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*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

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## **NORTHERN THEORY, SOUTH AFRICAN ENGAGEMENT: TWO HISTORICAL EXAMPLES FROM LABOUR STUDIES**

**Ercüment Çelik**  
Institute of Sociology  
University of Freiburg, Germany.

[Ercuement.Celik@soziologie.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:Ercuement.Celik@soziologie.uni-freiburg.de)

**Abstract**

*Is Southern theory formation a process of engagement, critique and transformation of Northern theory from a southern perspective, or a process of alternative and autonomous theory formation? What is the importance of particularizing and expanding Northern theory, in the historical development of South African labour studies? This paper attempts to deal with these questions by analysing the scholarly engagements with Northern theory in the labour aristocracy debate. The paper first, reviews the mainstream theoretical approaches and identifies the key dimensions of 'labour aristocracy' mentioned by various scholars. Second, it attempts to consider these dimensions in the South African case. By focusing on the works of Rob Davies and Frederick Johnstone as well as of some other scholars, the paper underlines how the definition of labour aristocracy in South Africa could be different from the European ones, and how a local/authentic aspect, 'race relations', could be integrated into the debate based on 'class relations'.*

**Keywords:** labour aristocracy, Northern Theory, South Africa, race relations

## I. Introduction

The engagement of the South African scholars with the Northern theory is a significant part of the analysis of the circulation of knowledge in the historical study of the South African labour movement. In his work on the life and work of Edward Webster, a prominent South African sociologist and labour scholar, Burawoy (2010) underlined the importance of particularising and even expanding Northern theory in the development of a “Sociology of the South”. Webster particularised Northern Theory, as Burawoy explains, in two ways: “First, he deploys Northern theory in the South to reveal its very different significations. What is conservative in one place may be radical in another. Second, he has taken Northern theories and shown that they are false when applied to South Africa” (p. 22). Another approach to Southern engagements with the Northern theory is presented by von Holdt (2012) in his engagement with the work of Pierre Bourdieu on social order. Von Holdt mainly argues that

*it may be more productive to think of southern theory formation as a process of engagement, critique and transformation of Western theory from a southern perspective, than as a process of alternative and autonomous theory formation ... Such engagement constitutes a double process of both enriching analysis of a society of the global South, and challenging and transforming Western theory (Abstract).*

In light of these approaches, this paper aims to explore the South African engagement with Northern theory in an example from labour studies. This engagement is explored in the *labour aristocracy debate*. By considering mainly the works of Davies (1973) and Johnstone (2000), this part underlines how the definition of labour aristocracy in South Africa could be different from the European ones, and how a local/authentic aspect, ‘race relations’, could be integrated into the debate based on ‘class relations’.

## II. The Notion of Labour Aristocracy

### II.1. Northern Approaches

The labour aristocracy is a concept referring to an upper and favoured stratum of the manual working class and it is the basis, for many Marxist scholars, of an explanation of working-class activity in Victorian (1837-1901) and Edwardian (1901-1910) Britain, including the years up to the World War I<sup>1</sup>. In his comprehensive and lucid review of the Marxist theory of the labour aristocracy, Moorhouse (1978, p.61) states that it is a key concept in many Marxist understandings of “the un-making of the British working class - as far as any quick, heroic, revolutionary role was concerned”<sup>2</sup>. This expression was applied to the highly-skilled and (consequently) strongly-unionised stratum of the working class that was economically, socially and politically allied to the middle class of the time.

Linder (1985, p.37) states that no author prior to Lenin recurred so frequently to the notion of labour aristocracy as Jones, who was a key figure in Chartist movement and known as one of Marx and Engels’ closest British political friends. He believed that the skilled artisans, receiving superior wages and organising under trades formed the aristocracy of labour. He was convinced that the unionism of these trades had weakened the democratic and socialist movements by having destroyed working class unity. As Waterman (1975) states, in 1858 Engels referred to the English proletariat as ‘becoming more and more bourgeois’ and in 1892 to the skilled artisans in the ‘great Trades Unions’ as forming an ‘aristocracy among working class’ (Marx and Engels, 1953 as cited in Waterman, 1975). As Linder (1985, p.45) remarks, Engels’

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<sup>1</sup> Although the contemporary debates are crucial to understand the development of this notion, our focus will be on the more historical debate referring to the abovementioned period.

<sup>2</sup> The approaches of Hobsbawm (1968, 1970), Foster (1974), Hinton (1965, 1973) and Gray (1976) in this part are reviewed by and taken from Moorhouse (1978).

original contribution was, for the first time, to postulate the existence of a “special form of the labour aristocracy” comprising an entire national working class, the English proletariat, and to point out England’s world market position as its source. The tendency toward working class embourgeoisement would be strengthened if an economic depression did not materialise. Hence, the labour movement should have assumed more radical forms of expression during the 1850s.

Lenin developed this notion during the First World War in his work on imperialism. Explaining the reformism and nationalism of the majority of European labour movements faced by the war, he argued that a “privileged upper stratum of the proletariat in the imperialist countries lives partly at the expense of hundreds of millions of members of uncivilised nations” (Lenin, 1959, p.312, as cited in Waterman, 1975, p.58). Hence, Lenin linked imperialism and colonial/imperial super-profits with the labour aristocracy and argued how these profits made possible a chain of ‘bribes’ from labour ministers to labour officials. This also led to a trade union consciousness marked by a narrow economism which essentially accepts the basic framework of capitalism. Hobsbawm (1968, 1970) who has been one of the main sources of the theory of the aristocracy of labour, follows Lenin and constructs these links further. Imperialism and its super-profits, combined with a changing technology and occupational structure, led to the dislodgement of the labour aristocracy as a special privileged stratum. The labour aristocracy arises, “when the economic circumstances of capitalism make it possible to grant significant concessions to its proletariat, within which certain strata of workers manage by means of their special scarcity, skill, strategic position, organizational strength, etc., to establish notably better conditions for themselves than the rest” (Hobsbawm, 1970, p.208, as cited in Moorehouse, 1978, p.62).

Hobsbawm essentially focuses on the period between 1840 and 1890 in Britain. He identifies in this period certain type of workers, who were in a position to make or keep their labour scarce or valuable enough to strike a good bargain, and to gain benefits, to a large extent, at the expense of their less favourable colleagues (1968, p.322). He makes his analysis on the basis of six criteria: the prospects of social security, the conditions of work, the relations with social strata above and below, the general conditions of living, the prospects of future, and the level and regularity of earnings. As Moorhouse (1978, p.63) argues, there is little doubt that Hobsbawm's labour aristocracy is to be defined mainly by the sixth criterion, its high and regular wages, and that these wages are held to be the causal impetus behind conservatism, class collaboration and derogation of lower strata. Hobsbawm (1968, p. 316) identifies "an aristocracy of labour enjoying special privileges and therefore inclined to accept the views of its employers". This aristocracy merged with the lower middle class not only on the basis of the level of their earnings, but also by developing a similar political attitude that devotes to Liberalism and failed to form an independent working-class party. Hence, we can underline first, that this aristocracy was economically privileged and their privileges were based on the structural subordination of the other workers; second that, besides their economic interests, their political interests merge with the interests of the higher strata, the lower middle class, which is the world of small shopkeepers, independent masters, managers, clerks, etc.

Another approach to labour aristocracy comes from Foster (1974), who stresses authority at work, not high wages, as the key dimension of the labour aristocracy in the same period. He argues that the labour aristocracy should be seen as the more or less conscious creation of British bourgeoisie, a device used to contain and control upsurges of working-class radicalism (Moorhouse, 1978, p.64). Foster's explanation is based on social control that was crucial for the

bourgeoisie to maintain its class dominance. This was achieved in the industrial organization by creating a privileged grade within the labour force, the labour aristocracy. Foster sees labour aristocracy as a new phenomenon, a labour force in engineering that demanded not just the creation of a whole new grade of supervisory taskmasters, but the elimination of an old grouping, the highly paid autonomous craft elite. For him, this old grouping has often been mistaken for a labour aristocracy, although there is a major difference between the new labour aristocracy and old craft elite: “while the self-imposed work routine of the craft worker served to insulate him from employer control that imposed by the technological demands of the new industry equally firmly identified the skilled worker with management” (Foster, 1974, p.229). Hence, these privileged taskmasters and pacemakers were the central institution of the new labour force and the new system of social control (Moorhouse, 1978, p.65).

This social control is also linked to the labour aristocrats in terms of their working-class leadership. Hinton (1965) sees labour aristocrats as a socially and politically articulated group distinct from the rest of the working-class. According to Hinton (1973, p.57), the structural conflict of interests between the aristocrats and the rest of the workers reflected on the politics of working-class in the mid-Victorian period. He links the political role of aristocrats with the character of trade unionism, which further shapes the working-class movement. Economic privileges which made the labour aristocrats the leaders of the labour movement, assure that they would lead the workers corporatively, as a subordinate, and not as a revolutionary class. Hence, they could never embrace the working class as a whole, and develop a politics of working class hegemony. In other words, the growth of a distinct, self-conscious group of labour aristocrats sharply divided from the mass of manual workers, became the spokesmen for the whole working

class, and so the working-class politics of this period were very much the politics of the labour aristocracy.

In his examination of labour aristocracy, Gray (1976, p.2-3) also argues that these upper strata of the working class largely defined the aspirations of the labour movement in this particular period. However, he goes beyond the objective consequences of economic differences between workers and stresses the articulation in socio-economic experience with the structures of ideological hegemony, and with the formation of a labour movement. The features of this kind of elite based on the industrial structures peculiar to the late Victorian period were the development of, first, a social identity which could be explained on the bases of community, patterns of housing, participation in voluntary associations etc.; and second, their domination in the institutions of the labour movement far more completely than other groups of highly paid groups. Moorhouse (1978, p.78) remarks that Gray sees the role of the labour aristocracy in forming the nature of the political side of the British labour movement analytically distinct from the phenomenon of the embourgeoisement and 'professionalization' of labour leadership. But at the same time, he considers them to be intimately related, and complementary rather than alternative explanations. For Gray (1976, p.188), labour aristocracy heavily influenced the moderation of the Labour Party and the first reason why the labour leaders tended to be reformist, having the moderate and accommodative outlook, was the general hegemonic ideology in the society in Victorian Britain, and the absence of any strongly articulated counter-ideology. This ideological hegemony was also the reason why the members were ready to accept compromises negotiated by leaders and why they did not formulate more ambitious demands. Second reason was that their role in the party was distinguished from that of the 'professional' leaders, by its voluntary character, as union and party activists, municipal representatives etc. Moorhouse (1978, p.79)



thinks that this is an abridgement of the labour aristocracy concept from skilled workers to party activists. Gray thirdly suggests that the power and traditions of the institutions of the labour aristocracy, i.e. the skilled unions, affected later organizations. It was due to this organisational and ideological heritage that the potential for a mass socialist party with a clearly defined programme became ‘transmuted into Labourism’.

It is commonly accepted that the notion and discussions of labour aristocracy is an ambiguous one: “‘labour aristocrats’ could apparently be either the working class as a whole, a section of the working class proper (skilled artisans), other wage earners (clerks), members of certain unions, or trade union or other labour leaders” (Waterman, 1975:58). However, we can still identify some core aspects attributed to labour aristocracy in these approaches. In addition to the studies of the British case by all authors, Linder’s (1985) study on continental European aristocracies, including American and South African cases, assures that skill was the element common and essential to all national labour aristocracies. The possession and control of relatively complex manual industrial skills was the basis upon which the peculiar position, role, privileges and power of national aristocracies rested. Linder (1985:236) further argues that “although this skill-base in some instances coincided or overlapped with ethnic (Austria-Hungary), racial (South Africa), religious (Ireland) or regional (Italy) proximate sources of working class divisiveness, the latter functioned authoritatively only insofar as they served to circumscribe the success of those segments of the class which might realistically have aspired to the status of the skilled”. In these approaches presented above, skill was connected to higher wages, to a social identity, and to a particular interaction of this stratum of workers with the petty bourgeoisie as well as with the lower strata of workers. What was argued as to be new was a scope of political expression associated with the interests of this stratum of workers that

neglected or even developed at the expense of the whole working class. Thus, this debate has a main focus on weakening effects a labour aristocracy did have on the revolutionary progress of the working class. At the same time, it points out the absence of an appropriate framework for analysing the socio-economic and hence political perspectives of a privileged stratum, which could also help to understand the general political tendency within the working class regardless of these divisions (Linder, 1985; Moorhouse, 1978; Waterman, 1975). Furthermore, social control takes a very important place in this debate with regard to the emergence of a labour aristocracy. Yet, there is no substantial agreement on whether this was a creation of the bourgeoisie.

## **II.2. South African Engagement**

The notion of labour aristocracy was applied by some Northern scholars in the 1960s and 1970s to post-colonial Africa. These studies argued that labour aristocracy is situated in the most advanced sector of the economy rather than in the artisanal trades. This privileged stratum is seen as one elite group among several competing for consumption advantages rather than as a social stratum involved in a contradictory position within two classes (Linder, 1985). For instance, a well known study by Arrighi and Saul (1973, in Waterman 1975) focused on the ‘proletariat proper’ consisting of the skilled and semi-skilled manual and clerical working class demanded by the capital-intensive investments of international capitalism and by the complex administrative apparatus taken over from colonialism. These authors found a consistency between the interests of international capitalism and the African elite, sub-elite and ‘proletariat proper’, which they collectively referred to as the ‘labour aristocracy’ of Tropical Africa. As Waterman (1975:71) underlines, these and all other scholars accepted the concept of labour

aristocracy. However, they were not able to clarify the suspicion about this notion. Moreover, they too did not investigate the problem of “the active agents of conservatism among the working class”. This led to a particular attention and importance given to the analysis of the South African case.

Departing from this background, this part intends to explore how the South African scholars in the 1970s engaged with this theory of aristocracy of labour, mainly developed through the analysis of the British case<sup>3</sup>. It will be demonstrated that their engagements refer to the studies of a local case that actually provide an extraordinary clarity about the existence of a labour aristocracy. As there is a general suspicion on the notion of a ‘labour aristocracy’, it is counted very significant to prove that the white South African workers might be a case to explain how a section of the working class lives on the surplus produced by another (Scanner, 1973; Linder, 1985; Waterman, 1975). Hence, it can be seen firstly, as a contribution to the general theory that is based on the particular and local South African case. Secondly, by bringing a new dimension, ‘race relations’, to the labour aristocracy debate, it shows how an aristocracy of labour merges with an aristocracy of colour. By demonstrating the existence of an authentic labour aristocracy, namely the white manual workers of the Apartheid Republic, it also underlines how white class interests were different from those in European countries. At the same time, it interestingly connects the history of skilled labour both in Britain and other British-settled colonies with the one in South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

It should be noted that it was not only in South Africa, but also in other British-settled colonies such as North America and Australia, the superimposition of racial and ethnic dimension gave rise to markedly variant mechanisms of privilege. However these cases of

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<sup>3</sup> The focus of this part is limited to the debates in the 1970s and does not include the focus of contemporary debates that range from union officials to organized/unorganized or formal/informal labour.

national labour aristocracies were not examined at length (Linder, 1985:240). Moreover, there are significant differences of these cases in comparison to South Africa. As Allen (2000) explains, from the beginning of the European settlement in 1652, the whites had to forge a relationship with the large indigenous black population on which it relied for labour power. But, blacks were not willing participants and they resisted being absorbed into what whites described as their superior civilisation. Immigrants from Europe preferred to go to North America rather than live in a hostile relationship with a large black population. It was the increasingly desperate need of white settlers for labour power, which they could not satisfy without the involvement of the vastly larger, uncooperative and culturally distinct black population, marked southern Africa off from most other colonised territories. Hence, indigenous blacks were forced into a relationship with whites, which they did not want. From the time that diamond and especially gold were mined extensively in the 1880s, every young black male in southern Africa was regarded as a potential mineworker. Briefly, black people could not be ignored in the industrialisation process in South Africa, as the freed black slaves were in the USA or the aborigines were in Australia. Focusing on the differences among these British-settled colonies, Linder (1985, p.230) states that in the USA after the American Civil War in principle released black slave labour for industrial capitalist exploitation, mass immigration of Irish and non-English speaking Europeans was systematically encouraged. In Australia, the absence of a large aboriginal population, whose destruction or expropriation might have created strong ties between workers and capitalists/landowners, as well as the antagonisms between the largely convict immigrant population and the ruling classes, did lead to the emergence of a militant labour movement which, favoured by the high costs of immigration and the lack of large-scale industry, was able to thwart attempts by employers to organize mass immigration. In addition, a

connection between Australia and South Africa, which will be elaborated later, must be mentioned here that immigrant British trade unionists in South Africa, many of whom were influenced by discriminatory attitudes nurtured in Australia, advocated the introduction of racial discrimination long before institutionalised Afrikaner nationalism (Katz, 1976).

In conjunction with a growing critique of Apartheid both from and outside the universities in the 1970s and 1980s, many academics involved in labour history and produced knowledge that corrected some of the biases of traditional labour history in South Africa. It was not a coincidence that many of these major works, such as Davies (1973), Johnstone (1976), Simons and Simons (1969), van Onselen (1976), Wilson (1972) dealt to a large extent with class and race dimensions of labour in the mining industry. It can be said that the system of industrial relations that emerged during the first three turbulent decades after the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886 was to shape South Africa's industrial development for the rest of the century (Webster et al., 2000). Hence, a short look at the changes in the social structure from the discovery of gold would be helpful to understand the sources of unskilled and skilled labour in the early stages of industrial development.

The discovery of gold and inflow of foreign capital into mining resulted in declining benefits for white farmers. Among others, as a result of these clashes of interests, the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 destroyed the rural settler economy of Afrikaners and accordingly large numbers of Afrikaners were forced to move into towns and began to seek jobs in urban areas. The majority of this new urban white population was unskilled and quite a large number were illiterate. The existence of this unskilled white urban population, in other words, the growing poor white problem led to a reinforcement of the demand for a segregated pattern of industrial relations (Davies, 1973; Katz, 1976). Diamond mining (which started earlier than gold mining)

required little skill at the beginning, but as more scientific methods of exploitation were introduced in the 1880s, skilled miners had to be imported (Linder, 1985). With the inflow of capital and technology came an inflow of skilled white labour, mainly men from the mines of Cornwall and Northern England, as there was a general lack of qualified labour in South Africa (Davies, 1973). As Katz (1976) adds, many skilled Australians too immigrated to South Africa and they were influential on the development of trade unionism. Linder (1985) argues that at the outset the relationship between the skilled whites and the unskilled blacks bore some resemblance to that between labour aristocrats and the unskilled in England in respect of the underlying economic mechanisms; but as non-whites gradually acquired the experience and skill required for certain occupations, and as unskilled Afrikaners seek jobs as unskilled labourers in urban areas which had theretofore been performed by native Africans, certain groups of Europeans developed a “sectional interest...to exclude native competitors” (Van der Horst, 1942 in Linder, 1985, p.232). Besides the competition with blacks for employment, this also meant a reduction in white wage levels related to the huge gap in the prevailing standards of living between whites and blacks. The ratio of white to non-white labour on the Witwatersrand was approximately one to seven in 1894 and 1895, and one to nine in 1899 (Van der Horst in Katz, 1976, p.16). Katz (1976) emphasizes that gold mining industry was built up on the basis of a highly-paid skilled white labour force together with a vast substratum of cheap migrant non-white labour; overseas miners and artisans were paid high wages, but they were not inordinately high when related to the high cost of living and desired consumption standards. At this point, we can underline that white labour was becoming a labour aristocracy from the beginning of the gold mines, and skills and wage levels related to an emerging colour bar could be highlighted as

the main aspects of it. In this manner, we can continue our analysis with first, elaborating the wage dimension and then the colour bar specific to South Africa.

The analysis of the South African case shows that in the explanation of the notion of labour aristocracy one can confirm the structural subordination of other workers similar to the Northern approaches. What makes South African case unique is the racial character of the structural positions in this subordination. While the subordinating position referred to the white workers, the subordinated 'other' workers were black workers. Davies (1973) produced a well known and unique approach to the labour aristocracy in South Africa, which rested upon this structural domination and wage levels. Using the Reports of the Department of Mines and Mining Statistics in Union of South Africa Yearbooks, Davies demonstrates the rough indication of white miners' share in surplus produced in the mining sector between 1911 and 1972. His analyses shows that "the average white mining wage have been, for the whole period in question, consistently above what [he]called the 'average allowable wage with no surplus content', very roughly an indication of the average wage each worker would receive if there were no exploitation" (1973, p.49). The ratio of white wages to black wages in the gold mines in 1911 was 11.7:1, while by 1966 the gap has increased to 17.6:1. The productivity of black gold miners increased 188% between 1920 and 1965. The black increase in productivity was above the total average in productivity (157%). In other words, whilst black miners had increased their relative contribution of labour value, their relative income position had declined. Hence, Davies (1973, p.51) concludes that "since the average white wage is a significant amount above the 'surplus free wage', and since it is not based on higher productivity, [...] the white mine workers benefit from surplus value created by blacks". For him the explanation of this peculiar economic and income situation was political. Because, black wages were kept low by the laws against effective

political and trade union organization, by the colour bar and by the migrant labour system- which were all official instruments of Apartheid State policy. Black workers were therefore the victims of a super exploitation. In other words, white workers indirectly shared in the exploitation of blacks, via their political support for the State and the economic privileges they receive from it in return.

While Davies (1973) demonstrated the existence of an authentic labour aristocracy, Johnstone (2000) focused on the asymmetry of class structure and race relation and showed how white workers became privileged through a colour bar<sup>4</sup>. According to Johnstone (2000, pp.117-118), the monopolistic structure of ownership of the gold mining industry determined its class structure, which was divided between a class of capitalist owners and managers, and a class of wage earning workers. The working class was divided into a relatively small artisan and overseer 'labour aristocracy' of white workers about 20.000, and a large force of unskilled African labourers, nearly 200.000. Thus, this structure was simultaneously a racial stratification, with two white groups on top of a stratum of Africans. The class structure and the racial stratification were thus asymmetrically related. It was not the case simply of a white capitalist class and a non-white working class. The white workers were simultaneously members of a subordinate (working) class and a dominant (white) group. Hence, the basic class interests of the white workers were somehow ambiguous. Although it was a possible choice to build class solidarity with fellow African workers, white workers pursued the protection of their elite status. While the material differentiation of the white workers from those of the African workers were similar to the familiar artisan-labourer division of the working class as in Europe of the time, this was significantly reinforced by the importance of colour in the South African environment as a

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<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that Johnstone is not South African national, but his study is seen as one of the major works in South African labour history, (see Webster et al. , 2000), and therefore, his engagement is taken as South African in this sense.



criterion of access to rights, power and status. In terms of both of these differentiations, the white workers occupied a privileged elite status relative to the African workers. Johnstone underlines that the majority of the white workers viewed themselves first and foremost as members of a ruling group and a labour elite. “While these white workers had belonged to lower classes in Europe, they enjoyed on arrival to South Africa to find themselves in a position of an aristocracy of colour” (Merriman, 1908 quoted in Johnstone, 2000, p.119). In summary, Johnstone argues that the white workers pursued the protection and consolidation of their privileged status as labour elite and as a member of a dominant racial group, using the advantage of the latter to secure the benefits of the former. They were concerned to maintain and increase their material security, especially job tenure and high wages, against the pressure of undercutting and displacement by much cheaper non-white labour. This expressed itself in the job colour bar - a system of racial discrimination reserving all skilled and responsible work to whites.

The application of colour bar began in the Transvaal in 1893 when the Kruger government passed a law preventing blacks from working as blasters. As Davies (1973, p.43) points out colour bars had not been quite so necessary for the earliest English miners, since they could bargain with their skill and experience as well. But in the twentieth century, a large number of white workers who had nothing else to bargain with came to consider that institutional privileges over their black fellow workers were vital. In 1896 the government accepted the demand of the Transvaal Engine Drivers’ Association for providing first-class, second-class and third-class certificates for driving enginemen, stationary enginemen and boilermen respectively, who would be required to serve a lengthy apprenticeship in each grade before taking their trade tests. Only white men were allowed to receive these certificates. Katz (1976, pp.23-25) highlights that before 1900 in the Cape and Natal, crafts unions had observed the tendency of the

capitalists to use cheap Coloured, Indian and African labour to undermine the wages of the skilled artisans. It was the time for white artisans that they “fought for their existence. The Indians- or ‘Coolies’- in Natal were categorised together with Japanese and Chinese as undesirable ‘competitors or neighbours’”. It is important to mention here, as Katz (1976, p.26) notes, that in the printing trade in the Cape and Natal there can be no doubt that Coloureds, Indians and Africans were performing skilled work, but at wage levels below the minimum rates laid down by South African Typographical Union (SATU), one of the first craft unions in South Africa. In 1903 trained Africans were informed that they could not join the Durban branch of the SATU. This refers to the fact that the unions too manifested a racial prejudice.

By the turn of the twentieth century artisans in the Transvaal had to face competition from non-white workers. The disruption of the Anglo-Boer War and the subsequent unavailability of the former large numbers of unskilled African labourers forced employers to experiment with white unskilled labour on the mines. These were experiments in job fragmentation which made skilled miners fear unskilled competition. When these experiments failed white workers were faced with the threat of indentured Chinese labour (Katz, 1976, p.31). In 1907, white workers went on strike against a proposal by the mine owners to permit African and Chinese indentured workers to perform skilled work. Immigrant, largely British workers held a preserved monopoly of skilled work at this time and the strike was broken by replacing the strikers with unemployed Afrikaner workers. This was a breakthrough for the emerging Afrikaner working class. In 1913 white miners went on strike (winning recognition for their trade union by the Chamber of Mines), in 1914 and again in 1922, on each occasion advancing their privileged position against the mine owners’ attempt at introducing cheaper African labour.

In fact, 1922 was the high-water mark in the making of a white labour aristocracy (Webster et.al, 2000, p.91).

The departure of many white workers to the First World War and their replacement by poor white Afrikaners, the increasing ration of Africans to whites in the labour force, and the increasing employment of Africans in semi-skilled work, intensified the importance of the job colour bar to the white workers and led to the Status Quo Agreement of 1918. However, as Johnstone (2000) remarks, by the end of 1919 mine owners were faced with a desperate crisis in the form of growing production costs and diminishing profits. This led the mining companies to attack the degree of protection secured by white labour through the job colour bar by reducing the number of highly paid white workers and replacing some of them with African workers. At the end of 1921, the Chamber announced that it would be no longer abide by the Status Quo Agreement. The white workers, however, refused to accept the reductions in security and status, and struck work in January 1922. White workers in related industries also came out on strike. The bloody clashes between workers and the army was only terminated in March and ended with 153 killed and 687 injured, and four executed (Webster et al, 2000, p.91). The army crushed the revolt of white workers and the Chamber secured the reduction of the number of white workers and the production costs. But what marked white workers' strike was their racist response to the developments in 1922, by formulating the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa!' Hence, racism was a conscious and rational response for white mine workers who were concerned with promoting their position of privilege (Davies, 1973; Johnstone, 2000). This was also a decisive point in terms of working-class politics in South Africa.

This victory of the mining capitalists ended very soon after the defeat of the Smuts government by the coalition of the Labour Party and the Afrikaner Nationalist Party at the 1924

general elections. The crucial aspect of this political change was that the white workers, who failed to achieve their demands through the strike, consciously supported this coalition at the elections in order to win economic privileges through their political support. Webster et al. (2000) remark that the Labour Party was formed in 1909 to promote the interests of the white workers and under the leadership of Creswell was the first political party to articulate a full-blown segregationist policy. The Labour-Nationalist Pact government secured a virtual monopoly of highly skilled jobs in the mines and, through the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924, introduced under the previous government, set up a system of collective bargaining which was in effect to exclude the African workers. As Johnstone (2000, pp.119,123) underlines, this legislation and government's 'civilised labour' policy protected the white workers and consolidated the job colour bar, which had already been extended by the Regulations of the Mine and Works Act of 1911, and was finally incorporated into the Act by the Mines and Works Act of 1926. "Thus if 1922 was the decisive point in the consolidation of the white labour aristocracy, it also marked the terminal point in the parting of the ways of white and African mine workers" (Webster et al., 2000, p.91).

The structural determinant of these labour conditions, for Johnstone (2000, p.120), was also the capitalist class as the source of racial discrimination. Hence, he consciously makes a distinction between the 'wage colour bar' and the 'job colour bar': as opposed to job colour bar, the 'wage colour bar' secures the cheapness of African labour, which constitutes the 'class colour bar' of the mining capitalists. This also helps us to understand the constitution of the dominant bloc and the place of white workers in this power bloc in South Africa. According to Davies (1973, p.45) this bloc has three elements: the settler bourgeoisie, which ran the State apparatus; the white workers, who depended for their economic advantages on the use of

political power; and the international capitalists who received approximately 50 per cent more on South African investments than the world average return-gain from the monopolization of natural resources and the forced direction of African labour. Therefore, it will not be wrong to argue that the formation of a labour aristocracy in South African case too, should be analysed in relation to (working class) politics as well as the development of capitalism both at local and international level.

One last note on the working class politics in the analysis of labour aristocracy in South Africa would be on the fundamental change in the strategy of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) following the 1922 strike. As mentioned in the Northern approaches, the role of the labour aristocracy in trade unions and correspondingly in the Labour Party in Britain was regarded as weakening the democratic and socialist movements by having destroyed working class unity. Respectively, there was a call for radical forms of expression in that period. Similarly, while the Labour Party together with settler capitalism was firmly establishing its place in the power bloc in South Africa, the racist response of the white workers to the 1922 strike led to a new orientation in the strategy of the CPSA. Their hope from the strike to develop a working class unity between the white workers and black workers against mine owners did not realise. Instead, as Webster et al (2000) states, the 1922 strike strengthened the argument of those socialists who argued that the white workers had been co-opted and that it was the black workers and peasants who were the most exploited section of the working class. At the third congress in 1924 the CPSA decided to concentrate their energies on organising black workers. This radical decision was a crucial step in the development of black workers' movement and in the transformation of the South African society in the twentieth century. At the same time, while Labour Party's power disappeared in the following decades, the CPSA (now South African

Communist Party) reached to a governing position within the Tripartite Alliance in democratic South Africa.

Another point of analysis would be the authority at work or social control as an aspect of labour aristocracy, as mentioned by the Northern scholars. The structure of the labour market on the mines in South Africa demonstrates that the skilled white miners had this authority at work. Highly paid white professional miners and skilled artisans supervised the unskilled low-paid non-white - chiefly African - manual labourers (Katz, 1976, p.16). The white miners could have a gang of African workers contracted to them. These men were under the arbitrary control of the white miner, subject to his discipline, and at the mercy of his power to dismiss them (Webster et al, 2000, p.92). These white miners or the gang leaders, shared in the increased earnings resulting from the rising productivity of black gold miners (Wilson, 1972). But the most identical apparatus of control was the compound system which imposed total control on the black workers while they were at the mines. African workers were housed in compounds away from their families, while white workers housed in mine houses with their families. They ate and slept together in these large and crowded buildings next to the mines. As Callinicos (1981) explains, for mine owners, the most useful thing about the compound system was that it kept tight control of workers. If workers gave trouble or tried to resist their low wages or conditions of work, it was easy for the army and the police to surround the compounds and imprison the workers with their guns. Compounds separated the mineworkers from other workers, controlled them and turned them into labour machines; therefore, compounds made workers more profitable to the mine-owners. Hence, except from the lack of the racial dimension in his analysis, Foster's (1974) argument could largely be supported in the South African case that it was for the interests of bourgeoisie to create a labour aristocracy and control upsurges of working class radicalism.

Moreover, the use of migrant workers in the mines completes this picture of the interests of the bourgeoisie. Migrant workers were those who left their homes in various parts of southern Africa to work in the mines for a certain time, and then went home again. It was cheaper to feed and house just one worker in the compounds instead of paying wages to support a whole family in the towns (Callinicos, 1981). In addition, the system of migrant labour inhibited effective working class mobilization as many migrant workers in the early years did not see their future in the labour market but in the rural areas (Webster et al., 2000). Thus, it can be argued that the emergence of a white labour aristocracy was encouraged by the bourgeoisie, as they benefited from the cheapness of African labour and could forestall the unity and mass organisation of the working class.

Related with all these dimensions, social identity of white workers can also be integrated into the analysis of the white labour aristocracy in South Africa. Similar to the British case, the labour aristocrats had a self-image as the respectable segment of the manual working class that was on the brink of the petty bourgeoisie. It was the white workers who regarded themselves as a labour aristocracy that generally showed an aversion to doing manual work of any kind. As Katz (1976, pp.19, 20) points out, although they performed manual tasks at home or in Australia, the circumstances were different in South Africa; white miners in the early years believed that Africans did not have “the brains enough to get beyond a certain efficiency and they relieved the whites from doing the nasty, ‘rough’, manual work”. It was construed as socially degrading for white men to do the kind of work normally done by ‘uncivilised’ black men whose wants were so much fewer than theirs. Although the racist attitude of white workers towards their black fellow workers were developed further more systematically, different periods in the early twentieth century showed that they had to face competition from black workers as well as

indentured Chinese workers. Nevertheless, from the 1920s on, colour bars and the ‘civilized labour’ policy of the Pact government assured that “‘civilized labourers’ no longer perform manual work in gangs of subsidized erosion-preventers; now the white worker is increasingly a superior or at least a skilled operative” (Davies, 1973, p.48). Other social aspects of the identity of white labour aristocracy can be seen in housing, education and social sectors. As mentioned previously, while black workers were living in compounds, white workers housed in mine houses. It can be seen in the 1950s that this segregation reached to a point where the urban centres became only white, and the blacks needed special pass to enter the city. Furthermore, while whites benefited from large sums of social investment of the State, i.e. education, Apartheid legislations increasingly prohibited the training and registration of African workers as skilled workers outside the ‘Bantu areas’. The simple logic as expressed by Hendrik Verwoerd, the man behind the conception and implementation of apartheid, was that “there is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?” (Clark and Worger, 2004, pp.48-52).

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

This paper explored how the South African scholars engaged with the labour aristocracy debate that developed in the 1970s in Europe with a focus on the Victorian and Edwardian period in Britain. The key dimensions of a labour aristocracy in these debates can be identified as skill, wage levels, authority at work or social control, social identity and politics of labour. The paper illustrated how these dimensions can be considered in the analysis of the particular South African case. But the main focus of the paper has been how an authentic labour aristocracy is



investigated through a new dimension, namely 'race relations' that also contributed to the development of the general debate on labour aristocracy. While many other South African scholars' contributions to this local analysis of the labour aristocracy were also included, this paper put a particular emphasis on the works of Davies and Johnstone. Davies empirically demonstrated the existence of this aristocracy of labour in South Africa. Johnstone showed how this aristocracy of labour merged with an aristocracy of colour. His analysis of colour bars remarked the asymmetrical relation between the class structure and the racial stratification.

Although Northern approaches tend, to a large extent, to separate different dimensions of labour aristocracy - wage levels, authority at work, social control, social identity, or politics- and set one of them as the key dimension of a labour aristocracy, the South African case demonstrates that all of them were adopted simultaneously as aspects of the aristocracy of white labour. The South African scholars followed rather a holistic and relational approach that analysed all these dimensions in connection with each other, as the conditions of labour in a racially segregated labour system were set according to the privileges and benefits of the white labour aristocracy in all these fields, say higher wages, superior positions and authority at work, high status, culture, education, and housing in the society or the support given to and power received from a racist government and political parties. It would simply not be possible to understand low wages of black workers without connecting it to the establishment of compounds or superior position of a white worker without seeing the reservation of skilled jobs to white workers, who benefited from large sums of racist government's investment on white education etc.

Throughout the analysis of the South African engagement, an interesting observation would be on the fact that neither Davies (1973) and Johnstone (2000) nor Katz (1976) discussed labour

aristocracy as a concept or theory. It is seen that they had the knowledge of what labour aristocracy meant in Europe, but regardless of that they centrally focused on the analysis of the local situation in South Africa. It is interesting too that this knowledge produced by South African scholars was not ignored by their Northern colleagues and regarded by them as a case providing extraordinary clarity to what labour aristocracy could mean in the general consideration of the concept and the development of the theory.

In the final analysis, the case of the notion of labour aristocracy shows that the South African engagement expanded the Northern theory of labour aristocracy by exploring a new dimension that provided clarity for the notion of labour aristocracy. Although the aim of South African scholars was not developing an autonomous theory through their engagement, their motivation has mainly been the deep engagement with the local and enriching the analysis of the South African society.

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