

Beyond 'Political Economism':

New identities for trade unions in Western Europe?

Graham Taylor, Andrew Mathers and Martin Upchurch.

Abstract

This article engages critically with Richard Hyman's work on trade union identity and European integration. There is a sympathetic review of Hyman's contribution to the debate on these topics over the past two decades alongside a critique of Hyman's approach which highlights a range of weaknesses and contradictions which result from Hyman's uncritical use of a range of categories and concepts taken from Regulation Theory. The authors question Hyman's argument that developments in European trade unionism can be conceptualized adequately through an analysis of the development and crisis of 'political economism': a dominant trade union identity that Hyman aligns with the development and crisis of Fordism. An alternative model for understanding the reorientation of European trade unions is presented based on a critical and dialectical conceptualization of the relationship between trade unions and capitalist development. This is used to construct a model of contemporary trade union reorientation along the dimensions of 'accommodation' and 'opposition' to neo-liberalism and 'national' and 'international' modes of organization and mobilization.

It is necessary to direct one's attention violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will. ... Antonio Gramsci, The Prison Notebooks (Gramsci, 1971: 175).

Introduction

The question of trade union identity has been a recurrent theme in comparative and historical labour studies. The concept has allowed the development of trade union typologies that

differentiate usefully between divergent ideological orientations, membership bases, organizing strategies and institutional forms. The work of Richard Hyman has been central to the task of exploring how trade union identities have been impacted by the dynamics and crises of contemporary capitalist development. Over the past three decades, Hyman has charted the increasing convergence of British and European trade unions around an identity of 'political economism' in the context of 'Keynesianism' or 'Fordism'. He has analysed the crisis and decomposition of this identity in the context of neo-liberal restructuring and the emergence of 'neo' - or 'post-Fordism' and a range of potential new and alternative trade union identities made possible by the 'variable geometry' of European integration. It would be wrong to dispute the seminal nature of Hyman's work on European trade unionism or to deny the agenda-setting status of his contribution to critical labour studies and industrial relations. From a critical Marxist perspective, however, there are some tensions, omissions and contradictions in the work of Hyman. Most notably, Hyman has drawn on the 'regulation approach' and, as a consequence, has seriously under-estimated the contradictory and crisis-ridden environment in which European trade unionism has developed and the complex patterns of continuity and change underpinning contemporary forms of European trade unionism.

In this article, we engage with the work of Hyman on trade union identity and European integration in order to develop a critical assessment of the crisis and decomposition of 'political economism' and the potential for alternative forms of trade union orientation in the context of European integration. We begin with an appreciative review of Hyman's work on union identity and European integration. This work is marked by his critical embrace of the 'Social Europe' agenda and the ways in which this has been underpinned by his analysis of changing trade union identities and the potential for trade union renewal based on the 'social'

dimension of trade union strategy. In the following section, we suggest that there are theoretical problems with Hyman's model of 'trade union identity' which, linked to his largely uncritical embrace of the regulation approach and his model of 'civil society', tend to undermine his approach to the politics of contemporary European trade unionism. In the next section, we present an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the crisis of 'political economism' in the context of European integration. We suggest that a more nuanced analysis of contemporary European trade unionism can be developed by charting the reorientation of European trade unions along the dimensions of 'accommodation' or 'opposition' to neo-liberalism and the focus on either 'national' and 'international' modes of organization and mobilization. We conclude with a critical discussion of the conceptual and theoretical problems underpinning Hyman's model of trade union identity in contemporary Europe and suggest that these can be overcome with the adoption of a more critical conceptualization of 'European civil society'.

The Promise of European Integration: Trade Unionism in a Warmer Climate?

Since the 1980s, there has been an increasing interest amongst trade union activists and commentators in the progressive potential of European institutions. For many union leaders, 'Social Europe' has come to symbolize a possible brighter future for British unions in which unions can achieve the status of social partner and substantive social rights for their members. This process, it is argued, will serve as a counterweight to neoliberal globalization and so produce a civilized and humanized capitalism (See, for example, TUC, 2006). This 'European turn' amongst the upper echelons of British trade unionism has been matched by one of the leading figures in British industrial relations, but in contrast to the 'Europhilia' of union leaders, Richard Hyman has seemingly retained a more balanced perspective on European integration. However, implicit in the work of Hyman on European integration and

the strategic choices facing unions in Europe, is the suggestion that 'Europe' is the terrain on which unions are able to operate in order to secure a new social settlement for labour. The work of Hyman on union identity and European integration can be traced to the early 1990s. His initial concern was to develop a framework for understanding trade union identity that was presented as the, often unrecognized, basis for trade union strategy. The basic components of trade union identity were presented as 'interest representation', 'democratic structure', 'agenda framing' and 'power mobilization' (Hyman, 1994a, 1994b). The range of trade union identities in a comparative and historical context included 'craft', 'business', 'confessional', 'syndicalist', 'social democratic' and 'communist'. According to Hyman, the dominant form of trade union identity in Western Europe during the post-war period was 'political economism'. The crisis of contemporary European trade unionism needed to be contextualized within a clear understanding of the development and crisis of this dominant trade union identity.

Hyman traced the historical development of trade unionism through a triple polarization of union identity between a revolutionary or anti-capitalist orientation, an orientation focused on social integration or social cohesion and forms of business unionism that involved a narrow orientation around occupational interests (Hyman, 1996a: 65). During the first half of the twentieth century, there were bitter and prolonged struggles within and between unions and union confederations on the basis of these rival identities. By the mid-20th century, the conflict over trade union identity in Western Europe had been transcended; although the transformation was obscured by organizational separation and ideological sloganizing (Hyman, 1994a). Trade unions that had articulated revolutionary or reformist political demands became increasingly focused on a collective bargaining agenda that rendered political orientations increasingly rhetorical. Simultaneously, the terrain of collective

bargaining became increasingly politicized as a result of Keynesian macro-economic management and the legislative regulation of employment relations and, in this context, business unionism also became increasingly untenable. The dominant trade union identity became what Hyman (1996a: 66) has termed 'political economism' which combined collective bargaining with employers with a concern to influence the broader political, legal and economic framework of collective bargaining. The consolidation of 'political economism' involved a complex process of institution building associated with 'political exchange' or 'neo-corporatism'. The resulting institutions articulated a reciprocal relationship between labour, capital and the state and involved the exchange of union restraint for labour friendly or labour neutral government policies. These developments displayed marked national specificities (Baglioni, 1987; Therborn, 1992; Crouch, 1993) alongside functional similarities and convergence.

The new environment which has been developing since the 1970s, and which was proving increasingly inhospitable for 'political economism', was presented by Hyman as the product of four intersecting processes of change (Hyman, 1994a: 109-119). These processes of change had undermined the socio-economic composition, institutional terrain, ideological legitimacy and socio-cultural relevance of 'political economism' as a trade union identity. First, the global restructuring of capital associated with globalization and the increasing prominence of MNCs had contributed to a shift from manufacturing to service employment and this had stripped the labour movement of its core membership and its heroic central figure in the form of the semi-skilled industrial worker. Hyman rejected the 'death of class' thesis to argue that industrial change had produced a 'crisis of a specific, narrowly based *type* of trade unionism' (Hyman, 1994a: 113) alongside the potential to develop more inclusive types of trade unionism out of the fragmented workforce generated by corporate and

industrial change. Second, 'economic stringency' had undermined the institutional basis for 'political economism'. In the Keynesian era, unions were able to operate effectively as intermediaries between the state and the working class through a mechanism of 'political exchange' that delivered material gains to union members and relative industrial quiescence to the state and employers. The end of Keynesianism had placed severe pressures on this exchange as unions came to be recognized by the state according to their capacity to make policies of retrenchment and restraint palatable to their members. The corollary of this was that restraint often resulted in loss of membership and/or leadership challenge owing to rank and file disenchantment. Third, the 'erosion of partisan attachments' associated with the demise of communism and confessionalism had resulted in the relative absence of an ideologically based alternative to, and replacement for, 'political economism'. However, Hyman argued that the retreat of old 'ideological obstacles' offered an opportunity to develop new trade union projects as an alternative to forms of apolitical trade unionism that capitulated to neoliberal globalization. Fourth, the 'decline of collectivism' (Hyman, 1994a: 117-119) associated with the shift from industrialism to post-industrialism had resulted in important socio-cultural changes and these had impacted on established forms and expressions of worker solidarity and union power. Specifically, Hyman questioned whether union leaders could continue to mobilize effectively the industrial power of workers through bureaucratic means of representation and whether more effective forms of participation and action could be developed based on the revitalization of trade unionism as a 'social movement' in 'civil society'.

The work of Hyman on neo-liberal restructuring and trade union reorientation has provided an important alternative to accounts of trade union reorientation that have posited business unionism and social partnership as the inevitable direction of trade union

reorientation in the context of neo-liberalism. In the next section, we show how Hyman's alternative conception of union futures draws explicitly on regulation theory and why this is a problem when it informs his conceptualization of union identity and his substantive work on trade union reorientation in Europe.

Regulation Theory, Trade Union Identity and the Variable Geometry of European Trade Unionism

Hyman (1994b: 3) has observed correctly that within the discipline of industrial relations explicit theorizing is poorly developed and articulated. In contrast, his own analysis of the relationship between the development and crisis of Fordism and Keynesianism and changes in national industrial relations regimes develops in a clear and explicit way the work of leading exponents of the regulation approach (Gordon et al., 1982; Piore & Sabel, 1984; Lipietz, 1985; Boyer, 1988 quoted by Hyman, 1994b). Hyman is clear that 'Fordism' or 'regulated capitalism' underpinned the stability of capital accumulation in the post-war period; although he is careful not to accept the regulation approach *in toto*. Hence, Hyman argued:

It is unnecessary to embrace all elements of 'regulation theory' in order to recognize the value of such an account for making sense of the relative stabilization of mid-20th century industrial relations [It is] plausible to interpret large scale industry as the dynamo of many socio-political developments in the western world (Hyman, 1994b: 7).

It is, however, unclear which aspects of regulation theory Hyman rejected. Nevertheless, his analysis of the strategic reorientation of unions is framed clearly by the shift from Fordism to 'disorganized capitalism'. This shift had limited the strategic choices available to unions; although Hyman is clear that this had not produced a single set of options or trajectories of

change. Rather, the space for strategic choice by trade unions was opened up by the contradictory nature of historically 'path dependant' structures within the context of 'disorganized capitalism' (Lash & Urry, 1987 quoted in Hyman, 1994b: 11). This embrace of the 'post-Marxist' paradigm by Hyman marked an important shift in how the relationship between the state and organized labour was presented in his work. In his earlier work, Hyman had traced the close institutional mediations between the 'politics of production' and the 'politics of politics' in order to highlight how the form of the state was determined by the confidence and cohesion of workers in the 'politics of production' (Hyman, 1989: 202-223). This dialectical approach was later abandoned for a structural functionalist approach according to which union 'identity' is determined by the orientation of unions along the axes between the institutionally autonomous spheres of 'politics', 'economics' and 'society'.

These institutional structures form the basis of the 'eternal triangle' of union identities explored in *Understanding European Trade Unionism* (Hyman, 2001a). In this book, Hyman explored the development and crisis of national traditions of industrial relations within a framework of trade union 'geometry'. The alternative orientations within this geometry were derived from a historical analysis of the ideological battles waged between business, social integrationist and anti-capitalist trade unionism. These orientations highlighted the collective interests of workers as a commodity (market), as a social group (society) and as a political force (class) and thus 'market', 'society' and 'class' formed the three corners of the 'eternal triangle' of trade union identity. Although this ideological battle was largely abated by the post-war settlement, Hyman argued that it was the enduring tensions between these orientations which shaped contemporary trade union identities.

Hyman applied this model to the development of trade unionism in the UK, Germany and Italy. In the UK, the union movement occupied the axis between market and class which expressed its attachment to voluntarism and its affiliation to the Labour Party. In Germany, the union movement occupied the axis between market and society which reflected its aim of achieving a social market. In Italy, the union movement occupied the axis between society and class which generated a highly politicized form of trade unionism that engaged the state to regulate the market. Hyman argued that each of these national movements had adopted a form of 'political economism' as its main ideology. However, the crisis of Keynesianism was generating 'ideological disorientation' and an 'identity crisis' in all three cases and unions were 'increasingly adrift within a sea of variable geometry' (Hyman, 1996b: 86). For Hyman, European integration offered a possible path out of the crisis. It offered a new terrain on which unions could develop a new transnational (utopian) vision that could revitalize the 'movement' dimension of trade unionism and so galvanize and mobilize workers across the continent around a concrete project of 'Social Europe'. The development of the 'movement' dimension required unions to redefine their role as 'actors in civil society' in order to engage in a struggle 'to shape beliefs and values in the wider society' (Hyman, 1996a: 61).

The rediscovery of the 'movement' dimension of trade unionism was based on Hyman's analysis of the crisis of 'political economism'. In the new environment, unions were operating with a 'diminished capacity to mobilize traditional forms of economic and political pressure' (Hyman, 2001a: 56) and, as a consequence, civil society was becoming an increasingly important terrain for trade union activity and influence. This illustrates how Hyman conceptualizes the power resources available to trade unions and the ways in which trade unions are able to mobilize power in civil society. Hyman does not refer specifically to the model of power that underpins his analysis, but it mirrors the three dimensional model of

power developed by Steven Lukes (Lukes, 2004) and, more importantly, the institutional configuration that Hyman has described as 'political economism'. The dimensions of power outlined by Hyman are first, the ability to achieve union objectives in the face of resistance; second, winning an institutional or legal framework to enable their agenda to be realized; and third, the ability to influence attitudes and perceptions in order to create a favourable ideological climate (Hyman, 1994a: 127). This model is, however, applied in a rather inconsistent way when Hyman moves his analysis to the European level. Hyman focuses on the need to create a favourable ideological climate in order to establish a positive institutional settlement for labour at the European level. This clearly plays down the importance of the first dimension of power and the question of how such a settlement can be achieved in the face of employer and governmental hostility.

Hyman argued that European trade unions had become integrated into the elitist institutions of EU governance and, as a consequence, levels of union mobilization and political contention had become increasingly inhibited (Hyman, 2005: 9). The elite-driven process of European integration along neoliberal lines was blocking the development of an effective model of social regulation at the European level and the ultimate goal of a progressive model of Social Europe. Hyman was particularly critical of the ETUC whose Faustian bargain with the institutions of the EU had made it a captive of the 'elite embrace' (Hyman, 2005: 24); whilst the practice of social dialogue had resulted in union leaders accepting the 'normative order' constructed by neo-liberal elites (Hyman, 2006). Hyman argued that European civil society was largely a construction of the European Commission and, therefore, communitarian regulation amounted to little more than consultation with officially recognized NGOs based on the neo-liberal norms of competitiveness and flexibility (Hyman, 2005: 35). However, Hyman clearly rejected the determinist argument that

globalization precluded the development of an effective European system of European regulation. In order to pursue this agenda, European trade unions needed to oppose the grain of neoliberal European integration. Hyman concluded that unions could only mobilize the 'serious pressure' required to achieve effective social regulation by opposing the capitalist logic of competitiveness with a 'new' socialist logic of solidarity (Hyman, 2005). Unions needed to engage in an 'internal social dialogue' (Hyman, 2001a: 174) through which leaders and members were involved in a meaningful discussion across sections of workers and across national borders that would generate a new solidarity and a new 'moral economy'. This could be expressed concretely as a modernized welfare state that could offer a new vision of citizenship around which unions could mobilize (Hyman, 2005, 2006).

The most recent work of Hyman suggests that European unions have not really risen to the challenge of developing an 'internal social dialogue'. The extensive support for a 'yes' vote amongst European trade unions in the recent referenda on European integration confirmed the tendency for most unions to support European integration regardless of its social consequences (Hyman, 2010). Moreover, unions have not been able to go beyond defensive forms of protest and partnership in response to the effects of the current financial crisis during which unions have deployed radical forms of action, but with the limited aim of mitigating job losses. At the same time, the scope for dialogue to achieve damage limitation through new social pacts has become even narrower. There has been little progress by unions in building popular support for a new agenda that could address the crisis through, for example, developing demands for economic democracy (Hyman & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2010).

There is, therefore, an increasing gap between the analytical and prescriptive elements of Hyman's work on union identity and European integration. Clearly, the 'optimism of the will' has predominated over the 'pessimism of the intelligence'. An adequate 'pessimism of the intelligence' requires a rejection of the illusions and fantasies generated by the 'regulation approach'. In the following section we highlight some of the problems and limitations associated with the 'regulation approach' and the ways in which these undermine Hyman's work on union identity and European integration.

'Pessimism of the Intellect....' Social Democratic Fantasies and Neo-Liberal Realities

In the previous section, we highlighted some of the key theoretical assumptions underpinning Hyman's analysis of the development and crisis of union identities in Europe. We demonstrated how Hyman has explicitly acknowledged his debt to the 'regulation approach' and the ways in which this is linked to a particular conception of power and civil society. In this section, we set out the main arguments contained within 'regulation theory' and how the weaknesses and limitations of this approach have tended to undermine Hyman's work on union identity and European integration. The regulation approach is an attempt to understand the crisis tendencies of capitalist development and the role played by political and social institutions in mitigating these crisis tendencies. The work of Aglietta (1979) was the most systematic attempt to trace the development and crisis of the 'Fordist' regime of accumulation and underpinned the more crude contributions to the regulation approach which followed. In the work of Aglietta, the 19th century was dominated by an 'extensive' 'regime of accumulation' based on a competitive form of regulation. This 'regime' became increasingly undermined by a generalized crisis of under-consumption and, following the crisis of 1929, an 'intensive' or 'Fordist' regime of accumulation developed based on mass production and a Fordist 'mode of regulation' that involved the reconciliation of high wages

and increasing social welfare with rising productivity and the intensification of labour.

During the 1970s, the 'long wave' of Fordist growth became undermined by an increasingly serious crisis of disproportionality as increases in productivity failed to keep pace with the rising organic composition of capital. The attempt to counter this tendency through Keynesian demand management and the expansion of credit served only to exacerbate the crisis through the intensification of inflation. This is the context in which later contributors to the regulation approach attempted to trace the emergence of a new post-Fordist 'regime of accumulation' based on globalization, Japanization and neo-Fordist restructuring of the public sector. The new 'regime of accumulation', it was argued, had changed the form and focus of class struggle and required labour to forge a new accommodation with capital in order to facilitate the development of a post-Fordist 'mode of regulation' and the renewal of social democracy for 'New Times'.

The regulation approach has undoubtedly contributed to a Marxist understanding of the crisis tendencies of capitalist development and the role of the state in attempting to regulate the crises and contradictions of capitalist accumulation. The debate on the regulation approach raged within the pages of *Capital and Class* and beyond during the 1980s and 1990s and tended to reflect a set of deeper divisions within the Marxist paradigm premised on the form and function of the capitalist state and the relationship between the state and civil society (Bonefeld & Holloway, 1991; Clarke, 1991b). While this debate was largely unresolved and remains ongoing, we would nevertheless argue that commentators working from a broad 'form theoretical' perspective highlighted a range of serious problems that tended to undermine the analytical usefulness of regulation theory from a Marxist perspective (See in particular, Bonefeld, 1991; Clarke, 1991a; Holloway, 1991; Peláez & Holloway, 1991). The notion that the state and civil society are autonomous from the dynamics and

contradictions of the capitalist economy underpins the regulation approach and this position was, we would argue, effectively undermined by a 'form theoretical' approach which highlighted the ways in which the social, political and economic are derived from the totality of the capital relation. We will now explore the main elements of the critique and the ways in which it problematizes major aspects of Hyman's work on trade union identity and reorientation.

Critics of regulation theory highlighted the ways in which its structural functionalist methodology downplayed the importance of class struggle in the process of historical development. Regulation theory is focussed on the structural imperatives of capital accumulation and the dynamics of structural integration and disintegration underpinning successive 'long waves' of capitalist development. In adopting the methodological assumptions of the regulation approach, therefore, Hyman tends to develop a rather teleological account of the relationship between trade union identity and the dynamics of social and political change. This can be seen in his argument that the 'political' and 'economic' forms of trade unionism associated with Fordism are no longer relevant to the structural imperatives of 'post-Fordism'. In the work of Hyman, trade union identities tend to be examined as part of a closed process of structural development rather than as emergent categories formed through an open process of contestation and struggle. In his earlier work, Hyman was sensitive to the dangers of adopting a 'too mechanical' approach to the analysis of trade union politics. Quoting Gramsci, Hyman (1989: 245) argued that a trade union '*becomes* a determinate institution, i.e. takes on a definite historical form, to the extent that the strength and will of the workers... impress a policy and propose an aim that define it'. Hyman also concurred with the position of Perry Anderson on the class nature of trade unions (Anderson, 1967). Anderson argued that trade unions articulate rather than challenge the

unequal and contradictory relationship between capital and labour. Trade unions represent the interests of labour within capitalism and, as a consequence, are unable to challenge the structural parameters of capitalist society (Anderson, 1967: 264-8). The notion of 'trade union identity' thus tends to reify and obscure a complex and contradictory set of relationships underpinning the form of trade unionism in capitalist society. The interests represented by trade unions, the mechanisms of democratic representation, the ideological framing of issues and interests and the mobilization of trade union power are manifestations of class struggle captured *post festum* in the institutional form of trade union identity. The notion that unions have an 'identity' in civil society overstates the autonomy of civil society from the state and economy and highlights the weakness of the neo-Gramscian conceptualization of civil society to which Hyman subscribes (Hyman, 2001a: 59). In his earlier work, Hyman himself highlighted the historically contingent and *provisional* characteristics of trade unions. This resulted from both the internal dynamics of trade unionism and the material interests and relations of production which they mediate. Hyman warned against analyzing trade unions in isolation from the wider social formation of which they are a key component; particularly when trade unions are impacted by the crisis tendencies of capital accumulation (Hyman, 1989: 138). In his earlier work, therefore, Hyman seems to accept that notions such as 'union identity' tend to encourage the forms of functionalist and teleological analysis that he later seems to embrace alongside his critical acceptance of the regulation approach.

There are also a number of problems concerning the development and periodization of capital accumulation suggested by the regulation approach that have a relevance to Hyman's analysis. Hyman's argument that 'political economism' constituted the dominant form of union identity in the era of Fordism and that this identity is no longer relevant in the era of

‘disorganized capitalism’ tends to obscure a more complex process of continuity and change. There are serious problems in the periodization of capitalism underpinning regulation theory. There was, for example, nothing inherently inflexible about Fordist technology and the inflexibility that existed was a product of worker resistance and struggle both individually and through trade unions (Clarke, 1990). This period of Fordist growth was, moreover, not overwhelmingly ‘organized’ or particularly stable. The generalization of Fordist production methods tended to heighten an increasingly serious crisis of over-accumulation and the social democratic goal of full employment was constantly abandoned in favour of price stability during the 1960s and 1970s (Clarke, 1988: 316-22). This suggests that ‘political economism’ was an unstable and crisis ridden form of trade unionism that operated in and against the Fordist settlement. This has important implications with regard to Hyman’s normative agenda around the development of a new social settlement for labour at the European level.

The central categories of regulation theory were also shown to have played an important ideological role in legitimizing the class compromise that underpinned the post-war settlement. The strength of ‘Fordism’ was always ideological and fuelled the social democratic fantasy that the levers of the state could be applied in order to overcome the crises and contradictions of capital accumulation (Clarke, 1991a: 122). In the work of Hyman, the category of ‘political economism’ is an important part of this ideological mix and serves to legitimize the ‘pluralist’ industrial relations regimes that developed in the post-war period. The category tends to obscure the contradictions of the post-war settlement and the extent to which this form of ‘identity’ highlighted the strength and obscured the weakness of organized labour. The Keynesian Welfare State, that Hyman is keen to see replicated at the European level, emerged in response to the crisis rather than the stability of ‘Fordism’. The ‘settlement’

thus served to deepen and politicize the crisis and provided the context for the prolonged period of neo-liberal restructuring since the 1970s (Clarke, 1988: 287-51).

These criticisms tend to undermine Hyman's prognosis for the crisis of European trade unionism and his blueprint for trade union orientation and renewal. Hyman accepts that there has been a transformation in the social relations of capital and that trade union renewal needs to be based on a new social democratic vision or 'utopia' for the 'new times'. Hyman also accepts, albeit critically, the post-Fordist fantasy that a new and progressive social settlement for labour is possible if only organized labour can bend its organizational form and bargaining agendas in the direction of neo-liberal flexibility. Hyman is thus part of a broader project of social democratic renewal that aims to resurrect the decaying institutions of national Keynesianism at the European level. The category of 'Social Europe' is central to this ideological project. 'Social Europe' is a central component in an emerging discourse of 'cosmopolitan social democracy' and Hyman has emerged as a leading exponent of this paradigm within the discipline of industrial relations.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the content of social democracy underwent an 'ideological leap' involving the elevation of the market and the devaluation of the economically active state (Moschonas, 2002: 293). Within the new social democratic discourse, the European Union provides a blueprint for a 'Social Europe' that will allow economic dynamism to be developed alongside social protection and well-being (Giddens, 2007). The notion of 'Social Europe' is central to Hyman's prognosis with regard to the demise of national trade union identities based on 'political economism'. Hyman has been critical of the extant institutions and practices associated with the EU; particularly the undeveloped nature of European collective bargaining and the top-down nature of European 'social dialogue. In opposition to

this, Hyman has championed a new 'moral economy' based on a Durkheimian conception of 'organic solidarity' achieved through an 'internal social dialogue' within the European labour movement. However, Hyman does not specify the contents of 'Social Europe' beyond the need to construct a new embeddedness of market processes at the European level and a new defence for the status of employees. The project of Social Europe lacks an effective social base to struggle for its implementation and its ideological appeal rests ultimately on its claim to historical necessity (cf. Clarke, 1991a: 74). This necessity is based on the notion that social democratic renewal needs to follow the trajectory of capitalist development and expresses an enduring hope that that capitalist development will once again be the saviour of social democracy.

An exploration of the logic underpinning the process of European integration highlights the political dangers and analytical problems of Hyman's strategy for the renewal of European trade unions. Hyman's strategy accepts the argument that the power of the nation state has been marginalized by the development of transnational institutions such as the EU and the notion that European civil society provides an arena in which to pursue an ethical counter-hegemonic struggle against neo-liberalism in Europe. These two presuppositions are highly problematic. It has become increasingly clear that the nation state has been neither strengthened nor weakened by neo-liberal globalization, but transformed from an agency of economic management into a procedural-regulatory agency that takes an increasingly polymorphous form within transnational and multi-level networks of other state and non-state actors (Sørensen, 2004). The development of the EU is ultimately a 'rescue' of the liberal state (Milward, 1994). The concept of European civil society is also deeply problematic. The process of neo-liberal restructuring has unleashed forces in civil society that are hostile to both organized labour and the forms of citizenship rights associated with the KWS. The

struggle for a ‘social movement identity’, therefore, cannot be achieved in isolation from political and economic engagement with capital and the state. The current struggle for ‘Social Europe’ is thus a struggle over the form of political relations in Europe and this highlights the normative and ultimately utopian nature of Hyman’s model of trade union renewal.

The methodological and conceptual approach which Hyman has adopted over the past two decades reflects an increasingly eclectic mix of regulation theory, Neo-Gramscian state theory and Durkheimian sociology. These combine to produce an over-emphasis on the autonomy of trade unions in civil society and an over-emphasis on the ‘social movement’ dimension of trade union renewal in contemporary Europe. As we highlight in the following section, the crisis of European trade unionism is more complex and patterns of union renewal and reorientation are more varied than Hyman suggests. We highlight how a more critical ‘pessimism of the intelligence’ can indeed generate a greater ‘optimism of the will’ in comparison to the rather narrow perspective developed by Hyman.

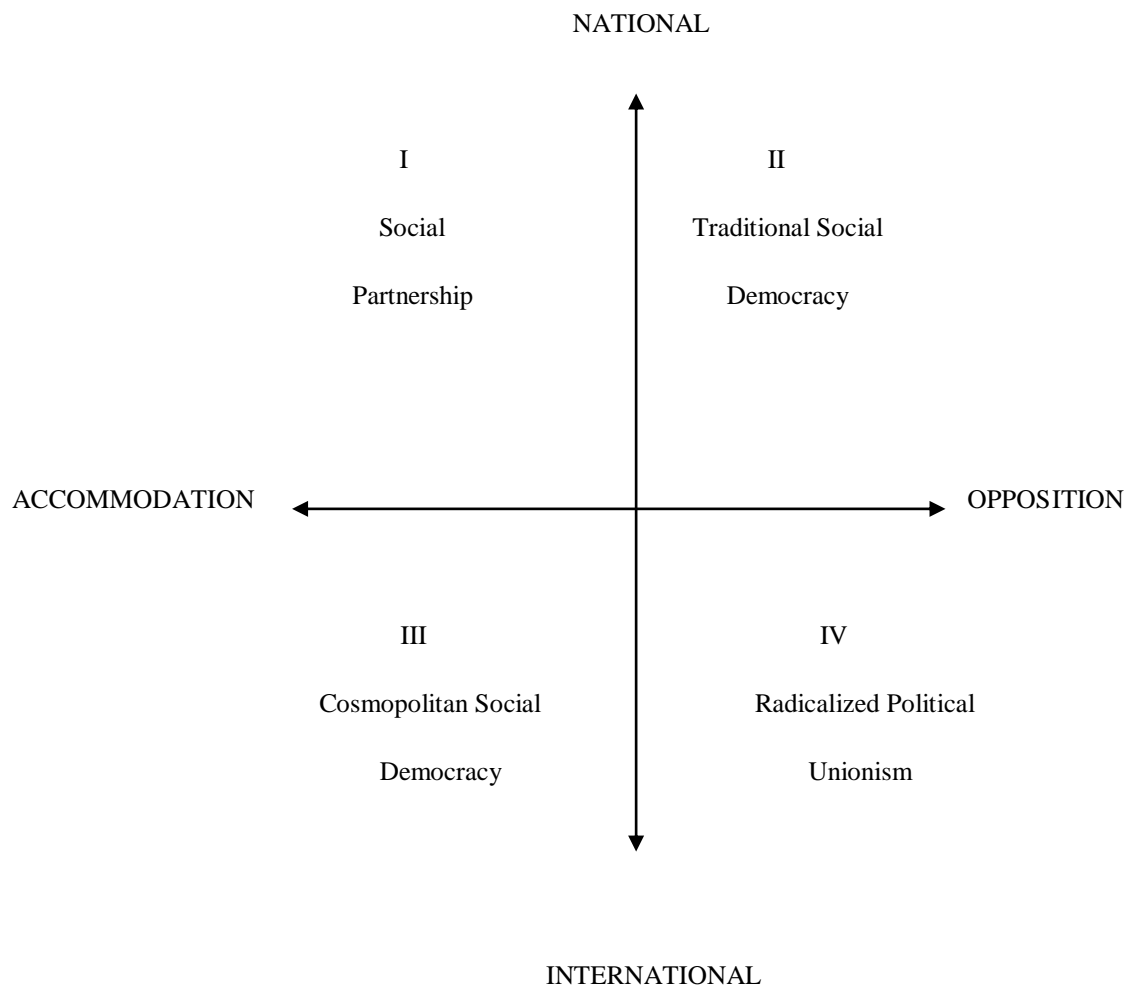
‘Optimism of the Will.....’ The Crisis of ‘Political Economism’ in Western Europe and the Search for Alternatives.

The conceptual framework developed by Hyman leads to a rather one-sided focus on the project of institutional re-embedding at the European level and the importance of the ‘social movement’ identity of trade unionism in achieving this cosmopolitan social democratic project. However, as we highlight in this section, ‘cosmopolitan social democracy’ is only one of four possible outcomes of trade union reorientation in Europe. The crisis of ‘political economism’ is necessarily partial and unions continue to engage with the reconstituted and increasingly hollowed out institutions of the nation state. However, the hollowing out of relatively labour-friendly institutions within the nation state has resulted in new ‘economic’,

‘political’ and ‘social’ orientations which reflect the depleted resources available to organized labour following three decades of neo-liberal restructuring. There are examples of trade unions accommodating with capital and the state at the national level or seeking new forms of accommodation at the transnational level. There are enduring examples of oppositional trade unionism at the national level and new forms of radical oppositional trade unionism that operate within and beyond the national arena. These involve trade unions as ‘social movements’ in civil society in complex patterns of ‘political’ and ‘economic’ accommodation and struggle with capital and the state.

Neoliberal globalization has generated a new set of circumstances which are framing the development of alternative union futures. It is possible to map these futures in relation to two fundamental tensions that are shaping union development. The first is a tension between *accommodation* and *opposition* to neo-liberal globalization. The second is a tension between *national* and *international* responses to globalization (See Upchurch *et al.*, 2009 for an elaborated discussion of this model). Mapping union futures onto these tensions generates four alternative strategic orientations (see figure 1). Variants I, II, III represent union futures that are premised upon versions of social democracy whereas variant IV marks a break from social democracy and the development of a political alternative to it.

Figure 1. Alternative Trade Union Trajectories



In segment I is the ‘Third Way’ which is articulated through the discourse of individualized and high consequence risks (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998) and represents an accommodation to liberalism and a strategy of national competitiveness. The logic of this approach involves the reconfiguration of unions as ‘social partners’ in the workplace, society and the state. The partnership agenda has involved unions forming productivity coalitions with employers to improve business efficiency and social pacts with governments to ensure that income levels do not hamper competitiveness (Prabhaker, 2003; Upchurch, 2008). The ‘Third Way’ reorientation is evident amongst sections of the German trade unions (such as *IG*

BCE – the mining, energy and chemical workers' union) (Dribbusch and Schulten, 2008). In the UK, it has been manifested in developments such as the establishment of the TUC 'Partnership Institute' and New Labour government support for 'Union Learning Representatives' and workplace partnership initiatives (McIlroy 2008).

In segment II is 'traditional social democracy' which is sceptical of the globalisation thesis (Hirst et al, 2008), tends to oppose liberalization and advances an alternative economic strategy through the nation state (Garrett, 1998, 2003; Wickham-Jones, 2000). This approach has involved an upturn in industrial militancy and an attempt to revive traditional notions of social democracy on the basis of a reconstituted and positive relationship between social democratic parties and trade unions (Leggett, 2007). There have been attempts by unions to 'reclaim' social democratic parties in order to reorient social democratic policy back towards Keynesian demand management and public ownership. In the UK, for example, there has been a strategy of 'internal lobbying' by 'left' trade union leaders in an attempt to 'reclaim' the Labour Party (Leopold 2006; McIlroy 2009). In Sweden, there are emerging divisions between unions organizing in the domestic and international sectors with regard to the balance between 'traditional' and 'third way' social democracy (Bieler and Lindberg, 2008). The re-emergence of a traditional social democratic orientation is also evident in relation to the 'Keynesianism debate' within the SPD in Germany and by the 'militant' turn of the FO in France.

In segment III is 'cosmopolitan social democracy' which is based on the notion that 'globalization can be better and more fairly governed, regulated and shaped' (Held and McGrew, 2002: 107). This approach articulates an accommodation with neo-liberalism and its goal is the construction of a social dimension to the global market at the international

level. This is associated with the 'regulated capitalism' project advanced through the EU and branded as 'social Europe' (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). In Europe, the ETUC have pursued this approach as is evidenced by its uncritical support for social dialogue, European Works Councils and the European Employment Strategy. It is evident that Hyman regards this type of 'top-down' cosmopolitan democracy as an inadequate foundation for the revitalization of European trade unionism. The notion of 'internal social dialogue' (Hyman, 2001a: 174) is an attempt to combine this approach with examples of trade union reorientation that attempt to develop this perspective from below. Examples of such initiatives include attempts to develop framework agreements that set minimum labour standards and the formation of alliances between trade unions and NGOs to lobby for improved social standards (Demitrova and Petkov, 2005; Hammer, 2005).

In segment IV is 'radicalised political unionism' which accepts that globalization is a real but contradictory and contested process. This orientation highlights the breakdown of institutionalized alliances between unions and social democratic political parties and involves a rejection of bureaucratic modes of organization and the mobilization of 'networked' trade unions (Passy, 2003: 41) in an increasingly transnational civil society (Moody, 1997). Within this approach, unions have emerged as an important component of an international social movement that poses a systemic challenge to the power of capital and the state. This challenge is expressed industrially as rising workplace militancy, politically in the form of anti-capitalist tendencies and parties and socially in the culture and values of the anti-capitalist movement or global justice movement (Edwards, 2008). There are examples of this approach in France in respect of the militant orientation of the *SUD* over the pensions issue and public sector cuts (Damesin and Denis, 2005) and in Germany in respect of how left oriented sections of *IG Metall* and *Ver.di* have engaged with *Die Linke* and mobilized against

the Hartz reforms (Jüncke, 2007). In the UK, this orientation can be seen in the increased mobilizing capacity (and sometimes membership) of the FBU (Fitzgerald, 2005), CWU (Beale, 2003; Darlington, 2007), RMT (Darlington, 2009) and PCS (Upchurch et al., 2008). In Greece, where social democratic *praxis* came late on the scene after the period of military dictatorship, we observe the development of ‘independent’ unions situated to the left of their social democratic or ‘clientelist’ counterparts (Zambarloukou, 2006; Kretsos, 2011).

The diversity and complexity of trade union reorientation in contemporary Europe highlights both the conceptual limits of Hyman’s analytical framework and the extent to which the prescriptive elements of Hyman’s work fail to embrace the ‘variable geometry’ of contemporary trade union politics. As we will demonstrate in the concluding section, this results from the limitations inherent to the model of ‘civil society’ on which Hyman’s analysis is based. We will argue that these limitations can be overcome through the application of a model of ‘civil society’ derived from Classical Marxism.

Conclusion: Beyond ‘Political Economism’ or Beyond Mirage and Fantasy?

So, what *is* beyond ‘political economism’? It is clear that Hyman aligns the crisis of ‘political economism’ not only with the existence, but more importantly the *vision* of the Keynesian Welfare State (Hyman, 2001a: 172). The core components of ‘political economism’ – free collective bargaining, historic compromise and social market – have lost purchase within national contexts. Trade unions have increasingly become the mediators of transnational forces and have been forced to negotiate the erosion of their previous achievements (Hyman, 2001a: 173). This has created an ideological impasse and a crisis of the ideological project of social democracy. The solution for Hyman is the search for a new vision or utopia that will enable unions to recapture the ideological initiative. The basis of this reorientation is a

Durkheimian project of reorientation based on ‘coordinated diversity’ and achieved through an ‘internal social dialogue’ within and between European trade unions (Hyman, 2001a: 174).

Hyman is clear that the construction of a European industrial relations system based on effective forms of European regulation is likely to remain an elite project unless it is underpinned by popular support. The basis of support, however, is presented as a European moral economy that can be forged through ‘civic dialogue’ within the sphere of European civil society (Hyman, 2001a: 175).

The definition of civil society articulated by Hyman is a sphere of social relations distinct from both state power and market domination. This constitutes a rejection of the classical Marxist formulation of civil society in favour of a perspective in which civil society is presented as a ‘third hand’ of non-market networks (Hyman, 2001a: 58-9). For Hyman, this sphere is the principal sphere of contestation and struggle and the terrain on which it is possible to build a counter-hegemonic project against neo-liberalism. This implies a model of civil society which is defined, not in a negative opposition to the state and capital, but *positively* in the context of *ideas* and *practices* through which cooperation and trust are established in social life (Hyman, 2001a: 59). The brave new world of European trade unionism is to be forged within this discursive sphere around a counter-hegemonic project premised on the moral and ethical superiority of European regulation and the promise of a European welfare state.

The work of Hyman tends to over-privilege the ‘social’ at the expense of the ‘economic’ and ‘political’. His approach identifies correctly the important requirement for European unions to re-connect with the ‘public’ and to develop a new popular legitimacy by refocusing on their role as a ‘sword of justice’. However, this refocusing cannot be at the

expense of engagement in workplace organization and mobilization. The process of neo-liberal restructuring has resulted in the 'opening up' of civil society in a way that poses both opportunities and threats to trade unions. During the Keynesian era, the scope of civil society was delineated by the extensive politicization and bureaucratization of employment relations. The integration of trade unions in this way was part of a wider phenomenon of the 'statization of civil society' (Panitch, 1986: 189) or what Poulantzas (1978) termed the 'statization of social life'. The process of neo-liberal restructuring has unleashed forces in civil society that are hostile to both organized labour and the forms of citizenship rights associated with the KWS. The privileging of the 'social' tends to downplay the threat posed by these hostile forces in favour of a focus on 'communitarian' regulation. While Hyman has highlighted the importance of exploiting the variable geometry of European trade unionism, his prognosis for the rejuvenation of European trade unionism remains one-sidedly focused on the 'social movement' dimension of trade union identity. The current financial crisis and the associated politics of austerity highlight clearly that European integration does not provide the basis for overcoming the crisis of the capital relation, but marks out the new terrain on which the crisis of the capital relation is deepening in its social, political and above all monetary forms. This is highlighting the importance of generating a radical form of political unionism that is located firmly between class, market and society. Returning to the question of trade union identity, beyond 'political economism' is a world of mirage and fantasy unless the analysis of trade union strategy and reorientation is analyzed in the context of the enduring and changing material struggles of organized labour in and against the alienating forms of 'economic' and 'political' domination associated with neo-liberal capitalism.

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