

Labour movements and labour unions

Emergence, institutionalization, crisis and revitalization of a social movement

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abstract Labour unions have been the central social movement in industrial society, and a central ground for sociological disputes. Despite their apparent decline in advanced capitalist economies, they remain a prominent institutional feature of labour markets and continue to attract a diverse range of sociological analyses.

keywords class ♦ conflict ♦ globalization ♦ industrial relations ♦ work

Introduction and definitions

The labour movement has been a prominent sociological topic, studied and discussed in a variety of ways by sociologists (as well as economists and political scientists) across the globe. From a sociological point of view, questions on the social determinants of the labour movement, and on its role in the broader society, are the main concern. While classic approaches competed in their interpretation of how central a social movement it was, all assumed it had a special status in and the potential to affect the nature of industrial society. More recently, however, questions have been raised as to whether the labour movement is not secondary to other (i.e. cultural) social movements, and as to whether it is still a social movement at all, and not merely a bureaucratized institution. By reviewing the evidence and rejecting a western-centric approach, this article argues for the manifold relevance of the labour movement.

The concepts of labour movement and labour unions are similar and largely overlapping, but not identical, and they are close to the broader concept of worker movement. By *labour movement*, sociologists mean the collective action of workers within social relations of production, opposing them to *management* and the controllers (within *capitalism*, generally, the owners) of the means of production. Such collec-

tive action has generally taken the form of labour unionism, and in American English the terms are virtually synonymous. *Labour unions*, or *trade unions*, in the UK were first defined by the British scholars and activists Sydney and Beatrice Webb (1894: 1) at the beginning of the 20th century as ‘continuous associations of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment’. This definition, however, has been criticized for being too narrowly focused on ‘working lives’: the boundary between working lives and broader social and political conditions (e.g. welfare state and democratic rights) is not clear-cut and trade unions’ demands have often gone beyond working lives strictly defined. Moreover, other forms of collective action, such as working-class political or cultural movements, works councils, mutual assistance organizations, or informal forms of resistance such as sabotage or work stoppages, can be considered as the expressions of a labour movement. Just as labour movements are not necessarily the same as trade unions, trade unions are not necessarily labour movements: in some cases, their activity is limited to welfare provisions to workers or partnership with the employers, and they manifest themselves as bureaucracies rather than collective action.

This article focuses on the area of overlap between

labour unionism and labour movement (using the two terms interchangeably), distinguishing it from the bureaucratic aspects of trade unionism and the non-union forms of labour movement. The latter will be indicated as *worker movement*, a broader social concept including the social, political and cultural expressions of the working class as a central social movement of industrial society (Thompson, 1968; Touraine et al., 1984).

Classic theoretical approaches

Different sociological fields (industrial relations, industrial sociology, economic sociology, political sociology, social movement studies) and different theoretical approaches (institutionalism, Marxism, social movement theories, corporatism, rational choice theory) have contributed to the understanding of the labour movement.

The aforementioned definition by the Webbs exemplifies the early focus by social scientists on working lives and their roots in the collective work experience of the factory. An explicit, important implication of this approach was a distinction between labour unionism and politics. This distinction was theorized by labour historian Selig Perlman in his analysis of American unionism in the 1920s. A representative of the 'Wisconsin school', which had a pioneering role in empirical research on labour unions, Perlman argued, in his *Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928), that trade unions focus on wages and working conditions of work because they are rooted in a 'natural' working-class consciousness, characterized by the experience of scarcity (especially of jobs). Such consciousness implies that manual workers, and trade unions as their 'organic' organizations, pragmatically prioritize primary needs while rejecting politics and revolutionary ideology. The latter were seen by Perlman as detrimental distortions introduced into trade unions by outsiders, the intellectuals, and not by the workers themselves. This understanding of trade unionism, called *business unionism*, was influential for the development of *industrial relations* as a field of enquiry in the USA and Great Britain, and, in turn, for the industrial relations *institutional pluralist* approach, focusing on rule-making at work, separately from broader social issues and conflicts. While the Wisconsin school and pluralism have followed an inductive, empirical approach, they hold the theoretical assumption that labour unions have the core function of negotiating socially acceptable rules in the workplace, which is too varied, complex and informal a social setting to be efficiently ruled by the law or by unilateral management. The theoretical implication is that unions

are 'trade-conscious', rather than 'class-conscious' (Hoxie, 1923), and that the forms of unionism would depend on the structure of business (Clegg, 1976). While this approach admits that there is a political side to unionism (see, for instance, the founding work by Commons [1919] of the Wisconsin school), this is strictly limited to rule-making at workplace and industry levels.

The *economic sociology* approach to unionism, with roots in classic institutionalism, has dealt with the role of trade unions in the *labour market* and in political economy. Sociologists have seen trade unions as a proof of the insufficiency of the economists' understanding of the labour market, based on rational individualistic behaviour, and point to the importance of groups, socialization and institutions. From a purely economic perspective, as has been discussed in the influential work of Olson (1965) on collective action, labour unions should not exist, as each individual worker should rationally prefer to save their union contributions, while still benefiting from unions' achievements: a typical free-rider problem of collective action. Moreover, they would necessarily cause economic damage, by distorting the market through monopolistic behaviour. Sociologists inspired by *rational choice theory* (e.g. Crouch, 1982) have tried to show that workers' rationality has a collective nature: workers are driven to combine by the nature of employment, and notably the inequality of being separate individuals being faced with an organized, unitary counterpart, capital (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1980). Moreover, sociologists have shown that workers' rationality is bound to their social experiences and their interests are socially constructed, as described for instance by Thompson (1968) in his history of the English working class. While unions obviously make mistakes, according to Offe or Crouch, workers' 'rationality' can benefit from inclusion in broader organizations that help redefine (and sometimes redirect) their interests. Moreover, these, when they 'encompass' a sufficiently large share of the workforce, may act in the general interest better than atomized individuals would do. Since the 1970s, this sort of argument has been important for the development of a *neocorporatist* approach to trade unions and industrial relations. According to this, associations like trade unions are an alternative, and potentially superior, source of social order to the market and the state: they create social rules through systematic compromise rather than through atomized exchanges (market) and the law (state). The theory of *corporatism*, elaborated in particular by Lehmbruch and Schmitter (1982) and Crouch (1993), echoes the functionalist sociology of Durkheim (1902), who had identified the potential

role of professional groups (corporations) in creating moral rules and social integration in an otherwise disorderly market.

Functionalist theories stress integration and rule production, contrary to Marxist theories' focus on conflict and contradictions. Dunlop's (1958) theory, particularly influential in the 1960s, tried to apply Talcott Parsons' social system theory to industrial relations, which he conceived as a sub-system – to be kept clearly distinct from the political one – with the function of providing rules, social integration and efficiency at work. According to Dunlop, trade unions were, beside employer associations and the state, one of the three actors of such a sub-system. His theory of an integrative industrial relations system lost its appeal after 1968, when union action showed its disintegrative, adversarial and political aspects.

While institutionalist theories originated in polemics against *Marxism*, there are parallels and symmetries with early Marxist interpretations of trade unionism. Some influential Marxists, and notably Lenin, equally believed that trade unions were restricted to narrow 'economism'. The difference lies in the fact that Marxists criticized this tendency and argued therefore for the additional need of a revolutionary party to allow the working class to move beyond a merely 'trade unionist' consciousness that fights against the symptoms but not the causes of exploitation. Tannenbaum (1951: 3) went as far as to define trade unions as the 'conservative movement of our times' for their role in integrating workers into the industrial order – although, moving away from Marxism, he did not see this as necessarily a bad thing, and recognized many positive social functions of trade unions. A more sophisticated neo-Marxist version of this argument was offered by Burawoy (1979), according to whom unions (with collective bargaining and personnel departments) are a component of an 'internal state' that contributed to secure workers' consent to their own exploitation within the factory.

Marx's own writings, while not containing a theory of labour unionism, pointed to the importance of shared struggles in the workplace to develop class consciousness, but also to the limits of unions, and contributed (alongside technology-centred and managerial approaches) to the later development of *industrial sociology* as a workplace-based empirical approach to the understanding of trade unionism. For their part, later Marxists or Marx-inspired theorists have radically criticized the business unionism approach as ideological, as an undue generalization of the US experience, and as incomplete. They stress the social *class* element of trade unionism, which goes beyond workplace issues to affect the whole of

the organization of society. In its most classic versions (e.g. Hyman, 1971; Zoll, 1976), Marxism has held that unions have a double character: on one side, as 'economistic' negotiators, they integrate the working class within capitalism, but on the other side, as representatives of working-class demands, they are class actors and a 'school of war' (in Engels' words) or a counter-hegemonic 'trench warfare' preparing a future frontal attack (in Gramsci's words). In a more recent and nuanced version, Hyman (2001) has discussed how both theoretically and historically business unionism is inherently incomplete because, without political interventions (e.g. labour law, welfare state, economic policy), trade unions can never protect whatever gains they achieve through strikes and negotiations – these will be taken away by inflation or adverse legislation. However, Hyman, like most neo-Marxists, now rejects class as a mono-causal explanation, and includes labour market and social partnership as equally important principles for trade unions. Besides, it is not only Marxists who have proposed a class-based interpretation of labour unionism. In a Weberian framework, in particular, Goldthorpe et al. (1968) showed, on the basis of their empirical research among workers in Luton, that unionism is rooted in the specific orientations of blue-collar workers (instrumental collectivism), which reflect social closures between themselves and the middle classes. Their theory, however, has remained open to criticism as, since the 1970s, trade unionism has expanded more and more into the service sector.

The issue of labour unions and collective action is also addressed by *social movement theories*, looking at the development of collective identity and social consciousness, and at the processes of mobilization. Pizzorno (1974–6), in a large collective study of the wave of worker mobilization in Italy after 1968, pointed to the role of new collective identities in emerging occupational groups, and to processes of 'institutionalization from below', which were then analysed in the rest of Europe (Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978). An important insight by Pizzorno is that trade unions do not just negotiate with the employers; they also operate in the public sphere through 'political exchange', whereby they try to influence the government. Touraine et al. (1984) add to collective identity the importance of opposition (*conflict* with employers and managers) and totality (an understanding of the 'stake', which for trade unions is primarily the control of industrial development). When combined, these three principles provide the coherent class consciousness that explains the prominence of trade unions as the central social movement in industrial society. Touraine (1966) had already linked the development of class consciousness to the

organizational characteristics of industrial work, and argued that such consciousness would decline with the shift to a postindustrial society; however, labour unions would survive, but rather than as class-based workers' movement, as important actors on sociopolitical issues. An implication of the social movement theory is the importance of *conflict* for the social construction of trade union action. According to Touraine, this explains why, against the assumptions of industrial relations studies, the worker movement is actually more assertive in complex, conflict-ridden urban areas than in closed worker communities such as mining regions or docks, where union action tends to be defensive. The strongest class consciousness and worker movement would appear in those sectors and organizations where a 'proletarian' consciousness of deprivation combines with the pride of skilled workers being threatened by new forms of organization – which was, at the time, the case of the automotive industry (Touraine et al., 1984). Social movement approaches to trade unions have also contributed to the understanding of labour unionism through *mobilization theory* (Tilly, 1978). Klandermans (1997) has combined resource mobilization with psychology and 'collective action frames' to explain worker protest and propensity to unionize, and Kelly (1998) has endeavoured to combine this approach with the Marxist one, arguing that trade union mobilization occurs in long historical waves. Eclectic combination of theories is frequent in labour studies, which have been accused, sometimes, of empiricism and under-theorization.

Empirical evidence

Research on trade unions has been conducted for over a century, although more in manufacturing and in industrialized countries than in other sectors and parts of the globe. In line with the theoretical approaches discussed in the preceding section, empirical research has aimed to assess unions' potential as a rule-making institution, or in class struggles, or as a social movement. The main topics have been the organizational features, the activity and the effects of labour unions, with approaches focusing on conflict (Marxists, social movement theories) hypothesizing growing mobilization and evidence of enduring antagonism, and functionalist/institutional approaches expecting a trend of stabilization, rule-making and compromise.

Research on union organization often starts from the issue of union membership: why do workers join unions? Variation in union density (share of employees who are members of a trade union) across countries, sectors and time has puzzled researchers. For

instance, within the European Union, union density varies from around 80 percent in countries like Sweden, to less than 10 percent in countries like France. Research has detected the importance of workplace 'cultures of solidarity', mostly based on opposition to management (Fantasia, 1988), as well as of 'social customs': social norms reproduced through institutions and networks that vary by sector and place (Visser, 2002) and, more recently, a broader idea of 'social capital' that may include new social networks (Ebbinghaus et al., 2011). Institutional factors of strong unionization are mostly at the nation-state level: the provision of select (member-only) benefits through inclusion in the welfare state (especially unemployment insurance, through the so-called 'Ghent system' that operates in Belgium and some Nordic countries), established workplace rights (to prevent employer opposition) and inclusion in corporatist policy-making through an alliance with a strong labour party. Social network and cultural factors, by contrast, operate mostly at the professional, craft and local community level, but are considered to be weakening in postindustrial societies (Gallie, 1996; Visser, 2002), explaining the decline in union density, which about halved in the USA and most of Europe (except in the Nordic countries) between the 1970s and the 2000s. The decline in union density and, with important implications for class analysis, its increasing concentration in the public sector (three times more unionized than the private sector in countries like the USA, UK and France) has been a research concern in many countries, and the trend has been most extreme in the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe. On the other side, the same social factors that weaken unions in Europe and North America may strengthen the labour movement in other, late-industrializing areas of the world such as East Asia, South Africa and Latin America (Silver, 2003). Some authors have however identified, behind this apparent divergence, a connection between the nature of workers' struggles within globalization in the South and the North (Webster et al., 2008).

The decline in membership in postindustrial society has been associated with structural trends, whether socioeconomic (sectoral shifts in employment) or sociocultural (the 'affluent worker' [Goldthorpe et al., 1968], individualization, immigration, feminization). The variety of unionization trends across countries and sectors suggests, however, that there is no single explanation, but rather an interaction between changing external conditions and actions by the trade unions themselves. For instance, Accornero (1992) argued that the particularly dramatic ups and downs in Italian unionization between the 1960s and 1980s were related to the

interaction between a specific union ideology (egalitarianism) and changing workforce composition. It follows that unions should adapt to changing technological and economic circumstances, as they did in the past, for instance during the transition from craft to mass production. Moreover, immigration and feminization have been dismissed as explanations because migrants' (Milkman, 2006; Penninx and Roosblad, 2000) and women's (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002) propensity to join trade unions is actually no lower than native male workers'. Their low membership at certain times is to be explained by their employment segregation in union-hostile workplaces or by exclusionary practices by the unions themselves (Rose, 1997).

In terms of *organization*, another stream of research has dealt with the internal relations between members and leaders. This has frequently been concerned with the 'iron law of oligarchy', elaborated by Michels (1911) in the case of the German labour movement. While labour unions have been found to have bureaucratic tendencies, pressures from below for representation, including through rank-and-file protest, have generally counteracted Michels' expectations. But rank-and-file movements have also appeared to be short-lived: the relationship between centralization and democratization is best described as dynamic, as particularly visible in the 1970s (Batstone et al., 1977; Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978; Pizzorno, 1974–6). Organizational analyses (e.g. Child et al., 1973) indicate that the role of trade unions as negotiators, whose achievements depend at least in part on the counterpart (employers) rather than executive bodies, implies that they can hardly become entirely democratic, apart from exceptional quasi-revolutionary times (e.g. the Polish union *Solidarność* in 1980). Comparative research on everyday union activity in the workplaces confirms that the dilemmas of 'representation' as a social relationship are a major constant of all unions, regardless of different national institutions (Dufour and Hege, 2002). Workplace union representatives, such as the British shop stewards (Batstone et al., 1977), have a crucial role in this, allowing the unions to become 'face-to-face' organizations, thereby avoiding Olson's collective action paradox. More recently, starting from the USA, research has focused on the strategic dilemmas unions are facing between 'servicing' members and 'organizing' workers, making them actively join the unions and campaign (Gall, 2009).

A further field of research relates to the activity of labour unions, and their relations with other actors. Much research has focused on collective bargaining, sometimes seen as the determining factor of trade union existence (Clegg, 1976). Collective bargaining is not an unproblematic concept, though, as it takes

very different forms. Notably, sociologists of work (e.g. Batstone et al., 1977) have argued that the most important activity of labour unions is in 'job regulation' and in shifting the 'boundaries of control', that is defining tasks and reducing therefore managerial authority, rather than the negotiation of wages. In analysing unions' relations with the counterpart, research has struggled with the often under-theorized issue of power: how, when and why can trade unions counteract the economic power of the employers. Different aspects of labour movement power have been distinguished: associational power (the number and commitment of members), labour market power (the capacity to control labour supply), workplace power (their understanding and control of workplace rules and the need for workers' active cooperation with management) and political power (Kelly, 1998; Silver, 2003). An area of particular interest in this regard is the issue of strikes and industrial conflict, which has led to sophisticated quantitative and qualitative analyses (e.g. Franzosi, 1995; Korpi and Shalev, 1979; Shorter and Tilly, 1974). Research in these areas has frequently combined sociology with economic analysis into multidisciplinary industrial relations studies (e.g. Ashenfelter and Johnson, 1969; Hicks, 1932; Reder and Neumann, 1980). Yet from a sociological point of view it has been repeatedly noted that official strikes are just one possible expression of workplace conflict (Edwards, 1986; Ingham, 1974).

The activity in the workplace has also been studied through the concepts, originally borrowed from behaviour and institutional economists, of 'monopoly' and 'voice' (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). 'Monopoly' represents the economic function of controlling labour supply and negotiating higher wages, by avoiding competition among individual workers: this function may be economically damaging. 'Voice' (or more precisely 'collective voice/institutional response'), drawing on Hirschman's Exit/Voice dichotomy, represents the political function of expressing worker grievances so that they can be taken into account, improving working conditions and avoiding workers' exit through quitting or disaffected behaviour: this second function is potentially positive.

Research on the effects of trade unionism has been contacted more by economists following this monopoly/voice framework, than by sociologists (e.g. Bennett and Kaufman, 2008; Freeman and Medoff, 1984). In the USA, comparisons of unionized and non-unionized workplaces have indicated – although not in an entirely conclusive way – that trade unions have small, positive effects on productivity, investment in human capital and reduction of turnover, while they have negative effects on profits.

The implication would be that, overall, unions increase social efficiency and produce public goods. In other countries, like most of Europe, where collective bargaining is generally extended to all workplaces whether unionized or not, these distinctions have less relevance, and union effects have been considered more in terms of worker dignity and satisfaction, or macro-level social and economic effects, suggesting that high union density affects joint regulation at work and effectively reduces managerial authority, but does not univocally impact social conditions (Vernon, 2006).

As already mentioned on the prominent case of diverse and divergent unionization rates, a frequent finding and sociological puzzle is national differences. Different models of unionism have been detected: the fragmented, business-oriented one of Anglophone countries, the centralized, social democratic one of Nordic countries, the sector-based corporatist one of Central Europe, the politically divided one in Latin-language Europe and the company-based one in Japan. Among the reasons for such differences, research has pointed to political traditions (e.g. Crouch, 1993), class structure (e.g. Gallie, 1983; Lipset, 1983) and modes of industrialization (e.g. Kassalow, 1982). National differences also affect union organization structures, with 'horizontal' (local, multi-sector) structures more common in Latin, class and social movement-type unions, and 'vertical' (industry-based) structures stronger in corporatist countries. The 'societal' approach in the sociology of work has been tempted to combine these explanations, and multiple institutions, into a theory of national models and an argument against convergence (Maurice et al., 1982), as have Hall and Soskice (2001) with their theory of 'Varieties of Capitalism'. Others (e.g. Dufour and Hege, 2002) have criticized these representations as exaggerations of national coherence and institutional rigidity, which recall Dunlop's functionalism. On this point, as on most of the issues reviewed in this section, the classic theoretical divide between institutionalists and Marxists has been largely replaced by the one between neoinstitutionalist and agency approaches – whether based on social movement theory, social constructivism or on labour process theory.

Future research development

The question of the role of labour unions in class struggles (whether they oppose class domination, or integrate workers within it), which absorbed theoretical and empirical debates in the 20th century, is on the wane. While class relations are still relevant for the understanding of the labour movement, neo-

Marxists (e.g. Burawoy, Hyman, Kelly, Wright) are now the first to reject mono-causal class interpretations: class is too abstract a concept to be the only organizing principle of labour unions, which combine class with other orientations, collective identities and forms of action. The decline of labour union strength in most of the industrialized world since the 1970s has also sidelined debates on whether unions can be revolutionary or even just transformative: they are now often seen as 'defensive', or even 'conservative' (as already argued by Tannenbaum, 1951) movements. The observation of a dualism in *labour markets* between insiders and outsiders (however simplistic empirically) has often led to the corollary that unions defend insiders' privileges: a burning charge that has been challenged by researchers pointing to the fact that it is the *weakness* of unions, rather than their actions, that leads to dualism (Palier and Thelen, 2010).

Researchers' concerns have therefore shifted to the opposite problem: rather than whether trade unions can lead to the end of capitalism, now it is being asked whether capitalism can lead to the end of trade unions. In the rather extreme case of France, already in the 1980s Rosanvallon (1988) had raised the hypothesis of trade unions 'without members', that is completely institutionalized as service providers and deprived of any 'social movement' nature. The idea of an irreversible decline, if not end, of the labour movement has been raised, for instance, by Castells (1996) on the grounds of the nature of the 'information society', and by postmodernists on poststructuralist grounds (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). How unions face crisis has therefore become a new area for empirical studies. Researchers of the determinants of unionization (Visser, 2002) are sceptical, but not totally dismissive, of the possibility of trade unions to recreate social customs that can convince people to join unions once the former worker communities and subcultures have disappeared. Similar arguments have been made regarding the decline of strikes (Shalev, 1992). On the other side, however, there is the optimism of those who look at the labour movement in terms of long waves, like Kelly (1998), and therefore at the current difficulty as temporary. In the 1950s, some sociologists had already prognosticated the 'withering away' of strikes (Ross and Hartman, 1960), only to be disproved by the unrest of the 1970s; according to Kelly, labour mobilization has not disappeared but temporarily declined, and the apparent collapse of strike statistics (a 90 percent fall in hours lost in strikes between the 1970s and the 2000s in Europe) only hides a change in strike tactics (shorter stoppages, often undetected by national statistics) and the time needed for unions to organize workers in

the new economic sectors. Moreover, while the incidence of strikes has long declined in industrialized countries, in 2010–12 waves of industrial strife hit the emerging economies of China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Bangladesh, pointing to a possible shift in the locus of labour resistance.

Those contesting the idea of union decline have elaborated the concept of ‘union revitalization’ (Frege and Kelly, 2004; Pheelan, 2007). According to this research orientation, unions are not just passive recipients of structural changes, but also active actors with some strategic capacity for reaction. Revitalization strategies hitherto identified are disparate: from organizational responses through union mergers, to political action, organizing, coalition building with other social movements, social partnership with employers and international action. The list is not exhaustive, and a recent overview of unions in 10 European countries revealed a picture of buzzing, if sometimes contradictory, ways in which unions are trying to take the initiative (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013): more research is required on the efficacy and implications of these strategies. The issue of links with other *social movements* is of particular sociological interest. A new perspective is to analyse union activity not simply in terms of hierarchical organization and structure, but as a networking organization, which can benefit from new communication technologies and opportunities for coalitions, while adapting to a more diversified and mobile workforce. An extreme approach in this direction is the concept of ‘social movement unionism’, meaning an activist mobilization-based unionism pushing for social change and not just insiders’ interests (Burawoy, 2008; Turner and Cornfield, 2007; Waterman, 1998), which has gained influence in particular in less developed countries (Dibben et al., 2012; Moody, 1997; Seidman, 1994).

The move to networks and coalitions raises further sociological problems. Within mass-production industry (Fordism), trade unions used to appeal to a sort of ‘organic solidarity’, based on similarity of status and fate, mostly through class but also, indirectly, nation, race and gender (Van Gyes et al., 2001). The diversification of the workforce in terms of gender and ethnicity challenges some union organization practices and culture, and while research is proving that the shift to more inclusive unionism is possible (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Milkman, 2006), such shifts have important implications for trade unions that deserve more research: from the move away from ‘male’ organization patterns (hierarchy, long anti-social hours ...) to the uneasy relationship with ‘diversity management’ and groups’ rights (Wets, 2000).

A major emerging area of debate and research is related to the contested idea of *globalization*. Globalization is often mentioned as a decisive factor in the weakening of the labour movement (e.g. Castells, 1996; Tilly, 1995; Wright, 2000). While on the structural level the increased freedom of movement of capital (without a corresponding freedom of movement of labour) involves a worsening of labour’s negotiation power, this negative perspective may reflect a Northern perspective and a static representation of trade unions. From a geographic point of view, the increased potential for the labour movement in the global South claimed by Silver (2003) is inspiring new research outside the old territories of 19th- and 20th-century unionism. It is not only a spatial move, though: according to Silver, globalization involves more opportunities for what she calls ‘Polanyi-type’ labour movements, focused on the defence of communities and social ties against the disruptive forces of the market, in opposition to Marx-type labour movements that express the growing force of labour as a force of production in the workplace and the labour market. Signs of labour’s growing assertiveness have been detected in the South (Webster et al., 2008) and even in the post-communist East of Central-Eastern Europe, Russia, China and Vietnam, scarred by regimes officially referring to the labour movement (Lee, 2007; Meardi, 2012; Pringle and Clarke, 2011). From the organizational point of view, while institutional analyses of trade unions, focusing on hierarchy and collective bargaining, tend to stress the huge obstacles (e.g. different regulations, lack of legal support and political space) to labour internationalism as a *global movement*, other approaches, focusing on networking or on new social movements, have been more optimistic. Hence, a new stream of research has developed on new ‘transnational’ labour practices (e.g. Bieler et al., 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 2007; Erne, 2008; Gajewska, 2009).

One point unites emerging research on conflict, revitalization, unions and diversity and globalization: the sociological study of the labour movement is faced with a similar dilemma to the labour movement itself – to renew or to decline.

Annotated further reading

Crouch C (1982) *Trade Unions: The Logic of Collective Action*. London: Fontana.

An accessible and stimulating, if UK-centred, theoretical discussion, passionately defending a corporatist approach to trade unions.

Franzosi R (1995) *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State*

Strategies in Postwar Italy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

An excellent example of quantitative empirical research on labour unions, with a theoretically and historically informed analysis of strike statistics in Italy.

Hyman R (2001) *Understanding European Trade Unionism*. London: Sage.

Accessible, stimulating and opinionated book, describing the union history of three European countries (UK, Germany and Italy) within a neo-Marxist framework with Polanyian influences. Similarly recommended is the follow-up *Trade Unions in Western Europe* (with R Gumbrell-McCormick, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Kelly J (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves*. London: Routledge.

Recommended to those looking for comforting, but thoughtful arguments about the endurance of the labour movement, based on a creative integration of industrial relations and social movement approaches.

Milkman R (ed.) (2006) *L.A. Story. Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

A book looking into the new frontiers of labour unions, describing and discussing the relation between the labour movement and immigrant workers in the global city of Los Angeles.

Silver B (2003) *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Similarly optimistic as to the endurance of the labour movement, introducing the important distinction between Marx- and Polanyi-types of labour movements, and promoting a focus on the global South.

Touraine A, Wiewiorka M, and Dubet F (1984) *Le Mouvement ouvrier*. Paris: Fayard.

Important and healthy counter-balance to possibly over-optimistic books, this social-movement inspired sociological analysis of French unions builds the fine argument that the history of the worker movement is coming to an end, but that of unions is not.

Journals

There are various journals focusing on trade unions in many countries, e.g. *Labor Studies Journal* in the USA, *Revue de l'IRES* in France, *Quaderni di Rassegna Sindacale* in Italy, *Transfer* at EU level. Important sociological articles on labour unions also appear in journals of sociology of work (e.g. *Work, Employment and Society*, *Sociologie du Travail*, *Sociologia del Lavoro*), industrial relations (e.g. *Industrial Relations*, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Cuadernos de Relaciones Laborales*, *Industrielle Beziehungen*) and economic sociology (e.g. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, *Socio-Economic Review*, *Stato e Mercato*).

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- Bennett J, Kaufman B (eds) (2008) *What Do Unions Do? A Twenty-Year Perspective*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Bieler A, Lindberg I, and Pillay D (eds) (2009) *Labour and the Challenges of Globalization: What Prospects for Transnational Solidarity?* London: Pluto Press.
- Bronfenbrenner K (ed.) (2007) *Global Unions: Challenging Transnational Capital Through Cross-Border Campaigns*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
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résumé Le syndicalisme a été le mouvement social central de la société industrielle et un terrain central pour les débats sociologiques. Malgré son déclin visible dans les sociétés capitalistes avancées, il demeure un aspect institutionnel important des marchés du travail, sur lequel les recherches sociologiques continuent à se diversifier.

mots-clés classe ♦ conflit ♦ mondialisation ♦ relations professionnelles ♦ travail

resumen El movimiento sindical ha sido el movimiento social central de la sociedad industrial y una base central para los debates sociológicos. A pesar de su aparente declive en las sociedades capitalistas avanzadas, sigue representando un aspecto institucional importante de los mercados de trabajo y las investigaciones sociológicas sobre el mismo siguen diversificándose.

palabras clave clase ♦ conflicto ♦ mundialización ♦ relaciones laborales ♦ trabajo