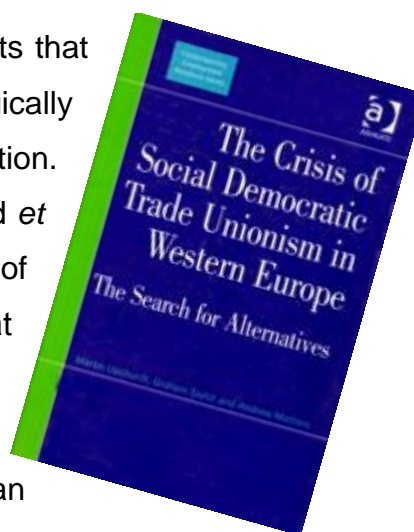


Book Review – Graham Taylor and Andy Mathers

Upchurch, M., Taylor, G. & Mathers, A. (2009)
***The Crisis of Social Democratic Trade Unionism in Western Europe:
The Search for Alternatives***
Aldershot: Ashgate

The origins of the book are in earlier research projects that have focused on how unions were responding strategically to the new challenges posed by neoliberal globalisation. Martin Upchurch (with colleagues from UWE) (Danford *et al.* 2003; Upchurch *et al.* 2008) examined the reality of both the 'organising' and 'partnership' strategies that were emanating from the British TUC. The TUC, in this period, was led by John Monks who was influenced strongly by the strategy of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) of which he later became General Secretary. Graham Taylor and Andy Mathers (2002a, 2002b), meanwhile, were subjecting developments in West European trade unionism to critical scrutiny leading them to conclude that unions possessed two main trajectories: towards an identity of either social partner or social movement. Their work continued by analysing the ETUC itself which, it was argued (2004), could, and indeed should, develop a 'transnational hybrid identity' that encompassed the diverse orientations of its nationally based affiliates. However, Andy Mathers (2007) found that such an identity was developing more rapidly in the margins of the established labour movement where a diverse array of grass roots networks were mobilising within and across nation states against the social consequences of neoliberalism.



Our research interests came together when we began to engage more directly with the debate over union revitalisation and renewal. Papers delivered at the 'Future of Labour Movements' conference at the University of Sheffield and at

the 'Reformulating Industrial Relations in Liberal Market Economies' conference at the University of Manitoba focused on how neoliberalism encouraged the de-institutionalisation of trade unionism and a consequent 'opening up' of civil society. This process, we argued, was producing a political space for new forms of strategic identities and practices. Our focus at this point was on investigating the extent to which the opening up of civil society had been conducive to the development of social movement unionism (SMU) oriented to developing an alternative societal and political project. At this time our investigation was limited to the UK where we found significant but limited evidence of industrial, political and social reorientation amongst unions towards the more critical, inclusive, and autonomous characteristics of SMU. We explained these limited developments in historical and comparative terms emphasising the specific trajectories of development of trade unions in the UK from the dominant forms of industrial and social democratic unionism and how this differed to the main trajectory in the USA from business unionism towards SMU (Mathers, Taylor and Upchurch 2004; Upchurch, Mathers and Taylor 2004).

This historical and comparative approach to understanding union orientation and revitalisation was retained for our investigation of West European trade unionism kindled by startling developments on the ground. These developments include: the huge strike wave in France in 2003 over pension reform (see Gordon and Mathers 2004); the rising tension between unions and social democratic parties in 2004-5 in both the UK and Germany resulting in union defections from the Labour Party; and the formation of a new 'Left Party' (Die Linke) in Germany with a strong trade union element.

Such developments encouraged us to conceptualise the crisis of trade unionism in Western Europe as a crisis of a particular form of trade unionism – social democratic trade unionism – and to argue that this crisis was linked to a wider crisis of social democracy. This broader conceptual framework for

analysing trade union reorientation in response to neoliberalism is set out in Chapter 1 of our book.

(Readers who wish to read this framework can follow the link).
<http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754670537>

Chapter 1 explains the general phenomenon of social democratic trade unionism in terms of the dominant party-union nexus (DPUN) and ideologically as the articulation and accommodation of working class interests to the liberal democratic state. We outline this on page 14 of the book where we argue that our conception of social democratic trade unionism is based on our understanding that 'social democracy is a historical phenomenon marked by the integration and interpenetration of socialism and trade unionism, and the *de facto* integration of the labour movement into parliamentary democracy'. We argue that this integration was based on historical settlements that exchanged an acceptance of the capitalist order for state welfare and support for collective bargaining and that these concessions were extracted through the relatively stable institutional linkages comprising the DPUN.

We draw upon the work of Padgett and Patterson (1991) to describe the nationally specific forms of social democratic unionism that developed in the Western European nation states. Sweden is regarded as the pinnacle of social democratic achievement. It is where labour developed a relationship of 'unparalleled intimacy' between party and union contributing to huge levels of working class electoral support for the Swedish Social Democratic and Labour Party (SAP) and sustained periods in office. In Germany, there was an 'informal alignment' between autonomous but legally restricted unions that, while remaining formally independent of the SPD, wielded significant influence with a leadership that was well represented in the party machinery. In the UK, union influence was achieved directly through 'formal affiliation' of unions to

the Labour Party, whereas in France, those unions oriented towards social democracy remained non-aligned in an environment characterised by the 'fragmentation' of politically partisan union confederations.

This national diversity reflects the path dependent articulation of union identities. Following Hyman (1996) we argue that the development of trade unionism involved a triple polarisation of union identity around anti-capitalism (class), social integration (society) and occupational interests (market). The historical struggles between unions based on these rival identities resulted in the post-war hegemony of social democratic trade unionism in Western Europe, but this came under periodic stress through the ideological revision of social democracy spurred by the limitations of corporatism and Keynesian crisis management. In the present period, we argue that de-industrialisation, globalisation and the accommodation of social democratic parties to neoliberalism have generated deeper problems for the persistence of SDTU. It is now possible to speak not only of its crisis but also of its supersession and this is suggested by the sub-title of our book: 'the search for alternatives'. Our contribution to this search is to explore the ways in which the 'institution-dissolving dynamics of neoliberalism' (p.15) have resulted in the 'opening-up' of new avenues for union reorientation. We investigated the processes of union reorientation through an institutional analysis that focussed particularly on divisions and fractures around accommodation and resistance to neoliberalism alongside the emergence of new union identities. The findings of this investigation in our case studies are presented in chapters 2-5 each of which begins with an examination of the development of SDTU within each nation state.

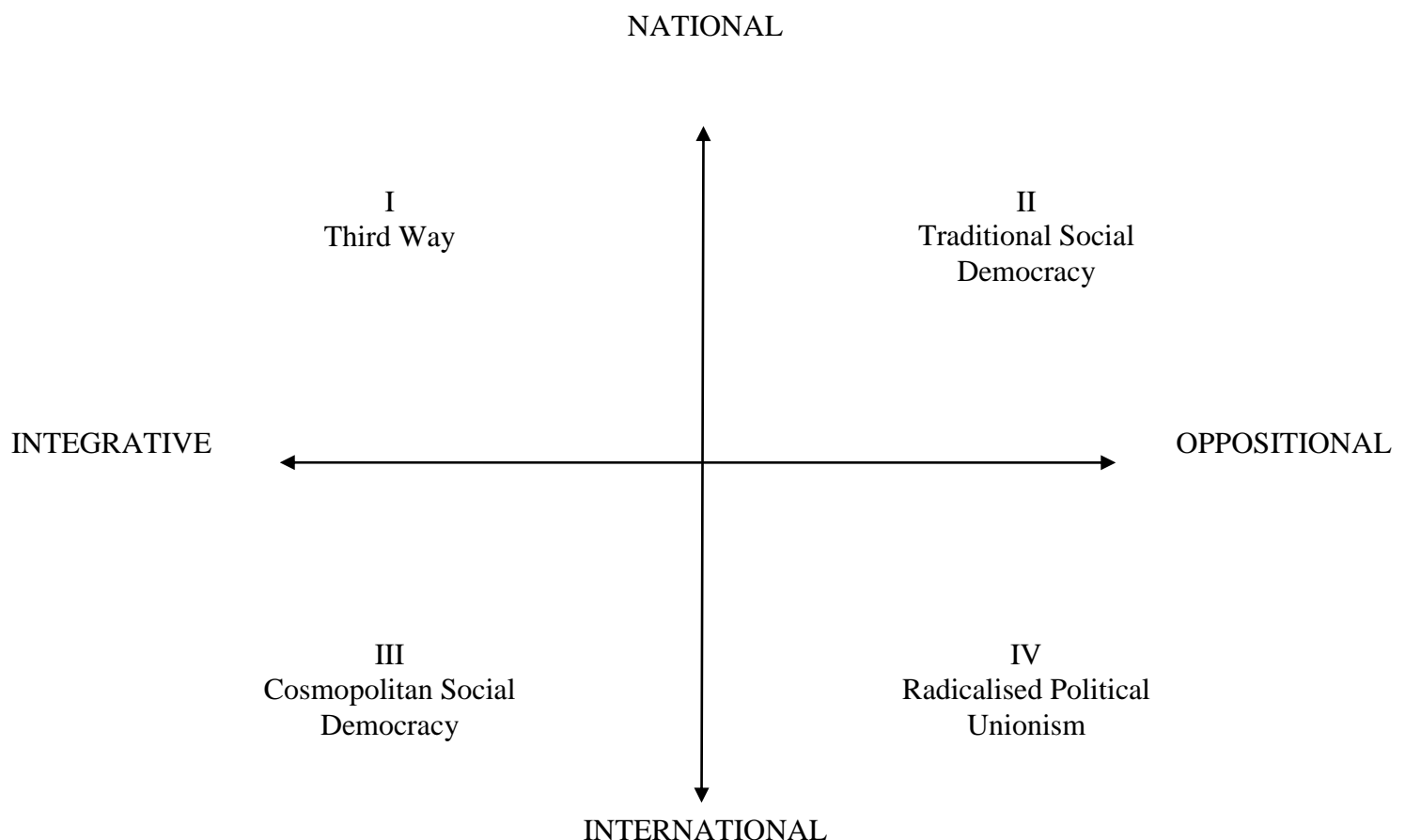
We find that in Sweden (Chapter 2) there has been a remarkable level of institutional continuity in spite of the ideological shift in the SAP towards 'utilitarian individualism'. This is displayed in the persistence of high union density, centralised sectoral bargaining and a low level of disputes. Although

LO has separated formally from the SAP, there remain close links and little evidence of union liaison with other parties. Political unionism has remained dominant with no significant social movement orientation emerging. In Germany (Chapter 3), the SPD's embrace of the agenda for reforming the social state (the Hartz reforms) has generated union disenchantment and discontent manifested as support for broad-based demonstrations against welfare reform and then as an upturn in industrial action in the public sector. This has been followed by growing union and popular support for new political formations to the left of the SPD such as the Left Party. Initially championed in the UK (Chapter 4) by the TUC and New Labour, 'partnership' has been understood increasingly by unions as an uneven relationship. This has encouraged a return to a more adversarial approach to industrial relations. Public service unions have been at the forefront of industrial unrest produced by the 'modernisation' agenda advanced by New Labour. This has translated into minority political discontent that has spilled over into expulsions and disaffiliations from New Labour, while the majority of unions still favour retention of the union-party link albeit with the proviso that the unions can 'reclaim' their party. Unions in France (Chapter 5) have contributed significantly to the most militant, widespread and protracted resistance to neoliberalism yet the confederations remain numerically weak and fragmented. There is, however, considerable evidence of union reorientation such as the CGT's shift away from industrial and political militancy that has opened up a space for the new social movement oriented confederation SUD. The CFDT has also indicated a route to the reformulation of SDTU around the identity of social partner. Both the CGT and CFDT have a strong orientation towards the European dimension of trade unionism but, as yet, both the trade union and party forms of SDTU at the European level are undeveloped and weak due in large part to their 'top-down' character. This is in contrast to hotspots of international and transnational activity that have been generated organically by the inter-section of nationally based movements against neoliberalism. We argue that this poses a major challenge for the

development of European level trade unionism which is to harness this oppositional energy into an effective transnational organisation that is capable of advancing a regulatory project and that this involves tackling the 'democratic deficit' that exists between the ETUC and its constituent confederations (Chapter 6).

These theoretically informed empirical investigations formed the basis for the development of a model of 'Alternative Trade Union Futures' set out in Chapter 7.

Figure 1: Alternative Trade Union Futures



The dimensions of the model are rather self-evident and their intersections produce four ideal types of union orientation three of which suggest alternative futures for SDTU and one which points beyond it. The sociology of Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1994) provides the theoretical underpinning of the 'Third Way' orientation in that globalisation is regarded as generating a new high-risk environment in which unions operate. Unions and political parties are not, however, passive respondents to this environment, but can engage actively with it to produce new projects that protect workers and citizens. For unions, the 'Third Way' project suggests unions engage with national governments and employers to produce social pacts that focus on supply-side measures to equip the workforce with the skills required by the global economy. The development of an active welfare state is a particularly crucial aspect of this endeavour. The close relationship developed by the TUC with New Labour in its early years in office around the notion of workplace 'partnership' exemplifies this approach to reformulating SDTU. The extension of the 'Third Way' approach to the European level also forms a significant aspect of the orientation towards 'cosmopolitan social democracy'. Indeed, Giddens (2006) has argued increasingly for a 'social Europe' as the expression of the cosmopolitan values of European states and their citizens. This supranational approach to developing a new social democratic consensus finds expression in the ETUC's embrace of its role as a social partner within the institutions of the EU and its strategy of seeking to develop supranational rights for workers through social dialogue with the organisational representatives of European employers. Proponents of 'traditional social democracy' (such as the FO in France and the RMT in the UK) have been increasingly sceptical towards the almost unconditional support for European integration that such a strategy has produced. They have advanced a more militant confrontational strategy aimed at wielding industrial power to gain influence over what they consider to be a still powerful nation state. Other critics of the hitherto liberal character of European

integration (such as the SUD in France) have argued for a 'Different Europe' as a banner around which to unite the diverse array of opponents to neoliberalism. This approach also has a tendency to move beyond SMU towards a 'radical political unionism' that challenges the DPUN and develops new political vehicles for unions that are to the left of social democracy.

While generally welcomed by both trade union activists and industrial relations academics as a timely intervention into the debates over trade union crisis and renewal, the book has itself generated debate, in particular with regard to the applicability of its model of 'alternative futures'. We are continuing to engage with such debate by presenting our findings and arguments at various conferences of academics and activists.

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