



Expert Comment

Armed police face a crowd of student demonstrators during the student riots in Paris, May 1968. Credit: Getty Images/Hulton Archive/Reg Lancaster/Stringer

Trade unions and social movements: Opportunities and obstacles in alliance-building and cooperation

Jürgen Grote (2019)

Copyright © 2019 by Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute

The right of Jürgen Grote to be identified as the author of this publication is hereby asserted.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the original author and do not necessarily represent or reflect the views and opinions of the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, its co-founders, or its staff members.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, please write to the publisher:

Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute gGmbH
Französische Straße 23
10117 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 209677900
info@doc-research.org

Trade unions and social movements: Opportunities and obstacles in alliance-building and cooperation

Jürgen Grote

At a time when much of the Western world is concerned with the upsurge of populism, of right-wing xenophobic movements, and of these movements backward-looking adherents and supporters, little attention is given to those embracing a more forward-looking worldview, namely trade unions and social movements.

In what follows, I attempt to find out why this is the case, and what research on the latter two groups would need to consider, both in theory and in practice, to improve the situation. Although no further references are made to the type of suffering and discontent underlying populism in Europe and beyond, much of this is clearly shared by trade union members and members of social movements. The following considerations may therefore also be of relevance, in part at least, when envisaging the eventual emergence of what was referred to as a fully-fledged countermovement by Karl Polanyi quite some time ago.

1. Passions and interests¹

There are three shortcomings in the recent literature on both the present state of politics in Western democracies and on forms of collective action. The general message resulting from research on political economy and forms of democracy in Europe is disastrous.

We seem to be in the midst of a mixture of decline; fragmentation; individualisation; diminishing trust in institutions hollowed out from the inside; a hoarding of power by small

¹ A slightly different version of this paper has been presented at the 19th International Likhachev Scientific Conference on Global Development: Problems of Predictability and Control; Section 4: "Social and Labor Relations – Labor Unions, Governments, and Transnational Corporations in the Global World"; St. Petersburg University of Humanities and Social Sciences; May 23-24, 2019; St. Petersburg, Russia

political and economic elites; and an increasing marginalisation and pauperisation of vast portions of the population.

While the accuracy of these trends shall not be called into question, the first shortcoming of the literature is the noteworthy extent to which it neglects the crucial capacity of those suffering most from the aforementioned malaise to collectively halt or reverse decline, or otherwise influence society in defence of their needs and interests.

The second shortcoming concerns established trade union research and research on social movements. While both fields acknowledge the extent of the current crisis and have submitted numerous books and articles on how their respective objects of research are reacting to it, the situation remains one of indifference. There is hardly any cross-fertilisation beyond the boundaries of established research traditions. It is as if students of the two forms of collective action are neglecting each other. At best, trade union researchers and social movement researchers envisage their respective counterparts in purely instrumental terms.

The third shortcoming is directly related to the previous one. It relates to divisions of a similar kind, or more precisely, to dichotomous reasoning in general. I borrow the notions of 'passions' and 'interests' from Albert Hirschman's (1977) path-breaking work on processes of transition from one historical period to another. 'Passions' are used in this paper as a shorthand for immaterial concerns whereas 'interests' refer to material interests. Standard work on both social movements and trade unions asserts that these have been the essential differences underlying collective action by both types of group, and that these differences have been difficult to overcome. This dichotomy has underpinned the entire debate since its very beginning.

However, it may not be as simple as this. What Hirschman clearly shows is that passions originally associated with positive properties in feudal times may become negative over time and then assume positive connotations again as a form of enlightened – i.e., interest-led – behaviour under capitalism. Greed, for instance, just as with the striving for

glory and honour, has become transformed into more prosaic interests that now benefit not only individual members of the aristocracy but the whole of society. Although currently shunned as negative and socially unwelcome aberrations – at least when driven to the extreme – in former times, interests were recognised as tamers of passions and this has in fact occurred in a long and cumbersome historical process. This conversion has very much been due to socio-political and economic change and to the way change has been perceived.

Passions and interests cannot be neatly distinguished from one another. They merge and mix all the time and which of them has the upper hand in peoples' minds at any historical moment is very much subject to shifting involvements and changing perceptions.

Social movement research versus research on industrial relations

The question, then, is whether divisions and dichotomies – like those of 'political economy and political theory versus collective action research'; 'industrial relations versus social movement scholarship'; and 'passions versus interests' – can be moulded and brought into alignment. This can be attempted by looking at some of the most recent examples of joint collective action by members of the two camps.

Not long ago, triggered by developments in South Africa and Latin America and following Waterman, a debate developed on what has been called 'social movement unionism' or 'community unionism'. Scholars of industrial relations delved deeply into social movement literature with a view to identifying patterns of action that might be conducive to trade union renewal. However, even these more advanced pieces of work essentially remained normative and, most of the time, instrumental in character.

For social movement scholars, unions have never actually formed part of the agenda. For quite some time, they have been completely discarded as possible alliance partners altogether. They have been described as anachronistic (Touraine, 1986) due to their

imprisonment within existing government institutions. They are said to be unable to adapt to the requirements of post-industrial society (Melucci, 1998). Gorz (1985) has described them as no longer being the focus of social change, and for Giddens (1990) and Beck (2000) their place is questionable in a late-modern world.

Overall, social movement research has tended to neglect the possibility of alliances with unions just as much as has been the case the other way around. To date, there are few exceptions to mutual disregard.

Primarily triggered by reactions to the post-2008 debt and financial crisis, the situation has only very recently changed. Some scholars have recognised that capitalism and the political economy need to be brought back into analysis. This is because most people fighting against austerity direct their discontent not just against forms of commodification – as with traditional industrial disputes – but also re-commodification, i.e., privatisation, and ex-commodification like exclusion from the labour market.

Alliances at the apex versus networks at the bottom

What is at stake analytically is the emergence of a counter-movement, or of a new form of joint collective action. We are therefore concerned with the question of whether, why, and when individuals that already form part of an established group decide to join more encompassing endeavours which cross the boundaries of different collective actors. Secondly, do these actors' professional leaders take a lead in doing so (and if so when)?

This distinction is important. It is one thing to look at agreements achieved by leaders. For this type of joint activity, the notion of an alliance or, as suggested by Diani (2018), of an organisational “mode of coordination” (MoC), could be the most appropriate. It is another thing to look at the level of the rank and file. Boundary-spanning joint activities by individuals are best understood in terms of networks, or of social movements and forms of ‘subcultural’ MoC.

Alliances and networks may markedly diverge with respect to their underlying goals, rationales, and structural configurations. Sometimes, alliances may function well even in the absence of support from the bottom-up. On other occasions, there may be pronounced collaboration between members of different organisations without necessarily bringing about alliance-formation at the leadership level.

Rather than delving into the established domains of trade union and social movement scholarship, I suggest re-reading a few modern classics in order to gain new insights on the subject.

2. Crosscutting cleavages and intersecting social circles

The dissolution of traditional cleavages and once clear-cut class barriers raises the question of whether an exchange of worldviews and identities across the porous structures of class and descent exists, and also of whether that exchange could trigger something like a shared consciousness among activists.

Cross-cutting cleavages

A central contribution in this respect is the work by Stein Rokkan (1970) on cleavage structures and cross-cutting cleavages. Cleavages relate to structure (economic and space-bound); to norms and values (ideology and attitudes); and to action and mobilisation (behaviour). But cleavages may also include things like ethnic, political, religious, gender, and cultural divisions in society. Most of the time, cleavages appear in the form of peculiar combinations of these divisions with a tendency to overlap and reinforce each other.

In cases where groups originally sharing post-materialist values start intermingling with members of groups preferring traditional material values, we have a cross-cutting cleavage. When members of both groups remain within their original circumscriptions, we speak of reinforcing cleavages.

During much of the relatively stable growth period up until the early 1980s, the dominant trend was arguably that of reinforcing cleavages. Since then, social, political, and cultural cleavages have become increasingly disintegrated with members of unions and movements alike developing identities and worldviews that tend to share the same kinds of anxiety, insecurity, and anger about mutually experienced threats of social relegation, political exclusion, and economic descent.

Intersecting social circles

Another potential source of help in shedding light on the intermingling of social positions, lifestyles, behaviour, and values is Georg Simmel's work on concentric and intersecting social circles (1955, pp. 125-195). While "Rokkan's concept (...) relates structural tensions to networks, Simmel's idea (...) enables us to grasp the individualization process, but also to look at how memberships may re-combine in different structural patterns" (Diani, 2000, p. 391).

Since it is not only perceptions and normative frames that change in strongly overlapping circles, but also the very nature of empirically observable social relations, such a combination may thereby help us to surmount the structure-action dichotomy altogether.

3. Movements and counter-movements

The concept of the 'counter-movement' was introduced by Karl Polanyi as early as 1944. In *The Great Transformation* (1957/1944), Polanyi set out to describe transitions from one historical period to another, primarily focusing on the 19th century. In his understanding, the development of capitalism was brought about by a 'double movement' that determined the embeddedness and disembeddedness of markets in relation to social and institutional arrangements at different points in time.

Turning to later events of the 1930s, Polanyi asserted that the collapse of the international economic system was a direct consequence of the attempt to organise the economy based on the laissez-faire concepts taken from the British and Austrian schools of liberalism. Just as in the century before, the laissez-faire movement that aimed to detach the market from governmental intervention, regulation, or other social restrictions, was subsequently attacked by a counter-movement fighting to safeguard the social and political rights and privileges it had obtained previously.

The double movement meant a clash of two opposing and incompatible principles. On one hand was the principle of the free (and 'disembedded') market; on the other hand, was society's desire to impose its values on the process of production and distribution.

This concept is particularly suited to analyses of protest events and large-scale mobilisation. Precisely when traditional trade union strongholds are dissolving, the defence of material interests is an increasing concern for larger portions of the population at the same time.

4. Forms of critique

Further conceptual elaboration is required for many of the supposedly accurate dichotomies that separate passions from interests, reinforcing cleavages from overlapping cleavages, concentric social circles from intersecting social circles, and progressive from reactionary parts of the countermovement. In the meantime, however, there is yet another classical concept which also suits our analytic focus.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's (2005) work on *The New Spirit of Capitalism* is concerned with analysis of the motives underlying the unforeseen coalescence of students and workers around the events of 1968 in France. They assert that different sources of indignation were underlying these events.

These sources of indignation included, firstly, a demand for liberation; secondly, a rejection of inauthenticity; thirdly, a refusal of egotism; and finally, a response to suffering.

Paired together, the demand for liberation and the rejection of inauthenticity, which had previously found classic expression in the bohemian milieus of the late 19th century, can be referred to as 'artistic critique'.

Historical articulation of the second pairing of the refusal of egotism and the response to suffering has seen the traditional labour movement at its centre, and represents a form of 'social critique'.

Artistic critique versus social critique

Boltanski and Chiapello compare the fortunes of the two forms of critique and find that the artistic critique essentially represented by the student movement has accomplished more, albeit in an unanticipated way, than its working-class counterpart.

Many of the demands advanced by the student movement in 1968, such as for forms of expressive creativity, fluid identity, autonomy, and self-development, were all directed against the constraints of bureaucratic discipline, bourgeois hypocrisy, and consumer conformity. Over time, these have been absorbed by the logics of capitalist production and management in the form of flexible labour systems, sub-contracting, team-working, multitasking and multi-skilling, flat management, and other features of so-called lean capitalism or post-Fordism.

Although social critique has been successful in achieving important workplace-related rights and regulations, much of these have subsequently been rolled back during the triumphal swing towards neoliberalism since the mid-1970s.

Prospects for merging types of critique

As with the other dichotomies referred to in the previous sections, the question is whether the present period of crisis and decline still justifies the neat distinction between two radically opposed forms of critique. Notwithstanding their previous arguments about the irreconcilable nature of form and content, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p. 468) are not completely pessimistic: "(...) the artistic critique should (...) take the time to reformulate the issues of liberation and authenticity, starting from the new forms of oppression it unwittingly helped to make possible" (Ibid, p. 469).

If artistic critique could do as Boltanski and Chiapello propose, it would move closer to social critique. Indeed, the new forms of oppression may be such that artistic critique, although not completely void of its *raison d'être*, no longer plays the role it played three or four decades ago. Most forms of despair, individualisation, exclusion, isolation, impotence, and abandonment have their origin in socio-economic, rather than cultural or political, forms of oppression. The so-called main and side contradictions of capitalism are today less easy to distinguish when it comes to real life situations.

So far, this paper has not been concerned with the issue of organisation. In what follows, some remarks will be made with respect to the relevance of organisation for the forthcoming of boundary-spanning alliances and networks.

5. The organisation of interests

It is important to consider the differences between free-floating motives – wishes, wants, desires, concerns, or indeed passions – on one hand, and more material interests which ultimately take precedence in the political marketplace. I shall tentatively refer to material interests as 'politically substantial interests'.

In real life, only collectively expressed concerns have a chance of being heard, especially so if brought forward by powerful organisations. The more professionalised the

expression and the more precise the articulation, the higher the probability of receiving attention. At the same time, the more realistic – i.e., system conforming – the form and content, the higher the chances of being tradable on the political market.

While movements and unions promote and express concerns in a roughly similar way, we know little about the mechanisms that transform initially amorphous passions into substantial interests. Interests are anything but social givens. What an interest is, or should be, is most of the time determined by a professionalised bureaucracy of interest entrepreneurs.

In the case of formal organisations like trade unions and business associations, the search for and the definition of interests is a complicated and troublesome process of transformation. Making use of the image of a funnel, Philippe Schmitter (2006/1981) has developed an intriguing model exhibiting the main ingredients of that process.

Imagine a funnel, delimited by an opening at the top, receiving a virtually unlimited variety of widely different individual needs affecting all members of society. The width of the funnel becomes increasingly reduced, with several bottlenecks along the way, ending in the form of a rather narrow outflow pipe. Traversing the funnel, the original needs, wants, wishes, and passions poured into it at the top thus become substantially reduced both in number and quality.

“Of all the needs which could potentially become interests, some are selected in and others are shoved out. The same is true at each ‘conversion point’ (...) until only a few privileged emerge from the mouth of the funnel to be actively defended or promoted (...). Along the way, a great many are lost or are frustrated” (Schmitter 2006, p. 302).

The leaks positioned at each bottleneck may be narrower or wider, so that some specific wants, wishes, and passions find it more difficult than others to continue their passage to

the bottom. Which ones manage to pass through and which are eliminated from the funnel is determined by deliberate choices in favour of exit by power, distortion, and concealment on the part of organisational leadership or by the actions and efforts of outside supporters or opponents. In any case, what is certainly the case for most formal interest associations and, hence, also for trade unions, is that, "(...) the politics of interest tend to be intrinsically conservative" (Ibid). They exclude a vast number of potential needs that lack sufficient identifiability, feasibility, consciousness, salience, justifiability, and resourcefulness.

The question then concerns what happens to the funnel in the cases of social movements and in the cases of more encompassing outlets for collective action. What about needs, wishes, and passions when structural configurations are less professionalised, when mechanisms of selection are less developed, and when individuals are less prepared to forego their original motives when joining associative forms of action?

For cases like this, Schmitter suggests the form of a tube. In a tube-like configuration, a whole range of conceivable needs would in theory be collectively elaborated, freely articulated, and rightfully satisfied. This, obviously, would come up against borders because many of them would be either incompatible or jointly unrealisable.

For our purposes, the only way of circumventing the problem of incompatibility is to redefine needs in such a way that they become both less comprehensive at the funnel's mouth and sufficiently specific at its lower end at the same time.

6. The politics of vital interests

One of the most urgent analytical tasks ahead is to address the needs of those subject to precarious living conditions and forms of social, economic, and political exclusion (Durkheim, 1897; Merton, 1949). One possible strategy would be to take the virtually unlimited amount of social needs, reduce them in number, line out the qualifying properties

of this smaller fraction, and look for mechanisms capable of eventually transforming them into political platforms and common agendas.

The transition to 'substantial interests' in the sense above would thereby be achieved the social needs would be more easily recognisable by the larger public, the media, and, last but not least, in politics.

I suggest calling this reduced number of needs 'vital needs' or 'the need to survive'. Vital needs are less extravagant and idiosyncratic than the needs that have guided much of social movement research in the past, but are also more encompassing than a simple advancing of particularistic demands, as practiced by many unions and defenders of workplace-related issues. At the same time, vital needs are also more specific than the myriad of motives feeding Schmitter's funnel of interest politics.

In any case, both the theoretical and the practical implications of the emergence of such boundary-spanning forms of collective action are awaiting their birth.

Notwithstanding the achievements of late capitalism in terms of growth rates and the creation of wealth, vital needs are today back on the agenda. They are awaiting more precise definition and also awaiting actors prepared to grab them and turn them into the sort of jointly elaborated and powerfully demanded interests a countermovement needs to justify the name.

Not least due to the historical success of trade union mobilisation, vital needs have fallen by the wayside, either because they have not been considered necessary or profitable anymore, or because of the conviction that most of them have become satisfied anyway.

Returning to the funnel image above, it is just as likely that vital interests may have leaked through the bottlenecks of the unions' internal filtering mechanism because of the individual departures of members, or because of intervention from conservative and inward-looking union leadership. It is now time to rediscover vital interests again and make them an essential part of the trade union agenda.

Conclusion: Beyond dichotomies

I have argued that, firstly, the study of joint collective action by trade unions, social movements and – why not – by those more enlightened and not completely aberrant voters for populist parties who might be recaptured for real-utopian projects, cannot proceed by sticking to the dichotomies which have been the norm in the fields of labour and social movement research. Secondly, the specific forms and content of the needs labelled ‘vital’ have found their objective social base in the precariat, a group constantly growing in importance. Thirdly, the satisfaction of vital needs and the definition of vital interests, understood as a consciously and repeatedly reflected menu of different aims and objectives, requires the consideration of passions and interests and of artistic and social forms of critique, just as much as of material and immaterial concerns.

Such a process develops through constant encounters with members of different groups that transcend the boundaries of traditional cleavages, form intersecting social circles, and eventually assume the quality of a veritable countermovement directed against further liberalisation and democratic decline.

Jürgen Grote*Senior Researcher, Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute*

References

- Beck, U. (2000). *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. (2005). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Diani, M. (2000). Simmel to Rokkan and Beyond: Elements for a Network Theory of (New) Social Movements. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3, pp.387-406.
- Diani, M. (2018). Unions as Social Movements or Unions in Social Movements? In J. R. Grote and C. Wagemann (Eds.), *Social Movements and Organized Labour: Passions and Interests*. London: Routledge:
- Diani, M., 2000. Simmel to Rokkan and Beyond: Elements for a Network Theory of (New) Social Movements. *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 3.
- Durkheim, E. (1897). *Le suicide. Etude de sociologie*. Alcan, Paris 1897.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gorz, A. (1985). *Farewell to the Working Class: An essay on post-industrial socialism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Hirschman, A. O. (1977). *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Melucci, A. (1998). *Nomads of the Present*. London: Hutchinson.
- Merton, R. K. (1949). *Social Theory and Social Structure. Toward the codification of theory and research*. Free Press, Glencoe IL.
- Polanyi, K. (1957/1944). *The Great Transformation*. Beacon Hill: Beacon Press.
- Rokkan, S. (1970). *Citizens, Elections, Parties*. Oslo: University Press.
- Schmitter, P. (2006/1981). A Prolegomenon to a Theory of Interest Politics. In J. Beckert, B. Ebbinghaus, A. Hassel, and P. Manow (Eds.), *Transformationen des Kapitalismus*. Frankfurt/ New York: Campus.
- Simmel, G. (1955). *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations*. New York: Free Press.
- Touraine, A. (1986). Unionism as a Social Movement. In S.M. Lipset (Ed.), *Unions in Transition: Entering the Second Century*. San Francisco: ICS Press.
- Waterman, P. (1991). Social Movement Unionism: A New Model for a New World. *Working Paper Series, no. 110*. The Hague: Institute for Social Studies.