Digital Activism and the Political Cultures of Trade Unionism

Debates on digital activism have often focused on the ways in which emerging forms of media have facilitated new forms of protest dynamics and mobilisations that center on particular activist cultures associated with more spontaneous and horizontal ways of organizing. Much less attention has been paid to the ways in which key organized political forms, such as trade unions, have engaged with digital activism. The place of digital activism in relation to trade unionism is a crucial area of concern at a time when conditions of work, and the ability to protect workers' rights, have been transformed by a congruence of technological developments, neoliberal ideology and rising corporate power. Wage stagnation and precarity have been the markers of the digitized economy, particularly since the financial crisis of 2008, with the prominence of low-wage labour markets intrinsically linked to the growth of a so-called 'gig economy'. As part of a wider labour movement, unions occupy a central role in taking on the crises of the twenty-first century.

In this brief essay, we situate digital activism in the context of the political cultures of trade unionism, highlighting in particular three fundamental divisions that have marked their development: 1) reform vs. revolution; 2) internationalism vs. nationalism; and 3) the relationship with political parties and business. We make the case that the role of digital activism in the labour movement needs to be understood in relation to these divisions. We highlight this by outlining the ways in which digital activism interplays with emerging forms of unionism, such as social movement unionism, community, independent and global unionism, that favour alternative political cultures than the corporatist model that we have seen come to dominate the core states in Europe and North America over the last two centuries. We start by outlining central theories of political culture and situate our own approach within Wallerstein's world-systems analysis (Wallerstein 2004).

The political culture of trade unionism

A concern with political culture is a concern with the relationship between the specific political habits, customs, conventions, tastes and histories of often

overlapping groups of people. Theoretically political culture has often been understood from within particular social science traditions, most prominently behaviourist and interpretivist approaches. Whilst behaviourism places emphasis on individual citizens and their voting behavior in order to measure and predict key aspects of political culture (Verba and Almond, 1980), interpretivist understandings draw attention to issues of the *meaningful* nature of social life and the factors that *underpin* patterns of behavior (Welch, 2016; Hughes and Sharrock, 2016). Thus interpretivists present a very different account of human nature to that found in behaviorism, regarding humans as inherently meaningful actors whose choices, reasons and ideas have to be understood within the context of the wider discursive and ideological frameworks within which they are situated. In so doing the aim is to restore agency to an account of political culture as being something produced and rendered meaningful by intentional human actions rather than being an abstract pattern of human behaviors (Welch, 2016).

Whilst such a critique of behaviorism is very important, interpretivist accounts have also been limited, particularly as they have tended to overlook the relationship between subjectivities and the structural context in which they are produced, reproduced and transformed, a point made forcefully in many critical realist accounts of positivist and interpretivist approaches to social science (Sayer, 2010: Bhaskar, 2014). A political economy of political culture such as world-systems analysis seeks to achieve the latter by supporting the important kernel in interpretivism – that people are knowing, conscious agents rather than the empty and unchanging vessel that behaviorism tends to depict – but situating them and their social relations in the context of the social, political and economic institutions and structures from which they emerge (Wilkin, 2016). As Marx famously noted, 'men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx, 1852). And this idea is prescient when considering the relationship between the political cultures of trade unionism and how they have emerged in the modern world-system.

In practice this means that the history of trade unionism has seen a variety of political cultures emerge and these can be mapped onto the modern world-system in a number of ways (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Darlington, 2013a and b; Waterman, 2001). It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a detailed account of the situated spatial and temporal location of particular trade union movements in relation to the different zones of the world-system, as union political cultures in specific locations have been constructed, evolved and adapted to changing systemic and local circumstances. However, whilst there are many complexities and contingencies to these developments we identify here three fundamental divisions that tend to recur in the evolution of political cultures of unions in order to provide a context for understanding the role of digital activism.

Firstly, this concerns the division regarding reform or revolution. Historically modern trade unionism which emerged in the UK in the early nineteenth century is inherently bound up with both radical liberalism and the emergence of socialism. Indeed, for many the self-organization of the working classes in unions and their communities through mutual aid, autonomy and self-help, is the logical precursor to the move towards a socialist transformation of society (Hyman, 2001; Collins, 2015). Revolutionary trade unionism (syndicalism in its various guises) has a long history and has proven to be an enduring part of trade union culture in the modern world-system (Hirsch and Walt, 2010). This has been seen in new union movements emerging across the so-called gig economy and service sector as well as in authoritarian states where unions have no legal status or autonomy, such as China (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Notes from below, 2018). However, over the course of the twentieth century this form of radical political culture lost out to reformist approaches that wanted to build links with the state and capital in order to force them to share the wealth that capitalist societies produced more equitably. This is encapsulated in the current era by the idea of a social partnership between unions and corporations as articulated in the European Union (Hyman, 2005). Thus, unions have gained legitimacy with the state, political parties and capitalist institutions by surrendering their more radical ideological aims such as to secure workers control of the economy (Miliband, 1969). Within the union structures this has led to a leadership political

culture of compromise, cooperation and support for existing democratic structures. For their critics this is seen as a form of cooptation and abandonment of the radical potential within trade unions. For others it has seen the union movement become a part of the state itself, much to the detriment of its members. This division often manifests itself in conflicts between union leadership and the grassroots or rank and file membership (Panitch, 1981). If the goals of trade unions, in different ways, have always been to improve the working lives of their members, the key question has always been: how is this to be achieved?

The second main factor in the development of trade union political cultures has been shaped by answers to the question of how to build international solidarity in a world shaped overwhelmingly by nation-states and in which national identity has been the most powerful form of social identity over the past 200 years. Marx noted that workers have no country but in practice this was a significant error of judgment and a major weakness in Marxist theory. National identity has proven to be more enduring than most others and has created fundamental problems for the union movement in terms of trying to coordinate its activities globally. Capital, while not strictly rootless, is far less constrained than trade unions politically, legally and ideologically. It is therefore able to play off groups of nationally-based workers against one another in order to lower wages and enhance its power over the workplace, most obviously through the trend since the 1980s towards off-shoring jobs from the core. Although global unions have existed since the nineteenth century, they have tended to act largely to coordinate and administer inter-union activity (Bronfenbrenner, 2007; Fetzer, 2012). The popular idea of 'one big union' straddling the world and connecting all workers, as most famously expressed by the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), remains an unfulfilled promise in the political culture of most unions. Nationalism remains a fundamental obstacle to the enlightenment-inspired cosmopolitan ideals of solidarity that are associated with the progressive parts of the trade union movement.

The final issue for trade union political culture we want to highlight has been the question of the relationship to political parties. This is a question about the means

by which trade unions can best secure their goals of improving the lives of their membership. Historically building links with political parties has brought very mixed success for trade unions, with those in the core winning major welfare reforms at the expense of capital, whilst in the periphery and semi-periphery of the world-system state welfare has had a far more limited development. Even in countries where it has been established in profound ways (the Soviet Union, Cuba, China, for example) this has been at the expense of the elimination and suppression of union autonomy. There is no doubt that successful relationships with political parties can see unions exerting meaningful influence on social relations and welfare but the difficulty is that, as its critics charge, these successes are built on a compromised and often neutered union political culture which sees the leadership and union hierarchy police its own membership to minimize conflict with the state and capital in return for being recognized as legitimate representative of the working classes (Darlington, 2013b; Dencik and Wilkin, 2015). As union membership has declined across the core of the world-system since the neo-liberal ascendancy began in the 1980s so have the welfare and wage gains secured by unions through political parties and the state withered too. The relationship between unions and political parties and social movements remains central to the political culture of unions in the twenty-first century. What are the costs for unions of formalized relations with political parties, and what are the gains?

Digital activism and worker resistance
The transformative potential of digital technologies for advancing the interests of workers intersects with all of these dimensions and divisions that have shaped the political cultures of trade unionism. We make the case that analyses of digital activism in relation to the labour movement needs to take account of the key divisions that have shaped the political cultures of trade unionism over the years. As we will go on to argue, this situates the role of digital activism beyond the question of visibility and media participation, and connects it to broader visions of the future of the labour movement and how best to advance the interests of workers in the contemporary world-system. This ads another dimension to the call for more integrated and less fragmented understandings of the interplay

between digital technologies, activist cultures and media cultures (Kavada 2013, Mattoni 2013). Affordances of emerging media forms, whether social media networks, 'smart' devices, or platforms, gain meaning in relation the wider media ecology (Treré and Mattoni 2016) and need to be situated within the 'repertoires of communication' available to social movement actors from which they can employ specific sets of 'activist media practices' (Mattoni 2013: 46). They also need to be understood in relation to the values, divisions and conditions of possibility that are inherent to the political culture of any social movement.

Historically, unions have been slow adapters to new technologies and were late in understanding the significance of the internet (Lee, quoted in Dencik and Wilkin 2015). The early adaptations to computer-mediated communications by trade unions were primarily focused on improving communications between trade unionists, creating networks of exchange across borders and boundaries in various incarnations of 'labournets' (Lee, 1997). These quickly developed into ideals of the potential for a 'global labournet' that could sustain the internationalism that several caucuses of the labour movement actively sought. However, although the technological infrastructure was there, developing a global communications network for the labour movement proved very challenging. Waterman (1984; 1992) described the failures of unions to advance such a project in those early stages as the result of ignorance or hostility towards the new technology, organizational conservatism, and a conscious or unconscious strategy of informational deprivation (or limitation) as a membership control device.

Despite continued conservatism and quest for membership control, digital technologies from the outset lent themselves to grassroots organizing and solidarity building within and beyond the labour movement, bypassing established international trade union bodies and formal channels of coordination. They emerged at a time when trade unions in the core states were under attack from the state and corporations and were struggling to recruit workers in many industries. During this period young people across many Western democracies began to shift their focus of concern away from traditional work-related issues to what has become known as forms of identity politics around such things as gay

rights, women's rights, animal rights, the environment, anti-racism and so on. We saw signs of this in the 'anti-globalisation' movement or 'global justice movement' (della Porta, 2007) that ascended on the streets of Seattle for the World Trade Organisation ministerial conference in 1999 (Wilkin, 2015). These events demonstrated some of the innovative uses that digital media technologies afforded resistance movements whose agendas were diverse and often potentially in conflict. In particular, activists could communicate, collaborate and demonstrate in new ways by aggregating small contributions into a broader movement (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2004). New alliances between labour organisations and new social movements and nongovernmental organisations were built in response to the onslaught of neoliberal restructuring programmes and free trade agreements. It illustrated the possibilities of a reinvigorated movement of workers in solidarity with other progressive sectors of civil society, not historically linked with organized labour.

The need for innovative and alternative ways of organizing the labour movement has been a continued focus, and digital activism has been key to visions of reinvigorating trade unionism. In particular, the move to consider organizing workers outside the workplace and outside of collective bargaining agreements has gained increased significance in light of developments in social media and the advent of a 'new protest culture' (Gerbaudo 2017). Initiatives such as US-based unions AFL-CIO's *Working America* and SEIU's *Fight for a Fair Economy*, set out to describe a revised, more flexible, vision of how to mobilise low-income workers who cannot get union recognition in their workplace. With a significant increase in low-wage insecure labour, unions have actively been considering how to build more flexible types of membership that are focused on community affiliation and communicated at home – online – rather than the workplace. This has meant an increased focus on community organizing and a concerted effort to broaden mobilizing strategies and tactics. An important caveat here is that both these initiatives do nothing to transcend the fundamental problems of nationalism and elite-led unionism that have divided workers effectively since the nineteenth century which we discussed earlier. They are, rather, reassertions of a nationalist form of unionism which, in this case, and following the rhetoric of former SEIU

leader Andy Stern, aim to make 'America great again' (Stern, 2006). Which is why the emergence of new local and global protest movements with much less clearly defined forms of *national* identity is a particularly important development today.

Indeed, social movements such as Occupy have been part of a move towards wider society-based labour organisations that target broad economic issues, such as income inequality and the call for a living or citizen's wage beyond national borders. Digital activism in this context has been part of nurturing a kind of movement that draws from labour movements of developing countries, challenging traditional corporatist models prevalent in many core countries that seek close relationships with political parties or business. Instead, this form of *social movement unionism* concerns itself with more than organizing workers around work-related issues and engages with struggles for social justice, building solidarity outside confined boundaries of trade unions (Waterman 1993). As Kavada (2015) has argued, social media served to blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the Occupy movement in a way that suited its values of inclusiveness and direct participation.

In conjunction with social movement unionism, occupation-based or immigrant community-centred labour organisations such as worker centers and alliances have grown significantly in a way that places emphasis on *community* and *independent unionism*. In the UK and the US, for example, alliances made up of janitors or cleaners that aim to support low-wage workers mostly from immigrant communities have become a significant force in the labour movement. At the University of London, the 3Cosas campaign brought together migrant workers, mostly from Latin America, working as outsourced cleaners, porters, security guards, catering and postroom workers on London campuses demanding three things ('cosas'): sick pay, holiday pay and pensions in line with directly employed staff. These workers organized themselves around a newly formed branch of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB), ultimately in response to failings of mainstream union Unison to deal with the challenges of engaging a migrant and diverse workforce demanding self-organisation (Alberti 2014). Combining a strong online presence with direct action and informal bargaining,

the immigrant backgrounds of workers has provided an anchor of solidarity for self-organisation that advances a contrasting culture of mobilization than dominant cultures of trade unionism (Alberti 2014). In the US, we are also increasingly seeing employer-based labour organisations that are formed to deal with individual employers such as OURWalmart or the Starbucks Workers Union often seeking to be independent unions, illustrating ways in which workers can exert influence on employers to improve working conditions outside of collective bargaining agreements (Dencik and Wilkin 2015). Here also, tactics have instead placed more emphasis on direct action and reputational damage, with a prominent role for digital media (Wood 2015). Similarly, the Fight for 15 campaign that initially focused on fast food workers in the United States deliberately incorporated tactics often associated with digitally-enabled networks of protest, making use of one-day 'flash-strikes' and rallies that could be amplified and widely distributed via social media, despite a relatively small base of organized fast food workers (Dencik and Wilkin 2015). In this sense, digital activism can exercise forms of symbolic power as a way to advance worker resistance in contexts where industrial and labour power might otherwise be difficult to leverage (Wood 2015).

The political cultures of trade unionism are being shaped by these new forms of organization, responsive as they are to changes in the organization of workplaces. Importantly, we therefore need to understand the integration of digital technologies into repertoires of labour activism as part of a pivotal moment of social experimentation in worker representation (Freeman, 2013).

Yet, whilst distributed networks of communication as advanced by digital activism can often challenge the hierarchical structures of many mainstream and older social movements, including many trade unions, there is simultaneously a question with regards to the sustainability of digitally-enabled protest that thrives on the dismantling of political organization as traditionally understood. Indeed, notions of 'connective action' (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), popular as an alternative to the more common understanding of social movement practices in terms of collective action, posits that digital media overcomes the shackles of

organizational dilemmas as movements become based on weak-tie networks, do not require strong organizational control or the construction of collective identities, but are nevertheless able to react effectively to given opportunities (Haunss 2015). For the labour movement this provides moments of mobilization and pressure that can prove to be very effective. The Arab Spring itself was foregrounded by widespread labour protests in Egypt that paved the way for the subsequent overthrow of the Mubarak regime (Del Panta, 2016). In the examples above, we see how digital activism expands repertoires of resistance to groups who might otherwise lack resources such as precarious and low-wage workers (Mattoni, 2012). It also takes power and control away from union hierarchies and places it in the hands of grassroots workers, allowing for more self-organisation (Freeman 2013).

At the same time, a turn to digital activism also raises concerns within the labour movement about media-centric activism, a growing focus on public image, public relations and symbolic power at the expense of worker and community organization, as well as building a sustained basis for empowering workers (Dencik and Wilkin 2015). The transient nature of 'connective action' is actually very much in keeping with neo-liberal ideas about the changing nature of subjectivity and might generate a temporary and limited form of protest which seems unlikely to generate the transformation of global order that the urgent problems of the twenty-first century (climate change, nuclear war, global poverty) demand. As Astra Taylor (2016) has argued, there has been a turn away from organizing in favour of activism, yet organizing is what the union movement and progressive social movements must cultivate to make their activism more durable and effective, to sustain and advance causes 'when the galvanizing intensity of occupations or street protests subsides'. This raises a challenge to the labour movement as how to nurture political cultures that can integrate and take what is useful with digital activism whilst drawing on long-standing traditions of organizing to create more relevant and sustainable forms of unionism for contemporary capitalism.

Conclusion – towards alternative imaginations?

The question of the place of digital activism in the labour movement brings to light the need for a discussion on broader transformations in how to protect the interests of workers in the modern world-system. The integration of digital technologies into repertoires of resistance have advanced alternative understandings of the nature and role of unions, but also run up against challenges as how to sustain an organized movement. This calls attention to the importance of understanding emerging digital technologies in relation to both media cultures and broader activist cultures.

In this essay we have outlined the interplay between the political culture of trade unionism and emerging forms of digitally-enabled activism and protest. As we have explained, political culture cannot be understood in the singular, and we find in the labour movement contesting and competing visions and practices surrounding the nature and role of trade unions. Whilst this has meant that there have been elements of conflict and factional alliances within the labour movement, the dominant form of trade unionism, certainly in Europe and North America, advanced a position based on a corporatist model in which unions sought to secure the interests of workers long-term through different kinds of partnerships with businesses and the state. The accompanied political culture of this kind of trade unionism has been rooted in hierarchical structures, centralized control and formal routes of negotiation, most notably through collective bargaining agreements, and often centered on a strong sense of national identity.

However, it has become widely recognized within the labour movement that this dominant political culture of trade unionism is struggling to keep abreast with protecting worker interests in a rapidly changing labour market and protest culture. Decline in membership and increasingly limited labour power has forced trade unions to (re)consider its role in society and seek alternative routes for advancing workers' interests. In particular, experiments in more flexible membership structures, alternative ways of organizing, and solidarity building beyond the union movement have highlighted potential avenues as well as the challenges of a stifling political culture that struggles to relinquish control and

loosen hierarchies in favour of a more grassroots-driven, social movements-based, and global form of unionism.

Digital activism and the uprisings of recent years have pointed to the possibilities for wider, societal and more militant forms of resistance to emerge that have also been reflected in changes in the labour movement. Whilst many of the large mainstream trade unions, certainly in the core states, have struggled to make themselves relevant in this context, we have seen some innovative experiments in how to organize and build collective worker action through critical engagement with digital technologies that point to a more flexible and autonomous political culture. Only by integrating digital activism as part of more horizontal worker-driven forms of organization and articulating an alternative vision of society (including the organization of technology) in alliance with other communities and social movements, can the labour movement start to rise to the challenge of the current crises facing the world system.

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