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FORUM RESPONSE

Class structuration, reproduction, and the politics of labour in India

Christian Strümpell[1]

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Abstract
The statement discusses Jonathan Parry's recent monograph, *Classes of Labour*, and in particular his "labour aristocracy" thesis of the most privileged sections of India's workforces that had been widely accepted in the social sciences in the 1970s but that had later been discarded. It is argued that the ethnography of an industrial town in Central India he presents in the monograph convincingly demonstrates that the relative privileges of public-sector employment have fostered the bifurcation of the town's industrial workers into two major distinct classes with different life chances, different attitudes to caste, and with often antagonistic political interests. *Classes of Labour* also demonstrates that Giddens' concept of "class structuration" offers a suitable theoretical grounding for identifying the major fault lines and driving forces of class formation in his case study but also for a controlled comparison between case studies across India and beyond. This statement moreover argues that this approach conceives of class as an historical, dynamic object, and it asks whether the current crises of class reproduction in the times of jobless growth might provoke a major change in the structuration of classes in India.

Keywords Class structuration · Caste · Labour aristocracy · India

Jonathan Parry's *Classes of Labour in a Central Indian Steel Town* is a milestone for the anthropology of India as much as for the anthropology of labour. It offers to date the most sophisticated and encompassing anthropological analysis of the working classes in post-independence India, and it also offers an analytical framework for the comparison of class formations across time and space. The analysis is based on 34 months of ethnographic research undertaken between 1993 and 2014 in the central Indian town of Bhilai, where in the 1950s the Government of India had established a large public-sector steel plant, the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP), plus an attached

✉ Christian Strümpell
christian.struempell@uni-hamburg.de

[1] Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universität Hamburg, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West), 20146 Hamburg, Germany

township. BSP attracted an array of ancillary and downstream industries, both in the public or, more often, in the private sector. And from the start, an informal sector developed around it, too, for example, in the large construction industry or in the service sector, but also—in the form of contract workers who are only precariously employed in contrast to the regular company workers—also the local steel and metal industries.

In this monograph, Parry charts in detail the heterogeneity of employment relations and labour processes across the local industrial landscape, and the social backgrounds, actions, and aspirations of the different workforces. While doing so, Parry covers the period since the town's birth in the 1950s and thus goes far beyond the often presentist accounts ethnographies produce. The historical perspective, gained through archival sources and oral histories, is a particular strength of the book because it allows for analysing the trajectory of class formation in Bhilai over time. The central thesis Parry develops is that over the decades, the industrial workforces have turned into two distinct "classes of labour", with very different economic resources, social standings, cultural values, and with very different—indeed often antagonistic—political interests. The divide runs between those who—in local categories—"have *naukri* (service)" and those who "do *kam* (work)", that is, between those who are regularly employed in organized sector industries, usually capital-intensive industries in the public sector like BSP, and those who are only informally employed in such industries or in any other workplace.

The divide thus rests on differences in the terms of employment, which decide whether a worker falls under labour laws and therefore enjoys relatively high wages, a high amount of job security, enforceable working conditions, and the right to trade union representation, rather than on differences of economic sector, as it was framed in the "dual economy and society" thesis that was developed and widely received in the 1970s. According to this thesis, the organized and unorganized sector, or the formal and informal sector, were separated by a sharp break that resembled—as Mark Holmström (1976) famously expressed it—"citadel walls" not only protecting the relatively privileged workers within it from the dire precarity prevailing outside of it but also from the intrusion of those outside. In the introductory part, Parry shows that a decade later, the "citadel" model was discarded, even by the same scholars, in favour of a "mountain" model, describing India's landscape of labour in terms of a slope with many plateaus that are difficult yet possible to move upwards. Parry argues that this was a shift from a class model identifying the most salient fault lines setting large segments of Indian society apart to a social stratification model focussing on its myriad complex gradations. As already indicated above, in the book Parry demonstrates in great detail that this shift in models does not reflect developments on the ground, rather the opposite: when he started research in Bhilai in the early 1990s, apart from the divide between capitalists and workers in private sector industries, the major fault line cut across the town's industrial workforce, between those who have *naukri* and those who do *kam*. And since then, it in fact further intensified. Not only did their earnings continue to grow apart, those with *naukri* increasingly supervised those doing *kam* in BSP or they employed them in their private moonlighting businesses. Beyond that, they rarely had any contact. They lived in different parts of the town, sent their children to different schools, married, and

socialized in different circles. Furthermore, social mobility across the divide—especially in the upward direction—became rare. Consequently, they developed a strong sense of belonging to different classes. Hence, Parry concludes, they progressively turned into distinct social classes in Weber's sense, freighted with social meaning and salience. Last but not least, Parry underlines the important political ramifications of this development, that is, that the relatively privileged public-sector workers abstain from fighting for social citizenship rights for the working class as a whole that they act as a "labour aristocracy", and that this comes at high costs for the truly disadvantaged.

Many of the different aspects of class polarisation within the manual workforce in Bhilai, Parry has described and analysed already in earlier articles. In the book, he adds ethnographic and historiographic evidence that further substantiates his argument. Furthermore, he theorizes it differently, in particular by referring to Giddens' concept of class structuration. According to this concept, the kind and degree of social interactions at work and beyond as well as social mobility between economic classes form the key indicators for their transformation into social classes. By casting class formation processes in such general terms, the concept offers a handle for comparisons across time and space, for comparing the specificity of class relations in Bhilai in the 1960s with the 1990s, or for comparing developments in Bhilai with those in other industrial settings.

In the final chapter, Parry undertakes such a comparison, drawing on the work of several anthropologists working on industrial labour in other sites, supplemented by brief visits to further sites. The comparison convincingly explains crucial differences and commonalities between the different cases that not only contextualizes the Bhilai case but also the others, and thus makes a ground-breaking contribution to the anthropology of industrial labour and class in general. He begins with "close comparisons" with other ethnographies on Indian industries, most of them steel industries, in the public sector and built in the 1950s. Hence, most of these industries were built in the Nehruvian spirit and supposed to turn into melting pots in which workers transcend their primordial differences of caste, faith and ethnicity to form model citizens; and these industries also all offered similarly privileged terms of employment. But each is located in a different regional state in India, and this explains some of the different dynamics that unfold in them. Many regional states were formed around linguistic-cum-ethnic boundaries; in some, nativist sentiments were strong, and regional elites tried hard to defend the interests of "sons of the soil" against other Indians who always also had migrated to these new industrial centres by restricting the latter's access to better paid *naukri* jobs and by patronising workers and unions subscribing to their nativist agenda. In Rourkela, for example, where I conducted ethnographic research (see Strümpell forthcoming, 2018), this led ethnic others among public-sector steel workers to stay closer to their co-ethnics among local informal sector workers and to sometimes ally with them politically. Hence, class structuration between these different workforces did not crystallize as sharply as in Bhilai, where, by contrast, the regional state was not ethnically defined and nativism never gained much ground, so that Nehru's vision of the melting pot remained relatively uncontested, and indeed largely materialized. At the same time, this made it unnecessary for the model public-sector working class to rub shoulders

with the working poor. This and other comparisons reveal that the degree of class structuration among industrial workforces depends on how it intersects with ethnicity (and in other cases also with caste), and that this depends on the wider political structures of the regional state as much as on local structures configuring labour processes and urban neighbourhoods.

Global capitalism of course also drives class structuration. Although Bhilai stands out for the high degree to which class structuration divides its workforces—and along slightly different lines also the Tata steel town Jamshedpur (Parry 2020: 652–6; see Sanchez 2016)—over the last decades also the other Indian steel towns, like Rourkela, "advanced" in this regard. Under pressure from global financial institutions, the Indian state neoliberalized its economy in the 1990s, opened the country for foreign capital, and structurally adjusted its public sector. In its wake, public sector workforces were drastically reduced, and their jobs were increasingly outsourced to precarious contract workers. This did not threaten the privileges of the smaller workforces still regularly employed: their jobs remained secure (and manpower reduction could hence only be achieved by natural attrition, not by retrenchments) and relatively well-paid. But it threatens the prospects of class reproduction. To maintain their children's chances for similarly privileged jobs in the public or the private sector, these workers invest large sums in their education (turning middle-class childhood into a career, as Parry aptly calls it, 2020: 484), further retreat into the educated, middle-class environment of the company townships, and more resolutely delegitimize the political claims of the working poor. In Rourkela, this meant that erstwhile sporadic solidarities between co-ethnics across the *naukri-kam* divide faded.

Despite all their efforts, many if not most of the privileged workers' children will not reproduce their parents' class position, and some will inevitably slide down the class hierarchy. This raises the question of whether the prospects of a future on the shadow side of the dual Indian economy will lead to a de-structuration of the inequality between its classes of labour, and whether the present heightened structuration of this inequality in order to avoid downward social mobility eventually also marks its demise. Trotsky's insight that capitalist development is uneven and combined by nature entails that it always produces—however small—niches of privilege for some workers, but only to destroy them after some years or decades, as Sewell (2005: 279) argues among others. According to Parry, for India's public-sector labour aristocracy, this moment has not yet come, although in my view it is fast approaching given the continuing decline of formal employment opportunities.

In any case, Parry also reminds us that even if class differences among workforces are de-structured, this does not inevitably lead to proletarian solidarity. Ethnographic research on the steel and mining industries in former socialist countries of eastern Europe, for example by Kesküla (2018), Kofti (2018), and Trevisani (2018), shows that their privatization and the constant threat of capital flight that this entails have hollowed out the benefits of formal employment and narrowed the class gap between company and contract workers. But this brought into sharper relief divisions based on notions of ethnicity and autochthony.

Hence, Parry (2020: 61, 664) concludes that the history of Bhilai as well as the other case studies do not provide a ready answer to the important question John Saul

posed some time ago, that is, what the objective conditions are under which relatively privileged workers identify downwards, with less fortunate fractions of the working class, and flex their muscle to fight for citizenship rights for the working class as a whole. However, early in the book, Parry (ibid.: 41) also emphasises that the dire picture of widespread working-class divisions should not obscure the fact that the possibility that classes emerge as self-conscious active agents is always inherent in class-divided societies. One example he refers to in this regard is colonial Mumbai's textile workers who were divided along differences of caste, religion, and ethnicity but who nevertheless sustained an impressive level of militancy during the entire inter-war period (see Chandavarkar 1994). As a contemporary example, one might add here workers in the export garment industry in Bangladesh who are divided by region of origin, by gender, and (usually overlapping) by skill but who (so far) nevertheless regularly transcended these differences and came together in huge industry-wide strikes (see Siddiqi 2017, 2020; Ashraf and Prentice 2019). Parry also concludes that the monograph suggests a way as to how Saul's important political question can be approached productively, that is, by paying close attention to and by comparing processes of class structuration, including their intersection with other forces of structuration, such as caste. I fully endorse this conclusion. And I consider Parry's monograph as the best evidence of what an ethnographically densely grounded and subtly as much as comprehensively theorized analysis can achieve in this regard that ought to inspire the anthropology, sociology and history of labour and class for many years to come.

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