, not altered it in any material way, and hope that it can serve as a catalyst for a debate on classes in imperialised social formations - vital if we are to fully understand the dynamics of the continent we live in.

Glenn Moss.

Notes:

- (1) Engels to Marx, October 11th, 1858.
- (2) Engels to Kautsky, quoted in Lenin, V.I.: Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism.
- (3) Lenin: Imperialism.....
- (4) See Arrighi and Saul (1968), (1969) and (1970).
- (5) Jeffries 1975a:60.
- (6) Arrighi and Saul 1969:158-159.
- (7) Jeffries 1975:61.
- (8) Sandbrook and Cohen 1975:204.
- (9) Arrighi and Saul 1968:149.
- (10) Arrighi and Saul 1970:121.
- (11) Arrighi and Saul 1968:160.
- (12) Arrighi and Saul 1968:147.
- (13) *ibid.*148.
- (14) *ibid.*148.

- (15) Arrighi and Saul 1969:169.
- (16) Jeffries 1975a.
- (17) Jeffries 1975b.
- (18) Jeffries 1975a:60.
- (19) Jeffries 1975b:270.
- (20) Jeffries 1975a:61.
- (21) Jeffries 1975b:263.
- (22) *ibid.* 276.
- (23) Peace 1975.
- (24) *ibid.* 284.
- (25) cited *ibid.* 284.
- (26) *ibid.* 290.
- (27) *ibid.* 298.
- (28) Saul 1975.
- (29) Woddis 1973:41
- (30) cited *ibid.* 45.
- (31) cited *ibid.* 47-48.
- (32) *ibid.* 53.
- (33) *ibid.* 113.
- (34) Waterman 1975:15.
- (35) see eg. chapter 11 in (ed) Blackburn 1973.
- (36) Poulantzas 1975:3
- (37) *ibid.* 4.
- (38) esp. Poulantzas 1973a and 1973b.
- (39) Poulantzas 1973a:78.
- (40) Saul 1975.

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