

Social Movement Theory and Trade Union Organising

Andy Mathers, Martin Upchurch and Graham Taylor

1. Introduction

It is now a little over five years since we coined the term ‘radical political unionism’ (RPU) and identified it as one of the possible alternative futures for the development of trade union strategic approaches. Much has happened socially and politically in this relatively short period of time shaped by the unfolding of the 2007/2008 financial crisis. This new crisis was only just breaking when our book on the ‘crisis of social democratic trade unionism’ (*The Crisis*), to which RPU was a response, was being written (Upchurch et al, 2009a). *The Crisis* has deepened yet further as social democratic parties have continued to accept neoliberal inspired austerity politics which have utilised the financial crisis as an opportunity to advance its project. This ‘austerity project’ entails further dismantling the welfare state, deregulating labour markets, and privatising public assets in the name of tackling allegedly unsustainable levels of public and private debt. These manifestations of austerity politics have met with significant resistance on a global scale, A much cited, albeit journalistic, account of them was titled ‘Why it is kicking off everywhere: the new global revolutions’ (Mason, 2012). Resistance to austerity in the last five years marks a new phase in the longer cycle of protest that we associated with the development of social movement unionism and its politicisation into RPU (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012). Workers and unions have played a prominent role in resisting austerity. In the West European context (which was our original focus), while unions have unanimously declared that ‘business as usual’ could not continue, they have been largely focused on the short-term imperative of defending workers’ immediate economic interests. This has hampered the development of the strategic thinking needed to achieve the longer-term goal of bringing about social transformation by contributing to the end of neoliberal ideological hegemony (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman, 2013: 122-131). The largely defensive wave of protests generated by this dominant response to austerity has seen some marked radicalisation in the repertoire of action deployed by unions, but while this is an indicator of RPU (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012, Upchurch et al, 2009a), it is not a sufficient proof of its existence let alone its widespread adoption as a strategy.

The weakening of links between unions and social democratic parties, due partly to reduced returns, was a significant factor in the rise of social movement unionism (SMU) that recast unions as political outsiders and encouraged their engagement in ‘contentious politics’ (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman, 2013). The concept of RPU, however, suggested that this was by no means a complete or irreversible shift away from institutional politics. Unions were not condemned to being an oppositional force that excluded all possibility of becoming a governmental power (Moody, 1997). In contrast, the weakening of the dominant party-union nexus (DPUN) created opportunities for the development of new political alliances and projects. Five years ago, few trade unionists or commentators were predicting the pace at which the roles of social democratic parties in the creation of the financial crisis and collusion in the austerity politics that followed would result in the formation of new left political parties and forces and, in places such as Spain and Greece, would grow in support so dramatically. Almost none could have imagined that such a party would gain office in an advanced capitalist state. The case of Syriza in Greece, together with its subsequent retreat on implementing its anti-austerity policies in the face of monumental pressures from the IMF and the institutions of the European Union (EU), raises many questions for developing a progressive politics as an alternative to neoliberal capitalism. It does however suggest that the ‘radical politics’ that were so central to the concept and strategy of RPU are still a key aspect of contemporary trade unionism and that an alternative politicised strategy is still sorely required.

The purpose of this chapter is to revisit the concept of RPU with a view to highlighting the role of social movement theory in its development and drawing out its implications for the development of a strategy for trade union organising. It will do so by returning to the main intellectual origins of the concept with a view not only to restating the main ideas, but also elaborating on them and offering some useful revisions. First, we will examine the ‘crisis of social democratic trade unionism’ and how this crisis has opened up civil society as a terrain on which trade unionism can be reorganised and remobilised as a social movement. Second, we will return to engaging with SMU through a re-examination of some of the main sociological theories of the new social movement movements (NSMs) which were influential in its development. Whilst our original critique necessarily emphasised the limits of such theories, this time we will also highlight their contributions in terms of identifying important dimensions of social movement development and the implications for developing RPU. Third, we will draw upon recent developments in the field

of social movement studies that have emerged from the study of anti-austerity protests and social movements against neoliberalism. In particular we will develop the earlier notion of a wave of protest and utilise the concept of ‘political cleavage’ in order to sketch some possible implications of RPU for the formulation of a strategy for trade union organising which can address the multiple crises of trade unionism. Lastly, we will address the ways in which other academics have attempted to utilise the concept of RPU in order to examine concrete developments in trade unionism and trade unions and the criticisms that this has generated.

2. The Crisis of Social Democratic Trade Unionism and the Opening up of Civil Society

2.1 The Crisis

The original formulation of RPUw as one of four alternative trade union futures. It related possible strategic directions and projects for trade unionism to an enduring crisis of the dominant form of trade unionism existing in Western Europe. This crisis was a particular one of social democratic trade unionism (Upchurch et al, 2009a). Social democratic trade unionism was the outcome of a ‘specific social structuration’ (Moschonas, 2002: 17) which saw a strong ideological and institutional relationship between the working class, trade unions, reformist social democratic labour parties and the nation state. In effect, as the twentieth century progressed the labour movement became integrated increasingly into the ideology and institutions of parliamentary democracy through a social settlement that granted substantive material and institutional gains in return for accepting the legitimacy of capitalist property relations at the levels of workplace, society and state. Such gains were based on the close ideological and institutional relationships between the trade union leaderships (in particular) and the dominant party of labour producing what we have termed the DPUN.

Social democratic trade unionism varies according to the specific national contexts in which it emerged and developed. It was also a specific form of ‘political economism’ (Hyman, 1994), which we can identify as the dominant type of trade unionism in post-war advanced capitalist states. Political economism, and its social democratic variant, were the contingent and historically specific outcomes of a protracted process of contestation over the development of trade unionism. However, this did not preclude the existence of alternative types outside of the dominant pattern. Forms of trade unionism cannot be read off from the structural developments of capitalism, but are rather emergent categories which are the outcomes of an essentially open process of struggle within the capital/labour relationship

(Taylor et al, 2012). From this perspective, we want to emphasise that social democratic trade unionism should not be understood simply as an expression of the strength of the labour movement in a stable 'Golden Age' of capitalism. Rather it existed as an inherently unstable form of trade unionism whose crisis tendencies have been made increasingly apparent by the processes of neoliberal capitalist globalisation.

Neoliberal capitalist globalisation has undermined the basis for social democratic trade unionism in two main ways. First, the process of deindustrialisation has decimated the industrial heartlands in the older industrialised countries from which trade unionism derived much of its structural and associational power and from which it provided the membership base for delivering political support to social democratic parties. This has not been the result of simple modernisation processes, but rather of a series of defeats in major industrial disputes which have paved the way for industrial restructuring. The effect has been that trade unionism has had increasingly less bargaining power with which to force concessions from both employer and state and increasingly less institutional influence over 'parties of labour'. Second, the pressures of intensified global economic competition, expressed as the increasing power of multinational corporations, has severely restricted the capacity of the nation state to offer meaningful concessions. This has produced a programmatic crisis of social democracy as it has become increasingly less able to utilise the levers of the nation state to intervene into economic and social life and so reproduce the material and institutional gains that have legitimised it. This failure to produce the goods on the part of social democratic parties has been associated with an ideological crisis as their core values of economic equality and political democracy have become increasingly marginalised by, and subordinate to, the imperatives of capital accumulation (Upchurch et al, 2009a, Taylor et al, 2011). As a result, trade unions, in states where social democracy has dominated the post war body politic, have reached both a crisis of legitimacy and a crisis of representation.

2.2 The Response

While the crisis is a generalised process it is not an even one across nation states and neither are responses to it uniform. Consequently, we explored the enduring institutional and ideological legacies existing within four cases (Sweden, Britain, Germany, and France). The conclusion was that while these legacies continued to shape the course of the development of trade unionism (Taylor et al, 2011), there was an increasing space for the exercise of union strategic choice which was producing a still marginal, yet significant reconfiguration of

union-party relationships that went beyond the limits of social democratic trade unionism (Upchurch et al, 2009b). At this stage, the emphasis was on identifying the processes through which union reorientation was occurring: accommodation or resistance to neoliberalism and the emergence of new union identities such as SMU and new labour internationalism. We also suggested three variables in relation to which we could comprehend the extent of reorientation: the re-politicisation of unions' relationships with social democratic parties, the opening up unions' organisational life, and the engagement with new forms of organising including alliances with other social actors (*ibid*). In these variables we can identify some of the processes of social movement formation around a *political cleavage*: politicisation, mobilisation/organisation, and identification, but not recognised or presented explicitly as such.

A final insight for understanding RPU from the work on *The Crisis* was that it enabled a link to be made between the two main institutional dynamics that underpinned the reshaping of the relationships between unions and parties in such a way as to aid the exploration of the remobilisation of trade unionism as a social movement. The de-institutionalisation of trade unionism from the comforting arm of the state suggested a focus on the way that civil society was 'opening up' as a terrain on which to organise and mobilise. This was linked to the way that trade union orientations and identities were being reframed ideologically (Taylor et al, 2011). Our analysis of these institutional dynamics was based on a fruitful, but critical engagement with leading academic commentators and in particular with the work of Hyman (2001) whose proposal for renewing trade unionism as a social movement was based on positing civil society as a positive sphere on which to advance a new moral vision. This we argued tended to privilege the 'social movement' dimension to union reorientation and revitalisation in such a way as to downplay the enduring importance of struggles within the workplace and over the changing form of the state. In effect this overemphasised the possible moral power of SMU whilst underplaying such dimensions as structural or institutional power. In contrast, we understood civil society as being constituted in relation to the totality of capitalist social relations and thus riven by its own contradictions. Remobilising trade unionism as a social movement could not therefore be limited to reframing its moral power, but also involved a remobilisation of its structural and political power through contestation in the spheres of the workplace and the state (Taylor et al, 2012). This analysis suggested that exploring the remobilising trade unionism as a social movement

would involve an examination of its economic, cultural and political dimensions and this contributed to demarcating RPU more clearly from SMU.

3. Social Movement Unionism and theories of New Social Movements

Demarcating RPU from social movement unionism (SMU) was also a product of an engagement with theories of the New Social Movements (NSMs) of which we were highly critical. Our criticism focused on our argument that NSM theories denied the class character of contemporary social movements. As we suggested in the previous section, if the crisis of social democratic trade unionism resulted in the opening of civil society as a field for organisation and mobilisation by trade unions, it was possible that this process of deinstitutionalisation would enable the renewal of trade unionism as a social movement. The main social scientific theories which developed to comprehend the emergence of the NSMs regarded these social movements as the products and producers of civil society regarded as a terrain from which to resist state encroachment and to develop alternative projects (Habermas, 1981; Keane, 1988). Civil society also appeared prominently in formulations of SMU albeit reconfigured at the global level required to act as a counterweight to the forces of neoliberal globalisation. Waterman (1998: 227) identified global civil society as the ‘privileged space for the civilising and surpassing’ of global capitalism. It is precisely this kind of formulation of SMU that drew explicitly and heavily on sociological theories of the NSMs that was the target of our critical attention in early formulations of RPU. The apparently new, high risk, radicalised modernity associated with global information capitalism had produced a new form of informational politics based around ethical choice. This ethical critique of capitalism would generate a new set of values expressed in alternative, autonomous projects in civil society. Stripped of its industrial power, labour needed to engage in dialogue and ally with the new alternative social movements in order to develop a new set of solidarities and a broad, democratic movement. These solidarities and ideals could be generated and circulated quickly and widely through new ways of networking making maximum use of new communication technologies including, of course, the internet. Labour as a new alternative social movement would eschew old forms of social democratic and Leninist politics, but the new democratised means for political expression and engagement were not identified (Waterman, 1991, 1998).

The main critique of such a conception of the NSMs and their implications for renewing trade unionism that we expressed (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012) was that Waterman

had over-stated the cultural dimension of social movements due to accepting the shift to a new informational mode of production. Moreover, he reduced capital to an economic relation and obscured the relations of exploitation which characterised and reproduced it. Indeed, expressed most strongly, Dunn (2007: 134) suggested that ‘Stated most strongly, such theories ... leave considerable doubt whether exploitation exists ...’. If, in spite of real and marked changes associated with neoliberal globalisation, capitalist exploitation remained central to workers’ lives both inside and outside of the workplace, the task of renewing trade unionism was not to develop labour as part of a broader social movement through a shared ethical critique of capitalism and discursively produced alliances. It was rather to broaden out the struggle against capitalist exploitation and the oppressive social relations associated with it and develop a material critique of capitalism as the basis for an alternative social and political project (Mathers, 2007, Upchurch & Mathers, 2012).

Even though sociological theories of the NSMs tended to operate with a highly caricaturised image of the labour movement forming part of an ‘origin myth’ of social movement theory (Cox & Flesher Fominya, 2013) we acknowledge that this body of work remains worthy of re-examination. Revisiting can enable an appreciation of some of the key insights offered regarding the nature of contemporary social movements and the conditions that have produced them. This can prove useful to developing our understanding of the current predicament of the trade union movement and of RPU. Four dimensions of analysis can be identified which map usefully onto the four processes of political cleavages discussed later in the chapter: structuration, identification, politicisation, and mobilisation (della Porta, 2015).

3.1 Structure

Key theorists of the NSMs regarded such movements as an expression of a fundamental shift in the socio-structural conditions that had originally produced the labour movement as the main social movement of the age. This age of modern, industrial capitalism, with the industrial working class as its central progressive social actor, had since been transcended by a new post-industrial (Touraine, 1981), or a late radicalised modern era (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990), or a new epoch in which capitalism had become disorganised (Lash & Urry), informational (Castells, 1996) or post-Fordist (Gorz, 1999). The corollary of this shift was that the class relations that had produced the trade union movement as the quintessential ‘old’ social movement had been superseded by a new set of non-class relations

expressed by the NSMs. In its strongest expression, capitalism, if it existed at all, now existed without classes (Beck, 1992) as labour market restructuring had produced generalised insecurity and individualisation (Beck, 2000). The class-based labour movement, focused on the industrial working class project of control over work, was replaced as the progressive social force by non-class actors desiring liberation through non-work activities and projects (Gorz, 1982).

We suggest that it is problematic to attempt to periodise capitalist society in this fashion. Arguments for the emergence of a 'new capitalism' have been subject to rigorous empirical analysis which suggests that insecurities arising from the transformation of work have been overstated and attributed incorrectly to structural socio-economic transformations rather than to neoliberal state restructuring (Doogan, 2009). Moreover, contemporary capitalism cannot be understood as classless if class is understood in terms of an antagonistic social relation rather than as a category derived from the labour market. While the objective basis for individualisation and insecurity may have been overstated, it is widely experienced subjectively even in industries and services where employment has remained relatively stable. This is an expression of a crisis of working class confidence, organisation and leadership and the concomitant crisis of the labour movement which has proven largely incapable of resisting neoliberal restructuring effectively. In essence, dominant sociological theorising on NSMs has reversed cause and effect. Changes in socio-structural conditions have not produced an ineffective labour movement, but are consequences of its defeats. The heyday of NSM theory was in the 1980s and early 1990s, yet later work that attributes the disaggregation, fragmentation, diversification and division of labour incorrectly to the shift to information capitalism (Castells, 1996, 1997) does offer a useful insight by identifying the challenges for unions in terms of a newly structured working class. Although structural conditions have changed, the task remains to form a class-based labour movement with a radical project of social transformation and not to dismiss this project as NSM theory would suggest.

3.2 Identity

Theories of NSMs emphasised the (past) strong collective class identity of the labour movement that cohered around a set of material values that provided the basis for a shared social critique of industrial capitalism and for an alternative socialist (largely social democratic) project. The NSMs in contrast were said to be more diverse and disparate yet

expressed the post-material values (Inglehart, 1990) that were increasingly widespread across advanced capitalist societies. There are here two connected elements of social movement formation and development: its critique of the social order and if and how its constituent parts are connected into a coherent movement with an alternative project. Central to NSMs was an engagement in ‘challenging codes’ (Melucci, 1996) resulting in conflicts over the ‘grammar of forms of life’ (Habermas, 1987: 392) construed as a result of the forces of state and capital intruding into the lifeworld. The cultural critique of the Keynesian Welfare State (KWS) expressed by the NSMs chimes with the aesthetic critique of the inauthentic and oppressive forms of life produced by the spirit of Fordist capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006). The NSMs expressed a critique of cultural conformity (Steinmetz, 1994) including the nuclear family and compulsory heterosexuality. This insight is useful in that it restores a central Marxist proposition that opposition to capitalism is not restricted solely to resisting exploitation in the workplace. Opposition to capitalist domination is expressed across the domains of social life.

Rather than regarding the cultural critique of the NSMs as displacing the labour movement’s social critique of the egoism and inequalities associated with the first spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006), the NSMs also highlighted the narrow economism of trade unionism. In relation to RPU, this suggests that developing a radical critique of contemporary capitalism involves going beyond militantly particular workplace struggles to developing a social movement project (Cox & Nilsen, 2014) that combines a material critique with a cultural critique to form an anti-systemic movement. The demands articulated by the NSMs were considered to be ‘either more *or* less inclusive ... than class issues’ (Offe, 1985: 835) and as well as expressing particular identities also expressed a critique based on ‘universal and emancipatory values’ such as human rights. The NSMs thus offer the insight that the labour movement had ‘forgotten’ its agenda for radical social transformation (ibid: 836). Remembering this radical project would however entail going beyond the ‘self-limiting radicalism’ of the NSMs (Cohen, 1985) which were considered as agents of systemic renewal (Melucci, 1989) rather than transcendence. Unions’ material struggle against exploitation pushes beyond these limits of the ‘system’ and provides a clear anti-capitalist core to renewing trade unionism as a social movement and provides the ‘radical’ element to RPU.

3.3 Politics

Castells (1997), a key writer within the dominant sociological theorisation of the NSMs, argues social movements that articulate a project identity which expressed a different way of life to that imposed by the new global order, emerge from a resistance identity that conveys initially a defensive reaction. This defensive aspect was present amongst the NSMs whose anti-statism was difficult to translate into a political form, let alone an alternative project (Habermas, 1981, 1987). Indeed, Melucci (1989) detected a 'pre-political' dimension to the NSMs that is suggestive of a pre-figurative politics of everyday life. He also identified a 'meta-political' dimension which by focusing on the big issues that institutional politics cannot address and process, alludes to a transformative politics only realisable within a different political order. Offe (1985), by way of contrast, detected a constructive collision between forces within and outside of established politics resulting in a possible new political alliance between the extra-parliamentary NSMs and the parliamentary parties of the Left. This new alliance might translate into a progressive agenda of economic democracy, unilateral disarmament, work redistribution and an environmental and developmentalist industrial strategy. Such an agenda would be based on making compatible the interests of the constituencies represented by the NSMs with those of the industrial working class, a task made easier by the way that the NSMs rekindled repressed ideological traditions of unions and left wing parties. Union and party organisations would require a radical reorientation and a process of opening up to the NSMs.

Some of these theorists dismissed trade unionism as a hopelessly institutionalised actor (Touraine, 1981) and incapable of articulating an alternative project (Castells, 1997). Such analysis is flawed, but it does show awareness that although radically focused mobilisation by social movements may not be articulated fully by institutional politics the institutional realm still plays an important role. When applied to trade union politics it means that the focus on the political dimension of trade union renewal as a social movement should be not only on framing its agenda politically and a transformative vision (Fairbrother, 2008), but also on how this is going to be advanced institutionally. The question of whether this will result in a radicalisation of existing parties of labour and/or the creation of new radical political organisations and parties is an open one.

3.4 Mobilisation

It was accepted by sociologists of the NSMs that their decentralised, horizontally networked structure based on direct participation contrasted with the centralised, hierarchical,

and representative structure of the trade union and labour movement. Moreover, this internal organisation of the NSMs expressed the informality of internal movement life along with a tendency towards spontaneity (Offe, 1985). Among the most interesting and valuable contributions offered is that for NSMs, the ‘movement is the message’ (Melucci, 1989). This analysis focused on moving beyond identifying the forms of organisations associated with the NSMs to understanding their underlying meaning in terms of a symbolic challenge to system rationality and to the instrumentally focused forms of organisation it produced. In other words, organisational forms within anti-systemic social movements cannot be understood simply as means to an end, but as ends in themselves. Moreover, the ‘self-reflexive’ element of movement activity suggested that organisational forms were not rigid and enduring, but could be reshaped according to a collective process of learning amongst participants.

This insight suggests that there is a normative dimension to the organisational element of social movements which renders the answer to the organisational question as something more than finding the most efficient means to mobilise resources. The emphasis on grass roots participation and horizontality in the NSMs is thus a democratic impulse which means that social movement actors are not merely human resources to be mobilised into action by movement entrepreneurs. Mobilisation is constructed through human agents deciding to act together for a common purpose through a collective process of deliberation and decision-making. In relation to the trade union movement this analysis suggests that trade unions may become something more than ‘mass’ organisations in which the interests of a largely passive membership are aggregated and represented by a bureaucratically elected leadership. They may become ‘class’ organisations in the sense that they are based on an active working class that propels itself into action through generating a collective willingness to act for a common purpose. New organisational forms may be created as trade unionists engage in discussions not only on the efficacy of existing forms, but also their responsiveness to the experiences and wishes of grass roots workers and activists. In relation to RPU, this suggests not only a political dimension but also a focus on the democratic modes of participation and leadership associated with trade union renewal and the creation of alternative structures.

4. Challenging the crises of trade unionism: RPU and Trade Union Organising

4.1 The wave of protest against neoliberalism and the emergence of a political cleavage

We have highlighted the importance of utilising insights from the political process theory of social movements to aid understanding of the development of forms of trade unionism, and

specifically RPU, in relation to the development of a cycle of contention or wave of protest. These are understood as a period of heightened social conflict which is manifested across the entirety of the social system (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012, Upchurch et al, 2014). We can even begin to speculate how “shifts” in aggregate capital accumulation play out in a wider arena. Beverly Silver explores these shifts within capitalist accumulation strategies and describes a “pendulum” effect whereby capitalism as an aggregate whole moves from a crisis of profitability (1870s, 1970s), from which state and employers begin renewed offensives against labour, to one of a crisis of legitimacy (1930s and today) characterised by worker resistance to “the breakdown of established social compacts, the re-commodification of labour and growing inter-class inequality” (Silver, 2014). The analogy of a wave or pendulum suggests a rather repetitive and predictable process in which the early mobilisation phase that creates new repertoires of meaning and action, organisational change and linkages across specific protests is followed by a later phase of demobilisation to which the selective processes of facilitation and repression by the state are key, resulting usually in reform or repression, but occasionally in radical or revolutionary changes (Tilly, 1978). Generalised social conflict can be confined around particular events or sustained across a whole phase of social transformation. Cox & Nilsen (2014) offer a more useful and more open framework for conceptualising the phases of social conflicts and movements that emerge around systemic crisis and transformation. In periods of organic crisis, social movements from above and from below develop to engage in a struggle over ‘historicity’. This term, first coined by Touraine (1981), suggests a contest over the fundamentals of society expressed as its dominant and emergent ‘structures of needs and capacities’. How a wave of protest develops depends mainly on the shrinkage and expansion of the space for contention as states and movements gain or lose hegemony.

This model is applied to the current crisis to comprehend neoliberal globalism as an offensive social movement from above. The neoliberal project has become institutionalised while the initially defensive ‘global justice’ movement (GJM) from below has become increasingly offensive in the sense of offering an alternative project. The dwindling hegemony of capitalism is expressed as its ‘twilight’ whereby the sun refuses to set (Harrington, 1977) while in its neoliberal incandescence it lives on in ‘Zombie’ form (Harman, 2009). The impasse it could be argued is the product partially, but significantly, of the enduring, but weakening allegiance of organised labour to the dominant historical bloc. As the wave develops, accommodation to neoliberalism can alter into opposition and may

take on a more overtly political form expressed as RPU (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012). The analysis of Cox & Nilsen shifts our attention away from a rather narrow focus on the state and the associated political opportunities, to a broader set of elements which have been associated with an emerging political cleavage as the GJM has evolved into the anti-austerity movement (della Porta, 2015). Rather than regarding the latter as usurping the former, we agree with the distinction between the GJM as a global movement which has contributed to the development of a subsequent global wave of protests (Flesher Fominya, 2014) which has witnessed the mobilisation of a broader and larger constituency.

Della Porta (2015: 4) begins with the entirely laudable aim of ‘bringing capitalism back into protest analysis’ and in relation to the recent wave of anti-austerity protests, concludes that it is still too early to make a definitive assessment on the existence of a new class cleavage. Her work however suggests that such a cleavage, like the formation of a fully radicalised and politicised trade unionism, would be the endpoint of a process of development. She explains that the concept of *political cleavage* has been deployed almost exclusively in relation to electoral politics, but is also applicable to social movements as they are engaged in structuring and politicising social conflicts. Cleavages are defined as ‘politicized divides’ whose socio-structural, cultural and organisational elements are translated into the social group, normative, and organisational bases for social movements. Each of these elements provides a structuring device through which to examine how RPU is a response to, and can respond to, a series of crises of trade unionism: of its social base expressed as a crisis of membership (but also of mobilisation), of identity and legitimacy, and of political representation and project.

4.2 The crisis of membership (and mobilisation)

Trade union membership has declined across most European economies over the last thirty years and in spite of significant variation across countries, density rates have fallen by as much as a half and this has resulted in a significant reduction in the associational power of trade unionism (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). As we argued in section two, while sociological theories of the NSMs misrepresented the structural changes that have helped generate a crisis of membership, and overstated the processes of class decomposition, they suggest focusing on new social bases as a means to trade union renewal. RPU is based on understanding this new working class composition as the outcome of the restructuring of the capital-labour relation and therefore the basis for subsequent class struggles. We can also

identify new sectors of workers, such as those engaged in knowledge and service sectors, as well as marginalised workers, who may offer new constituencies for unions and the potential for catalysing radicalisation. However, it certainly does not dismiss industrial workers as a progressive social actor or crucial to destabilising capitalism as they still possess considerable structural power. In order to be an effective force for change, whether ‘old’ or ‘new’, the power of the diverse social bases of trade unionism needs to be mobilised and this requires effective organisation.

The ‘organising model’ has been presented as a strategic attempt to address the crisis of membership by recruiting and representing new social bases. As Sullivan (2009: 239) suggests, applying social movement rhetoric to trade union organising has been an attempt to ‘broaden labor’s traditional membership base’. Where organising has focused on marginalised actors the main outcome has not been to boost membership, but rather to strengthen the image of trade unionism as a champion of the powerless (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). This focus on the marginalised follows in the sociological tradition of the NSMs and has been expressed as the identification of the ‘precariat’ whose desire for security through citizenship can be met by a universal basic income (Standing, 2011). However, both Standing’s precariat and its polar opposite the ‘salarariat’ of full time permanent (mostly public sector employees) are both social categories derived from the labour market and suggests a status division within the working class rather than a class relation. Focusing on the most marginalised and disorganised has enhanced the moral power of trade unionism without raising its associational power, let alone its structural power.

The active agents of organising have been paid recruiters and it has tended to be delivered in a tightly controlled top-down fashion that expresses a fear of grass roots activism amongst the established leaders of social democratic trade unionism (Upchurch et al, 2014). An alternative approach to organising associated with RPU would draw upon the insight that social movement imagery needs replacing with social movement analysis and thereby shift the bias of organising away from membership density towards ‘mobilizing existing members’ (Sullivan, 2009: 247) in disruptive forms of action such as street protests, boycotts, and particularly strikes that are deemed risky, but used routinely by social movements. Elsewhere we have highlighted the kinds of ‘high risk activism’ required to develop a contentious repertoire of action (Upchurch & Mathers, 2012). Here we want to suggest that this analysis suggests that an effective organising strategy should be focused somewhat less on organising the unorganised (although this remains important) and rather more on organising where a

membership base already exists and where effective structural power can be mobilised. There are multiple logics of social movement action and mobilising union membership according to a 'logic of damage' may prove to be a more fruitful route to union power than recruiting members according to a 'logic of numbers' (della Porta & Diani, 2006). Moreover, it is possible that increased membership will follow mobilisation rather than mobilisation following increased membership. Such infilling of membership and targeting of organising campaigns has met with some success yet developing effective mobilising structures in the workplace can be a 'thankless labour of Sisyphus' (Gumbrell McCormick & Hyman, 2013: 48).

Difficult though it may be, it is exactly this task which RPU addresses by going beyond top-down 'mobilisation unionism' and attempting to construct mobilisation from below (Camfield, 2007) that is targeted mainly at key social bases possessing latent structural power. In social movement analysis, mobilisation is the infrequent, but visible counterpart of extended periods of latency in which the collective identities that underpin solidarity are constructed (Melucci, 1989). Social movement formation out of individualised, fragmented components is a longer-term largely subterranean process in hidden networks that only occasionally bursts into the sunlight of collective action. It is here that theories of social capital formation can prove useful as they focus on constructing grass roots solidarity (Nissen & Jarley, 2005) and associate increased participation with the formation of trust and reciprocity through networks that act as 'envelopes of meaning' (Passy, 2003: 41) that aid identity formation. In these networks, the key agents are not only skilled organisers with a 'deep understanding of social networks' (McAlevy, 2014: 41) but also 'worker-leaders' with an organic connection to the grass roots. It is possible that rooting mobilisation in grass roots networks may involve forms of organisation which appear initially to be somewhat like the 'subcultural/communitarian mode of coordination' identified by Diani in this book in that they may involve personal connections that bypass as well as traverse unions. However, if understood in relation to the movement process, it is possible that this may develop into something more like the 'social movement mode of coordination' with clearer connections between individual members, trade unions and mobilisations. As Sullivan (2009) argues, a valuable outcome of organising is to mobilise collective identity formation. Therefore, Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman (2013) are correct to suggest that we need to go beyond 'mobilisation theory' (Kelly, 1998) to incorporate a focus on the formation of a collective identity around class antagonism. Capitalism does indeed generate diverse social bases, but

these are not merely distinct social categories, but share a common social class relation that forms the basis for a process of common class identification.

4.3 The crisis of identity and legitimacy

Social movement theory suggests that the beliefs and values of social movements can be understood through a structure of identity, opponent and project (Touraine, 1981) which in the current protest cycle of 'movements against globalisation' has been reinterpreted as a set of movements with competing shared identities, adversaries and goals of which the GJM appeared as the most coherent and progressive (Castells, 1996). While useful analytically, this approach tends to freeze social movements and fails to capture the dynamic process of social movement development. Movements develop logically, but not necessarily chronologically, from militant particularism, through campaigns, and onto social movement projects. Movement development entails a contest between a 'common sense' conception of issues and an emerging hegemonic 'good sense' (Gramsci, 1999) which by becoming radicalised and generalised focuses on challenging the social totality and offering an alternative project (Cox & Nilsen, 2014). Social movement theory has expressed this insight in terms of how social movements in a cycle of contention must challenge the status quo with 'an alternative mobilising belief system' (Gamson et al, 1982: 15). In political process theory, such beliefs have been examined through a focus on cultural framing and as cognitive mechanisms (Merton, 1968) in its development as 'contentious politics' (McAdam et al, 2001). Cognitive framing mechanisms operate not only externally by leaders reframing issues so that they resonate with constituents, but also within social movements as the movement process is the result of discussion and learning amongst participants which entails contestation between competing cognitive meanings in various movement fora.

In the current cycle of contention, movements against neoliberal globalisation and austerity have created new arenas for debates such as the social forums of the GJM and the assemblies of the anti-austerity movements. These have produced some shared understandings as part of a new social critique: that the crisis is the result of greedy bankers, that neoliberal economics and representative democracy are failing and that demands for social rights should be ceded (della Porta, 2015, Flesher Fominya 2014, Flesher Fominya & Cox, 2013). Underlying the dominant shared meanings are tensions. For example, the British Trades Union Congress message that the alternative to austerity is a 'more sensible timetable for deficit reduction' (cited in Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013: 156) is contested by

more radical, yet still emergent definitions of anti-austerity. This is comprehensible in terms of the different levels of cognitive meanings that range from the ‘condensing symbols’ that produce mobilising moral shocks, through the particular ‘goals and proposals’ around which to mobilise and onto the ‘ideas, ideologies ... (and) master frames’ that underlie critiques and alternatives (Jasper, 2008). Although drawing on more than one ideological tradition, it is apparent that RPU communicates in an imagery and language of a conflict between classes not elites and citizens, it expresses a radical critique of capitalism *tout court* and not solely of its neoliberal variant, and its social movement project points beyond capitalism, not in the sense of alternative structures in civil society, but of a radical alternative political economy which to be achieved will require the labour movement to achieve a significant degree of political power. This offers a radical alternative to a trade union movement whose identity as a progressive movement is in crisis.

4.4 The crisis of political representation and project

The old hierarchically structured organisations of the labour movement are no longer alone in terms of the emerging political cleavage. For this reason it is erroneous to conflate unions (and the social democratic party) with the labour movement as to do so obscures the construction of other campaigning organisations that focus on workers’ interests and struggles (Sullivan, 2009). On the other hand the temptation to conclude that the weakening of links with parties allows unions to engage in ‘cultivating alliances with other progressive organizations and groups’ as expressions of a ‘new politics’ (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013: 157) may run the risk of de-politicisation of the movement. This has been identified as a potential danger in relation to ‘community unionism’ by way of expressing a politics of ‘agonised liberalism’ (Wills, 2006) thereby reinforcing the retreat from class politics. This serves to deepen the crisis of political representation that unions face as social democracy mutates into social liberalism. As Moschonas (2002) suggests, political organisation not only reflects political identity it also serves to structure it. The development of political organisation (including parties) is an essential element of RPU because the processes of identification and politicisation in cleavage and social movement formation are closely linked (della Porta, 2015).

In the current cycle of contention, political developments have been occurring according to two main dynamics: the reorientation of existing political parties (the institutional or inside route) and the creation of new political forces through popular

mobilisation (the movement or outside route). Within the inside route, defections, expulsions and splinters from larger social democratic parties have combined with the aggregation of smaller, left wing organisations and parties to form new political parties generally either as 'left reformist' parties or to the left of social democracy altogether (Die Linke in Germany, Syriza (and Popular Unity) in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Left Bloc in Portugal are all variants). Within the outside route, the 'anti-politics' of rejecting all institutional parties and politics (della Porta, 2015) has mingled with a kind of meta-politics of 'autonomous' networks presented as incompatible with the 'institutional Left' (Flesher Fominya, 2014). This has coalesced with more conventional political initiatives to translate movement concerns into the institutional sphere through the development of a loosely 'structured movement' (Panitch, 2000) or formal political parties expressing a left populist politics. Combining these routes generates a quite complex field of political developments whose patterns are far from clearly defined. It is possible, however, to discern amidst them several key areas around which a break with existing social democratic politics is occurring and in relation to which a radical politics can be formed. For example, in relation to work and employment, pay and pensions are not to be made subject to business or market criteria and managerial power is to be curtailed. Military intervention and the associated 'war on terror' and criminalisation of migrants is opposed. The welfare state is not to be reshaped according to principles of productivity or cut to reduce the public debt. Its crisis is the product of corporate tax avoidance and evasion which are to be addressed vigorously and the resulting income spent on job creation and public services. Ecological damage is deemed the result of capitalist growth strategies which are to be replaced by environmentally sustainable forms and levels of production.

Conclusion

Neoliberal capitalist globalisation has been accompanied by a protracted wave of protest, but this has not resulted in the revitalisation of trade unionism. Trade unionism remains wracked by a multiple crisis of membership and mobilisation, of identity and legitimacy, and of political representation and project. In the Western European context unions have continued to remain attached to a social democratic form of trade unionism which is tied to institutions from which unions have either been largely expelled or within which they retain only marginal influence. In this chapter we have argued that the de-institutionalisation of trade unions has, however, opened up civil society as a terrain on which to remobilise trade unionism as a social movement. We have also shown that although

sociological theories of the NSMs have generated a set of useful insights into the limits of social democratic trade unionism that point to its transcendence, these have not been acknowledged by labour study commentators or expressed fully within attempts to revitalise trade union organising. The concept of RPU is a way of utilising some insights drawn from a critical reading of social movement theory, but which does not jettison the central understanding that unions remain class-based organisations with attendant structural power that can develop a radical, anti-capitalist critique and project which, in order to be advanced, requires an engagement with institutional politics and therefore political organisation. The development of RPU is tied inextricably with the broader social movement against neoliberal capitalist globalisation which is the expression of a deepening political cleavage which is generalised, but expressed unevenly within and across nation states. RPU is also developing unevenly and as a distinctly minority tendency, but it is also a general phenomenon. Indeed, the original concept of RPU has since been explored (Connolly et al eds. 2014) beyond the original four countries used as our case studies (Germany, Britain, France and Sweden) to examine emergent movements in a range of countries from both eastern (Poland, Hungary) and western Europe (Ireland) as well as the southern Mediterranean (Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal). In particular, the upsurge of resistance to austerity in many of these states since 2009 may signify that such movements of resistance have ‘found outlet in new organisations and new alliances’ (ibid: 23). More detailed case studies of the RMT railworkers’ union in Britain and SUD-Rail in France have also revealed a distinct tendency towards a more militant orientation of a critical mass of members framed by a rejection of neoliberal orthodoxy. Connolly and Darlington (2012: 239) report that ‘the RMT has combined a distinct version of the organizing approach with an explicit rejection of partnership and accommodative forms of unionism in favour of the mobilization of members through repeated threats and use of strike action, alongside a politically engaged form of left-wing trade unionism’. For SUD-Rail a similar pattern of militancy is observed combined with a social movement orientation, ‘SUD has been identified with a social movement model of unionism, basing their collective struggles around employment and social themes. Thus the SUD unions are linked to a variety of social movement organizations and are involved in campaigns on wider social issues such as globalization (ATTAC), the homeless (DAL), the unemployed (AC!) and undocumented workers (*les sans-papiers*)’ (ibid: 238). In the melting pot of the struggle against austerity in Greece we can also observe the rise of unions based in local or regional districts which appear to have developed a symbiotic relationship with a

more generalised movement against the effects of austerity from a variety of grass-roots organisations (Bithymitris, 2010; Kretsos, 2011).

These and other examples may illustrate to us that there is some continuing saliency in our concept of radical political unionism. Our analysis continues to suggest the emergence of an admittedly tentative, unstable and even transient break with the traditions of social democratic trade unionism. We suggest, however, that this phenomenon is more politicised and rooted in the 'structured antagonism' between capital and labour than more widespread descriptions of social movement unionism. This is not to reject the importance of understanding social movement theory in developing strategies for trade union revival, but rather to acknowledge its weaknesses and to utilise its strengths.

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