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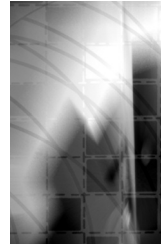
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Labour market or labour movement? The union density bias as barrier to labour renewal

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ABSTRACT

Most labour scholars view the unionised share of the labour market, union density, as the movement's primary source of power. Conversely, social movement scholars usually consider power embedded in disruption, organisational networks, resources, or political opportunities. Although many labour scholars promote 'social movement unionism' to reverse labour's decline, they have largely failed to adopt a thoroughgoing social movement perspective. A sign of this is that union density remains the sacrosanct indicator of organised labour's success and power. I argue that this *density bias* has significant analytical implications, leading observers to overlook non-market sources of movement power; to reduce a heterogeneous movement to a single organisational form, and to oversimplify the complex processes of movement organizing. I contend that treating labour explicitly as a social movement rather than implicitly as an agent in a market will open new lines of inquiry that may strengthen analyses of labour's prospects for renewal.

KEY WORDS

labour movement / labour movement revitalisation / social movements / social movement unionism / unionisation / unions / union density

Introduction

Between 1970 and 2003, the portion of the unionised workforce has fallen in nearly every Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country. Union density in France, New Zealand and Australia fell by more than 50 percent while rates dropped 47 percent in the USA, 44 percent in Japan, and by roughly one-third in Germany, Ireland and the UK (Visser, 2006: 45). The crisis of declining membership has sparked

a lively international discussion in the field of industrial relations regarding the prospects for labour movement renewal (see Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Clawson, 2003; Fairbrother, 2000; Fantasia and Voss, 2004; Fernie and Metcalf, 2005; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Kelly, 1998; Milkman and Voss, 2004). A recent symposium in *Employee Responsibilities and Rights* reflects a major thread within the literature concerned with 'social movement unionism' and whether it is the best (or only) way to rebuild labour movement power (Clawson, 2008; Fairbrother, 2008; Fairbrother and Webster, 2008; Waterman, 2008). This discussion is also found in *Work, Employment and Society*, most notably in the exchange between De Turberville (2004, 2007) and Carter (2006) debating the merits of the organising and servicing models of unionism. While this dialogue is important and efforts to clarify the concept are necessary, these discussions often fail to acknowledge a larger conceptual issue at the heart of the dispute – specifically how assumptions about labour movement power condition the way we think about labour renewal.

Despite attempts to analyse labour as a social movement (Kelly, 1998, 2005) and calls to 'place studies of unions and labour relations back within the framework of social movements' (Waterman, 2005: 202), labour studies remain largely based on the conventional wisdom that labour movement power is derived from the portion of the labour market that is unionised. But tying labour movement power to union density is empirically and analytically problematic. Historical and comparative analyses show that labour can be, and has been, efficacious when union density is low, and conversely labour movements can be weak even when density is relatively high. Furthermore, relying on union density undermines efforts to conceptualise labour as a social movement. Labour scholars who have embraced social movement unionism have yet to explain why labour remains alone among social movements in the use of proportional membership to evaluate strength.¹ Evoking the imagery of social movements, while relying on union density, suggests that organised labour remains viewed implicitly as an agent in a *market* rather than an actor in a *movement*.

The practice of uncritically treating union density as the primary source of labour movement power constitutes what I call the *density bias* (for an expanded discussion of this idea see Sullivan, 2009). I contend this density bias affects analyses of labour's renewal by restricting our ability to consider alternative sources of movement power, by causing us to overlook the contributions of organisations operating outside the traditional collective bargaining framework, and by oversimplifying complex processes of member recruitment into dichotomous terms that obscure dynamics of collective identity formation. In this essay I seek to problematise our use of union density by showing its impact on assessments of labour renewal and efforts to link labour conceptually to social movements.

Complicating density-based power

The logic of density as a proxy for labour movement power is based on the notion that it reflects labour's capacity to affect wages and working conditions,

either by restricting the supply of workers, or by commanding a sufficient portion of the pool of available labour within a given industry or region to take wages out of competition. It is generally understood that as the unionised share of a given labour market rises, labour's bargaining power increases (Goldfield, 1987; Rose and Chaison, 1996).

While union density may be an appropriate tool to gauge labour's relative strength within a functioning collective bargaining system, it is less useful when such systems do not exist or when they have broken down. Over the last few decades, the state's increasingly warm embrace of neo-liberal economic policies has led to the collapse of post-war labour-capital accords, especially in English-speaking countries. Where unions had enjoyed status as a player within an institutionalised framework of labour relations, many now occupy an outsider role with vastly diminished bargaining leverage. It is this circumstance that has led many observers to advocate a more insurgent posture for labour akin to a social movement.

But while the current revitalisation debate is predicated on the fact that the rules governing labour relations have changed fundamentally, research and theorising remain largely tied to the density-as-power orthodoxy. As John Kelly observes, 'much of the literature on [union revitalisation] within the "liberal market economies" of the UK, USA, Canada and Australasia equates union revitalisation with membership growth' (2005: 67). More than a dozen recently published monographs and edited collections on labour renewal begin by citing declining union density figures as proof of labour's weakness and to support the tacit proposition that its rejuvenation depends on reversing the trend.

The density bias also shapes movement strategists. In the summer of 2005 a handful of American unions split from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) to form a rival labour federation. Steve Lerner, a key leader of the group and an advocate of the organising model, proposed restructuring the US labour movement into 10 to 15 sector-focused unions, creating a broader vision for the labour movement, and committing more resources to organising (Lerner, 2003). The centrepiece of his plan was to increase labour's market share in each of the primary economic sectors in an attempt to ensure the movement's survival. Somewhat ironically, the defections from the AFL-CIO to build a 'new' labour movement reinforce old notions about power predicated on union density.

In advancing the concept of the density bias it is important not to overstate the case. Certainly, not all scholarship treats density as the central problem or the solution to labour's renewal. Chris Howell (2005) for example focuses on labour's relationship with the state to explain why the British labour movement succumbed to the radical reform efforts of Conservative governments from in 1979. He argues that through institutions designed to manage and regulate class relations, the state plays an important role in shaping 'the ideology, organisation, and practice of British trade unions' (2005: 2). Beverly Silver's (2003) compelling historical analysis examines evidence of labour unrest since 1870 as it corresponds to the state's response to capitalism's recurring crises of profitability and legitimacy. Her study is noteworthy for distinguishing between labour's structural and associational

power. She finds no correlation between strong workplace bargaining power and labour militancy. Indeed, where structural bargaining power was weak, gains were based on labour's associational power. The implication for the contemporary labour movement, she points out, is that 'we might expect the weight of associational power in the overall power strategies of labour movements to be on the increase' (2003: 172).

On one hand Silver's acknowledgment of associational power stands as a significant counter point to the assertion that scholarship is fixated on density. On the other hand, by highlighting the role of associational (or movement-based) power, Silver lends support to the argument that density is not the only, or even the most important, source of labour movement power. Certainly exceptions to density-based analysis exist (see also Behrens et al., 2004; Kelly, 2005), but the concern with the decline in union density pervades the revitalisation literature. However subtle it may be, the density bias conditions our analyses in meaningful ways.

Presuming that density is a necessary precondition for labour movement vitality elides evidence showing the correlation between density and labour movement power is imperfect. International comparisons serve to illustrate the point. Union density in France is relatively low at 8.3 percent in 2003 (Visser, 2006), but its labour movement has a comparatively high degree of influence. The French working class has a history of militant direct action and effectively thwarting policy proposals viewed as hostile to workers. For instance, recent attempts by the French government to give companies more flexibility to hire and fire young workers were met with massive resistance from a coalition of student and labour groups. This brought nearly three million protestors to the streets in March 2006 in what was called 'the biggest single day of strikes and demonstrations that the country has seen for well over a decade' (*Economist*, 2006: 22). Conversely, in the UK where union density is more than three times higher than in France (Visser, 2006: 45), the labour movement is widely believed to be moribund and in need of renewal (Fairbrother, 2000; Fernie and Metcalf, 2005; Heery et al., 2003a). Clearly density alone is insufficient to explain the difference in labour movement efficacy.²

Several features distinguish the French labour movement from its counterparts abroad that underscore the challenges in making cross-national comparisons of density rates. For one, density measures something qualitatively different in France than it does in other settings, such as the US. 'Union members' in France are often ideologically committed activists comprising the leadership core of the movement (Bouneaud, 2007). Conversely, American union members are generally much less active and include workers who join for purely instrumental reasons or as a condition of employment. Therefore, union density measures different dynamics depending on the context.

International comparisons of density also prove difficult due to variations in labour's relationship to the state. Behrens et al. (2004: 13) note the difficulties of comparing labour movements in liberal market economies with those of coordinated market economies. In nations where unions enjoy state support and have

been incorporated institutionally within the labour relations system, density may be less vital – or at least mean something different – than in settings where labour is a relative outsider. As Silver's (2003) findings suggest, high levels of structural bargaining power tend to coincide with periods where the state has adopted an accommodationist stance vis-a-vis labour.

The fact that the state plays a variable role across nations supports the claim that density may be too imprecise an instrument on which to base assessments of labour movement strength or its prospects for transformation. Although union membership has declined throughout the world, interpretations of the significance of the decline are contingent and variable. This highlights important validity issues regarding density but also raises questions about how its use may affect analyses of labour revitalisation.

The density bias and labour renewal

There are at least three ways the density bias affects analyses of labour movement renewal. It leads to overlooking alternative sources of movement power. It reduces analysis of a heterogeneous movement to a single organisational form – the trade union. And it reduces complex dynamics of union organising to simple binary terms of wins and losses.

Alternative sources of power: protest and politics

Challenging the assumption that the labour movement is principally a player in the *economic* arena will help us to consider other available sources of power. One alternative source of power comes from protest and direct action. Yet disruptive tactics have played a diminished role in labour's tactical arsenal. Since the 1970s strikes and work stoppages have been increasingly ineffective in the USA and Europe (Gall and Allsop, 2007; Martin and Dixon, 2007). In the USA, the risks involved in engaging in collective forms of protest that violate legal and contractual prohibitions are considerable. But while labour movements in much of the industrialised West have become reluctant to engage in disruptive tactics, recent examples of mass protests by workers in Korea, South Africa, Spain, and France indicate that the tactic can still be effective (Kelly, 2005: 67). Even though unions may have good reason to eschew direct action, mass protest remains an important source of power – one that social movements utilise routinely despite the financial and legal consequences for doing so. To the extent our analyses seek to treat labour as a *movement*, it is appropriate to consider the potency of protest, which can be efficacious even when union density is low.

Another form of power is derived from workers' participation in electoral politics (Dark, 1999; Hamann and Kelly, 2004). In the USA, where the electorate is closely divided, the votes of 15 million union members can have a major impact on national politics. According to exit poll data from the 2008 presidential election, one of every five voters lived in a union household and 59 percent

of them voted for Democrat Barack Obama (CNN, 2008). White Evangelical Christians, a key conservative constituency, voted at a much higher rate – 74 percent – for Republican John McCain. This 15-point disparity in support from each party's base did not affect the outcome in the most recent election. However, had union households voted for Democrats at the same rate Evangelical Christians voted for Republicans in 2000 and 2004, George Bush would not have won either election.

Irrespective of density rates, union members *as voters* are a potent force. Labour's political power in the USA could be enhanced by strengthening the relationship between these voters and the Democratic Party (Dark, 1999). While American unions have spent considerably to maximise labour's political influence (Moberg, 2004), returns on this investment have been mixed. Not only have labour-friendly policy initiatives stalled, but the relationship between the Democrats and the working class is shaky. Only 36 percent of voters in union households identify with the Democratic Party (Stanley and Niemi, 2006: 178). If more workers identified with the Democratic Party, labour's share of the vote might increase enough to change the political landscape and put labour in a stronger position to achieve its policy goals. In other words, mobilising *current* union members and their families may actually have greater strategic impact than achieving a marginal up-tick in union density. Focusing on proportionate union membership obscures the collective power embodied in these 15 million dues-paying members. The protest potential and political power of organised workers remain under-theorised in large measure because renewal strategies are oriented toward market-based solutions.

Union-centric labour studies

Another indication – and consequence – of the density bias is that labour's organisational field is reduced to a single entity: the trade union. If we accept (implicitly or explicitly) that labour movement power is based on union density, increasing union membership becomes a prerequisite for revitalisation. Because unions are – by definition – the only organisation able to affect union density, they become our exclusive unit of analysis.³ But treating unions as the movement's constitutive form excludes other organisations that are contributing to labour's revitalisation (Sullivan, forthcoming). For example, living wage campaigns, worker centres, central labour councils and other community-based labour organising efforts have emerged as promising sites of movement activity (see Fine, 2006; Gapasin and Wial, 1998; Gordon, 2005; Luce, 2004; Wills and Simms, 2004). But because they operate outside the formal collective bargaining system, these movement-building efforts go largely unnoticed. This organisational homogeneity is a unique feature of labour studies. Whereas social movement scholars include a diverse range of organisations in their analyses, mainstream labour revitalisation theories remain union-centric, marginalising those organisations not oriented toward collective bargaining.

Union-centric labour renewal may make it difficult for scholars to acknowledge the limitations of the trade union as movement organisations. In the present political-economic context, collective bargaining has proven to be untenable in many industries due to competitive pressures and antipathy toward unions. In this inhospitable milieu organised labour has suffered in the global North and workers have been exploited with impunity in the global South. Against this backdrop, the ability of trade unions to survive, much less thrive, is questionable – no matter which model of unionism is adopted. As Farber and Western (2001) and Metcalf (2005) have argued, economic restructuring is likely to offset any gains unions make through increased organising activity. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which unions might organise workers on a scale large enough to negotiate measurable improvements in wages and living conditions in the global economy. It is possible that revitalisation strategies based on density, trade unions and collective bargaining may simply not be viable in the current context.

Labour organising as binary

The density bias and the concomitant union-centric character of labour revitalisation produce a third analytic problem: reducing the complex process of movement organising to binary outcomes. If labour movement power is a function of union density, and trade unions are essential, then recruiting members becomes paramount. For many scholars, the most important research task centres on identifying tactics that produce new union members (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich, 1998; Heery et al., 2003b). But union membership status does not necessarily indicate that workers have strong movement identities, nor does it ensure their willingness to act in support of movement goals (see Kelly, 2005; Simms, 2007). Thus, it is possible that we lose considerable analytic precision by measuring the process in dichotomous terms.

In the USA the organising-as-binary problem is a result of the ‘winner takes all’ nature of the unionisation process. Traditionally, American unions have been established via certification elections overseen by a state agency. In order for unions to prevail, they must garner support from a simple majority of the workers. If the union wins, the workers are considered to be ‘organised’. But assessing organising effectiveness in such terms is problematic. First, union members who are enthusiastically committed to the labour movement are analytically equivalent to those who become members as a condition of employment. All union members are counted among the ‘organised’ despite significant differences in their support for the movement. Second, treating organising as zero-sum inhibits labour scholars’ ability to address important micro-dynamics of the recruitment process. Students of social movements pay considerable attention to the complex relationship between movement participation and movement identity formation (Gamson, 1992; Melucci, 1995), while few labour scholars address this important dimension. Finally, assessing organising

dichotomously is problematic because outcomes are not always clear-cut. Workers might *lose* a particular organising campaign only to come away with new-found political consciousness, feelings of efficacy, and a stronger commitment to the movement overall (Johnston, 2000; Rachleff, 1993). Conversely, ‘successful’ unionising campaigns may leave workers feeling disaffected or antagonistic about the labour movement (Markowitz, 2000; Sullivan, 2003). These cases raise doubts about the value of binary assessments of union organising.

Conclusion: from market to movement

The aim here is not to suggest that union density is irrelevant, but rather to show the consequences of treating it uncritically as the principal basis of labour’s strength. I contend that density’s sacrosanct status obscures alternative sources of power, reduces the range of participating movement organisations, and oversimplifies complex processes of movement recruitment. As such, the density bias inhibits efforts to theorise labour’s renewal.

The view that density is the primary source of power presumes that a collective bargaining system exists, is functioning properly, and can be relied upon as a foundation of political and economic influence for the working class. When unions are supported by the state and incorporated into a stable, relatively equitable labour relations system, maximising labour’s bargaining power by expanding union membership is a reasonable strategic approach. But these relationships are unravelling. Yet despite some notable exceptions, analyses of labour’s revival remain rooted in the premises of this vanishing political economic era. Now may be the time to reconsider density-based strategies, and to more rigorously explore alternative ways of harnessing workers’ collective power, especially as labour shifts necessarily toward a social movement footing.

While I agree with Sue Fernie’s critique that ‘unions seem to have some difficulties in recognising that the world of work has changed, and are therefore using structures and tactics more suited to the 1970s’ (2005: 16), labour scholars may be guilty of a similar charge, as we continue to focus our analyses and theories on market dimensions of labour such as density, trade unions, and collective bargaining. Current formulations of social movement unionism do not go far enough in challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying much of the literature on labour revitalisation (but see Waterman, 2004, 2008). One reason for this may be that labour continues to be regarded as a special kind of movement – quintessentially ‘old’ as opposed to the ‘new’ social movements – that justifies a fundamentally different analytic treatment (Webster and Lipsig-Mummé, 2002). Acknowledging the density bias and its implications will enable us to shift the focus from labour’s market role to its capacity as a social movement. New sources of power should be explored (Silver, 2003) and more effective ways of tapping the latent power of the millions of union members worldwide must be sought. We can also endeavour to expand the movement to include a much broader array of organisations and constituencies

as legitimate movement actors (Wills and Simms, 2004). And finally, research on labour organising ought to go beyond tactics that correlate with campaign victories, to a more nuanced examination of micro-dynamics that produce collective identities among workers (Holgate, 2005; Kelly, 2005; Simms, 2007). Opening new analytic territory will inevitably change the terms of the debate, which may be precisely what is needed if scholars are to contribute to labour's renewal.

Notes

- 1 Analysts of the American Civil Rights movement for example offer myriad explanations for the emergence and impact of the American Black Civil Rights Movement – but none involve membership density. If they did, we would find the ‘density’ of that movement – using its largest organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – peaked in 1963 at less than 2 percent (Census Bureau of the US, 2004; Meier and Bracey, 1993). Yet despite this anaemic density, the movement achieved significant gains for African Americans and changed the political and social landscape in the USA.
- 2 A similar point could be drawn using the Spanish labour movement: see Hamann and Kelly (2004) and Lucio (1998).
- 3 The common terms ‘community *unionism*’ and ‘social movement *unionism*’ illustrate that unions remain conceptually wed to analyses of labour renewal. Even the De Turberville and Carter debate is concerned with the merits of different models of unionism.

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