BOOK REVIEWS

LUMMIS, TREVOR. The Labour Aristocracy 1851–1914. Scolar Press, Aldershot 1994; Ashgate Publishing Company, Vermont. xii, 190 pp. £35.00.

It would seem difficult for anyone now entering the fiercely contested thirty-year-old debate over the labour aristocracy to find much to contribute that is distinctly new. This, however, is precisely the claim of Trevor Lummis. He proposes what he describes as "a new approach" and, for this reason if no other, his work has to be assessed in the context of this wider debate.

It was, of course, Eric Hobsbawm who was originally responsible for the conceptual rebirth of the labour aristocracy in the 1950s. He first brought together data on the scale of wage differentials in nineteenth-century Britain, produced evidence that they increased in the second half of the century and decreased thereafter and linked the increase to the existence of a unionized skilled elite who pursued sectional policies for their own limited advantage. This appeared to provide substantiation for Lenin's views on the social base of conservatism in the British Labour Movement – as well as for the earlier comments by Marx and Engels on the change in the political temper of British workers between the 1840s and 1860s.

The debate unfolded in three stages. In the 1960s Pelling, Musson and later Hunt concentrated their attack on Hobsbawm's data. They questioned whether wage differentials significantly increased in the later nineteenth century, and, additionally, argued that the skilled workers of that period were in fact more progressive and less imperialist than other sections of the working class. The next stage of the debate was more strategic. Herbert Moorhouse in the 1970s did not dispute the degree to which later nineteenth-century labour leaders collaborated with the two establishment parties. But he differed over its significance and cause. Involvement with the Liberals and Conservatives did not mean the acceptance of bourgeois ideology. Nor was it necessary to resort to economic determinism to explain it. Trade union leaders were responding quite rationally to a system of representation devised to produce exactly that result. It was a political response to a system of parliamentary reform which deliberately sought to cultivate alliance politics by ensuring that wage workers possessed an outright majority of votes in virtually no constituency. The post-modernists of the 1980s and 1990s took this critique a stage further. Joyce, Stedman Jones and McLennan challenged the entire legitimacy of talking about cultural attitudes on the basis of strata defined in terms of questionable economic paradigms. This economic reductionism has, they claim, seriously impoverished the writing of modern social history by concentrating attention on a narrow range of male-oriented and industrially specific concerns at the expense of a fully gendered analysis of the rich diversity of cultural experiences found in later nineteenth-century Britain.

While Dr Lummis himself emerges as a strong critic of the labour aristocracy, he makes clear his disagreement with this last perspective. "To accept", he writes, "that there is no correlation between 'privilege' (that is material advantage) and attitudes begs a crucial question, for to abandon the attempt to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000113719 Published online by Cambridge University Press

link social-cultural and political attitudes to material conditions is to abandon a materialist attitude to history."

The basis of Lummis's "new approach" is to explain political attitudes on the basis of the very material experience of job security. The key determinant of political attitude was, he argues, the degree to which a particular worker enjoyed, or did not enjoy, the privilege of continuing, long-term employment with the same employer. And secure employment was, he claims, by no means restricted to the skilled work-force but was spread among all grades of worker. He instances the docks, gas manufacture and brewing as well as service occupations such as the post office and the railways. No less central for his critique of the labour aristocracy is his assertion that large segments of insecure, casualized workers were also to be found in skilled occupations – and they were no less subject to anti-employer and potentially collectivist attitudes. Hence if moderate political attitudes dominated in the later nineteenth century, this was because of the number and strategic positioning of loyal core workers spread throughout the work-force rather than the exercise of discipline from above by a cohesive stratum of elite skilled workers. Equally if radical attitudes had become somewhat more influential by the end of the century, this was a consequence of economic circumstances which lessened the number of such core workers throughout the work-force.

At least potentially, therefore, Lummis's model does provide an explanation for the generally non-radical politics of the third quarter of the century and the slow development of more radical attitudes thereafter. As an approach it certainly has its merits. It does not seek to explain attitudes in terms of wage differentials themselves. No less important, it permits a diversity of attitude with any particular grade – which, it is argued, matches observed reality far more accurately than the criteria for the labour aristocracy. Lummis seeks to provide a demonstration of this, as well as of the occupational range of secure and insecure employment, by way of a series of short profiles covering engineering, coalmining, docks, brewing, gas, and construction as well as the new type of large-scale and centrally organized service industries such as the railways and post office.

Is this, then, an approach that actually advances our understanding? In general the answer may be yes. Lummis focuses historians' attention on a phenomenon that has hitherto escaped systematic investigation and which today is perhaps particularly topical given current labour market trends towards core work-forces, subcontract and outsourcing. On this he should be congratulated. Specifically for the labour aristocracy the answer may be no. It remains an open question whether "security of employment" can really offer an effective explanatory model.

There is, first of all, the problem of timing. It is not totally clear whether Lummis acknowledges the scale of radicalization in the second quarter of the century, or whether, like Musson and Chalinor, he prefers to believe that a majority of trade unionists remained untouched by Chartism. What is clear is that he fails to provide convincing evidence as to whether, or why, the core of permanent workers might have become bigger in the middle and later years of the century.

Lummis gives four reasons as to why employers might employ a core of permanent workers. One was technological: the need to have at least a limited number of workers of known competence and experience. The second was to

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do with control: the usefulness of a division between permanent and casual in undermining solidarity. The third was a matter of custom. The "last-in, first out" principle would tend towards the maximization of long-service workers inside a firm and to the formation of a residuum of workers outside who were always the first out during trade recessions. Finally, there were certain service industries, such as railways, that needed high levels of experience, punctuality and obedience to function effectively. Only for the last does Lummis demonstrate a secular increase between the 1840s and the 1900s. There might have been an increase on any of the other counts. But Lummis does not prove it. To do so would require much more grounded research than he is able to give us. His occupational profiles are generally short, based on secondary materials and are drawn from a variety of regions over a very long time period. Critically they lack quantification, and are not contextualized in a way that enables us to observe relations between the workplaces and social processes in the wider community.

Second, there is the question of the cultural and political effects of secure employment. Here Lummis's work appears to be somewhat under-theorized. He eloquently describes the centrality of employment to the well-being of a worker and of the working-class family, and rightly argues that this was far more important than any wage differential. But he does not fully explore the potential range of links between security of employment and political attitude. Secure employment might be the result of employer patronage in conditions of otherwise high unemployment, and in this case it might well tend to produce the results that Lummis proposes. But it might be the result of worker control over access to a particular labour market. Or it could be the consequence of wider labour market conditions produced by war, as between 1914 and 1919, or by a political balance of class forces as after 1945. In such circumstances the political consequences of security might be quite different. Even apparently deferential work-forces, previously dependent on employer patronage and acquiescing on poor working conditions, could revolt quite spectacularly when circumstances changed.

To say this is not to take away from Lummis's correct point that security of employment, though listed by Hobsbawm as one of the six criteria for a labour aristocrat, has not been explored as thoroughly as it should. It is simply that employment security cannot act, in our current state of knowledge, as a catch-all explanation for political attitude.

Where, then, does this leave Lummis's critique of the labour aristocracy? He has opened a significant new salient for attack – and it may yet prove that, as he claims, there was as much, if not more, secure employment towards the unskilled end of the labour force. Otherwise, he has not taken the discussion very far. Hobsbawm's data on differentials has never been conclusively disproved. It is not here. Nor is Hobsbawm's general argument associating the politically conservative positions of the skilled unions with the relatively privileged positions of their members. Moreover, in common with other critics, Lummis targets only a somewhat stereotyped and simplified version of the thesis. Hobsbawm published an important restatement of the case in 1970 in which he stressed that the labour aristocracy, as a political formation, had to be seen dynamically. For the 1850s and 1860s he presents the labour aristocracy as a stratum of skilled workers which was able to benefit from a sectional use of the new right to collective

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bargaining. By the 1880s he sees it as taking on a much more bureaucratic complexion, as skilled workers became radicalized and as trade union right-wingers were propped up by parliamentary alliances and the development of welfare policies. This analysis is not mentioned. Nor, even more surprisingly, is the work of Neville Kirk. If the labour aristocracy has a demonstrable origin and rationale, it is most clearly to be found in the profound reassessment of political strategies and values which occurred at both governmental and local levels in the 1840s and 1850s. It is in Kirk's studies of this period that we find the most comprehensive treatment – and one which makes it clear that we are not dealing with some mechanical linkage of wage differentials to politics but rather a politically negotiated and tactically contingent conferment of rights that were themselves as yet of uncertain consequence.

Overall, therefore, Lummis's contribution is not to the debate on the labour aristocracy. It is to social history more generally, and the book might have been better entitled Job Security and Politics in Victorian Britain: an exploratory essay.

John Foster

WEINER, MICHAEL. Race and Migration in Imperial Japan. [The Sheffield Centre for Japanese Studies/Routledge Series.] Routledge, London [etc.] 1994. xi, 278 pp. £37.50.

Japan is said to be one of the most homogeneous societies on earth and unusually resistant to migrant labour from overseas. Indeed, until illegal workers from other Asian countries appeared in great numbers in the late 1980s, the Japanese had repeatedly rejected the possibility of employing "guest workers" during the post-war era. Michael Weiner reminds us that Japanese labour markets were not always so closed. The nation's most significant twentieth-century encounter with foreign migrants occurred before, not after, World War II, as large numbers of labourers journeyed to Japan from Korea, a Japanese colony from 1910 to 1945. This is not the first account of resident Koreans in Japan. The author himself has written another book on the Korean community. This is, however, the first English-language study to analyse how the construction of "race" affected labour in Japan before 1945. Weiner also offers an informative, well-researched account of aspects of Japan's colonial administration of Korea and their impact on both the migration of Korean workers and the hostile reception that awaited them in Japan.

The author, a historian of Japan, does not use Korean-language sources, and this, of course, tends to muffle the voices of Korean workers. Nevertheless, Weiner draws extensively on seldom-used reports by Japanese police and social affairs agencies, and he offers readers in the West, to date, the most comprehensive examination of the conditions of Korean labourers in Japan and their relationships with Japanese workers and the state.

At the theoretical level, the study challenges earlier work on minorities in Japan that generally accepted "race" as immutable and unproblematic. Weiner argues that "racial ideology and policies are neither fixed in content, nor simply a consequence of capitalism or late-nineteenth-century imperialism" (p. 12). Consisting of a loose set of often contradictory discourses, Japanese racial

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