A New Focus in African Worker Studies: Promises, Problems, Dangers.

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Résumé


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In the 1970s, argument on African workers and unions was largely dominated by the 'labour aristocracy debate'. As first expounded for Africa by Arrighi and Saul (1973), the labour aristocracy thesis was that the 'proper proletariat' of industrial workers was economically privileged above, socially isolated from and politically opposed to the 'semi-proletarianized peasantry' consisting of casual and migrant labourers. The first were seen as identified with the local elite and sub-elite and with the international capitalism they served, the second with the mass of the peasantry. The first category was thought of as essentially conservative, the second as at least potentially radical.

I have completed a study of Lagos port workers (Waterman 1983) intended to provide both an empirical and a theoretical refutation of this thesis. My argument runs as follows. It is true (as other critics of the thesis have asserted) that the labour aristocracy theory is empirically falsifiable: its economic, social and political assertions are simply wrong, or inadequate, or misleading. However, the problem underlying the empirical error is one of misconceptualization: the concept and its binary opposite (the semi-proletarianized peasantry) have ambiguous and shifting referents, and they represent a logical rather than a sociological dichotomy. Underlying this misconceptualization are methodological errors (which other critics have also partially noted): 1) the imposition of dichotomic oppositions in place of a dialectical approach to the working class as both structure and process; 2) a crude economic determination of working-class behaviour and consciousness. The thesis has, moreover, conservative political implications. Since Arrighi and Saul consider the

* This paper is taken in large part from the conclusion to my Ph. D. thesis (Waterman 1983: 340-356), for which I am presently seeking a European or Nigerian publisher.
labour aristocracy conservative and the semi-proletarianized peasantry rebellious but unreliable, the leading role in the building of socialism in Africa must be consigned to someone else. There is thus inherent in this theory the danger of encouraging bureaucrats or intellectuals to impose their development strategies or political perceptions on those most capable of resisting them (the workers), in the name of those least capable of doing so (the semi-proletarians and peasantry).

As a more satisfactory starting point for dealing with the real problem that the labour aristocracy theory mystifies, I suggested in my work that proletarianization is everywhere—and always has been—a matter of the simultaneous division and unification of the wage workers. It was therefore necessary to examine not only the positions of workers within the division of labour but also their positions within the division of labour existing inside the working-class movement itself (Poulantzas 1975: 36). The rest of my study was concerned with carrying out such an examination. What I hope to have done is less to have refuted the labour aristocracy theory than to have surpassed its terms.

One of my conclusions, however, was that such myths are killed off less by direct attack than by a shift in intellectual interest. It is with such a shift in African labour studies that this paper is concerned.

The works I have selected for consideration all have a direct relationship to labour in West Africa, even if the last of them represents a reflection on research in other parts of the capitalist periphery also. Collectively they reveal a change in the focus of attention, that constitutes a welcome broadening from the terms of the labour aristocracy debate but also carries a certain danger of side-stepping crucial issues raised by that debate. In terms of approach, purpose and method they are varied—there are amongst the authors cited marxists, marxisants and a traditional orthodox sociologist. But I am here less concerned with establishing my own theoretical position against theirs than in identifying the practical implications of the shift that they all represent.

The four works to which I shall refer are those of Meillassoux and Bagayogo (1980), Sandbrook (1981), Peil (1981a) and Bromley and Gerry (1979). The first is one of the few studies in French on the working

1. The studies of both Sandbrook and Peil are based on or drawn from research that has later appeared in greatly extended book form. I received these books as I was drafting my paper and regret that I have been therefore unable to take advantage of their findings here. Sandbrook (1982) not only provides a masterly survey and synthesis of research on urban problems and classes in Africa but ends with a chapter directly addressing the strategic options facing both African and international labour movements. Peil (1981b) presents a mass of survey data on West African cities which will certainly provide us with a far better basis for understanding of social relations amongst the urban poor than heretofore. I hope on another occasion to give them the attention they deserve.
class in Africa, and also one of the few drawing on the experience of francophone West Africa. The second deals with Africa in general but draws quite heavily on studies of West Africa, and even refers specifically to workers in Lagos port. The third is based on a survey of West African cities and suburbs, and includes a study of the Lagos district of Ajegunle in which Lagos port and dock workers live. The fourth is itself a collective and comparative work on casual labour in peripheral capitalist towns, but one of the authors deals with a West African city, and the introduction and conclusion to the work inevitably refer to the relationship between different types of labour. Let us consider them individually before discussing them collectively.

Meillassoux and Bagayogo: A Dependency Model

The purpose of Meillassoux and Bagayogo (1980) is, at least in part, to establish whether, under present conditions, ‘le prolétariat africain [...] est [...] susceptible de “se transformer” et d’évoluer vers la constitution d’une classe sociale ouvrière entièrement et organiquement liée au développement du capitalisme’ (p. 6). The present conditions are characterized as the predominance of the national and international migration of peasants, working in the cities or abroad for international capitalism, but dependent on their impoverished villages for security and reproduction:

‘Partagé entre son pays et le pays qui l’emploie, ou entre son village et l’entreprise dans laquelle il travaille, le prolétaire africain ne vit cette condition qu’imparfaitement. Ce prolétariat n’est africain que géographiquement, par l’origine ou la nationalité. Économiquement, c’est toujours un prolétariat “étranger”, c’est-à-dire employé et exploité en quasi-totalité par le capitalisme européen ou américain. Son appartenance économique est distincte de son appartenance nationale et politique. Bien que formé de citoyens d’États réputés indépendants, son emploi et sa rémunération dépendent de décisions prises par des entreprises presque toujours étrangères ou transnationales’ (pp. 5-6).

Meillassoux and Bagayogo state that whilst it is in the long-term and general interest of capitalism to bring about complete proletarianization,
it is in its short-term interest to have a good part of the labour costs borne by the non-capitalist sector in the villages. Within the cities one sees the development of a dual labour market: one is for relatively skilled and stabilized labour, which must therefore be provided with social security and pay sufficient for urbanization; the other is for unskilled labour, which can be paid a below-subsistence wage and be either allowed or forced to return periodically to the village. However, to this double labour market there corresponds a triple division of the proletariat:

Meillassoux and Bagayogo then investigate the extent to which the proletariat in Africa is 'integrated', drawing on evidence from Mali and Senegal. They consider as indicators of such an integration the stability and continuity of employment, the nature of wage payment (piecework, daily, weekly, monthly), access to social security services and capacity to organize. On this basis, and after examining the complex and differentiated labour and social security legislation inherited from the French, they determine that over eighty percent of Malian workers in the modern sector are not integrated, and that in Senegal an overwhelming and growing majority of such workers share this status. These findings, however, take no account of the second type of industrial enterprise in Africa, the tiny labour-intensive productive or service workshop in the so-called informal sector. Taking the case of Lomé (Togo), they find that the 'modern' part of this sector (wood, metal, building, electrical and mechanical services) provides for twenty percent of industrial wage employment and if unpaid apprentices are included fifty percent of industrial employment in this city. The apprentices are drawn from outside the capitalist or modern sectors and, indeed, are required to pay for their apprenticeships. But this type of modern informal enterprise is providing a service to the large-scale modern sector by: 1) purchasing from it over-priced inputs, and 2) providing it or its workers with cheap goods and services. The authors conclude: "La subordination de l'économie domestique au secteur "non structuré", lui-même directement dépendant du grand capital, réfute les thèses sur la nature non prolétarienne des
travailleurs des villes et des campagnes d’Afrique qui ne relèvent pas du salariat. Il s’agit bel et bien d’un prolétariat puisé et renvoyé en permanence dans le marais de la surpopulation relative’ (p. 47).

Turning to the matter of organization, Meillassoux and Bagayogo lay stress on the weakness of trade unions only resting on the tiny industrial proletariat. Although unions based on the integrated fraction of the working class did exist in colonial times, and although unionized workers together with non-workers did show themselves capable of action leading to some successes, these unions were subjected after independence to destruction or incorporation. Today, therefore, ‘Les principales actions politiques populaires viennent désormais des milieux scolarisés et universitaires, étudiants et enseignants, sans que la jonction avec la classe ouvrière ait réussi à se faire véritablement. Ainsi la défense de la fraction intégrée du prolétariat se fait mal à travers un syndicalisme faible, tandis que celle des autres fractions prolétariennes ne passe par aucune organisation de masse’ (p. 51). The unions set up in the colonies by the Confédération générale du travail (the French Communist-controlled trade union centre) were on the European model, and failed to take into account the minority nature of the African proletariat: ‘Faute de s’atteler à l’organisation des milieux ruraux et d’établir la liaison avec la paysannerie, les liens organiques entre l’économie domestique et le salariat urbain sont restés strictement privés. Ils n’ont jamais été mis en évidence ni pris en considération dans les programmes revendicatifs des syndicats ouvriers’ (p. 49).

In a number of ways Meillassoux and Bagayogo seem to be offering us an up-dated, if more nuanced, version of the Arrighi and Saul thesis. This is not so much because of their use of the labour aristocracy category, since they confine it to the integrated supervisors and technicians, and do not in any case make any further use of it. The similarities lie in: 1) the underlying dependency model, with capitalism primarily seen in terms of external impingement and expropriation; 2) reliance on economic analysis and categories in determining the nature and role of the working class; 3) reduction of such economic relations largely to market and consumption relations. Thus, the process of class formation is largely reduced to that of commercialization and proletarianization, i.e., what capital is doing to labour. Similar also to Arrighi and Saul is their way of defining worker consciousness and behaviour neither by research nor by reference to the literature but by assertion. What Meillassoux and Bagayogo have added to the earlier thesis is: 1) arguments concerning the destruction/preservation of non-capitalist forms in the interest of capitalism; 2) related arguments (and, here, evidence) on the dual support provided by the ‘informal sector’ to the capitalist one; and 3) a somewhat different and more complex model of the division of the proletariat. These new elements make the paper worthy of consideration, be it only in terms of hypotheses to be tested. What we are in fact presented with
is an image of the incorporation of petty-commodity production (both rural and urban) into a national and international capitalism, at the same time as the classical process of proletarianization is being blocked. One does not have to accept the particular models used (of enterprise scale, labour markets or proletarian status) in order to recognize the generality of the semi-proletarianization portrayed. But should we then be worrying about the incapacity of the proletariat to become a class entirely and organically tied to the development of capitalism? Where this process has largely taken place, in the industrialized capitalist countries, it has not (yet?) implied capacity to destroy and surpass capitalist relations. Should we not rather take the structuring of the labour force in Africa as a datum and lay out the capacities and potentialities for anti-capitalist struggle in this situation? Unfortunately, Meillassoux and Bagayogo confine their analysis of labour struggle to unions and strikes, and, then, do not even take into account (or mention) the major post-independence strikes in ex-French Africa—Congo-Brazzaville 1963 and 1968, Senegal 1968, Madagascar 1972 (for which, see Sandbrook 1981). Nonetheless, this should not be taken as disqualifying their conclusion on the restricted character of the traditional trade unions, or the implication that one needs to find forms of organization that will link the different parts of the labour force.

Sandbrook: Eurocentric

If Meillassoux and Bagayogo can be criticized for their failure to directly deal with the non-economic in analysing relations between labouring people in Africa, this can hardly be said of Richard Sandbrook (1981). His purpose is to establish whether a ‘social-democratic or revolutionary role’ is likely to be played by the working class in the peculiar circumstances of contemporary tropical Africa (p. 1). To do this he considers in turn the limits of proletarianization, the labour aristocracy theory, populism amongst the workers, and the possibility of ‘worker political consciousness’. This implies a comparison of the African working class with its European (or Russian) forebears. Sandbrook first asserts the incomplete proletarianization of even the stable wage force, which remains tied to the village through retention of land rights, through remittances and on retirement. For him, the whole working class is a semi-proletariat, the worker having both ‘traditional’ ties and interests in the village, and urban ones with respect to employment, wages and prices. Yet, the unions make ‘no connections between sociopolitical grievances and the workers’ specific industrial grievances and protests. Obviously, the political effect of such an orientation on the part of powerful sectors of the working class is to stabilise the development of peripheral capitalism’ (p. 4).
Sandbrook then discusses whether such an orientation can be explained by the labour aristocracy theory. He questions the logic of the theory as well as its economic determinism, and makes an empirical critique which draws on both well-known and more recent evidence concerning income differentials, living standards, etc. This critique is followed with more empirical evidence concerning urban residence, life styles and aspirations shared with the rest of the urban poor, and the issue of multiple job roles and job circulation amongst urban labourers. If, Sandbrook concludes, 'economism is a common tendency among organized labour in Africa, the labour aristocracy thesis provides no general explanation for this' (p. 13). In the section on populism he first argues that the lack of worker radicalism has been due to the absence of a 'vanguard group', and to the fact that, in both the colonial and contemporary periods, unions (above the grass-roots level) have been essentially incorporated into the State. Nonetheless, 'in some parts of Africa, segments of workers have evolved at least a "populist", if non-revolutionary, political consciousness that transcends economism' (p. 15). Placing here populism above economism but below revolutionary consciousness, he also argues that populism is not a specifically working-class consciousness: it is rather the consciousness of the underprivileged as a whole, who hold the elite responsible for their sufferings and invest all virtue in the common people. Whilst populism provides a limited guide to effective political action, it has stimulated and found expression in major general strikes. In such strikes, which have occasionally brought governments down, were expressed the demands not only of the workers but of the urban masses more generally. Sandbrook thinks that this indicates a capacity for rebellion but not for revolution. He therefore asks about the possibility for the development of a working-class political consciousness - implying the notion of an 'economically dominant class enemy' and the idea that 'control or transformation of certain economic and political institutions through collective action' is to bring the necessary change (p. 23). He sees the existence of long-established communities of dockers, railway and mine workers as providing a firm basis for populism, and the growth of factory employment as likely to extend this. But even with further proletarianization we cannot assume the development of a common working-class consciousness: 'In any specific case study, one needs to explain why, if workers' experiences on the job are similar, they develop a differential consciousness' (p. 23).

Sandbrook points out as general politicizing or depoliticizing forces ethnicity, occupational community and education. A politicized ethnicity he finds compatible with a trade-union or populist consciousness, but not with a 'working-class political consciousness' (p. 25). Occupational community (e.g. of miners or railway workers) can reinforce a working-class identity, especially if a labour group is ethnically homogeneous, and can spread working-class attitudes to non-workers living around
them. Finally, the educated workers can gain consciousness through their disappointed expectations, and form a stratum that could provide leadership to the less educated workers. In conclusion, says Sandbrook: ‘Any study of the political potential of African workers should focus upon the links between these and elements of the petite bourgeoisie, subproletarian and peasantry. Under current conditions, any popular movement limited to workers is unlikely to have much long-term impact’ (pp. 27-28).

It is evident that Sandbrook is trying, at the continental (or halfcontinental) level, to come to terms with the consciousness and behaviour of empirical (as distinguished from theoretical) African workers and trade unions. Rejecting the labour aristocracy theory, he attempts to find more adequate concepts to deal with a more complex reality. His treatment of residential community, of ethnicity and of education as forces influencing class consolidation and expansion also encourages a more sophisticated and differentiated study of African workers. The main question left is whether his conceptualization is adequate to the analysis of this new data and to the proposed new subject area. Sandbrook is one of the major critics of the labour aristocracy theory, and one of the few who identifies its conceptual shortcomings, but he does not attempt to get to its roots, and therefore does not feel it necessary to develop an alternative conceptualization. He accepts, though not uncritically—the standard Leninist formulae: the economic and the political (with or without quotes), truly working-class politics as either reformist or revolutionary (and populism, therefore, as non-working-class). His major qualification is that the two dichotomies must be converted into a trichotomy or a spectrum by the insertion of populism between them. But, as already indicated, populism is not simply above economism in the hierarchy of working-class consciousness, it is also to one side—it is a consciousness common to the labouring poor, crude, limited, etc. Sandbrook links it with peripheral capitalism, early industrialization and unsuccessful rebellion. He raises here a crucial issue for the understanding of working-class consciousness, and of the political relations between differentially proletarianized workers. He reveals the problem of a worker consciousness that is simultaneously more advanced and less working-class than ‘economism’. The solution to this puzzle would seem to lie in a recognition of the necessity for worker demands to be articulated with those of other classes and non-class social groups resisting capital and State (Laclau 1977: 143-199; Afonso 1980; Laclau & Mouffe 1981). Given the increasing impotence of both social-democratic and communist (revolutionary?) strategies in Europe and elsewhere: an impotence increasingly admitted by those within both traditions, the question of whether the populism of the West African working class is less advanced than the other strategies: ideologies remains an open one. In order to be able to understand the political potential of the African working class, it would seem to me
that we shall have to devote as much attention to the internal relations in the labour movement and to its history as to the class itself. Sandbrook has done this elsewhere (Sandbrook 1975, discussed in Waterman 1977), but here national union centres appear rather as instruments of State, and as anti-working class, than as a terrain of struggle between workers (or even the grass-roots union organizations) and capital. And analysis slides from workers struggling against unions, to 'powerful sectors' of workers whose orientation is such as 'to stabilise the development of peripheral capitalism' (p. 4). Finally, I wonder whether Sandbrook's implicit understanding of the 'political' in terms of control over the State does not prevent him from estimating the extent to which grass-roots political struggle by workers has obstructed the development of peripheral capitalism—to such a point that the State has been obliged to attempt to incorporate their organizations (for a rural parallel in West Africa, see Van Hear 1983). These qualifications made, one cannot but endorse Sandbrook's conclusion on the limitations of purely worker actions, and his insistence on the necessity to study relations between these movements and those of the rest of the urban and rural labouring people.

Peil: Orthodox Categories

The purpose of Margaret Peil (1981a) is to demonstrate that the incorporation of workers into hometown-, kinship- and residence-based relations 'severely limits the development of an organised working class and even widespread commitment to trade unionism on a continuing rather than a sporadic basis' (p. 72).

Basing herself primarily on social survey data, she considers in turn the relations of wage earners (and self-employed workers) with their workmates, their kin and other friends. After showing the variety of occupations and employment sectors in the eight towns surveyed, Peil declares that 'craft guilds are often more important than unions for skilled workers'; that although unskilled dock workers do strike, 'they have tended to seek individual rewards through theft or smuggling, rather than participating in group action' (p. 77); that teachers have been the most militant government workers in Nigeria; and that white-collar workers have often provided literate leaders for the unions. In a more direct analysis of union membership, she claims that unions are 'of negligible importance to a large majority of urban residents' (p. 79); that they attract mainly the easily organizable (miners, railway workers, teachers); that members get little for their dues and often 'do not see the union as the logical place for [...] defence' (p. 81). Her survey suggests to her that unions are irrelevant even to the majority of potential members, since they were hardly mentioned when questions were asked about
membership of voluntary organizations in general or trade unions in
particular. Furthermore, the presence of top-level administrators
within workers' unions is viewed as likely to discourage militancy. 
Overall, the data provide convincing evidence that unions as presently
constituted do little to raise the class consciousness of the majority of
workers (p. 84).

Looking at informal contacts amongst workers, M. Peil suggests that
these are more important than union ones, but she also finds that they are
most developed amongst professionals, least amongst the least urbanized,
educated or skilled. Contacts with kin and homeplace are strong amongst
workers, particularly for those with most to gain from them (entrepre-
neurs and older workers). In all four industrial towns surveyed, 'primary
associations' (ethnic, family, clan and hometown) have memberships
much higher than all kinds of occupational associations: 'Some members
attend meetings of these societies once or twice a month, whereas once a
year or only in emergencies is enough for attending trade union meetings'
(p. 89). Peil finds that most people spend considerably more time with
co-tenants and neighbours than with workmates. Speaking of friends,
she finds that half the interviewees have one or more workmate friends,
commonly met at work, that such ties are more permanent than those
with non-workmates, but that these friends are often chosen for other
reasons, such as shared ethnicity. Furthermore, there are many cross-
class friendships and 'work is less important than either home or urban
experience' in the selection of friends (p. 95). Her conclusions are the
following: 1) 'Society probably has a much greater effect on the workplace
than vice versa' (p. 99); 2) there thus appears to be severe limitations on
the spread of class consciousness 'from large bureaucratically-oriented
workplaces to the general population'; 3) the workmates who do become
friends are often selected on 'ascriptive grounds'; 4) 'If changes in social
structure must await the development of mass movements arising from
workplace relations, they will be very slow in coming. Increasing
inflation and economic differentiation, blocked mobility and the level of
responsiveness of national and local government to public demands, will
probably affect the rate at which class consciousness develops in these
societies to a greater extent than the influence of workers in industry or
trade unionists. So far, these data seem to explain quite well the
"conservatism" . . . and "populism" . . . of West African workers'
(pp. 100-101).

Like Sandbrook, Peil tries to shift the locus of studies of African
workers from the workplace to the wider community. Unlike him, she
does not deem any theorization to be necessary, establishing her position
primarily on the basis of empirical, and primarily survey, data. She
could, indeed, be understood as making an implicit criticism of the
methodology employed by Sandbrook (or myself) when she declares of
worker and union studies that:
an historical or statistical approach which concentrates exclusively on records or an informant approach which relies on union activists is likely to give a false impression.

A problem that has dogged much of this research is that most of those engaged in it have had no systematic training in survey methods. While a few have tried small surveys, they know little about the techniques of conducting or analysing them and instinctively mistrust them. As a result, the marginals from less than 100 interviews, often with poorly framed questions, tell us little about how the majority of workers feel about trade unions. Surveys can tell only part of the story, but they would be an invaluable supplement to balance the data' (p. 80).

This is no doubt true, both in the negative criticism and in the positive recommendation, and one cannot but endorse the necessity of following up studies based on other methods with rigorous social surveys of workers as Peil here advises and has elsewhere (1972, 1981b) carried out. The addition of such methods to the armoury of radical research on African workers has certainly added to their impact (Sandbrook & Arn 1977; Lubeck 1979, 1981).

Is the problem, however, simply one of expertise and rigour, or is it also one of the combination of survey with other evidence, and of the general theoretical approach and conceptual equipment of the researcher? Such matters have been vigorously debated by specialists of African workers problems in the 1970s (Jørgensen 1977; Waterman 1978; Konings 1978; Sandbrook & Arn 1978). Although Peil does not make her own theoretical approach explicit, it is evident that she is operating within an orthodox sociological paradigm. She employs such terms as 'traditional norms', 'primary associations' and 'ascriptive grounds', which imply a traditional/modern dichotomy, and contrasts 'industrialising societies' with industrialized Western ones (characterized as 'post-capitalist') (p. 99). Her survey methodology also falls within an orthodox sociological tradition as she considers any identified social structure or factor as an 'independent variable' for the study of behaviour and consciousness.

Yet there would seem to be serious problems about applying the concept 'traditional' to West African villages, deeply incorporated into the national and international capitalist economy in the ways that Meillassoux and Bagayogo have suggested, and subject to world-market fluctuations, to State marketing boards, taxation, police and public schooling. Secondly, does one not need to present an argument for treating certain social structures as independent variables if one is not to give the impression of a uni-directional and structural determination of the social process? It is certainly possible to argue that industrial and occupational structures are themselves shaped by class attitudes and struggles, but survey research carried out within the framework of such
an explicit assumption will evidently produce results different from those based on another.

What Peil's survey does do is to supply additional evidence of the incorporation of West African workers into kinship, residence, friendship and rural relations outside the workplace. This confirms the argument of Sandbrook and is of utmost importance. But neither her survey nor her use of other authors would seem to support the string of assertions about unions, or the relations of workers with unions, or the influence of unions on urban labour in general. Her argument is supportive of the labour aristocracy theory insofar as it stresses the leadership dominance of white-collar over other workers, union membership of top administrators, the non-organization of unskilled dockers, the irrelevance of unions for the raising of class consciousness. But the assertions she makes, or the image she creates, is in conflict with most of the research which has been carried out on for example -Nigerian workers recently (Waterman 1983; 23-25, 49-54). Even the two works she cites on the conservatism and populism of these workers (Waterman 1976; Sandbrook & Arn 1977) were rather concerned to demonstrate the relative radicalism of organized workers than the opposite. This is not to detract from the relevance of her conclusion on the limits to consciousness-raising of unions 'as presently constituted' in West Africa. But it is to suggest that we need to combine direct observation of relations outside the workplace with those inside both the workplace and the unions. And it is to argue that it is necessary to carry out such studies on the basis of an explicit model and methodology.

Bromley and Gerry: Developmentalist

The work of Bromley and Gerry (1979) is a collective study of casual labour in Third World cities, to which they both make contributions and add a joint introduction and conclusion. Although the collection deals with labour rather than labourers, and although it concentrates on casual labour, it is obliged to consider in detail at least the economic relations between this massive category and that urban minority in regular wage employment. And it does spell out certain political implications of such relations. I will present in turn their approach, their economic analysis, their political analysis, and the implications for action they draw from these. Bromley and Gerry are concerned to reject the traditional assumptions underlying reformist/idealistic (i.e. current international agency) strategies for 'informal sector' development at the capitalist periphery, and to replace the category 'informal sector' itself. They

2. The argument concerning Bromley and Gerry is largely drawn from Waterman 1984.
reject the dichotomic opposition of formal and informal sectors, proposing instead a continuum running from 'stable wage-work' to 'true self-employment' (p. 5). We thus get a typology stretching from: 1) true or indefinite-period wage work, through 2) short-term wage work or casual labour, 3) disguised wage work (e.g. outworkers, commission sellers), 4) dependent work (dependency for credit, rental of premises or equipment for supplies or sales), to 5) true self-employment. Such a typology of labour (which can be applied by analogy also to enterprises) permits, the authors argue, an examination of the relations between large and small enterprises, between enterprises and workers, between the State and the labour process more generally. Why the State? Because of the significant role played by law in distinguishing between wage work (category 1 and, to some extent, 2) and non-wage work (the other categories). It is, more specifically, legislation which marks category 1 off from the rest. The 'normal' wage contract provides for some or all of the following: 'minimum wages, regularised working hours, fixed overtime payments, "minimum notice requirements" for both employer and employee, paid holidays, sickness benefit, redundancy pay, life insurance, and even access to subsidised consumer purchasing, mortgage, and public housing arrangements' (p. 8). Loss of work is 'normally' (their emphasis) compensated for by various forms of social provision (sickness benefit, various forms of insurance, redundancy pay, pensions, unemployment benefits, etc.) (p. 9).

The replacement of dichotomic opposition by a spectrum of employment statuses is certainly more realistic. The authors' treatment of the role of law in the structuring of the total labour process is an important addition to what has been said by Meillassoux and Bagayogo. What is still open to question is the manner in which both innovations are used to divide—in dichotomic opposition—'stable wage-work' from all other types of labour. They do qualify the opposition by their use of the word 'normal' with respect to the security of the 'stable wage-workers', but they then use this implied status to contrast it with 'the remainder of the continuum' (p. 5). I will return to this later. In terms of the economic relation within the cities, what comes over most strongly from Bromley and Gerry is the intimate interrelation of large-scale foreign and local capitalist production on the one hand, and even the smallest-scale artisan production on the other. In his own contribution, dealing with forward and backward linkages of petty production in Dakar, Gerry shows the extent to which even some 'traditional' crafts are dependent upon inputs (and imports) from large capitalist producers. In terms of the process occurring within the petty-production sector, Gerry shows the increasing trend to proletarianization:

'Such relations may lead to formerly "independent" petty producers losing all but nominal control of their production, them-
selves becoming little more than wage-workers, even though a pretence of autonomy is kept up on both sides [. . .] this process may be partial, intermittent and, in the present context, sometimes appear to operate, in reverse. In this latter case, the process of proletarianisation has not ceased, but has merely become more covert [. . .]. Nevertheless, the fundamental mechanisms of exploitation (both through the labour process and the market) will be the same as in the factory. . .' (p. 246).

Gerry adds the 'small but noticeable' trend in the direction of 'capitalisation', but he stresses the limits to such a development not merely in the numbers who can benefit from it but in the distance they can travel. The transformation is to petty capitalism, not to large-scale industrial production.

Because of the concentration of the Bromley-Gerry collection on the economic relationship, it has little to say about the political one. The overall image projected is one of the individualism, competitiveness and apathy of the petty producers (p. 248), and the conservatism and self-interest of the regularly employed. What political implications do the authors draw from their findings? Although distancing themselves somewhat from the term 'aristocracy of labour', they do in fact twice present organized wage workers as privileged, self-interested and opposed to the rest of the poor. Having, in their introduction, opposed 'stable wage-work' to other types of labourers, they argue as follows:

'The tendency of government to respond to pressure from trade unions, associations of civil servants, the armed forces, the police, and other organised groups of workers with a degree of job security, and the pressures exercised upon governments by international organisations (and particularly the International Labour Office), tends to lead to an increasing provision for regulated job security. At times provision may be extended to new groups of society, but the stronger tendency is for provision to remain concentrated upon a minority of workers, and to be improved for them, further differentiating this group from the casual workers. In many cases, industrial trade unions, the armed forces, and other organised groups who have attained a degree of job security, tend to behave as vested interest groups, concerned to preserve and improve their privileges, rather than to express solidarity with the large numbers of less privileged workers engaged in a variety of forms of casual employment' (p. 9).

And in their conclusion they talk of 'a select group of coopted workers who contribute substantially [. . .] to the continued impoverishment of their less-favoured colleagues among the casual poor' (p. 309).

Sceptical of the political capacities of both the casual labourers and the regularly employed, Bromley and Gerry initially appear just as sceptical
of the progressive potential of State strategies. These are treated as suicidal by Gerry, who considers that if Third World governments continue with present policies toward the labouring poor ‘their days will be numbered’ (p. 248). The overall pessimism with respect to positive State policies, and the threat of mounting mass discontent in Gerry’s account, are not matched by any evidence that the labouring poor are capable of toppling the regimes, nor any advice to them on how they might be able to do so. It seems as if an orientation (either positive or negative) toward the State as the only possible political power leads the editors of this work to precisely that blatant idealism they hope to avoid: ‘If we are to move from a world in which the manifest objectives have a strong chance of success [. . .] a revolution in policy making is essential [. . .] [which] [. . .] could prepare the ground for the attainment of authentically developmental objectives which would match the aspirations and potentialities of the mass of the population’ (p. 307).

It is most interesting to rediscover Bromley and Gerry a set of features similar to those in Arrighi and Saul (1973) almost one decade earlier. There is the critique of an earlier model as simplistic, the attempt to reconceptualize the problem in primarily economic terms, the, yet undemonstrated, assertion of a conflict between the regularly wage employed and the rest of the poor, and one is left only with the State as a deus ex machina to solve the problem for the powerless or selfish labourers. Let us just reconsider the logic of the Bromley-Gerry argument. Firstly, whilst they recognize the problematic nature of the security and privileges of indefinite wage work and the increasing instability of wage employment in the Third World (pp. 15-19), they nonetheless use these as the criterion on which to base an opposition. Secondly, whilst they admit the relationship between categories 1 and 2 (both wage work, both recognized in law), do they not fail to acknowledge a crucial further one, that both are engaged in co-operative labour within capitalist enterprises? Thirdly, in discussing the political mechanism by which relative security is achieved by certain sectors of the wage labour force, Bromley and Gerry group trade unions not only with civil service associations, but also with the army and the police—two types of wage labour whose function (and not only at the capitalist periphery) is partly to repress restive wage workers.

It would then seem that the replacement of a dichotomy by a spectrum is insufficient to overcome the shortcomings of the labour aristocracy theory. What would seem to be needed is not—or not only—a finer or longer scale for the identification of differential wealth or security within a national or international capitalist system but: 1) the identification of

3. Curiously enough, one of the significant differences from the Arrighi-Saul model is precisely that replacement of a dichotomy by a spectrum that Saul himself (1975: 310, fn. 13) had recommended.
labouring people as the source of the power and wealth that is used (differentially) to manipulate them; 2) a theory of class relations within different modes/forms of production; and 3) a direct examination of the political struggles of labourers within these forms, and of the relations of such struggles to each other. The combination of a model of relations between modes/forms (Gerry) and these other elements would enable one to analyse the significance of differential position within the wealth/security hierarchy. And it would also suggest both the possibility and the necessity for the combined protest of labouring people. The possibility of such a combination is demonstrated not only by such rare occurrences as social revolutions, but also in the increasing numbers of urban uprisings and general strikes brought on in the 1970s and 1980s by the proletarianization process Gerry indicates, and in such modest complementary (if separate) worker protest actions as those shown in my own study (Waterman 1983: Part IV).

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At the beginning of this paper I said I was interested in the practical implications of the recent works reviewed. Here I would like to try to identify both their positive and negative implications. I think that the most important contribution that they make is the identification of a new problem area. This shift of attention will contribute to the death of the labour aristocracy theory. The new problem area is that of the relations of the better-paid and more-securely employed wage earners with other labouring people, either 1) as urban residents, or 2) in terms of relations on a wage non-wage axis, either urban or rural, or 3) as all— but differentially—semi-proletarianized. With the explicit addition of relations between wage-earning men and women (wage earning or not), this suggests not only a broad terrain for research but a wide area for political activity in creating an anti-capitalist movement. If full proletarianization is blocked in the manner that most of the writers reviewed suggest, this need not be seen only as a disqualification for effective anti-capitalist struggle. As Gould (1979: 30) has pointed out, whilst working-class struggle is ‘the main locus of overt, organised anti-capitalist struggle’ even at the periphery of capitalism, we can and need to ‘seek out aspects of the “non-capitalist” social structure which can play a positive role in deflecting the onslaught of capital’.

The second important contribution of these writers lies in their critique of trade unions ‘as presently constituted’. The implicit or explicit argument here is that union forms and strategies based on European models are irrelevant to the pattern of proletarianization in contemporary Africa. This point is acceptable providing it is recognized that traditional trade union forms are also increasingly irrelevant to contemporary patterns of proletarianization in Eastern and Western Europe. For
Eastern Europe this has been vividly demonstrated by the rise of Solidarity in Poland, and its attempt to link urban and rural workers within its folds (Szlajfer 1981). In Western Europe it lies more in a recognition of the immobility and impotence of the unions, and in suggestions of the necessity for a broader social role (Ross 1981). This said, we are still left with the necessity to fashion alternative forms of organization and action appropriate to the particular structure and capacities of African labourers. This will require research, discussion and above all experimentation by the movement itself. So much for the positive aspect of the new studies.

What of the negative side? Firstly, a cautionary note: I am wondering whether the new focus on the wage/non-wage axis does not mean an abandonment of certain other terrains of research and struggle with which my own work has been concerned. The first is that of workplace organization and struggle itself. In the case of both independent and racist Africa, there can be no doubt that the workplace is 'the main locus'. We therefore need more studies of both the institutionalized and overt forms of worker protest (such as this one has been) and of its informal and 'hidden forms' (Cohen 1980). Another terrain which will require continued attention is the axis running 'up' to the intermediate salaried strata (Wright 1976) it is no use shifting up the concept of labour aristocracy, or analysing the people in conventional historical terms as simply middle class. Examination of this axis is necessary for several reasons. In the first place, it is amongst such strata that much of the power and knowledge denied those in routine clerical or manual labour is concentrated. In the second place, the contradictory status of these strata means that they can potentially be won by the labour movement. In the third place, paid union leaderships can and do stand in an analogous position to workers within the labour movement as do the middle strata within society more generally. Study of the manual/mental division, in other words, is necessary for the extension of worker control both over their own organizations and over the society as a whole.

Another shortcoming of these studies is, I feel, the lack of a comparative perspective. This is implied above where I refer to the international crisis of traditional union forms. All the writers tend to view the problem of relations between different kinds of workers or labouring people as a specifically African (or 'Third World') one. In so far as comparison is made, it is with European models that are either implicit (real proletarianization) or presented in an uncritical or idealized fashion (social-democracy and communism as really working class). It may be for the same reason that struggles not only of the unions but of the workers themselves and of other popular forces are seen (excepting Sandbrook with respect to the workers) in a pessimistic light. Comparison is here either explicitly or implicitly being made with a model of reformist or revolutionary achievement elsewhere in the world. However, recent studies of,
for example, the West European and American working class and labour movements have themselves been increasingly demonstrating divisions either identical or analogous to those identified by our authors (Edwards 1979; Leggett 1971). There has also, of course, been increasing recognition of the limitations on post-revolutionary regimes in Europe, Asia and Africa itself. This does not mean that we should return to either proletarian or peasant or 'lumpenproletarian' messianism. But reference to international experience may enable us to avoid both a messianism that will lead to adventures and disappointments and a pessimism that inevitably leaves the power of social change to the rich and powerful.

One final problem with the studies is connected with this last point. It is that (with, again, the partial exception of Sandbrook) even the socialist writers amongst this group do not see the problem of division primarily as a policy problem for the labour movement. Unless one addresses oneself either explicitly or implicitly to the existing social movement, one is likely to be providing information or advice—explicitly or implicitly—to the rich and powerful. Addressing oneself to existing organizations is a problem fraught with traps and dangers. But it does require one to come to terms with the movement as it exists, with its capacities and shortcomings. And, in our case, this does mean accepting that trade unions are still the only organizational form that African workers have and the only permanent and effective organization of labouring people in Africa.

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