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How Can Trade Unions Act Strategically?

Richard Hyman

Summary

It is generally agreed that trade unions require new strategies in response to external and internal challenges. Economic internationalisation makes it easier for employers to escape national structures of employment regulation, and appears to weaken the ability of governments to defend nationally-based social models; sectoral and occupational shifts in employment erode traditional union strongholds, while social and ideological changes undermine workers' traditional orientation to collectivism. Yet what do we mean by trade union strategy, and how can it be modernised? This article addresses in particular the literatures on organisational learning, social capital and vocabularies of motive to explore how the twin principles of leadership and democracy can be harnessed to meet the challenges of the 'new' capitalism.

Trade unions have often been described as 'secondary' or 'intermediary' organisations (Müller-Jentsch 1985). In the industrial arena, they provide a formal mechanism of collective representation, partially (though not totally) independent, to workers who are already organised collectively by the employer. Their organisational structures are thus indirectly shaped by the capitalist division of labour and by the practices and preferences of their members' employers. In the socio-political arena, unions' goals and methods are likewise shaped, even if in some cases conflictually, in reaction to the dominant institutional arrangements. In both respects, despite (usually sincere) professions of internationalism, their terrain of action is largely bounded by the contours of the nation-state.

Capitalism is constantly restructuring and transforming: as Marx put it, capitalist survival requires 'constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation.... All that is solid melts into air.' Yet historically we can speak of periods of relative stability and others of radical restructuring. The present moment is clearly one of systemic transformation; and at such times, trade unions are typically fire-fighters, reacting desperately to challenges to the established 'industrial legality'. Typically also, they do so in a strategic vacuum.

What does it mean to describe trade unions as strategic actors, and how can they enhance their strategic capacity? These are the central issues for my discussion below. My original intention in approaching this paper was to survey concrete trade union experience in different countries, and no doubt many of my readers (and indeed the editors) would have preferred this. But I have come to the conclusion that much more work is needed to clarify our understanding of the meaning of strategy in the trade union context, and that there are many concepts and arguments in the broader literature of organisational-political processes which, interpreted critically, can be of key importance for trade union policy. So these are the focus of what follows.

Challenges and Changes

Almost universally, trade unions in Europe (and globally) are on the defensive, having suffered a decline in membership, in public status and in effectiveness in achieving their core objectives. There has been widespread discussion of the need for modernisation, revitalisation and renewal (Hälker and Vellay 2006). With their involvements in both formal organisational links and informal networking at European level, union policy-makers have paid increasing attention to experience in other countries.

Does this entail that there has been a process of mutual learning, leading in turn to convergence towards 'best practice' in the selection of trade union goals and methods? There are reasons for scepticism. In short, there are clear cross-national differences in the character and severity of the challenges – from above and from below – confronting trade unions, in their organisational capacity to respond effectively, and in the traditions and identities which shape their directions of change.

Trade unions developed in the twentieth century as national actors. As collective bargainers, in most countries their primary role was at national (sectoral or cross-sectoral) level. As 'social partners', their key concern was to influence the macroeconomic and social policies of national governments. The precondition of effectiveness in both cases was that their counterparts – employers collectively, and the state – enjoyed relative autonomy in shaping the wage relation. The increasing integration of the global economy, and more specifically the European economy, puts this autonomy in question. Many analysts have seen 'globalisation' (or, more narrowly, 'Europeanisation') as a challenge from above which narrowly constrains the scope for employment regulation at national level, and hence undermines the regulatory capacity of trade unions themselves. Inability to achieve the improvements in real wages and social benefits which had become part of workers' normal expectation is in turn seen as a reason for loss of membership and status.

Others have contested this analysis. Globalisation is a notion which is typically 'left vague and undefined, better to conjure up the large panoply of forces that have seemingly imposed similar imperatives across advanced industrialized countries' (Schmidt 2002: 13). Yet some of the most successful (by conventional criteria) trade union movements have been located in relatively small, open economies. There is a substantial literature which insists that 'globalisation' is as much a political as an economic phenomenon and that the notion of the eclipse of the nation-state is a myth (Weiss 1998). From this perspective, a reversal of the gains achieved by trade unions in previous decades is not inevitable. This is certainly part of the thesis developed in Western's important study (1998): unions thrive where they are 'institutionally isolated' from market forces (by government policies of demand management, institutional supports for collective bargaining coverage, and/or a formal role in welfare administration). Where unions are already relatively strong, they are best able to maintain an influence on public policies in order to limit the damaging effects of 'globalisation'. The logic of this interpretation is that the gap between 'strong' and 'weak' union movements is likely to widen, spelling growing diversity rather than convergence. As a corollary, the severity of external challenges to trade unions, precisely because these are mediated by political decisions, will be cross-nationally variable.

Trade unions in most countries achieved their peak of membership and hence representativeness with the expansion of large 'Fordist' manufacturing firms and of centralised public services. In the former case, sectoral collective agreements took wages out of competition and provided employers with (at least partial) guarantees of labour peace; in the latter, public authorities often had a political rationale for encouraging collective representation. Typically also, union strength was based among male manual workers in full-time employment and with more or less permanent contracts. Often, trade unions mirrored the centralised, bureaucratic character of their members' employers; while the construction of solidarity among a workforce with limited opportunity for individual career advancement encouraged the pursuit of a standardised 'common rule' in employment.

Changes in the demography of both employers and employees have challenged established regulatory processes from below. Curbs on public expenditure, and in some countries an extensive process of privatisation, have diminished the size of former public

sector strongholds. The average size of private firms has shrunk (in part because of the fashion for contracting out activities which were formerly undertaken in-house), and small firms tend to be less unionised and less willing to affiliate to employers' associations or observe collectively agreed conditions; while increasingly, even large private employers seek to develop company-specific regimes of production organisation and conditions of employment, either abandoning their associations or insisting on a shift to a two-tier bargaining system in which decentralised negotiations assume predominance. In some respects linked to these trends, there has been everywhere a relative decline in the manufacturing sector and a growth in private services, which in most countries have in the past been weakly unionised. In all these respects, the structure of employers which supported a nationally standardised system of industrial relations has given place to a 'post-Fordist' pattern which, it is often argued, presupposes a more diversified and fragmented system, often without any form of collective bargaining.

The parallel changes in the labour force are in part a consequence, in part a reflection of separate dynamics. Universally, white-collar employees today outnumber manual workers. In almost all countries, the former were traditionally far less well unionised than the latter, to some extent because the scope for individual career progression inhibited collective consciousness but also because many trade unions had reservations about recruiting occupational groups which were seen as close to the employer. Among manual workers, occupational differentiation has increased, and indeed the boundary between manual and white-collar (always conventional as much as real) has become blurred. The growth in non-manual occupations is linked to a feminisation of the workforce; and many union movements in the past failed, or often made no serious effort, to recruit and represent women. To some extent a connected process, there has been a growth in part-time employment. Other increasingly prevalent forms of 'atypical' work include fixed-term contracts, agency work and dependent self-employment: again, categories not traditionally unionised in most countries. In many cases the labour force has also become far more ethnically diverse, and minority groups have often been neglected by trade unions.

To some extent related to these workforce trends, it is often argued that employees have become more individualist in orientation; or, put rather differently, that work itself has a diminishing importance in defining personal identity. To the extent that disparate personal life-worlds shape employees' expectations and aspirations from work, the possibility that a standardised common rule can satisfy is diminished. As Björkman puts it (2006: 330), 'there are no average members' any longer. For many analysts, the consequence is that solidarity is no longer possible, or at least cannot be sustained as traditionally defined by most trade unions.

Though the above trends are common across countries, the extent to which economic and occupational structure has been transformed varies cross-nationally. But in addition, how trade unions experience and evaluate such trends varies substantially. Locke and Thelen (1995) have suggested that ostensibly similar issues vary markedly in significance according to national circumstances and traditions; while apparently dissimilar issues may have the same implications. More specifically, the historical formation of distinctive national union identities shapes those issues which are likely to provoke major conflict and those which are not. Hence in the USA, the struggles of the 1930s and 1940s established a system involving rigid job definitions and a prescribed seniority-based hierarchy of promotion opportunities and job security; in consequence, employer demands for more flexible forms of work organisation challenge principles of union action in ways which do not arise in most European countries. By contrast, in Germany the pressures for more flexible organisation of working time and for greater

company-level discretion in wage determination clash with the institutional/ideational significance of the *Flächentarifvertrag*. Conversely, in both Sweden and Italy (though in very different ways) egalitarianism has been a vital component of trade union identities, and pressures for increased pay differentials between and within sectors in the one case, the abolition of the *scala mobile* in the other, had disruptive effects which would not have occurred in different national contexts.

This argument has parallels with my own discussion (Hyman 2001) of trade union identities and ideologies as involving a triangulation between market, class and society. Unions whose *raison d'être* rests primarily on control of the labour market through pay bargaining with employers (as in the UK) will be more sensitive to an erosion of economic bargaining power than those (as in France) oriented more centrally to mobilising workers, whether or not union members, to press government for improvements in minimum wages and social benefits. Inherited identities also shape the likely trajectory of union renewal: trade unions rarely overturn all their past definitions of character and purpose; rather, they adapt selectively, and seek to persuade members and activists that any changes remain consistent with the fundamental values and objectives of previous generations. For this reason, the course of 'modernisation' is likely to be path-dependent.

Whether, and how, unions respond to external and internal challenges is also conditioned by what may be termed organisational capacity. This can be understood as the ability to assess opportunities for intervention; to anticipate, rather than merely react to, changing circumstances; to frame coherent policies; and to implement these effectively. It is not easy to theorise or to specify concretely the components and causal dynamics of organisational capacity, but it is obvious to any informed observer that some European trade union movements possess this quality to a far greater degree than others. Perhaps we may define the key elements as *structure*, *intelligence*, *strategy* and *efficacy* (Hyman 1997). Structure indicates the degree to which national trade unionism is unified or fragmented between rival organisations, and hence possesses the competence to aggregate diverse perspectives into a common set of priorities. Intelligence is in part an organisational matter: the extent to which unions and confederations possess specialist expertise in research, education and information-gathering, and the means to disseminate knowledge throughout the organisation (which is to some degree a question of resources); but it is also (and perhaps more importantly) a matter of the degree to which, at all levels within union movements, knowledge is seen as an essential component of union power. Strategy depends on organisational procedures and traditions which link knowledge to action through analysis of circumstances, evaluation of alternative options and planning of objectives and forms of intervention. Finally, efficacy is in part a question of the attainability of union policies within the objective context; in part, of the overall coherence (notably, between and within unions) of aims - which is more easily achieved where a reasonable degree of centralised authority exists; in part, of the degree to which union members (and non-union workers) 'own' the strategic priorities and are willing to take action in their pursuit - which calls for scope for decentralised initiative. I explore some of these dimensions in more detail below.

What Is Strategic Capacity?

The notion of strategy is often used loosely. Etymologically it is a military metaphor, deriving from the Greek for a general: strategy denotes the planning of a whole campaign or war, in contrast to the tactics deployed in a single battle. This clearly requires a long-term perspective (though there will surely be disagreements on the nature and duration of the campaigns in which unions are engaged, and indeed whether

they regard industrial relations as analogous to war), and also effective overall coordination.

The literal origins of the term also suggest that strategy is closely related to leadership. This is a concept which often causes unease to those committed to union democracy. 'Who says organisation, says oligarchy,' Michels famously concluded. Union democracy clearly requires adequate scope for all categories of members to shape the priorities and programmes of their organisations. It also requires appropriate *structures* for participation, involvement and self-activity at rank-and-file level. Yet grassroots self-determination alone, as Streeck (1988: 312) has argued, seems a recipe for 'a "pluralist" multitude of small, narrowly based collective action units competing with each other for organizational resources and political influence' and lacking 'a capacity to deliberate and control the macro-level outcomes of their actions'.

The self-negating consequences of purely decentralised democracy can be transcended only when articulated – a point developed further below – by coordination from above. Union effectiveness requires 'the capacity to interpret, decipher, sustain, and redefine the demands of the represented, so as to evoke the broadest possible consensus and approval' (Regalia 1988: 351). This is one of the functions of leadership, which is therefore a prerequisite for participative democracy to deliver beneficial results. As Barker et al. insist (2001: 15-17), it is crucial to differentiate between *authoritarian* and *authoritative* leadership, and between leadership as *hierarchy* and as *process* or *function*: 'leadership is exercised at all manner of levels and locations... and not only by those obviously designated as "leaders"'. Gramsci's notion of the 'organic intellectual' is relevant here: grassroots activists may develop a breadth of information and analytical capacity which distinguish without distancing them from their colleagues. Hence there can, and must, be a complex dialectic between leadership and democracy.

One of the most substantial attempts to explore trade union strategic capacity in terms of such a dialectic is the study by Ganz (2000) of the unionisation of California farm workers in the 1960s. The United Farm Workers (UFW) possessed only limited resources, but compensated for this through what Ganz terms 'resourcefulness'. This derived from the interaction between the personal qualities of the UFW leadership team and the union's internal organisational structures (factors which, one might add, are often causally interconnected). 'Strategic thinking is reflexive and imaginative, based on how leaders have learned to reflect on the past, pay attention to the present, and anticipate the future' (2000: 1009). Such creative thinking is essentially collective; it is most likely when there is a leadership team from diverse backgrounds and with a range of organisational experiences, and is least likely when there is a homogeneous leadership group deeply embedded in bureaucratic routines. The organisational characteristics which Ganz identifies are 'deliberative arrangements, resource flows, and accountability structures' (2000: 1007). Where there are effective channels of both horizontal and vertical dialogue over aims and methods, with democratic involvement of activists and the general membership, and a recognition that union effectiveness depends ultimately on the members' willingness both to pay and to act (Offe and Wiesenthal 1985), the scope for successful strategic initiative is enhanced. This point has been reiterated by Heery (2005) in Britain and Milkman in the USA (2006: 152-3): successful organising requires an interconnection between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches.

Organisational Learning

Trade unions are collective organisations, and insights from analysis of strategy within (typically capitalist) organisational settings are thus potentially at least of relevance to trade unions. The notion of organisational learning has received growing attention within

the management literature over the past three decades. One may question some of the presuppositions underlying this concept: not only whether organisations are unitary actors (as discussed below), but also whether – or in what sense – organisations as such *act* at all. Action clearly occurs *within* organisations, and by individuals and groups *in the name of* organisations, typically deploying organisational *resources*; but these social and political processes are mystified by attributing the essentially human process of action (or, more specifically, of learning) to more abstract and impersonal entities. Be that as it may, organisations are clearly contexts within which learning can occur, and organisational effectiveness may well depend on the capacity of those within them collectively to learn appropriate responses to new challenges – and, in the process, as emphasised below, often to *unlearn* responses which are no longer appropriate.

Huber (1991) provides a useful overview of recent managerial literature, identifying four dimensions of organisational learning. The first is the acquisition of new knowledge; the second, its dissemination and generalisation within an organisation (for ‘organizations often do not know what they know’ (1991: 100); if information and experience are fragmented among a diversity of individuals and groups, without overall coordination, their potential is radically diminished. Third is the interpretation of knowledge: making sense, inevitably selectively, of what increasingly involves information overload. Finally, organisational memory is essential if useful learning is not to be lost. All four dimensions have obvious relevance in the trade union context.

Also relevant are distinctions between different types or levels of learning. Bateson (2000: 167-9, 274) distinguishes between first-order ‘proto-learning’ and second-order ‘deutero-learning’. In the first, an individual solves problems by trial and error; with experience, the correct solution is applied without the need to experiment. In the second, the individual learns *how* to learn, and is able to devise solutions more rapidly to *new* problems. While Bateson founded his analysis on animal (and individual human) behaviour, a similar distinction was soon proposed by Argyris and Schön (1974) in the context of business organisations: that between single- and double-loop learning. The former involves learning to apply established procedures; the second, critically scrutinising these procedures. Organisational politics normally make the latter difficult, since it requires those at the sharp end of organisational practices to challenge the policies and procedures defended by those in more powerful positions; the prudent course is to keep quiet. Hence normal organisational processes encourage subordinates to suppress doubts and conceal information, reinforcing single-loop learning; double-loop learning tends to occur only in ‘extreme conditions’ of crisis (Argyris 1976: 373).

Much of the vast subsequent literature on organisational learning addresses how the obstacles to second-order learning may be overcome and positive incentives created. Nonaka (1994) points to two key questions: how the knowledge of individuals within an organisation can be generalised and socialised; second, an overlapping issue, how knowledge which is intuitive and not explicitly articulated can be made explicit. Part of his answer is that it is necessary to create ‘communities of interaction’ through which individuals share experience on a foundation of mutual trust, synthesising discrete understandings into a more coherent whole. How does this occur? One answer is that a crisis for the organisation can generate ‘creative chaos’ which in turn encourages social learning. Another is that individuals who possess surplus (‘redundant’) information may integrate this in innovative ways. A third is that those in intermediate positions in the organisation may facilitate both upwards and downwards communication. Finally he suggests, by analogy with computer software, that such processes are facilitated by the construction of a ‘hypertext’ structure which can ‘provide the organization with a strategic ability to acquire, create, exploit and accumulate new knowledge continuously and

repeatedly'. This requires non-hierarchical institutions to complement the more hierarchical arrangements which govern routine activities.

Can such analyses be applied to trade unions, and if so, how? Zoll (2003) has extended Bateson's core distinction to 'trade unions as learning organisations'. In responding reactively to specific challenges, they exhibit first-order learning. To the extent that they recognise that new challenges are the order of the day, and are able to develop internal structures and processes to facilitate reflection over new problems and collective discussion of appropriate responses, they advance to second-order learning. But Zoll goes on to suggest the need for third-order learning, involving the critical scrutiny and redefinition of unions' existing learning strategies and structures, and more fundamentally of their existing understanding of what it is to be a trade union. The challenge of attracting and representing a far more diversified employee constituency than existed even a few decades ago means that to survive and thrive, unions must reinvent themselves as organisations.

More recent literature on organisational learning has had little impact on trade union analysis, but its relevance is not hard to perceive. One of the few systematic applications of this literature in the trade union context is the study by Huzzard and Östergren (2002) of the Swedish private-sector white-collar union SIF. They point out that theories of organisational learning have been developed within a unitarist, managerialist framework, tending to neglect internal diversity and conflict over organisational identity and purpose (Huzzard 2001). This is even more a problem in the context of trade unions, which – unlike business organisations – have an explicit democratic rationale, and in which competing ideological tendencies possess at least a degree of legitimacy. Huzzard and Östergren found a major disjuncture between the 'modernising' conceptions of the national SIF leadership – seeking to move towards a more individual-oriented service to workers and greater partnership with employers – and the continued commitment of most local leaders to the values of collectivism, solidarity and (if necessary) militancy. The authors interpret this ideological contrast as a 'barrier to organisational learning'. An alternative reading, however, is that local activists fully understood the problems which the national leaders identified and the alternative strategies they were proposing, but rejected the latter as deriving the *wrong* lessons from the former. This indeed is the message of their conclusion (2002: S58): trade unions 'have difficulties in developing shared meanings, visions, ideologies and identities;' but 'if learning is a *dialectical* process, then ideological differences may even promote reflection and learning rather than hinder them'.

Two final considerations on organisational learning are important. The first follows from Huber's argument that 'organizations often do not know what they know'. In an important sense, of course, organisations as such do not 'know'; knowledge is a human capacity, though the knowledge of many individuals is synthesised, disseminated and retained within organisations. However, experience acquired at specific levels or in particular locales within a union (or any other organisation) may not be generalised (and as Argyris and Schön suggest, there may even be structural disincentives to generalising valuable experience). To return to the analysis of Ganz, effective intra-union communication channels – what Culpepper (2002), in a different context, calls 'dialogic capacity' – are thus of key importance; and, one may add, to the extent that the most serious challenges today concern labour movements as a whole, effective *inter-union* (and indeed international) channels are essential.

The second point to emphasise is that before we can learn we may have to *unlearn* our established routines and conventional wisdom. Hall (1993: 279), in his analysis of 'social learning' at the level of the state, has argued that 'policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the

goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing'. And it is certainly the case that trade union policy-makers 'tend to rely on familiar repertoires or behavioural scripts when faced with new conditions' for which old tactics may be inappropriate (Johnston 1994: 37). Milkman (2006) has shown how the organisational approaches which served effectively a few decades ago for American industrial unions in large-scale manufacturing industries were totally unsuited to the growing numbers of low-paid, insecure service employees often working for small subcontracting employers; locals without an industrial union background have been the most successful in organising such groups. In the management literature, the notion of 'competency traps' (Levitt and March 1988) is widely used: skill in applying methods which worked well in the past is an obstacle to innovation in changed circumstances. Within trade unions, particularly those long established, the widespread respect for precedent and protocol means that the traditions of all the dead generations frequently inhibit learning; as Ross and Martin comment (1999: 4), unions 'are "path dependent", constrained organizationally by their pasts. They tend to move in directions which will not threaten shared ideas, values, and habits and their organizational learning will be skewed towards what is already known.' To overcome such conservative bias, strategic innovation often requires a process of creative destruction.

Membership Activism, Union Democracy and Social Capital

The logic of the previous discussion is that strategic capacity in trade unions is a product of *both* leadership *and* internal democracy. In his classic comparative study, Kjellberg (1983) argued that the most effective union movements combined, in an articulated manner, strong central organisation (coordinated leadership) with vibrant local activity (high membership participation). This combination was one of the explanations of the exceptional unionisation in Sweden. A similar thesis has been developed more recently by Lévesque and Murray (2003), who explore the means of refashioning trade union power in the face of economic internationalisation. They propose a triangulation between three elements: the strategic capacity of workplace union organisation (its ability to develop a proactive agenda rather than simply reacting to management's initiatives); the internal democratic life of the union ('internal solidarity'), which enables members to identify with – or in the current jargon, to 'own' – the policies pursued on their behalf; and 'external solidarity', the degree to which broader national (and international) organisational resources and commonalities of interest shape local priorities and counteract the pressures towards competitive undercutting of standards. Their conclusion is the need to build a virtuous circle of proactive capacity, active democracy and higher-level strategic support as the basis for an effective strategy for labour: 'it seems more and more obvious that these three levers of power are mutually reinforcing' (2003: 22).

In a subsequent study, Lévesque et al. (2005: 402) suggest that workers' identification with trade unionism has been undermined by a 'radicalization of difference. Divergent social identities challenge traditional notions of collectivity and lead to an erosion of the relevance of traditional frames of reference.' Their survey of union members in Québec found that those most likely to see trade unionism as relevant to their own circumstances felt that they were consulted over union policy and had an opportunity to shape its direction. 'Democracy is a building block in the construction of union identity' (2005: 409).

Richards argues (2001: 35-6) that 'labour solidarity has always been a constructed and contingent phenomenon built on local foundations. It is now more so than ever in an era of generally decentralised industrial relations, increasingly localised

threats, fragmented work forces and growing corporate power.' Yet a fragmentation of solidarity, in a context where localised workers are increasingly compelled to compete with those in other localities, is no effective solidarity at all. This means, to return to the starting point of this section, that local activism is necessary but not sufficient for effective union strategy. But how can fragmentation be overcome?

In the past, unions have often striven to overcome differentiation by imposing what the Webbs (1897) termed a 'common rule', or what I have described as 'mechanical solidarity', imposed from above (Hyman 2004). But the 'radicalisation of difference' means that diversity cannot be suppressed; it must be accepted, even welcomed. The issue is how actual and potential trade union members can be encouraged to perceive common interests despite difference, and to negotiate the tensions which often exist between their own multiple social identities in a way which is compatible with collectivism. This is to raise difficult questions of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity. As Zoll has insisted (1991), increased differentiation of circumstances and interests, and the growing uncertainty of social norms and values, make effective unity of action possible only if trade unions become 'discourse organisations'. And here, I believe the notion of social capital may be relevant.

Social capital is a notoriously problematic concept, popularised by Putnam (1993, 1995) in a manner which is 'troubling and potentially politically reactionary' (DeFilippis 2002: 791). Putnam's central argument is that individuals benefit from social capital when they participate in a variety of social networks and voluntary organisations, and that a dense associational life contributes to the strength of the broader community and polity. In some respects this overlaps with much recent usage of the equally ambiguous notion of civil society. Critics (for example DeFilippis 2002; Fine 2002; Law and Mooney 2006; Levi 1996; Portes 1998) have shown that Putnam's treatment neglects the role of power, inequality and class in shaping individuals' social and economic opportunities; encourages a 'blame-the-victim' approach to disadvantage and social exclusion; and fails to recognise that dense social networks can often serve to exclude, oppress and victimise 'outsiders'.

Nevertheless, the concept has a longer lineage, as Field (2003) and Portes (1998) have shown, and in the case of writers like Bourdieu has a very different meaning from Putnam's. The same is true of the cognate idea of civil society, which historically has had a variety of conflicting interpretations. What is the relevance to trade unions? Crucially, it seems to me, the idea of social capital can indicate that union organisation derives its vitality from the networks of social relationships among the individuals who constitute the (actual or potential) membership, and that the quality of their interpersonal or 'sociable' relationships gives the union its human face and ultimately its capacity to act. Understood primarily in collective rather than individual terms, social capital can define a potential resource for the relatively powerless and disadvantaged to challenge those who are economically and politically dominant, a basis for resistance. This is certainly not what Putnam and his followers envisage (Law and Mooney 2006: 20). However it has some affinities with the classic analysis of the Webbs, who saw the internal democracy of trade unions as a force for broader societal democratisation, allowing workers 'to regain collectively what has become individually impossible' (1897: 850).

This collective dimension of social capital emerges clearly, for example, from the four-country research by Dufour and Hege (2002): 'representative capacity' derives in part from formal institutional provisions but depends no less on the quality of the interrelationships between representatives and their constituents, on the responsiveness of representatives to the often individualised everyday concerns of workers, indeed their readiness to act as a kind of social worker in dealing with issues arising outside of work

itself. Since networks of sociability pre-exist formal collective organisation, they can provide the springboard for unionisation (or conversely, for unwillingness to unionise) and the resource for effective dialogue. The latter was demonstrated in the study by Batstone et al. (1978) of a British engineering factory: the workplace union leadership was able to shape their constituents' 'willingness to act' by orchestrating debate and discussion through the network of first-line shop stewards down to informal groups of workers who ate lunch together, played cards during rest breaks or debated the previous Saturday's football match. In the USA, Fantasia (1988) described a similar articulation between informal social groupings and union solidarity.

In an analysis based on US experience, Jarley (2005) has argued for the development of what he calls 'social-capital unionism': trade unions should adopt the role of a facilitator of mutuality among workers, as a basis for recovering their membership and influence. He suggests that the 'servicing model' of unionism, by making members dependent on the full-time officials, actually weakens networks of collective mutual support among workers and thus reduces their social capital. The 'organising model' in some respects devolves collectivism back to the workplace, but tends to replace dependence on officials with dependence on a core of committed activists who are themselves liable to victimisation or 'burn-out'. His alternative model creates a more diversified social network, with no clear demarcation between mutual support on issues which are 'union-relevant' and those which are less obviously so; linkages built up over one type of issue can subsequently facilitate collective action over others. A study of two local branches of the United Food and Commercial Workers' Union (Johnson and Jarley 2005) suggests that such a model proved effective in recruiting and involving young workers in the union, as well as in broader political activism.

Two particular advantages of 'social-capital unionism', Jarley suggests, are building union capacity to 'borrow and extend the social capital of its most well-connected members' (2005: 12); and the fact that social networks, because not confined to purely workplace issues, can be sustained among workers who are mobile across employers, making union membership more readily 'portable across firms' (2005: 19). Interestingly, though Jarley does not develop this point, there are analogies both with the principle of 'mutual insurance' which the Webbs saw as the core of solidarity within early craft unions, and the efforts of early socialist trade unions to organise a wide array of social activities to increase the cohesion and loyalty of their members. Whether or not Jarley's model is considered practical, the idea of re-inventing broad networks of mutuality, potentially as a basis for 'insurgent social capital' (Law and Mooney 2006) to resist the relentless drive of neo-liberalism, certainly deserves serious consideration.

Vocabularies of Motive, Ideologies and Utopias

A theme of much of the preceding analysis has been that trade union strategic capacity can be, and needs to be, enhanced through internal dialogue, discussion and debate. Uniform policy cannot be mechanically imposed when the 'average' member no longer exists (if s/he ever did); increasingly, unions need to be 'discursive' or 'dialogical' organisations, allowing the explicit negotiation of increasingly overt internal differences. This prescription is not of course unproblematic: within any union, some individuals and groups are more motivated and/or able to voice their opinions and interests than others. Traditionally, the formal democracy of many unions has been a framework within which certain sections (male, full-time, native-born, relatively skilled) have dominated policy-making. Today, electronic communications permit a far broader participation in strategic dialogue, but as anyone involved in union message boards appreciates, the most active participants tend to be self-selected advocates of a distinctive agenda. How to achieve

'bottom-up' dialogue which is truly representative of the diversity of rank-and-file opinion is a major challenge.

One answer is that 'social-capital unionism' would necessarily enhance the vocal capacity of the less articulate members and constituents. Another, which links back to Offe and Wiesenthal (1985), is that one of the leadership tasks in agenda-setting is to transform particularistic and competitive demands and aspirations into more encompassing policy goals by redefining the 'spontaneous' self-definitions of interest. And here, it is necessary to move beyond the *process* of discourse and dialogue to the *content*. Fragmentation of employee identities and self-definitions of interest is not a natural development, but rather the outcome of politically-driven efforts to erode national post-war industrial relations settlements and hence to weaken or remove workers' social protections and set them in competition and conflict one with another. What is at issue is a radical shift in the balance of forces between labour and capital. Dore (2003: 32), a writer not given to over-dramatisation or leftist rhetoric, has described the attack at national level on established employment protections as the outcome of 'not only flexibility/efficiency objectives but also the political objective of breaking the power of the trade unions and their ability to influence the electorate'. In his assessment, 'politicians who responded with the legislation demanded by the powerful managerial class, were not just concerned with creating the conditions for national competitiveness. They were also engaged in class struggle.' Class struggle is a good description for the Washington consensus, and it is equally fitting as a characterisation of its current enthusiasts in Brussels.

To defend employees at workplace level and no less within the national (and international) political economy requires a confrontation with the dominant policy logic of our age. This implies that unions must turn (or return) to a self-conception as organisations campaigning for rights and engaging in 'contentious politics' (Tarrow, 1998). This involves an assertion of unions' identity as 'sword of justice' (Flanders 1970): contesting oppression, inequality and discrimination. It can also imply cooperation, often uneasy, with other social movements which have never acquired the respectability gained by trade unions in most countries. Potentially it redefines unions as outsiders in a terrain where until recently the role of insiders was comforting and rewarding.

The key issues here involve ideas, language and mobilisation. The decline of union organisation is in part ideological in causation: European unions were able to thrive when the prevailing policy discourse made collective regulation, employment protection and state welfare provision the commonsense of the times. The ideological counter-revolution of the past three decades – which has indeed proceeded further and faster in some countries than in others – has placed trade unions very much on the defensive. They are often seen as representing a vested interest: those who are already relatively secure in the labour market, and have relatively good wages and working conditions; those who are in most cases winners or at least not major losers in the process of economic restructuring. But unions have to convince themselves and others that they are the voice of the majority, that they represent the losers as well as the winners and that they want to try to convert the losers *into* winners.

The battle of ideas is also a battle of words. Human actors 'discern situations with particular vocabularies, and it is in terms of the same delimited vocabulary that they anticipate consequences of conduct. Stable vocabularies of motive link anticipated consequences and specific actions' (Mills 1940: 906). Yet the vocabularies of motive which legitimated traditional trade union action have an archaic ring today. As Kelly has insisted, trade unions require effective linguistic means of 'framing' workers' perceptions of the circumstances that afflict them, of attributing blame for their problems, and of proposing credible remedies. If for example workers accept that deteriorating conditions

of work, or threats of workplace closure, are the inevitable outcome of uncontrollable economic forces, collective resistance is futile. If they blame employers or governments for their predicament but have no conception of alternative policies, they may protest but are unlikely to prevail. Touraine (1966) argued along very similar lines many years ago.

Tilly (2006) has made the analogous point that socio-political movements draw on 'repertoires of contention': forms of action which have been developed in the past and provide 'scripts' for the future, but which nevertheless are subject to constant innovation. Such repertoires, he suggests (2006: 184-5), contain three key elements: 'identity', the assertion that those involved are a group with distinctive interests and the capacity to pursue these vigorously; 'standing', the insistence that these deserve to be taken as seriously as the claims and interests of other more powerful socio-economic groups; and 'programme', an integrated set of demands. All three in his view are mutually supporting. Indeed this is a useful prism through which to regard European trade unions: in their period of greatest strength they could credibly claim to represent a constituency with a strong collective identity, to possess the standing of a valued actor in societal policy-making, and to articulate a programme which reflected the general interest. In more recent times, in most countries, all three claims have been weakened, and this weakening has been mutually reinforcing. New vocabularies which give meaning to the identity, standing and programme of trade unionism are part of the key to union survival and renewal.

Much more broadly, unions have to win back their legitimacy. There is a battle of ideas taking place, a battle which is often one-sided. There is a widespread consensus, not only in Washington but also in Brussels, which accepts the virtues of neo-liberal globalisation, treats 'competitiveness' as an ungovernable force, and assumes that work and workers must be adapted to the new economic realities. 'There is no alternative,' prime minister Thatcher used to say. But there have to be alternative ways of connecting economy and society, work and life, and trade unions should be in the forefront of defining these alternatives. Trade unions need a new vision, even a new utopia if they are to become subjects rather than objects of history.

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