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Trade Unions and the Politics of the European Social Model

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There is a consensus among European trade unions that economic integration should be complemented by a strong 'social dimension'. What is far less clearly agreed is what 'Social Europe' means, and how it should be defended against the challenges inherent in a neoliberal approach to economic integration, the dominant logic of 'competitiveness', and the pressures for 'modernization' of social welfare. Unions' ability to resist these challenges is weakened by their integration into an elitist system of EU governance in which mobilization and contention are inhibited. The article concludes that a new mode of trade union action is required if the 'social model' is to be sustained.

Keywords: European integration, trade unions, social dimension, competitiveness, elitism

Introduction

There is a consensus among European trade unions that economic integration should be complemented by a strong 'social dimension'. If European integration merely creates a common market, its underlying principles – the free movement of goods and services, capital and labour – threaten the viability of systems of employment regulation which rest on purely national foundations. To the extent that such systems are undermined, or at least reduced in their effectiveness, a complementary framework of regulation at European level is required. To defend the 'European social model', action at European level is thus essential.

So much is largely uncontested among national trade union representatives. There is far less common ground as to the nature of a desirable European framework, and even less as to the means of its attainment.

In this article I discuss some of the ambiguities of the 'European social model', and the complex ways in which it is challenged by economic integration. I suggest that the nature of this model, and much more generally the very idea of 'Europe', is a contested terrain. It is increasingly evident that the dominant dynamic of Europeanization reflects a neoliberal logic, a logic which the official institutions of European trade unionism, through their commitment to the role of European 'social partners', have found it difficult to challenge forcefully. In the process, there has developed a dangerous gap between the enthusiastic Europeanism of the official policies of most unions, and the far more sceptical or even hostile attitudes of many of their memberships. European unions are confronted by serious strategic dilemmas, and new modes of engagement both with the EU institutions and with their own memberships are urgently required.

Industrial Relations and the 'European Social Model'

Industrial relations can be understood as the regulation of work and employment through some combination of market forces, state intervention and collective bargaining. None of these elements can be seen as independent. For example, markets are always socially constructed; laws, to be effective, must be interpreted, observed and enforced by employers and employees (and their organizations); and the status of collective agreements, and of the bargaining parties, is in most countries statutorily defined. But the relative importance of each of the three elements varies very considerably across countries. As we understand the term today, industrial relations is an invention of the era of the nation-state. Industrial relations systems in most countries emerged on a local and occupational basis, but in the twentieth century became consolidated within national institutional frameworks. Each acquired unique characteristics, reflecting nationally distinctive economic structures, political traditions and social practices.

This variation makes the idea of a common European industrial relations system rather difficult to imagine, yet alone implement (Ebbinghaus, 1999). Nevertheless, there are significant common features in continental western Europe which distinguish it from both the 'American model' of largely deregulated labour markets and the 'Japanese model' of management-dominated company employment relations, to some extent justifying the label 'European social model' (Visser, 1998: 234-5). First, in important respects 'labour is not a commodity'. There are substantial limits to the ways in which labour (power) can be bought and sold, often imposed through elaborate employment protection legislation; while 'decommodification' (Esping-Andersen, 1990) is reinforced by extensive welfare systems. Second, partly as a corollary, collective agreements usually have priority over individual employment contracts, further limiting the freedom of individual labour market actors; moreover, centralized bargaining and in some countries legal extension mechanisms result in high levels of coverage (even when union density is low). Third, there is broad social and political acceptance that labour possesses distinctive collective interests which (whether or not defined as antagonistic to those of the employer) need independent representation; from this follows the idea of labour as a 'social partner', often with a key role in shaping social policy and administering public welfare. Fourth, almost universally, there is a standardized system of workplace representation at least partially independent of management (underwritten by law or peak-level agreement, or both). The autonomy of employers is thus constrained to a degree unknown elsewhere in the world.

Because industrial relations systems are nationally embedded, economic internationalization alters the preconditions for their functioning and perhaps survival. National systems of employment regulation were constructed when national economies were relatively self-contained and national governments relatively autonomous. Trade liberalization has substantially increased the openness of markets for both goods and services; cross-national investment flows, mergers and acquisitions, and the rise of multinational companies (MNCs), have likewise externalized key influences on national economies; and the liberalization of financial markets and the intensification of speculative pressures on

individual currencies has subjected governments to new constraints. On pessimistic readings, such features of 'globalization' create inexorable pressures to eliminate labour market 'rigidities' by reducing or removing employment protection legislation and encouraging company-specific regulatory structures, and to 'modernize' welfare states by curbing in particular the taxation obligations on companies. The countries of western Europe, with their highly developed systems of labour market regulation and social protection, are particularly vulnerable to these imperatives; there is a drive to transform welfare states into workfare states, with a 'marketization' of citizenship and a re-commodification of labour (Crouch et al., 2000; Handler, 2004). And the pressures to sustain national (indeed company and workplace) competitiveness encourage unions to engage in concession bargaining, both with individual employers and with governments, a form of 'beggar-your-neighbour' behaviour from which all ultimately are losers: the outcome is a 'race to the bottom' (Gray, 1998). The conclusion is often drawn that the autonomy of national industrial relations cannot be sustained.

Others have disputed this assessment. For example, it is argued that in some respects, economic internationalization has a long history: a century ago, trade and investment were as 'globalized' as today. Hence the idea of globalization should be seen primarily as an ideological weapon, to support a political project of deregulation (Hirst and Thompson, 1996). It is often noted that some of the most open European economies (Sweden, the Netherlands) created the most generous welfare states: competitiveness does not obviously dictate low social standards. From a different perspective, it is evident that the locational decisions of MNCs reflect a complex of factors: access to markets, infrastructural advantages, political stability, availability of skilled labour; levels of wages and corporate taxation are not necessarily the most important determinants, at least in some areas of production. More generally, the notion of globalization is itself often considered misleading: economic integration is primarily regional in character (the 'Triad' of North America, East Asia and Western Europe being the main poles of integration) (Ruigrok and van Tulder, 1995).

The 'regionalization' argument connects directly with any assessment of the industrial relations consequences of economic integration within the EU. In one sense, Europe

can be seen as a particularly strong instance at continental level of ‘globalization’, involving transnational product market integration, corporate restructuring and financial liberalization – threatening the traditional basis for autonomously created national socio-economic regimes. Hence in much of continental Europe it is widely argued that Anglo-Saxon principles of ‘shareholder value’, and associated practices of labour market flexibility, are necessary concomitants of the single market (Chapon and Euzéby, 2002: 37). Some suggest that the ‘European social model’ may be unable to survive (Hodge and Howe, 1999).

But conversely, European integration can be seen as a bulwark *against* globalization. The relatively integrated European market (the EU, or the somewhat wider EEA) is sufficiently large and sufficiently self-contained to be potentially insulated from ‘global’ challenges to the ‘European social model’ of employment regulation. Even though individual national economies may be increasingly internationally open, some 90% of trade is within the boundaries of the EU itself. In other words, European economies have become Europeanized rather than globalized; there is no compelling reason why the remaining 10% of trade should dominate policy (Hoffmann, 2002). If the ‘four freedoms’ of economic activity within this space nevertheless pose a threat to many traditional safeguards for the status and standards of workers at national level; if rule-making at European level increasingly impinges on, without displacing, national regulatory systems; and if this supranational regulation remains weak and ‘negative integration’ is the norm (Scharpf, 1999), this is the result of political contingencies rather than economic imperatives.

Europe: A Contested Terrain

Underlying these political contingencies is the existence of rival visions of Europeanization. In the abstract, who can oppose the aim of transcending ancient rivalries and conflicts between nations through the construction of a common European home? Yet ‘Europe’ is an ambiguous and disputed ideal. Attali (1994: 9) cautions that ‘Europe, evidently, does not exist. It is neither a continent, nor a culture, nor a people, nor a history. It is neither defined by a single frontier nor by a common destiny or dream.’ Others identify the idea of Europe as ‘an

essentially contested concept' (Cederman, 2001: 2; Diez, 1999: 602), and an ideological resource deployed in support of particularistic interests or projects. It 'was always politics masquerading as geography that determined the definition of Europe' (Delanty, 1995: 49).

In the contemporary EU, three understandings predominate. The first, the most prosaic but almost certainly the most powerful, is that of Europe as a common market *tout court*. Whatever the broader ideals and visions of its 'founding fathers', what the Treaty of Rome established was a European *Economic* Community. If the central adjective was quietly expunged from official communiqués a quarter of a century later, this was perhaps in embarrassed recognition that the relaunch of European integration ('completing the single market') was driven above all by the neoliberal project of eliminating obstacles to free trade within what was by now the Europe of the twelve: winning popular commitment required a more positive social gloss (Boyer 2000: 26-7).

A second conception focuses on the 'politics of identity' (Laffan, 1996: 82). EU integration itself displaces symbols of national identity (not least, within the eurozone, national currencies); and political symbolism abhors a vacuum. A consequence has been an essentially artificial attempt to invent a common European identity (Kohli, 2000): artificial not only because the boundaries of Europe are unclear, but also because the continent is in reality 'a field of multiple, overlapping and sometimes even conflicting identities' (Calhoun, 2001: 52). The twelve-star flag may have become an innocent fashion accessory; but in practice, the project of creating unity out of diversity is most readily achieved in counterpoint to an alien outsider. This was the moslem world in the formative era of the European idea, the 'dark continent' in the heyday of colonialism, the soviet threat during the cold war, today those who fall outside an ethno-cultural identity of Europe as a repository of white, judaeo-christian civilization (a conception linked to the exclusionary model of Fortress Europe).

A third meaning is closely allied to the notion of 'social Europe', a central element in EU discourse from the time of the Delors presidency of the Commission but in some respects a subtext of arguments for economic integration since the creation of the original EEC: a promise of the upward standardization of outcomes across the Community. More modestly,

the EU can be regarded as a potential mechanism of ‘collective defence’ of the existing architecture of social regulation in the Member States, in the face of external pressures to dismantle workers’ rights at national level (Grahl and Teague, 1997). Such a conception is clearly unappealing to powerful actors whose vision of Europe is simply as a free trade zone. As Hay has argued (2000: 521), ‘the irony of the process of regional economic integration in Europe is that although initially conceived [*some may question this!*] as an attempt to secure the continued viability of a distinctly European “social model”, the nature of the ensuing process of economic and monetary integration may well serve to establish and institutionalize a distinctly “subversive liberalism”’.

This is reflected in the ever-increasing influence of the mantra of competitiveness. As Wedderburn (1995: 260) has demonstrated, employment regulation at European level has always owed more to a concern to ensure a ‘level playing field of competition’ for employers in different Member States, than to a concern to protect workers’ rights. More recently, policy has been driven even more forcefully by preoccupations with the *external* competitiveness of the EU. As an example one may consider the European Employment Strategy (EES), often regarded as one of European labour’s achievements. Yet even sympathetic commentators (Goetschy, 2003a; Watt, 2004) note a structural imbalance: employment policy is subordinated to macroeconomic governance which is in turn dictated by a restrictive monetary policy and a neoliberal vision of marketization.

It is not surprising, then, that two of its original four pillars (since transmuted into ‘ten commandments’) were adaptability and entrepreneurship. What do these mean in practice? The business understanding of adaptability is that labour should be disposable: it should be easy to hire and fire in order to respond rapidly to fluctuations in product demand. (Variable capital, someone once called it.) Entrepreneurship is typically identified with the self-employed and the small employer. But self-employment is commonly a form of economic dependency marked by long hours, small rewards and precariousness; and it hardly needs emphasis that small firms are not always model employers. Trade union representation and (in countries where these are legally prescribed) functioning works councils are usually

absent, and nationally defined statutory employment rights may have little if any purchase. Demands for ‘administrative simplification’ in the interests of entrepreneurship may weaken workers’ rights even further. (We might add that a third pillar of the original EES, employability, encapsulates an exclusively supply-side understanding of unemployment and casts the unemployed as scapegoats for their own predicament.)

Hence any serious pressure to defend and extend ‘social Europe’ contradicts a dominant logic of actually existing European integration. As Scharpf (1999) has argued, the preferred mode of Europeanization has been ‘negative integration’, the elimination of national regulations which constitute obstacles to free movement. This deregulatory bias is not conducive to the construction of a new framework of positive law at European level. Negative integration reflects the priority of economic over social and political integration: a common market can be understood primarily in terms of freedom *from* regulations which inhibit cross-national exchange, whereas the creation of a social community depends on *rights* which are entrenched in new regulatory institutions. There is a ‘constitutional asymmetry’ expressed in a ‘selective Europeanization of policy functions’ (Scharpf, 2002: 647).

Not surprisingly, as Schmitter and Bauer (2001: 55) laconically comment, the EU ‘has made only fitful and erratic progress in defining its *social* citizenship’. The Treaty of Rome established Community competence primarily in market terms; the Single European Act was most mandatory and specific in the field of market-making (with the formalization of qualified majority voting primarily directed to this end); the Maastricht Treaty, though celebrated by the trade union movement for its social chapter, was most binding in outcome in respect of the notorious convergence criteria for economic and monetary union (EMU); the Stability and Growth Pact of 1999 reinforced the commitment to budgetary restraint; and the new EU constitution reaffirms neoliberal economic imperatives in unambiguous terms while giving far more diffuse approval to social goals. Thus ‘discourses on “social Europe” have so far failed to be translated in any significant way into concrete norms governing the daily life of citizens in matters of work, health, housing, retirement’ (Bourdieu, 2003: 53).

In the uphill struggle for a meaningful social Europe, trade unions confront not only the gravitational pull of the existing constitutional framework, but also the force of weighty opponents. There is the familiar imbalance within the institutions of the EU itself: the Parliament, the most ‘popular’ (directly elected) element in the decision-making architecture, and the most reliable supporter of an effective social dimension to European integration, is also the most limited in its powers. The Commission, while dependent for its own status on the extent of EU regulatory capacity, is at best an ambiguous ally. While the Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs (DG EMPL) may be sympathetic to many trade union aspirations for social regulation, its own influence is subordinate to that of the many others with a primarily market-making mission. Note that in recent years, DG EMPL has always been assigned a Commissioner from a ‘peripheral’ country, after the more influential briefs have been carved up amongst the heavyweights. Within the Prodi Commission, Commissioner Bolkestein – responsible for the internal market – pursued a fervently neoliberal agenda, including pressing the notorious directive on the liberalization of services (Laux, 2004). All the indications are that the new Barroso Commission will be even more dominated by free market fanatics.

To these biases is of course added the imbalance of influence between labour and capital. This is not simply a matter of organizational resources. In many respects, the ETUC is organizationally more robust than UNICE, though we should not forget the ranks of lobbyists and representatives retained in Brussels by individual companies and national associations, vastly outnumbering the European officials of national trade unions. Former DGB president Heinz Oskar Vetter, subsequently MEP, described the blocking of the Vredeling directive in the early 1980s as evidence of ‘the gentle air of a banana republic’ (1983: 213). Far more than veto power is exercised by the European Round Table of Industrialists: the single market project of the 1980s, and the more general commitment to liberalization of European societies, was largely the outcome of its strategic initiative ((Balanyá et al., 2003; van Apeldoorn, 2000). But the issue is also structural: employers and industrialists work with the grain of entrenched EU policy, while trade unions (if they are serious about ‘social Europe’)

seek a major change of course. In such a context, veto power is typically more effective as well as more discreet. Recall the argument of Offe and Wiesenthal (1985: 191-3) concerning the 'structural asymmetry' of capital and labour in their relationship with the state: since governments are dependent on the investment decisions of a multiplicity of individual firms, capital exerts political pressure without the need to mobilize collectively. The normal economic rationality of company decision-makers has a political significance which may not even be intended. Against this background, the relative organizational weakness of UNICE may constitute a strength for capital: even if its professional representatives were inclined to compromise on principles which some employers consider sacrosanct, it lacks the capacity to commit those it supposedly represents.

Not surprisingly, then, there is a strong tendency within the EU to adopt 'symbolic politics' (Streeck, 1998: 447). At national level, employment regulation typically takes the form either of collective agreements between unions and employers (in many countries, with binding status) or of legislation, the two commonly operating in conjunction. In the EU, the analogue to national collective bargaining is the social dialogue, only exceptionally resulting in anything more than 'joint opinions', with the number of agreements reached under the Maastricht social partners' route still minimal; while the analogue to national legislation is the directive, an instrument which is always slow (that on European Works Councils was first proposed in 1980), and rarely does more than codify existing practice in the great majority of member states. Over and above this, there has been a marked shift in recent years away from regulation by directive to 'softer' methods.

Constitutionally, the possibility of the type of regulation familiar at national level is obstructed by the fact that the EU lacks a government in the normal sense of the term. For this reason it has become common to use the alternative notion of 'governance': which means, if I understand correctly, the *process* of control and regulation. Bulmer (1998: 366) has argued that 'governance... has particular value in examining the pattern of rule in the EU. The EU does not resemble, or have, a government, so governance offers some descriptive purchase on the character of the polity.' To counterpose governance to government is to indicate the

uncertainty of agency: who does what, and with which, and to whom? As Jachtenfuchs has suggested (2001: 258), ‘the governance approach... has a strong bias towards effective and efficient problem-solving and almost completely ignores questions of political power’ (hence, one must add, fails to consider who has the power to define what are problems and what are efficient solutions). Again, in pessimistic mode it can be argued that the ‘external coercive laws’ of the European market impose a set of outcomes which governance can merely ratify: obstacles to competitiveness are the overriding problem. More optimistically, however, some suggest that the dynamic can be channelled as a means at least of damage limitation; governance can provide a ‘steering’ of market forces.

Current analysis of EU governance has developed a repertoire of concepts such as soft law, thin policy integration and flexible regulation. The notion of ‘steering’ seems to imply a looser, less visible mode of control than is customary in economic regulation by national governments. But is it possible to steer a tiger? Also popular is the concept of multi-level governance (Marks et al., 1996). It denotes the extent to which the locus of policy determination in the EU is diffuse: ‘EU public policy-making is non-hierarchical, heavily bargained and fragmented in different institutional settings’ (Laffan, 1998: 242). Most recently, the EES has given us the principle of the open method of coordination (OMC), celebrated as an alternative to hard law regulating European labour markets – which would almost undoubtedly be politically unattainable. Yet is ‘openness’ – the involvement in the EES of a wide array of interests and actors – actually at the expense of coordination? A sceptical view would be that it underpins a form of neo-voluntarism, that in the absence of enforceable norms it assures the primacy of market dynamics over social protection.

Once more, very different readings of this phenomenon are possible. Viewed negatively, the fragmentation of regulation favours non-decision-making, underwriting multiple bases of veto power and offering wide-ranging scope for economic actors to escape the regulatory net. Thus ‘policies promoted through the open method of co-ordination must avoid all challenges to the *acquis* of the internal market and monetary union’ (Scharpf, 2002: 655). In a more positive scenario, it can serve to inhibit member states from pursuing

‘individualist approaches conducive to social dumping [and] to follow an aggressive deregulatory policy’ (Pochet, 2003: 99). Viewed even more positively, it provides a framework for new types of regulatory initiative: ‘new strategic alliances and loose neocorporatist arrangements’ emerge that can exploit ‘the fact that global capital is still organizationally and environmentally dependent on local political, economic and social contexts’ (Martínez Lucio and Weston, 2000: 205). Here too the question arises: who participates in such strategic alliances, and around what type of agenda? I pursue these questions in a later section; but first I turn to the specific engagement of European trade unions in this process.

Unions and Europe: A ‘Conversion Experience’?

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which in 2003 celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, has achieved a remarkably comprehensive representative status. It is also one of the most reliable interlocutors of the Commission, and one of the most enthusiastic supporters of more extensive European integration.

Attitudes of national trade unions have been more differentiated. Confronted with the tension between a process of European integration which seems in principle desirable, and the potential threats from economic integration to national industrial relations practices, four broad categories of response might be identified. The most negative could be termed ‘no, because’: for example, the French CGT long opposed actually existing Europeanization as a conspiracy driven by multinational capital to undermine workers’ protections. A more nuanced position could be termed ‘no, unless’: the position of opposition groups within many trade union movements, particularly in the Nordic countries. This shades into what might be termed the ‘yes, if’ stance: for example, the Austrian ÖGB in 1988 endorsed accession to the EU on nine specified conditions. More positively, many trade unions have embraced a ‘yes, and’ posture: their support for integration is virtually unconditional, but they articulate a ‘wish list’ of desired accompaniments to Europeanization.

Over time, most European union movements have moved from the former end of the spectrum to the latter: it is possible to discern a ‘conversion experience’ (Martin and Ross, 1999: 35) through which even sceptical organizations have changed position. As I have argued elsewhere (Hyman, 2003), this conversion owes much to the exhaustion of the old ideologies (communist, christian, or social-democratic) which once provided a vision and utopia for trade union movements: ‘Europe’ represents a new moral inspiration. But there are also pragmatic reasons. Marks and Wilson (2000), in a study of party-political attitudes to European integration, offer a rational-choice interpretation of differences and trends. Their analysis of social-democratic parties suggests that those with limited strength and effectiveness at national level have tended to regard European integration positively; while those with a greater power to shape national policy have resisted the idea of subordinating national decision-making capacity to an (almost certainly more conservative) European regime. But once locked into the European framework, such parties were likely to favour more elaborated integration which could facilitate a greater EU competence for social and macroeconomic governance. This interpretation of a dynamic of policy shift was anticipated in some detail in an earlier study by Haahr (1992, 1993) of the changing official positions of Danish social democracy and British Labour.

Marks and Wilson provide a valuable, though insufficient explanatory framework. First, it neglects the *interactive* character of politics: parties adopt stances at least in part either to distance themselves from, or to capture the same ground as, their antagonists. Second, as Featherstone (1988: 317-8) has indicated, the pragmatics of parties *in government* can encourage a political logic whereby other interlocutors (national business elites, international financial institutions, foreign governments) prove influential: perhaps more so than their own members or their domestic electorate. Thus, for example, in Britain in the 1970s (despite sharp internal divisions) the Labour government embraced a far more accommodating stance towards continued European Community membership than did many of its influential constituents. In the Nordic countries, the preoccupations of macroeconomic management likewise seem to have inclined social-democratic leaderships in government to

favour EU accession. In any event, how far does the logic proposed by Marks and Wilson relate to trade unions?

To a degree, certainly, the same propositions apply. Probably the most detailed study – of both party and union policies towards European integration – is the comparison by Geyer of the British and Norwegian labour movements. He argues that international sensitivities pushed their leaderships towards support for European integration despite rank-and-file scepticism or hostility. In the 1994 Norwegian referendum (which in many respects replicated that of 1972), ‘despite strong support from the trade union leadership, at the grass root level the majority of trade union members remained opposed to membership’ (1997: 2). In line with Marks and Wilson, he suggests (1997: 5) that the strength of Norwegian social democracy made EU membership relatively unattractive to labour. Conversely, the effect of the Thatcher onslaught in the 1980s was to enhance the attractions of Brussels for British unions. Geyer also notes that in Britain, embracing European integration appealed to the ‘modernizers’ who from the 1980s were in the ascendancy within the Labour Party; in Norway ‘social democratic traditionalism’ was more strongly rooted (1997: 7). One may note here that the British party leadership began to moderate its anti-EC posture after the disastrous electoral defeat of May 1983; the TUC shifted its official position only with Delors’ watershed speech to Congress in 1998. There is by now a significant literature on British labour’s ‘conversion’ to Europe, though in some respects the explanations differ (Daniels, 1998; Geyer, 1997: 161-5; MacShane, 1991; Rosamond, 1993; Teague, 1989). As so often in the recent history of the TUC, policy shifts long bitterly contested were ultimately embraced with minimal debate. In Norway, by contrast, attitudes within LO remained finely divided (Geyer, 1997: 60-9). Certainly within more recent British controversy over the single currency, trade union positions seem to have owed far more to pragmatism than to traditional ideological orientations (Mulhearn, 2004). In the words of the former secretary of the TGWU (Morris, 1998: 182), ‘the real criteria against which all claims need to be tested is jobs. So the EMU debate needs to be sober and balanced.’

Another comparative study focuses on Finland and Sweden. While Geyer's interpretative approach is primarily material – the capacity of labour movements to regulate labour markets and welfare systems at purely national level – the emphasis of Johansson and Raunio (2001) is for the most part on ideological factors. They identify seven determinants of European policy positions: basic political ideology, public opinion, nature of internal factionalism, strength of leadership influence, importance of inter-party rivalry on European issues, engagement with cognate parties (and by analogy, trade unions?) in other European countries, and the process of European integration itself. Only the last theme connects with the perspective of Marks and Wilson (though unlike the latter, Johansson and Raunio do take account of dynamic shifts in EU regulatory capacity). A simple statistical contrast in their account is that the slightly greater referendum majority for EU accession in Finland than in Sweden was linked to a sharp contrast in support among social-democrat voters: 3:1 in the former, 50:50 in the latter; the Left Party in Sweden was also more strongly opposed than its Finnish counterpart. Unfortunately Johansson and Raunio say little concerning trade union involvement in these events (nor do they stress the degree to which, in Finland, EU membership was seen as a protection against a possible reassertion of the Russian embrace). Their neglect of the trade union role is mirrored in Christensen's comparative study of left parties (1996). Haahr, in his comparison (1992, 1993) of British Labour and Danish social democracy, gives some attention to the position of LO, but the discussion is only marginal; and while he notes in passing the specific attitudes of individual unions (SiD and *Metall* hostile on several occasions, NNF in support of the Single European Act), no explanation of such differences is proposed. In Sweden, it is interesting that LO appears to have supported accession earlier than the social-democratic party (Misgeld, 1997). One may also note that Rudolf Meidner, progenitor of the 'Swedish model' of industrial relations, was an ardent campaigner against EU membership.

In southern Europe, trade unions – except when subordinated to the political priorities of communist parties – have tended towards the 'yes, if' or 'yes, and' positions. Often, EU integration has been perceived as a form of 'modernization' linked to the definitive escape

from a tradition of dictatorship and authoritarianism. In Spain, for example, both main confederations viewed EU accession positively, and support by the (ex-)communist CC.OO. was reinforced after its admission to the ETUC in 1991 (Magone, 2001: 230). In Portugal, while the social-democratic UGT was always pro-European, the communist CGTP-In shifted from its 'dogmatic anti-European policy approach' as the precondition for ETUC membership in 1994 (Magone, 2001:169). In Italy, interestingly, all main confederations have long been supporters of European integration, and more recently have endorsed the 'widely shared determination of virtually all elites' to join the euro despite the concomitant requirements of wage restraint and welfare retrenchment (Crouch, 1999: 453).

Dølvik (1997: 29) has proposed that 'the incentives for trade unions to engage in Europeanisation... are influenced by interplay between the particular structure of opportunities related to the social dimension and the structural bias of the broader trajectory of European integration'. Structures of opportunity should be broadly understood. At one end of the historical trajectory, this helps explain why the German DGB supported European integration at a stage when the SPD remained opposed. The founding of the European Coal and Steel Community provided an agency with the capacity to regulate the economic environment of the two largest DGB affiliates, and trade unionists were appointed members of the ECSC High Authority. At the other extreme of historical development, the Austrian ÖGB was perhaps reinforced in its support for EU membership by the government's provision of a strong role in the accession negotiations (Falkner, 1999) – though domestic concerns have certainly entailed a critical orientation to eastern enlargement (Meardi, 2002). The French CGT overturned its long-standing ideological opposition to European integration as its isolation came to seem increasingly a recipe for impotence – though the shift can also be seen as an expression of the strongly contested victory of 'modernizers' over 'traditionalists' within the PCF. A possible inference from the diversity of national experience is that analysis must accept the need for 'contextualized comparisons' which are sensitive to the ways in which traditional identities have shaped distinctive 'sticking points' in different countries (Locke and Thelen, 1995).

The Fatal Attraction of the Elitist Embrace

For Rosa Luxemburg, famously, the work of trade unions at national level was ‘a sort of labour of Sisyphus, which is nevertheless indispensable’. Even more is this the case at international level; and within the EU, defending workers’ interests is an uphill struggle for reasons many of which have already been indicated. But indeed, this does not make engagement pointless. What can be achieved, and how, remains far more uncertain and contested, and involves major strategic dilemmas.

A few years ago, Ramsay (1997: 528) wrote that ‘ETUC efforts are focused almost entirely in the EU lobby circuit’. Is this true, and does it matter? No doubt it can be argued that the ETUC has always played an important information and coordination role, has attempted to transform the diverse and at times conflicting aims of its affiliates into a coherent policy agenda, and has even organized the occasional mass demonstration in support of these objectives. Nevertheless, it remains the case that its limited resources are substantially concentrated on engagement with the Brussels institutions: a priority which generated debate at its 2003 Prague Congress. Is this a problem?

The answer is that, with too one-sided an engagement with the Brussels machine, unions can succumb to an elitist embrace. Dølvik (1997), in his detailed insider study of the ETUC, distinguishes between a ‘logic of membership’ and a ‘logic of influence’. The former requires unions to maintain their representative credentials by articulating the wishes and interests of their constituents. The latter requires them to adapt their aims and methods to the actual decision-making processes on which they wish to exert an impact. Balancing the two logics is a difficult art: neglect the logic of influence and one’s demands are ineffectual; neglect the logic of membership and one loses representative legitimacy. The Brussels embrace can all too easily achieve the second outcome. ‘The seductive appeal of the social partnership rhetoric has been instrumental in bolstering legitimacy and support around union

claims for recognition and influence in the EU polity,' but with the risk 'that the ETUC representatives might become co-opted by the EU institutions' (Dølvik and Visser, 2001: 32).

The decision-making process within the EU is often termed 'comitology': initiatives are formulated, analysed, revised, debated, further amended and reformulated, within an elaborate network of interacting committees, until an outcome emerges (or fails to emerge). This process has a strong technocratic bias: the focus of argument is diverted from principle to detail. One could say that this takes the politics out of policy: as Goetschy comments, in an overall favourable assessment of the OMC (2003b: 32), 'a relative "depoliticization" of decision-making and the reliance of the OMC on expert networks and procedural routine does not facilitate public political debate'. Likewise, de la Porte and Pochet, also generally positive in their assessment, note (2003: 34) that the involvement of the 'social partners' in the policy process is intended to counteract the EU's democratic deficit but fails to do so because those involved 'operate through unknown mechanisms behind closed doors'.

The outcome of comitology is reminiscent of what, at the British TUC, is known as the composite resolution. Different member unions submit conflicting proposals on a contentious policy issue, but are then pressed to agree through backroom negotiation a form of words which somehow embraces the opposing viewpoints. In this way, potentially embarrassing disputation is removed from the public arena. The outcome of Brussels comitology seems similar. For example, take the EES: a political compromise, and as such an attempt to achieve the unity of opposites. From the Delors white paper through Essen, Amsterdam, Luxembourg and all subsequent elaborations, the underlying message seems to have been that the prescriptions of Keynesianism and monetarism, of social regulation and of deregulation, can somehow be harmonized through a technocratic fix which transcends hard political choices. The Lisbon European Council in March 2000 famously declared that 'the Union has today set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. Again, can all these desirable goals be achieved simultaneously; and if not, who decides the priorities? In the

evolution of policy since Lisbon, the goal of ‘better jobs’ has been transformed into the slogan of quality, which has in turn been redefined primarily in terms of productivity. Competitiveness links directly to the ‘adaptability’ pillar of the EES, with its synonym flexibility. Do such attempts to square the circle risk abandoning the ‘European social model’ by stealth, through the erosion of the social protections which unions achieved with such difficulty over many decades? There is no cause to fear, for flexibility can be reconciled with security: comitology has even given us a new term, ‘flexicurity’ (Wilthagen and Tros, 2004), a composite resolution in a single word!

The ETUC is sucked into this process in part because of material constraints: as Martin and Ross (2001) put it, it depends on ‘borrowed resources’. ‘Because national union movements in Europe were reluctant to allocate resources and to grant it significant opportunities to acquire capacities on its own, the ETUC had to seek its building materials elsewhere, from friendly, but self-interested, European institutional elites’ (2001: 54). Gobin (1997 and 2004) has charted in detail how this material dependence has constrained the ETUC’s agenda and made comitology the line of least resistance. She also shows (2000: 169) how the discourse of competitiveness and flexibility has come to frame its own pronouncements. Yet as the Canadian Auto Workers declared two decades ago: ‘competitiveness is a constraint, but it is not our goal’ (quoted in Panitch, 2000: 374).

There is a subtle but insidious interaction between discourse, ideology and practice. European integration is an ‘elite project’ (Dunkerley and Fudge, 2004: 239), and all who are familiar with the Brussels process – whether as participants or as observers – have come to talk a strange language. We speak easily of horizontal objectives and open methods, of the social partners’ route and co-decision, of macroeconomic dialogue and transposition. We can master a whole lexicon of acronyms. Unlike most normal people, when we refer to Barcelona, Stockholm or Nice we do not think of them as tourist destinations. Welcome to the world of Eurospeak! European integration has generated an organizing discourse which – presumably unintentionally – most effectively distances professional Europeans from the citizenry of European states. There is ‘a multitude of common understandings, inter-institutional

agreements and informal modes of behaviour which are reproduced every day in the political and administrative practice of the EU'; and 'a lobbying community has produced an entire political class that shares the language' (Christiansen et al., 1999: 539, 541). To the extent that Eurospeak has become the working language of the ETUC (and national union representatives active within its structures), their logic of membership is undermined by the fact that they speak a different language from those they seek to represent. Not only different, but actually opposed: 'analysis of the official statements of the ETUC clearly shows a gradual integration of the employers' vocabulary and, increasingly, a vocabulary produced by the administrative apparatus of the Commission, at the expense of a vocabulary expressing traditional trade union demands' (Gobin, 1997: 116).

The consequence of the elite embrace is a suppression of both political alternatives and mobilization capacity. Political alternatives are suppressed because, in effect, European unions lack the nerve to say no, which in turn dilutes the logic of influence. Take two of the biggest issues of economic integration. The 'social dimension' was invented by Delors to provide a 'human face' to the completion of the single market, and to turn the trade union movements of Europe from potential opponents into reliable allies. This offered the opportunity for significant influence, if and only if the unions had been prepared to reject the Single European Act unless it gave labour social rights which matched the economic benefits for capital. Likewise with EMU: 'despite judging the design of EMU as fundamentally flawed, the ETUC continued to back it, arguing that it was needed politically to keep integration going' (Martin and Ross, 1999: 349; 2001: 72). Yet if the Maastricht convergence criteria were the price for the single currency, it was a Faustian bargain. Unions are 'expected to support those integration projects, which further undermine social regulation in Europe' but 'lack the autonomous power to counteract the market-dominated form of integration' (Schulten, 2003: 113).

Having assented to the underlying architecture of actually existing Europeanization, unions' capacity to mobilize around an alternative vision of social Europe has been severely reduced. In consequence, it is left to other political forces to campaign uninhibitedly against

the current bias of European integration as an elitist project which brings unemployment, labour market deregulation and the erosion of social protection. Trade unions are ill placed to offer a powerful political antidote to the poison of ultra-nationalism and xenophobia. Indeed the ‘trade unionists in suit and tie’ (Lefébure and Lagneau, 2002) may appear to ordinary employees as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Is there an Alternative: Can Unions Re-invent Social Europe?

How might Europe’s trade unions escape the elitist embrace and pursue a model of integration which protects and enhances workers’ rights? Perhaps we should start by asking how, in the past, workers’ protections were gained at national level. First, they were typically the outcome of *contention*: trade unions and other advocates of reform asserted a claim for rights which contradicted the orthodoxy of the time. Recall Marx on the Ten Hours’ Act in Britain: ‘this struggle about the legal restriction of the hours of labour... told indeed upon the great contest between the blind rule of the supply and demand rules which form the political economy of the middle class, and social production controlled by social foresight, which forms the political economy of the working class’. Advances were won because labour movements challenged the seeming ‘naturalness’ of the market society which had been imposed at such human cost, and insisted that a different society was possible. Second, new rights were normally won only when workers’ organizations were able to *mobilize, campaign* and *protest* in support of their own alternative agenda. To the force of argument was added the argument of force: the relatively weak discovered that only through mass action, if necessary disruptive, could they redress the balance and create what Tarrow (1998) has called ‘power in movement’.

Both aspects of historical experience are relevant today. Imig and Tarrow (2001: 8) have argued ‘that Europe’s authorities not only tolerate but encourage the expression of claims through lobbying and other routine forms and that this has a containing effect on more contentious forms of collective action’. European labour needs to break out of this cage. I am reminded of the sombre comment of Panitch and Gindin (1999: 5), that ‘every progressive

social movement must, sooner or later, confront the inescapable fact that capitalism cripples our capacities, stunts our dreams, and incorporates our politics'. If 'competitiveness' is accepted as an ineluctable objective imperative, the only response can be to embrace its fundamental capitalist logic. The result is a series of desperate and mutually self-defeating efforts by local and national union representatives to find local and national solutions – in partnership with 'their' managements and governments – to a global crisis. Solidarity becomes redefined as its opposite, what Streeck (2001) terms 'competitive solidarity'. The ETUC, with its policy of bargaining coordination, has attempted to moderate the pace of retreat, but without any real conception of a different strategic direction. Working for marginal adaptations to the dominant orthodoxy of actually existing Europeanization is the line of least resistance, the new realism and practicality of a trade unionism which has lost its former utopian inspiration.

There is indeed a coercive economic reality to globalization, but it is to an important extent politically created and ideologically reinforced. 'To the extent that functional imperatives related to globalization do exist, they are mediated by nation-specific structures and politics. Policy outcomes are thus primarily influenced by domestic political conflict' (Alber and Standing, 2000: 112). Thus Foster and Scott argue (2003: 705) that despite strong pressure for 'radical dismantling of the European welfare state', a pressure certainly reinforced by the dominant logic of EU integration, what has actually occurred has been more complex and nationally variable. Neoliberal macroeconomic policy is not the 'one best way' (and may indeed be the one worst way) to competitiveness (Amable, 2003: ch. 6; Boyer, 2004). This creates the potential for new forms of intervention by labour movements.

Dølvik and Visser insist (2001: 39) that 'even as a junior partner in European social partnership capitalism, itself a bleak variant of Rhineland capitalism without the underpinnings of sectoral bargaining and societal participation in corporate governance, the unions did condition European events during the 1990s more than in the 1970s and 1980s'. Such 'conditioning', one might however add, has been largely a defensive process of damage limitation. Yet is there space for a more positive and proactive redefinition of 'social

Europe’? This would require strategies of mobilization and contention, a clear conception of potential allies and predictable opponents, and – if trade union ambitions are to be genuinely European – new understandings of internationalism.

Eight decades ago, one of the leading figures in international trade unionism, Edo Fimmen, insisted that the process of economic integration across national boundaries required a corresponding extension of regulation. ‘One of the most notable of the economic phenomena of the post-war epoch in Europe is the vigorous concentration of capital’ (1924: 15). Employers, he added wryly, ‘do not hold congresses; they do not pass pious resolutions about international class solidarity. Nevertheless, they think and act internationally.’ By contrast, ‘the workers have international organisations; hold international congresses; pass numerous and high-sounding resolutions. None the less, they continue to restrict their activities to the national arenas.’ National unions, he added, were ‘terribly alarmed’ lest the international organizations which they themselves had created should interfere in their national affairs (1924: 104).

These arguments sound uncannily familiar. The principle of subsidiarity is the implicit presupposition of trade union action today – even though it is one which unions criticize when it drives, or restricts, the politics of the EU. All too often, official trade union practice seems implicitly to accept that internationalism is an elite concern, that it is safer if the membership does not learn too much of policies which they might perhaps oppose. In some unions, certainly, international issues are given reasonable prominence in internal communications and education; I fear that this is far from typical, though openness may be increasing as unions struggle to find a response to ‘globalization’. In any event, since effective international solidarity is impossible without a ‘willingness to act’ on the part of grassroots trade unionists, it is unattainable without an active strategy by union leaders and activists to enhance knowledge, understanding and identification of common interests cross-nationally. This means engaging in what might be termed an ‘internal social dialogue’ (Hyman, 2001: 174). The external social dialogue, introduced by the Delors Commission in the 1980s, has been described as a mechanism ‘for teaching union leaders gradually to accept

in part the employers' neoliberal positions' (Gobin, 1997: 116). The internal social dialogue, by contrast, must be an open-ended method of shaping unions' own goals and methods, in which leaders and officials certainly offer strategic direction but in which members themselves contribute to shaping policies which they understand and own – and on behalf of which they are prepared to act collectively.

An old principle of trade unionism, in Britain at least, is 'know your enemy'. To some advocates of social partnership, this slogan is today ridiculously old-fashioned. Yet how much partnership is really possible with advocates of ever more liberal product markets and ever less regulated labour markets? The area of potential agreement with employers at European level, or with the majority of Commission representatives, is narrow indeed – unless trade unionists, in pursuit of agreement at any price, surrender their own principles.

One reason for pursuing compromise almost irrespective of content is that union representatives recognise their own weakness. Across Europe, unions have lost membership and public status. In their interactions with the powerful, unions acting alone have diminished negotiating power. Yet rather than accepting the inevitability of concession bargaining, an alternative option is to seek to mobilize support from the relatively weak (which was indeed how unions in the main originated). It is significant that, in Europe and in the world more generally, what were once known as 'new social movements' – though by now many have become middle-aged and institutionalized – have been able to engage effectively in forms of 'contentious politics' (Tarrow, 1998) which most trade union leaders until very recently considered signs of immaturity. Among trade unions, there is increasing acceptance of the need to seek alliances with other collective agencies once viewed with distrust and disdain (Munck, 2002).

This does not mean that trade unions should become NGOs (except to the extent that outside dictatorial regimes they surely are, and have to be, 'non-governmental organizations'); nor that they should subordinate themselves to NGOs. Unions have a distinctive constituency, agenda and terrain of action, they have a democratic rationale which not all NGOs possess, and they have the organizational capacity for long-term strategy which

most NGOs lack. Nevertheless, there is much that unions can learn from the imagination and spontaneity of NGOs, their capacity to engage the commitment and enthusiasm of a generation which in most European countries has failed to respond to the appeals of trade unionism.

One source of the appeal of the ‘new social movements’ is that they offer a vision of a different future, a new understanding of the labour movement’s traditional values of solidarity (Zoll, 2000). The challenge for trade unions is to recapture their role as ‘sword of justice’ by constructing a vision of a different Europe – what Bourdieu (2003: 62) calls a ‘rational utopia... which ... could provide the trade unions with the mass base of grassroots activists they currently lack’. But this would entail abandoning the ‘composite resolution’ and openly confronting fundamental policy choices in a manner which is both heterodox and contentious. There are some indications that such a strategic shift would indeed possess a mobilizing capacity able to reconnect the logics of membership and of influence: for example, Hooghe (2003: 296) concludes from her assessment of survey evidence that popular attitudes are more nuanced than a simple notion of Euroscepticism implies. While ‘elites desire a European Union capable of governing a large, competitive market’, ‘citizens are more in favor of a caring European Union, which protects them from the vagaries of capitalist markets’. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, trade unions articulated what Thompson (1971: 78) called a ‘moral economy of the poor’, insisting that markets should serve humanity, humans should not be slaves to market forces. There have been recent signs that the ETUC ‘is tentatively moving’ towards a reassertion of this moral economy through the type of contentious politics typical of a social movement (Taylor and Mathers, 2004), and since the election of a new leadership team in 2003 the tone of its official pronouncements has become more critical; but there are few signs that it is willing to escape the elitist embrace. Trade union Europeanization remains deeply ambivalent and ambiguous.

Conclusion: Trade Unions and The Dilemmas of ‘Social Europe’

There is a tense and threatening relationship between work, employment, citizenship, European integration, 'globalization' and trade unionism. The 'European social model' represents principles which to an important extent vary cross-nationally, sometimes substantially, but as suggested earlier, nevertheless reflect a common core. Most fundamentally, employment is not simply an economic contract but a relationship which embodies reciprocal rights and obligations and hence cannot be terminated at will. Workers possess collective interests which can legitimately be expressed in organized form, and can expect employers and governments to engage constructively with their representatives. The state has the right and duty to defend the principle of collective representation, to underwrite minimum standards of employment conditions where these are not codified voluntarily, and to extend 'decommodification' by managing a system of welfare provision.

These are important values. Nevertheless, they are certainly not unproblematic. First, welfare states were created as elements in more general national systems of organized capitalism. In important respects they were key components of different types of 'historic compromise' between the entrepreneurial ambitions of the newly consolidated employing class on the one hand, and on the other *either* the defenders of pre-capitalist conceptions of social rights and obligations (notably the catholic church), *or* the demands of the rising labour movement (or in some cases, both). This accommodation was enabled by a competitive regime within which employers were willing (not usually enthusiastically, indeed) to share the costs of social solidarity, partly because governments could 'take social and labor standards "out of competition"' (Streeck, 2001: 22). This willingness has evaporated in the new regime of international competition.

Second, most welfare states were primarily mechanisms for the redistribution of resources and life-chances within rather than between classes; and were rooted in a typical life-cycle when the employee spent far longer working (and hence contributing to the costs of welfare) than in deriving benefits. Extended education, earlier retirement, and above all increased longevity, have shifted the balance radically (Korpi, 2001; Palme, 2001). Such

trends posed important challenges even before the tightening constraints in public finances which EMU has now institutionalized.

Third, the progressive character of welfare states was normally bounded. In most cases they rested on the model of the 'male breadwinner', reinforcing a sexual division of labour and a culture of female dependency (Korpi, 2001; Lewis, 1992). More generally they tended to demarcate 'insiders' from 'outsiders', a problem increasingly recognized in recent years with growing emphasis on issues of social exclusion.

It is against this complex pattern of challenges that the need for 'modernization' of social protection has become part of the conventional wisdom. The dominant understanding is threefold. Perhaps the overriding priority, though not always admitted as such, is cost-cutting: governments must spend less on welfare. Second, in part as a corollary, welfare should be privatized: by restricting the range of publicly financed provision, by imposing or increasing charges for services, and by shifting from tax-based to insurance systems. Third, 'supply-side' considerations should increasingly shape welfare: provision should be targeted towards enhancing national competitiveness and productivity, hence 'political capacities are deployed to improve and equalize the marketability of individuals and their ability to compete, instead of protecting them from the market' (Streeck, 2001: 26).

How might trade unions respond? The typical reflex is to reassert the need to protect 'social Europe' (Mückenberger, 2001). Yet this primarily defensive reaction coexists with the recognition of an imperative for European unions 'to radically overhaul their policies and structures. Only on this basis will they be able to fulfil their classic role – *ensuring social cohesion and justice* – and uphold their cultural values – *solidarity and equal opportunities*' (Hoffmann, 2000: 627). This more nuanced conclusion, however, raises both strategic and tactical dilemmas.

Strategically, the 'modernization' of the welfare state cuts to the heart of the meaning of 'social Europe'. Who is to be protected, and how? What type of social order is a common objective of the diverse constituents of European trade unionism? What concessions to the economic *Realpolitik* of European integration are unavoidable, what can appropriately be

contested? And where contestation is indeed appropriate, how far, and how, can it be coordinated transnationally?

Tactically, the key questions concern the modalities of ‘political exchange’ involved in any process of ‘modernization’. At national level, across western Europe, unions have more often attempted to negotiate the dilution and at times dismemberment of established welfare systems, in the hope of blunting the most radical aspects of demolition, rather than mounting determined opposition, let alone mobilizing in support of an alternative vision of citizenship. In part this is because, in so many countries, unions are locked into the administration of the actually existing welfare regime and can sustain their traditional organizational advantages through a consensual approach to ‘modernization’ (Crouch, 1999). The organizational benefits which labour movements derive from national welfare arrangements help explain the fact – which Streeck (2001: 25) finds remarkable – that most unions are committed to their ‘familiar and predictable national institutions’ rather than envisaging a new, more homogeneous European welfare regime.

In an important sense, then, there is a triple obstacle to strategic union intervention at European level in pursuit of a new, stronger and more equitable system of social protection. First, most union conceptions of social Europe are defensive rather than proactive. Second, rhetorical commitments to Europeanization fail to override unions’ own ideals of subsidiarity. And third, the institutionalization of supranational action discussed earlier – matching that involved in social pacts at national level, though perhaps yielding fewer organizational benefits – ensures that a vigorous struggle in support of a distinctive agenda is virtually precluded.

Could a more resilient and more progressive version of social Europe be envisaged, and how might it be pursued? Here it is useful to revisit the familiar distinction between two dimensions of trade unions: as movement and organization (Herberg, 1968), as ‘sword of justice’ and ‘vested interest’ (Flanders, 1970), as bearers of ‘moral’ and ‘pragmatic’ legitimacy (Chaison and Bigelow, 2002). Almost universally, unions emerged as social movements which challenged key principles of the prevailing social and economic order,

depending for their effectiveness on their ability to persuade, first their own constituents but also the broader community, of the legitimacy of their vision and their objectives. With time, however, unions became increasingly dependent for their survival on institutionalized internal routines and formalized external relationships with employers and governments. As Gramsci noted (1977), this constituted an 'industrial legality' which could bring organizational (and material) advantages yet could weaken the organic, ideational resonance with those whose aspirations unions sought to voice.

Unions' engagement with the EU has largely abdicated contentious politics in favour of industrial legality. Such an outcome, as has been seen, has been systematically cultivated by the Commission. One may note that this domestication of contention has been extended beyond trade unions to other representatives of 'civil society' through the 'civil dialogue' launched in 1994; the White Paper on European Governance (EC, 2001) can be viewed as in part a project to gain the EU some of the legitimacy of popular social movements drawn into 'partnership', while diminishing the latter's spontaneity and accentuating their bureaucratic aspects. In this way the civil dialogue, like the social dialogue before it, can result in 'a paradoxical dilution of participative democracy' (Armstrong, 2001: 10).

Conversely, an autonomous trade union policy for social Europe would need to be radically distanced from official EU conceptions of welfare and labour market modernization. It would require a vision and imagination capable of meeting the interests and aspirations of a diverse and sophisticated workforce; a language of social solidarity able to rekindle unions' moral legitimacy as a 'sword of justice'; and a will and capacity to re-learn cross-nationally both strategies and tactics. Utopian indeed: but utopias are indispensable in the bureaucratic maze of official Europe.

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