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Article information:

To cite this document: Amiya Kumar Bagchi . "A Comment on the Post-Cope Debate on Labour Aristocracy and Colonialism" *In Sraffa and Althusser Reconsidered; Neoliberalism Advancing in South Africa, England, and Greece*. Published online: 29 Oct 2014; 261-273.

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S0161-723020140000029009>

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A COMMENT ON THE POST–COPE DEBATE ON LABOUR ARISTOCRACY AND COLONIALISM

Amiya Kumar Bagchi

ABSTRACT

The issue of the existence and persistence of a labour aristocracy in advanced capitalist countries is connected with the emergence and persistence of an extremely unequal international economic order. The emergence of that order is the direct result of capitalist colonialism. That colonialism helped garner and control resources for the pioneering capitalist countries, which also emerged as the top imperialist countries of the world. The colonial resources were used to support and augment the profits of the capitalist class, but after the immiserizing phase of industrialization had passed, they also helped increase the incomes of workers in the advanced capitalist countries. Workers' struggles and the threat of such struggles in some phases of development of capitalism led to increases in their incomes. However, there are instances in which the ruling class in the USA and UK deliberately used the lure of private property or acquisition of colonies to try and get their support. Thus, the debate

Sraffa and Althusser Reconsidered; Neoliberalism Advancing in South Africa, England, and Greece

Research in Political Economy, Volume 29, 261–273

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ISSN: 0161-7230/doi:10.1108/S0161-723020140000029009

between Post and Cope can only be resolved by invoking the complexities of the patterns of exploitation and governance under actually existing capitalism.

Keywords: Colonialism; colonies of exploitation; international economic order; undocumented immigrants; unions; persistent wage gap

There are several different levels at which the debate between Charles Post and Zak Cope has been conducted. At one level, it is a discourse about exactly what the different authorities cited by the two authors meant by labour aristocracy. Cope has cited authorities from Engels (1845) through Lenin (1916, 1918), and Elbaum and Seltzer (1982, 2004).¹ A second level of debate is about the nature of capitalist colonialism and its significance for the performance of actually existing capitalism. Another level of discourse is the influence of colonialism, imperialism and the inequitable international economic order in structuring a permanent gap between the wages of workers in the advanced capitalist countries and of the workers in the world outside those countries. Finally, there is also a fourth level of debate, namely, the circumstances under which these just-mentioned groups of workers can put up a joint fight against the depredations of capital.

I will not spend much time on the fourth level of debate. Post (2013, p. 3) states: ‘Cope and I differ not on the *reality* of the dominance of reformism and conservatism among most workers in capitalist societies – north *and* south – but on *the explanation* of this phenomenon’ (italics in the original). This statement may be contested by Cope, because he may not accept the narrow way Post defines the nature of the ‘bribe’ paid by the ruling classes to the workers, in order to obtain their passive or, on occasion, active acquiescence in the existing order. I would, however, agree that the workers’ militancy or passivity depends on the context defined by the preparedness of the workers to mount a struggle, the kind of crisis faced by the capitalist order, and the power of the weapons of coercion and propaganda wielded by the ruling classes.

These points can be illustrated with the history of US labour since World War II. The highest percentages of unionization of the total labour force in the USA were recorded from the 1950s to around 1960; work stoppages also peaked just after the war, and then they declined until around 1965–1966 and then peaked again in the early 1970s (Goldfield, 1987,

table 1 and figure 6). In 1959, US steel workers went on what may have been the longest and costliest strike in US history, causing a severe decline not only in the output of steel, but also in that of automobiles (Takeaway, 2013). Until the middle of the 1960s, the United States was the dominant power in practically all major areas of high-technology production, including steel and automobiles. There was also a very low level of unemployment in the country. All that strengthened the bargaining power of the workers and their unions. But already from the 1960s, Japan and Germany were beginning to challenge US domination of exports of several of these major products. Monopolistic control and inertia, for example, had led the US steel producers to invest on a large scale in the obsolete open-hearth furnace technology for reduction of iron ore, whereas by adopting and improving the Austrian innovation of direct oxygen reduction of iron ore, Japan was emerging as the lowest-cost steel producer and soon the largest exporter of steel in the world (Adams & Dirlam, 1966; Adams & Mueller, 1982). Moreover, the increasing involvement of the USA in the Vietnam War took a toll of the macroeconomic fundamentals of the US economy. By 1971, the USA was forced to give up the link of the dollar to a fixed amount of gold. After that the ruling class went on a warpath against the workers, in order to restore the fast eroding profitability of investments by big capital. The intensity of workers' strikes also reached a peak.

Take another area in which the position of the capitalist country in the global capitalist order and that of the workers in that country influences both workers' militancy and the response of the ruling classes. That is the issue of immigration. Partly as a result of the earlier, essentially racist laws severely restricting immigration and partly because of the dominance of the post-World War II global economy by the USA, capitalists in the latter country were quite happy to deal with a labour force, without a significant supplement of a permanent reserve army of labour. The unions were also satisfied with the situation and generally opposed immigration for fear that it would lower their bargaining power (Briggs, 2001). However, after the US authorities had successfully broken the power of the unions, there was a flood of immigration into the USA, especially from the neighbouring countries of Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and South America. Not only the governments of the USA, but also of the large-immigration European countries dealt with the situation by keeping a very large fraction of them as 'undocumented' or more bluntly, as 'illegal' immigrants. In the process, they often thereby violated international conventions on human rights and also their own laws (Bagchi, 2008). This gave a handle to the employers who used that illegal status as a threat against them, while

threatening the enfranchised workers with replacement by immigrants. The government in the USA needed the immigrants for work on reconstruction at sites of disasters such as that caused by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy (Fletcher, Pham, Stover, & Vinck, 2006; Sanchez, 2013). They are also used extensively for fighting forest fires (Johnson, 2006). Fletcher et al. (2006) found that undocumented workers constituted a quarter of the workforce in New Orleans and that 45 per cent of construction workers were of Latin American origin, of whom 54 per cent were undocumented immigrants. They also found that 'Documented and undocumented workers were vulnerable to exploitation by their employers because of inadequate legal protection and the failure on the part of federal and local authorities to monitor construction sites' and that the wages of many workers were so low that they could not buy enough food for themselves.

Immigrant workers in the USA took out a huge rally on 10 April 2006, demanding a legal status for all (Swarns, 2006). Gradually, the attitude of the unions including the biggest of them, AFL-CIO, has changed, and they now often express solidarity with striking immigrant workers, and new initiatives are afoot to organize the workers who do not have unions (Davis, 2012; Greenhouse & Yaccino, 2012; Takeaway, 2013).

I would also argue that until now, in most periods of history, the workers of advanced capitalist countries have supported the existing order, but they have also demanded better wages, working conditions, security at the workplace and public services such as publicly funded education, health care and protection of the old and the disabled. It is necessary to recognize this constant, although often suppressed demand and go on struggling for involving them fully in the fight for a more just international and internal social and political order. It is by now evident that the workers of the advanced capitalist countries will benefit immensely if a more equal international economic order creates better conditions of work for the struggling poor of the developing countries. The only group that will lose out is the global predatory capitalist class.

I would also not spend much time on the exegesis of exactly who said what when, with regard to the existence of a labour aristocracy in the advanced capitalist countries. I believe that the foundational texts are those of Engels (1858, 1882) and Marx (1869), and his further comment on the necessity of linking the struggle for socialism in Britain to the liberation of Ireland, as quoted by Cope (2013, p. 93). Basically, the argument is that the British trade unions were built on the basis of the dominance of the unions by the leaders of skilled craft workers, and as the working class gradually became more bourgeoisified through propaganda and gradual

improvement of the living conditions of those workers, the power of that aristocracy of labour extended over the whole working class. The issue of the liberation of Ireland was linked to that of the fight for socialism in three different ways. Ireland, as England's oldest colony, continued to yield a surplus to the absentee English landlords. It served as a reservoir of cheap labour for the factories of England. Its domination by the English was used as a chauvinist handle of propaganda by the British ruling class to influence the workers to support its tenacious hold on the empire, and the extension of the latter. *Mutatis mutandis*, much of that analysis would apply to the use of the informal colonies by US-led imperialism today. Some of the leading examples of such neo-colonies are Saudi Arabia and Egypt after the aborted Arab revolution, Mexico which allows thousands of its citizens to be killed while trying to cross the border with the USA and acts as the policeman for preventing migrants from Central American countries from moving to the USA. Morocco acts in a similar fashion as the policeman protecting the border of EU countries.

I will, therefore, confine my attention to the actual historical context, the intertwining of capitalism and colonialism and the influence of that intertwining on the persistence of a much higher standard of living of the workers in the USA, Western Europe and its overseas offshoots than of the workers in the rest of the world. (That privileged working class has been vulnerable to repeated attacks by the capitalist class in those lands, but the privilege persists, even while it is used by the rulers to divide the working class.) A connected issue is that of a wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers. To start with, we have to get rid of the idea of existence of a pure capitalism without any entanglement with colonies or the use of non-market power. Post (2013, p. 12) writes:

The use of non-market coercion – military power, monopoly power, etc. – is the distinguishing characteristic of *pre-capitalist, not capitalist imperialism* (Wood, 2004). The distinguishing feature of capitalist social relations is the absence of non-market coercion in the exploitation of direct producers. Rather than relying on legal, juridical, and other non-market forms of coercion to ensure that producers perform surplus labor for their exploiters, capital relies solely on the operation of the market in labor-power to ensure the production of surplus-value.

This formulation is contrary to the analysis of the genesis of capitalism in the only volume of Marx's magnum opus published in his life-time, namely, *Capital, volume I* (Marx, 1867/1886). Second, it flies straight in the face of the historical evidence of the growth of capitalism in England, the pioneering capitalist-industrialized country (Bagchi, 2005, chapter 3; Bagchi, 2013). The use of non-market coercion was a constant feature of the rule of

colonies. The use of the Masters and Servants Act of England, for example, which made a breach of contract by the servants a criminal, not a civil offence, survived in the colonies long after its abolition in England (Hay & Craven, 2004). Slavery remained in effect in most of the British colonies throughout the British colonies long after its formal abolition (Anderson, 1993; Lovejoy & Hogendorn, 1993; Sarkar, 1985). A new system of slavery, in the form of indentured labour was introduced into the plantations owned by British capitalists, when they could not persuade emancipated slaves to work on those plantations Tinker, (1974). The so-called law and order in the colonies was underpinned by a law of emergency, which could be invoked any time the colonial authorities thought that their power was challenged by the natives (Hussain, 2003). The perpetrators of atrocities under that kind of law went unpunished because those acts did not violate the legal code the colonial authorities recognized.

So let us overcome the confusion of actually existing capitalism with pure capitalism, and turn to the uses of colonialism for actually existing capitalism. Then we will take up the issue of wage gaps between skilled and unskilled labour in advanced capitalist countries. In the case of England, the surplus generated by the West Indian colonies and the tribute extracted from British India added substantially to the savings needed to finance the industrial revolution (Bagchi, 2005, chapters 16 and 17; Cuenca Esteban, 2007). A second function the colonial connection with India served was to allow the English to develop the cotton textile industry by adopting policies that promoted the substitution of the imports of Indian cotton textiles first in England and then in other markets as well (Bagchi, 2010; Inikori, 2002, 'Introduction'). The significance of this history is twofold. Until the late eighteenth century, India was the biggest exporter of cotton textiles in the world. By 1830, India had become a net importer of cotton textiles, and soon emerged as the largest market for British-made cotton yarn and cloth. On the other side, cotton textile manufacture became the leading industry of Britain during the English industrial revolution.

Britain was the leader in flows of foreign investment during the nineteenth century. Its stock of foreign investment has been authoritatively estimated at £4000 million on the eve of World War I. On the other side if we compound the tribute extracted from India and Burma only from the 1870s to World War I, we get figures ranging from £3199 million to £3779 million (Bagchi, 2005, chapter 17). Thus the India–Burma tribute alone would have paid for the major part of British foreign investment that financed the development of the USA, Canada and Australia during the late nineteenth century. Only a very small part of British foreign investment went to the

colonies of exploitation peopled by non-Europeans. Colonies served the European powers in other ways also. During the period the Netherlands became the dominant naval power in Europe, its control of the spice islands and spice trade of Indonesia provided it with enormous profits. But as is well-known, for a number of reasons, including that of scale, it fell behind England and France in economic and military power, and in the late 1790s it became a colony of France. It was able to forge ahead only on the basis of the surplus extracted from Indonesia, after that archipelago was returned by Britain to the Netherlands as part of the peace settlement of 1815 (Bagchi, 2013; Van Zanden, 1993, chapter 6).

Let us now turn to the issue of labour aristocracy. Post (2013, p. 17) states: ‘... wages for all workers in British industry, skilled and unskilled, fell throughout the 1870s and 1880s’. This is just factually incorrect. Van Zanden (1999) and Allen (2000) and many later works show that real wages of English workers rose during the late nineteenth century. One of the contributory factors to that rise was a fall in primary product prices from around 1873 to about 1898. Colonies contributed to that fall in three ways. First, the British Indian empire exported rice and wheat even during periods of famine in India. What was true of India was true in the case of other colonies of exploitation. This contributed to the global excess supply of primary products. Second, the US and Canadian prairie and the Argentine pampas were opened up with the help of British investment in those countries. As I have argued earlier, the surplus extracted from the colonies of exploitation contributed to that investment. Third, British foreign investment sustained the massive overseas migration of European labour from the 1870s down to World War I (Bagchi, 2005; Massey, 1988, chapters 16 and 17). Along with working class struggles for higher wages, better conditions of work and democratic rights, the tightening of the labour market caused by this mass migration contributed to the rise of the wages of the workers, and also helped maintain wage differentials between skilled and unskilled labour.

I have already sketched how immigration, changes in the global economy affecting the position of the particular capitalist economy and state-led attacks on the bargaining power of the workers (Goldfield, 1987) can change the position of workers in a country such as the USA. The question may be asked, ‘How have these changes impacted wage differentials in the advanced capitalist countries?’ This last issue has been the central focus of Post (2013). I will confine my attention to the wage gaps between skilled and unskilled labour in the USA and Europe from World War II up to the present. The distinction is made on the basis of the unskilled being those who do not possess a college or post-college degree and the skilled being

those who do. According to the data available in [Autor, Katz, and Krueger \(1998\)](#), the skill premium was about 50 per cent of the unskilled wage in 1940, it then fell to 30 per cent in 1950, rose between 1960 and 1970, fell in the 1970s, then rose steadily from 1980 to more than 55 per cent in 1998. The data provided by [Autor, Katz, and Kearney \(2008\)](#) indicate that the wage gap has continued to increase in the twenty-first century.² Similarly if we adopt the same kind of definition of skilled and unskilled as in the case of the USA, large and increasing wage gaps are found in the labour markets of Europe, including the new countries of the ex-Soviet republics incorporated in the European Union ([Parteka, 2010](#); [Tåhlin, 2006](#)).

The reasons for this persistent and increasing wage gap are quite complex. They cannot be reduced to just differences in productivity between skilled and unskilled labour as is done in most mainstream studies such as [Autor et al. \(2008\)](#). If a doctor trained in a developing country, after migrating to the USA, is forced to take up a manual job with no skill requirement, because she cannot afford to train herself again as a doctor recognized by the US authorities, her lower earning is not due to her inherent low productivity, but because of so many restrictions working in a 'free market'. The existence of the differences is due to the fact that in the USA and most EU countries university education was expensive, but could be afforded by boys and girls who could manage to get scholarships. With the progress of neoliberal policies, those scholarships have become more scarce in relation to the potential claimants for them. Even secondary school education has become more expensive as the neoliberal regimes have cut down public expenditures on social sectors. Student loans for education in the USA are hazardous for students from poor families, since many of them have to drop out because of personal or family circumstances, and while billionaires can get out of their obligations by declaring the bankruptcy of the corporations they controlled, students cannot get rid of their obligations by declaring bankruptcy. During the last two decades and more, there has been a steep increase in the shares of the top 1–5 per cent of top income earners in many advanced capitalist countries, and especially in the USA and the UK ([Atkinson, Piketty, & Saez, 2011](#)). Steep increases in salaries and other incomes of the top layer of executives, and capital gains accruing from operations of deregulated stock markets have contributed greatly to this historic increase in inequality in these countries.

Global income inequality has also increased over this period ([Milanovic, 2011](#)). That increase has been superimposed on a highly unequal international economic order in the 1980s. Structural adjustment programmes mandated by the IMF and World Bank left many developing countries more

impoverished than before. Again, Argentina is a paradigmatic case. The dollarization of the Argentine economy under the custody of Domingo Cavallo, the poster-boy of the World Bank, led to the handing over of a large part of the economy to foreign multinational companies. By 2001, Argentina had been saddled with the largest foreign debt in its history: it is only the courageous decision of Kirchner and his successors to repay that debt on Argentina's terms that has rescued the country from that economic catastrophe. In ex-Soviet republics the breakneck privatization of public sector assets created many millionaires out of persons who could position themselves near the political bosses. At the same time, foreign bankers and finance companies aggrandized themselves at the cost of these hapless countries. Resource-rich developing countries in every continent became targets for operations of US and European multinational companies, protected by the armed might of the US and NATO forces. Along with that, there was a steady process of incorporation of well-heeled professionals from developing countries in the finance, management, IT and telecom sectors into the top layer of the skilled workers, especially, in the USA. Such incorporation, on the one hand, deprived the home countries of the expertise created with large amounts of investment. On the other hand, these newly domiciled professionals often became handy tools for further exploiting their home countries, because of their greater familiarity with the political and economic opportunities available there. Thus, inequality within countries is closely tied up with inequality in the international order in many ways, only a few of which have been touched upon here.

In the Cope-Post debate, the issue of 'bribing' the working class has come up several times. I think the real issue is how the working class in advanced capitalist countries has been incorporated as a conscious or unconscious participant in the maintenance of the highly unequal internal socio-political order and the inequitable international order that has grown up under the actually existing capitalism. I have briefly dealt with the processes through which such participation has been sought to be ensured. But, of course, the ruling classes have sought consciously to 'bribe' or influence the working class from the time they faced a challenge from that quarter. I will cite only three examples, two from the late nineteenth century Europe, and the other from Britain under the heel of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. *Semmel (1960, p. 13)* writes:

The governments of Europe, during the decades before the war, had erected barriers against socialist internationalism by their programmes of social reform which gave the workers a further stake in national well-being. The Italian working class, to cite one

example, which had attempted to sabotage the ill-fated Ethiopian War of 1896, joyously supported the successful war against Turkey to acquire Libya in 1911. One Socialist even described it as imperialism in the primary interest of the Italian working classes. What had intervened was a decade of Giolittian social reform, a system of national insurance, and a promise of universal suffrage, all of which had sapped the revolutionary ardour of Italian socialism.

Turning to Britain, the most powerful capitalist-imperialist country of that era, we find that Joseph Chamberlain, an industrialist turned Conservative politician, championed the cause of social reform that would benefit the workers, with the pursuit of an active imperialist and protectionist policy. His son, Austen Chamberlain shared his views. According to Semmel (1960, p. 14):

‘The democracy’, Chamberlain observed, ‘want two things; imperialism and social reform’. The Conservative party was successful when – under Disraeli – it combined the two; its success ended when it failed to satisfy the aspirations of the working class in the matter of social reform. ‘We can only win by combining them again’, Chamberlain had concluded. Disraeli had ‘combined’ the two—he had called himself both a social reformer and an imperialist—but had made no attempt to integrate them. In the first decade of the twentieth century, several attempts were made in Great Britain not only to combine these ideals but at the same time to demonstrate their interdependence, to say that the realization of one was not possible without the realization of the other.

Following the same tenet, Chamberlain opposed Home Rule, and of course, even more, the independence of Ireland. He was Foreign Secretary of Britain under many administrations. He famously said that ‘you can do business with Mussolini’. Again, following the usual practice of imperialist powers to reward persons who serve their interest well, he was rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1925, because he played a large role in the signing of the Locarno Pact that legitimized the then division of Europe among the contending powers.

Soon after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of Britain (in 1979), her government passed a Housing Act under which tenants of houses built by local governments or councils could buy the houses they occupied at prices that were sold to them at 33–50 per cent discount on the market values.

About one in three tenants, that is, 2 million out of 6 million tenants bought the houses they lived in. Thatcher’s policy created a Conservative vote bank, but the construction of more houses for the poor was badly affected. Moreover, since most of the best housing was sold off, and the Conservative government did not spend much money for repairs, there was

a large backlog of housing when the Labour Party came back to power. That party had to get to continue Thatcher's policy in an attenuated fashion. The result has been the entrenchment of a working class which is willing to sacrifice a public good in pursuit of private benefits. Combined with other policies of retrenchment of expenditure on social security, that policy of blessing home-ownership at public cost has led to also to an enormous increase in the numbers of homeless people in Britain (BBC, 2013; Jones & Murie, 2006).

In conclusion, the question of the existence of a labour aristocracy and its evolution over time is intimately related to the emergence and evolution of an unequal global economic order. The degree of success achieved by workers in their struggle to obtain better working conditions cannot be delinked from how the international economic order shapes up. Before the abolition of formal colonialism, the tributary remittances from the colonies pushed up the profits of the capitalists of the imperialist countries, but from the late nineteenth century, they also helped increase the wages and improvement of living conditions of workers in those countries. Earlier, in the days of declining living standards of workers, say, from the 1780s to the 1840s, cane sugar, cheaper cotton clothing and tea had provided supplemental calories and some comfort for the distressed workers. Up to the 1970s, exploitation of the initial advantages of the imperialist countries had allowed continuation of the earlier relationship. But as new competition and resistance movements of peoples in poor countries have threatened the dominance of the USA and EU as economic superpowers, the fates of the workers of the advanced capitalist countries and developing countries have become much more intimately tied up than before. Unfortunately, deliberate misinformation, manipulation of opinion and state repression have kept workers from a full recognition of this fact. Full recognition would not only improve the conditions of workers in all countries but might threaten systemic change – something that is dreaded equally by the ruling classes of both imperialist countries and the developing nations.

NOTES

1. For full references, see Cope (2013).

2. A critique of the methodology of this chapter appears in URL: www.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/undereducatedappendix.pdf, accessed on 7 October 2013.

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