Trade Unions and Social Movements.
Chances and Obstacles to Alliance Building and Cooperation

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1. Passions and Interests

There are essentially three shortcomings in the recent literature on the present state of politics in Western democracies and on forms of collective action. The general message resulting from research in the political economy and in forms of democracy in Europe is disastrous. We seem to be in the midst of a situation characterized by a mix of decline, fragmentation, individualization, diminishing trust in institutions hollowed out from the inside, the hoarding of power by small political and economic elites, and the increasing marginalization and pauperization of vast parts of the population. While the accuracy of these trends shall not be called into question, it is noteworthy, and this is the first shortcoming of the literature, to what extent that literature tends to neglect one crucial aspect, namely the capacity of those suffering most from the above malaise to coming together and searching for possibilities of collectively halting, reversing, or otherwise influencing decline in defense of their needs and interests.

The second shortcoming concerns the literatures on precisely these actors, namely 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 the respective research targets are reacting to it, the situation continues to remain one of indifference. There hardly is cross-fertilization beyond the boundaries of established research traditions. It is as if students of each of the two forms of collective action would mutually neglect each other. At best, trade union researchers and social movement research envisage the respective counterpart 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. We have borrowed the notions of passions and interests from Albert Hirschman's (1977) pathbreaking 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 on trade unions asserts that these were the essential differences underlying collective action by both types of groups, and that these differences were hard to overcome. This dichotomy underpins the entire debate since its very beginning. It may not be as simple as this, however. What Hirschman clearly shows is that passions originally associated with positive properties (in feudal times) may over time turn negative to assume positive connotations again - yet this time in form of an enlightened, i.e. interest-led behavior (capitalism). For instance, greed and avarice as much as the striving for glory and honor, have become transformed into more prosaic interests now benefitting not just individual parvenus and feudal lords but the whole of society. In a long historical process, interests have come to be discovered as tamers of passions, the latter now being discredited as negative and socially unwelcome aberrations, and this

conversion has very much been due to socio-political and economic change and to the way how that change was perceived by the people.

Passions and interests cannot neatly be distinguished from one another. They are merging and mixing all the time and what exactly will have the upper hand in the minds of the people at any historical moment is very much subject to shifting involvements and changing perceptions. The question up for debate, then, is whether the above divisions and dichotomies (political economy and political theory versus collective action research; industrial relation versus social movement scholarship; and passions versus interests) could be molded and brought into line by looking at some of the most recent examples of joint collective action by members of the two camps under study.

Not long ago, mostly triggered by developments in South Africa and Latin America, there has been a debate on what is called, following Waterman, social movement or community unionism. Scholars of industrial relations have deeply dwelt into the social movement literature with a view to identify patterns of action that might be conducive to trade union renewal. Yet, 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 being anachronistic (Touraine) due to their imprisonment in existing government institutions. They are said to be unable to adapt to the requirements of post-industrial society (Melucci). Gorz has described them as not being any longer the focus of social change, and for Giddens and Beck their place is questionable in a late-modern world. Overall, social movement research has as much tended to neglect the possibility of looking for alliances with unions as this has been the case the other way around. There are to date few exceptions to that mutual disregard. Foremost triggered by reactions to the debt and financial crisis following 2008, the situation has finally changed only very recently. Some scholars have recognized that capitalism and the political economy need to be brought back into the analysis because most of those fighting against austerity tend to direct their discontent not just against forms of commodification (traditional industrial disputes) but also of re-commodification (privatization) and of ex-commodification (exclusion from the labor market).

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 already forming part of an established group decide to join more encompassing endeavors spanning the boundaries of different collective actors and, secondly, when and whether these actors' professional leaders take the lead in doing so. This distinction is important. It is one thing to look at agreements achieved by the leaders. For this type of joint activity, the notion of alliance or, as suggested by Diani (2018), of an organizational 'mode of coordination' (MoC), might 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 movement and 'subcultural' MoC. Finally, 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. At other occasions, there

may be pronounced collaboration between members of different organizations without necessarily bringing about alliance formation at the level of their leaderships.

Rather than dwelling into the established domains of trade union and social movement scholarship, I suggest a re-reading of a couple of modern classics potentially enabling new insights with a view to the subject.

2. Crosscutting Cleavages and Intersecting Social Circles

The dissolution of traditional cleavages and of once clear-cut class barriers raises the question as to whether there is an exchange of worldviews and identities across the porous structures of class and descent, and whether that exchange may trigger something like a shared conscious-ness among activists. A central contribution in that respect is the work by Stein Rokkan (1970) on cleavage structures and on cross-cutting cleavages. Cleavages relate to structure (economic and space-bound), to norms and values (ideology and attitudes), and to action and mobilization (behavior), but may also include things such as ethnic, political, religious, gender, and cultural divisions of society. Most of the time, they appear in form of peculiar combinations of these divisions with a tendency to overlap and reinforce each other. In cases where groups originally sharing postmaterialist values start intermingling with members of groups preferring traditional material ones, we have to do with a cross-cutting cleavage When members of both groups remain within their original circumscriptions, we speak of reinforcing cleavages. Concerning the two groups under study, it could reasonably be argued that the latter was the dominant trend during much of the relatively stable growth period until about the early 1980s. Since about 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 very same type of anxiety, insecurity, and anger about mutually felt threats of social relegation, political exclusion, and economic descent.

Another candidate possibly of help for shedding light on the intermingling of social positions, lifestyles, behavior, and values is Georg Simmel's work on concentric and on intersecting social circles (Simmel 1955: 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: 391). Since it is not only perceptions and normative frames that are changing in strongly overlapping circles, but also the very nature of empirically observable social relations, such a combi-nation may thereby help surmounting the structure-action dichotomy altogether.

3. Movements and Countermovements

The notion of countermovement had first been introduced by Karl Polanyi as early as in 1944 (Polanyi 1957 [1944]). In "The Great Transformation", Polanyi sets out to describe transitions from one historical period to another thereby primarily focusing on the 19th century. In his understanding, the development of capitalism has been brought about by a double movement determining the relative extent of the embeddedness and disembeddedness of markets from social and institutional arrangements at different points in time. Turning to later events in the 1930s, Polanyi asserts that the collapse of the international economic system was a direct consequence of the attempt to organize the economy based on concepts of laissez-faire as taken from the British and Austrian schools of

liberalism. Just as in the century before, the laissez-faire movement that aimed at discharging the market from governmental intervention, regulation, or other social restrictions, was subsequently attacked by a counter-movement fighting in the interest of safeguarding the social and political rights and the privileges that it had obtained previously. The double movement meant the clash of two opposed and incompatible principles. On the one hand was the principle of the market, on the other hand was the desire of society to impose its values on the process of production and distribution.

The concept is particularly suited for the analysis of protest events and of large-scale mobilization precisely at a time when traditional trade union strongholds are dissolving while, at the same time, the defense of material interests is getting more and more a concern of larger parts of the population.

4. Forms of Critique

Many of the seemingly accurate dichotomies separating passions from interests, reinforcing from overlapping cleavages, concentric from intersecting social circles, and progressive from reactionary parts of the countermovement require further conceptual elaboration. There is, however, yet another meanwhile classical concept, and this really hits our analytic target. It is represented by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's (2005) work on The New Spirit of Capitalism. Concerned with an analysis of the motives underlying the unforeseen coalescence of students and workers around the events of 1968 in France, the authors assert that at the bottom of these events have been different sources of indignation. Firstly, a demand for liberation, secondly, a rejection of inauthenticity, thirdly, a refusal of egoism, and finally, a response to suffering. The first pairing found its classic expression in bohemian milieus of the late nineteenth century and is called "artistic critique". The second pair has centrally been articulated by the traditional labor movement, and represents a form of "social critique". Comparing the fate of the two forms of critique in terms of their success over time, the authors find that the artistic critique as essentially represented by the student movement has accomplished more, albeit in a quite unanticipated way, than its equivalent on the part of the working class. Many of the demands advanced by the student in 68' such as, for instance, the types of expressive creativity, of fluid identity, of autonomy and of self-development, all of which directed against the constraints of bureaucratic discipline, bourgeois hypocrisy and consumer conformity, have over time been absorbed by the logics of capitalist production and management, namely in form of flexible labor systems, sub-contracting, team working, multitasking and multi-skilling, flat management and all the other features of a so-called lean capitalism or post-Fordism. Albeit social critique has been successful in achieving important work-place-related rights and regulations, much of these have subsequently been disbanded during the triumphal swing towards neoliberalism setting in from about the mid-1970s.

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 irreconcilability of form and content, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 468) are not completely pessimistic in that respect: "(…) 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.: 469). This would bring it closer to the social

critique. Indeed, the new forms of oppression may be such that artistic critique, although not completely void of its *raison d'etre*, does not play the role anymore it has played three or four decades ago. Most types of despair, of individualization, of exclusion, of isolation, of impotence and abandonment have their origin in socio-economic rather than in primarily cultural or political forms of oppression. 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 organization. In what follows, some remarks will be made with respect to the relevance of organization for the forthcoming of boundary-spanning alliances and networks.

5. The Organization of Interests

It is important to consider the differences between free-floating motives (wishes, wants, desires, concerns or, indeed, passions) on the one hand, and those more material interests that ultimately becoming relevant on the political market place. These latter shall tentatively be called "politically substantial interests". In real life, only collectively expressed concerns have a chance to be heard, especially if brought forward by powerful organizations. The more professionalized 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 to be tradable on the political market. While both movements and unions promote and expose such concerns in a roughly similar way, we know little about the mechanisms that transform initially amorphous passions into such substantial interests. Interests are anything but social givens. What an interest is, or should be, is most of the time determined by a professionalized bureaucracy of interest entrepreneurs. In case of formal organizations such as trade unions or business associations, the search for and, indeed, the definition of interests is a complicated and partly 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 the most different individual needs affecting all members of society. The width of the funnel would get increasingly reduced, with several bottlenecks in between, while ending in form of a rather narrow outflow pipe. Traversing the funnel, the original needs, wants, wishes, passions, etc. poured into it at the top thus are becoming substantially reduced both in number and in 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 [of them] emerge from the mouth of the funnel to be actively defended or promoted (…). Along the way, a great many [of them] are lost or are frustrated" (Schmitter 2006: 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 continuing their passage to the bottom. Which of them manages to pass through, and which are eliminated from the funnel is determined by deliberate choices in favor of exit, by power, distortion and concealment from the part of the organizational 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, "(…) 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, resourcefulness, etc.

The question then is what happens to the funnel in the cases of social movements and of more encompassing outlets for collective action. What about needs, wishes, and passions when structural configurations are less professionalized, 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 either be incompatible or jointly unrealizable. For our purposes, the only way of circum-venting the problem of incompatibility then is to redefine needs in a way such that they become both at the same time - less comprehensive at the funnel' mouth, and sufficiently specific at its lower end.

6. The Politics of Vital Interests

One of the most urgent analytical tasks ahead, then, would be to address the needs of those being subject to precarious life and to forms of exclusion of various sorts. One possible strategy would be to take the virtually unlimited amount of societal needs, reduce them in number, line out the qualifying properties of this smaller fraction, and look for eventual mechanisms capable of transforming them into political platforms and common agendas. They would thereby make the transition of becoming 'substantial interests' in the sense above, and would be more easily recognizable by the larger public, the media, and, not least, by politics. We suggest calling that reduced number of needs a 'vital need' or the need to survive. Vital needs are both at the same time – less extravagant and idiosyncratic than the ones having guided much of social movement research in the past, but also more encompassing than just advancing particularistic demands as practiced by many unions and defenders of work-place 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 imply-cations considering the emergence of such boundary-spanning forms of collective action are still 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 still awaiting both a more precise definition and, not least, actors prepared to grab them and making them become the sort of jointly elaborated interests and powerful demands a countermovement would need to justify being given that name. Not least due to the historical success of trade union mobilization, vital needs have fallen by the wayside, either because not considered necessary or profitable anymore at all, or because of the conviction that most of them have become satisfied anyway. Returning to the funnel image above, they may equally have leaked through the bottlenecks of the unions' internal filtering mechanism because of individual exit of members, or because of intervention from the part of a conservative and primarily inward-looking union leadership. It would now seem to be time to rediscover them again and make them become an essential part of the union's agenda.

Overall, what this paper has been trying to argue is, firstly, that the study of joint collective action by trade unions, social movements - and by actors not considered here - can impossibly proceed by sticking to the types of dichotomies having been the norm in the

fields of labor and movement research. Secondly, the specific forms and contents of the needs that have been given the label of 'vital' have found their objective social base in the precariat that is 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 aims and demands, comprises passions and interests, artistic and social forms of critique, as much as material and immaterial concerns. It develops in 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 liberalization and democratic decline.

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