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## **In search of a new societal paradigm; Trade union renewal strategies and citizenship learning in an enlarged Europe.**

### **Abstract**

This paper suggests that renewal strategies by trade unions in western and eastern Europe needs to be situated against the unravelling of the post-1945 societal compromise with its promise of economic, social and political progress. The weight of this breakdown together with emerging neo-liberal solutions to these problems has resulted in a rediscovered interest within an enlarged Europe of contested conceptions and practices of democratic citizenship. Engaging with this crisis and with suggested societal answers it will be argued, provides an historic opportunity for European trade unions to critically examine their rationale and activities at a regional and global level. Connecting with and mobilising around, issues of subjectivity that challenge neo-liberal arrangements within the workplace and wider environment provide one possible important trajectory of citizenship learning and of union relevance.

### **Introduction**

These are difficult times for trade unions within the enlarged Europe. Unemployment, privatisation, restructuring and new employer strategies coupled with moves towards labour market flexibility and shifts in political climate, has resulted in declining membership and a reduced effectiveness. The reasons for the current defensiveness of European unions are varied and complex but in general, result from an interrelationship of internal (organisational) and external (changes at the societal and global level) circumstances. This decline and effectiveness is worrying given the important contribution of labour movements (in their 'intermediate' role) to democratic politics - through the aggregation and representation of the interests of a large number of working people. This paper is situated within these difficulties confronting trade unions. Against a background of growing political and economic uncertainty within the enlarged Europe Union, it suggests a possible revitalised role for unions as societal actors. The re-emergence in recent years of the workplace as an important and contested terrain provides trade unions with fresh opportunities to address their decline. In particular, it is suggested that the increasing importance of 'worker subjectivity' through the promotion

of knowledgeability in work regimes and practices provides the political and organisational space for trade unions once again to connect membership concerns with changes at the wider societal/regional level. The rediscovered interest in conceptions and practices of democratic citizenship within the enlarged Europe it is argued, provides an avenue for unions to situate workplace changes within the debates and uncertainties of the wider societal context.

The first part of the paper briefly outlines the current, increasingly fragile 'fault-lines' within the enlarged Europe that have resulted from the breakdown in the 1970s and 1980s of the 'old' Fordist agreements and set of understandings. The tentative emergence of a 'new societal paradigm' as Lipietz puts it (1992.11), strongly informed by neo-liberal perspectives and sentiments remains it will be suggested, an incomplete project. The second part of the paper explores the difficulties confronting trade unions. Particular attention is given to the workplace, to the perceived changes in the nature of work and to the promotion of human capital, human resource strategies by employers.

Doubt is expressed over the perceived claims for widespread change and 'paradigm-shift'. However it is agreed that partial change is detectable and it is within such changes that employee subjectivity - involving issues such as motivation, commitment, experience, tacit knowledge, creativity - has emerged as a key area of contestation and struggle. The issue of worker subjectivity today however extends beyond the workplace and is part of wider complex societal issues that centre on self, membership and identity. Part three of the paper explores these issues through linking the economic (workplace subjectivity) and the social and cultural (diversity and membership) issues in debates over understandings and practices of citizenship. The final section of the paper provides brief illustrations of union learning activities that are informed on the one hand, by the increasingly complicated nature of work experiences with on the other hand, broader questions about social and political membership and participation. Such initiatives it is suggested, offer the possibility of practices that involve broader constituencies, community partnerships and fresh alliances around common agendas.

## **A European crisis?**

The rediscovery of citizenship concerns within the new Europe is best understood as a partial response to a number of serious and strategic issues of a profound economic, social and political nature. Alan Lipietz (1992) for example focuses on the breakdown in the advanced capitalist economies around the 1970s and 1980s, of the dominant Fordist compromise. The promise of increased mass consumption through rapidly rising shared productivity gains in the post 1945 period provided the stability for profitability objectives. Accompanying modes of regulation such as social legislation (such as that covering collective bargaining agreements, wage levels, occupational safety) and the development of the welfare state were won through popular struggle and political action against an increasingly frenzied 'cold war' background. In contrast to the earlier regimes of control and knowledge embodied in craft and specialised skills, the emphasis within the Fordist framework was the widespread Taylorist use of repetitive, deskilled, measurable and monitored task performance. At the international level, the emergence of American hegemony in the post 1945 period completed the worldview or societal paradigm. This framework continues Lipietz, offered a three-pronged conception of progress: technical progress, social progress (greater purchasing power and access to consumer goods) and thirdly, progress of the State (through defence of the general interest against arbitrary interference). Social democracy in the advanced European economies of the non-communist world had arrived and reigned supreme.

The unravelling of this societal compromise is situated generally in the period around the 1970s and 80s and was mistakenly attributed to the unchecked growth of trade union power, interventionist government policies and national protectionism. Negotiation was to varying degrees, replaced by confrontation in attempts to implement a programme of rollbacks, privatisations and liberalisations that it was argued, is both inevitable and irreversible. Increased welfare benefits for the rapidly rising number of those out of work as a result of depressed markets challenged the post-1945 societal compromise. The practices of international business as evidenced for example, by cross border flows of foreign investments, trade and finance increased the calls for the abandonment of Keynesianism welfare state accommodations in favour with what is now referred to as 'neo-liberalism' (Radice 2004.154). Parallel to these problems was the cracks in Taylorism. The denial of worker subjectivity within the labour process together with the

necessary fierce regimes of worker subordination increasingly were seen as unsustainable as well as unproductive from the employers perspective.

Compounding the growing crisis within advanced capitalist economies in Western Europe within the new Europe was the collapse of the central and eastern European countries communist regimes around the 1990s. Almost overnight, the entire European geo-strategic framework had been recast.

The problems characterising the enlarged European Union (EU) at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are of a profound and strategic nature. The terminal decline of the 'old' economic and political model required the search and identification of a new 'societal paradigm' i.e. a new perspective and set of understandings which shapes 'agreement on a certain way of life in society, on the basis of a particular conception of what is moral and normal and desirable' (Lipietz, 1992.11). As has been extensively documented and debated over the last two decades, economic globalisation centred on the integrated and liberalised international capital markets, has emerged as the solution to the search for an alternative societal paradigm. Global market liberalisation is championed as the solution to the inefficiency and indiscipline seen as characterising 'the golden age'. However the success and difficulties associated with attempts to construct the 'new societal paradigm' should not be underestimated. As Zuege et. al. conclude in their review of 'the globalisation decade',

Growth in many parts of the world remains anaemic, social inequality within and between nations has dramatically increased, and waves of instability ripple through the international finance system (2004.7)

As an example of these difficulties in reaching a societal consensus, the rejection of the proposed European constitution by voters in France and Holland can be seen in part at least as a rejection of a particular market-orientated solution to the societal crisis facing the EU. As Zizek (2005) noted, the rejection was 'a message of hope - - - that politics is still alive and possible, that the debate about what the new Europe shall and should be is still open'. The increasing shrill clamour in recent years for 'modernised' labour market reforms, 'flexibility', 'employability', 'individual responsibility' and 'lifelong learning' resulted in people being asked to vote 'for a choice that was effectively no choice at all. People were called out to verify the inevitable' (ibid.). In contrast to the confident claims that there is no alternative to equipping people with the means to adapt to the needs of

the global markets, the 'no' vote can be seen as indicated the absence of an acceptable new 'grand bargain'.

### **Trade unions, the workplace and the struggle over subjectivity**

For labour organisations, the breakdown of the post-1945 societal framework has been particularly painful. Waddington (2000) in his review of European trade unions notes that the end of the long post-war boom during the 1970s marked the onset of decline.

'By the 1990s decline had deepened to crisis as the breadth and depth of the challenges facing unions from the pattern of economic development, shifts in political climate, and employers policies transformed the terrain of union engagement' (Waddington 2000.317)

With the perceived decline of old Fordist model of economic /business unionism, a substantial literature exists today on union decline and renewal strategies (Frege and Kelly 2003, Hyman 2001) and especially, around the merits of a 'new organising model' (Bronfenbrenner et. al. 1998) versus 'social movement unionism'. Both models to a different degree stress the politicisation of membership activity and a high level of mobilisation. However, in Eastern Europe the situation is somewhat different. As Ost (2002) points out, the unprecedented economic depression after 1989, the dramatic effects in ending obligatory union membership, the decline of the old manufacturing sector, the strong connection between unions and political movements and the challenge of building unions in post-communist societies ' when capitalism is popular but the effects of primitive capital accumulation are not' (Ost 2002.34), has resulted in different contexts for union revival. In these circumstances evidence suggests that unions succeed where they stress the old-fashioned economic/business concerns of their members ie of representing labour against capital. Business unionism argues Ost (2002.48) needs to be understood not as a lack of interest in class struggle as it is often presented, but as a way for labour to achieve through direct action what it could not achieve through politics. Recognising that specific structural, historical and ideological contexts shape particular union growth and renewal strategies however does not mean unions either in Western or Eastern Europe being absent from wider societal concerns. Indeed the heady mix characterising the political, economic and social uncertainty over

the future nature and direction of the enlarged European Union provides a dramatic context and opportunity for labour organisations. Arguably, to a greater extent than has ever been the case in the post-1945 period, the workplace today has emerged as a strategic site of contestation - a site that is central to the competing societal visions and practices of an enlarged Europe.

The re-emergence of the workplace as an important focus of attention in both eastern and western Europe arises from a variety of sources. The usually rhetorical promotion of employees as 'human resources' or 'human capital' agents within the 'new flexible work order' has stressed the importance of employee knowledge and learning within the moves towards 'the learning organisation' or 'learning company'. Underpinning such claims are the perceived 'shift from *abilities for achievement*, such as knowledge, dexterity or experience, to *willingness to achievement* manifested through motivation, engagement and identification with the company' (Flecker and Hofbauer 1998.112). New methods of organisational socialisation (such as personal appraisal, performance appraisal, self-motivation appraisal) emphasise the importance of 'unlocking potential' and developing work-related virtues, self-reliance and reflective abilities. The evidence for such claims of substantive change and 'paradigm shift' however, remains weak. As Ackroyd and Proctor note (1996.1 and quoted in Thompson and Warhurst 1998.8),

there is little evidence that the emasculation of traditional skills is being counter-acted by the emergence of new comprehensive systems of education and training to produce the 'polyvalent employee'. What evidence there is of new forms of training points towards the use of cut-down 'on-the job' company based skill appraisal and training schemes.

Similarly, a recent five-year study on the 'Future of Work in Britain' concludes that 'command-and-control systems are still very much in evidence in Anglo-Saxon economies, and probably more widely than ever' (Nolan and Wood 2003. 173). From a European perspective, after reviewing the evidence Thompson and Warhurst conclude that the most important trend appears to be people working harder! They conclude

Despite the bewildering number of change programmes and grand new titles for people and practices, the 'new workplace' is still easily identifiable for the vast majority who too often remain poorly motivated, overworked and undervalued (Thompson and Warhurst 1998.19).

Such conclusions however, does not exclude recognising that **some** changes **are** taking place of 'a uneven and contradictory' (Nolan and Wood 2003.165) nature. Continuity is as persuasive as change (Thompson and Warhurst 1998.19). Although much of the available evidence rarely fits popular policy narratives of qualitative and widespread change, it is important to recognise that powerful forces are reshaping the world of work. While the notion of 'knowledge work' and knowledge workers' bear little relation to organisational practices for example, there is evidence for the growth of knowledgeability in work. Underpinning this focus on knowledgeability is the new emphasis given to employee subjectivity. Capturing employee experience, creativity, tacit knowledge and ingenuity is often, the hidden agenda of a plethora of new 'enlightened' managerial initiatives such as 'team working', 'quality circles' and forms of 'continuous improvement'. Re-shaping the affective domain of employees through the promotion of emotional labour, corporate commitment and 'whole person' strategies is an important feature of current management discourse.

Subjectivity and identity are of importance for employees but in ways that extend far beyond the narrowly conceived and stunted practices of Human Resource Management (HRM). Work remains significant in shaping the lives of individuals, the character of the self and of societal organisation (Casey 1999.26). Experiencing wage labour is simultaneously both a vehicle and context for understanding and developing human needs as well as an object of exploitation. It is this contradictory experience and feature of 'work' which renders current human capital strategies as only, at the best, ever being partial. As Casey (2003) puts it, there is a clear contrast and set of practices, to conceiving the employee as a subject who works, desires and learns to that of a rationalised, abstracted human resource and object of organisational utility. Flecker and Hoffbauer (1998) go further and use the notion of 'superfluous subjectivity' to highlight the gap between the aspirations and desires for self-actualisation by employees with the narrow instrumental designs of HRM. Workers' needs and wants are exceeded (in surplus) by that required in the new forms of work organisation.

The notion of subjectivity however does have a wider importance and significance beyond that of the workplace. As Hall and Held (1990. 176) insist, we need to recognise 'the diverse communities to which we belong, the complex interplay of identity and identification in modern society and the differentiated ways in which people now

participate in social life'. Before exploring further this focus on membership that Hall and Held raise with the struggle over workplace subjectivity, a brief review of changing understandings of citizenship will be provided.

### **The re-emergence of citizenship.**

Citizenship has made something of a comeback in recent years. Given the search for a 'new societal paradigm', this is not surprising. As Martin (2003) notes, it is not coincidental that recent intellectual and practitioner interest in citizenship is occurring within a restructuring of welfare, state and economic activity. Or as Oliver puts it, 'It seems that when the relationship between the state and its population is in crisis, citizenship becomes the device whereby such a crisis is talked about and mediated' (Oliver 1996.44, as quoted in Martin (2003)). More specifically in relation to Eastern Europe, Somers makes the same point;

In the wake of the Eastern European revolutions of the 1980s, citizenship has been rediscovered even while it is being constantly reinvented. Its discovery is a result of world events: we live in a post-1989 geopolitical world stunningly reconfigured by revolutionary transformations in Eastern Europe. Its ongoing reinvention results from the wide unpredictability of this new world set off against the limitations of those few theories available to make sense of it all.

(Somers 2001.11)

The 'ongoing reinvention' that Somers mentions contributes to the complexities and debates associated with contemporary conceptions of citizenship when set against the backdrop of political turbulence. The historic tensions between the ideals of citizenship (symbolised in the granting of civil, social and political rights) and the ability and will of institutions to deliver on these ideals are today interwoven with changes and struggles over welfare social democratic changes in Western European and with the post-communist upheavals in eastern Europe. Or as Scobey (2001.16) puts it, citizenship 'is at base a story about globalisation but one that is specified in different ways from differing national, ideological and disciplinary vantage points'.

A number of themes can be identified in recent discussions of conceptions and practises of citizenship. For example, there has been the recognition of the need to move beyond Marshall's (1950) post 1945 model of citizenship which attempted to achieve a more equitable balance of the state and the political over the market and economic. Johnston



(2004.59) writes of the importance of 'moving beyond the standard reference points of rights and responsibilities to take account of other key dimensions of citizenship, for example, of identity and participation'. A second theme of current debates and reforms is the difference and struggles around communitarian understandings and practices (that embed participation and redistribution in the non-state, non-market realm) on the one hand, with more marketisation orientated approaches (such as in the case of the Citizen's Charter in the UK) on the other hand. Thirdly, emphasis has been given to the need for a strengthened negotiated, culturally-based understanding of citizenship that recognises some of the exclusionary measures that results in limited access to citizenship rights due to for example, social class, gender and ethnicity issues. The advocacy and development of a genuinely inclusive, multicultural or transcultural model of citizenship recognises that exclusion via social divisions and difference, continues to be the 'lived experience' of many citizens throughout the new Europe (Cresson 2001, Lister 1997). As Coare remarks, 'it is crucial that definitions of citizenship are created that allows as many people as possible to enjoy both the rights and responsibilities of the citizens (2004.51). An example of a policy approach to citizenship that attempts to incorporate many of these contemporary concerns is in the activities of the Council of Europe. At the start of its five-year 'Education for Democratic Citizenship' programme in 1998, the Council explicitly rejected the more popular market-driven policy experiments ('citizens as passive consumers of 'democratic products' '). Instead there was the emphasis on citizenship centring on greater participation, social cohesion, accountability and solidarity, culture and values rather than procedural issues and finally, 'is at the centre of a number of complex, societal issues and problems such as sustainable development, security, social justice, the environment, the nature and future of work etc' (Council of Europe 1998). Such an approach to citizenship illustrates the fruitfulness of combining people's rights as individuals with their lives as social beings and therefore, making connections between the local with wider societal concerns. It is an understanding that is no longer based on homogeneity but instead acknowledges diversity. It is this linking of the social and cultural (diversity and membership) to the economic (subjectivity) that provides opportunities for engagement by unions.

### **Union learning and citizenship activities**

Absent from most traditional and current considerations of citizenship is the workplace and yet as Johnston points out in his discussion of citizenship (1997.48), it is 'a key area which affects everyone'. Casey goes further in pointing out that 'some powerful currents of thought and practice in the everyday world of work and organisations at the present time serve not to extend and encourage democratic civil society values and practices as - - - to oppose them' (Casey 2003.621). An important contributing feature to this situation as suggested earlier, is that workers' capacities for knowledge, action and life far exceed those required by production (ibid.633). The demand by employers for corporate employee commitment within the workplace on the one hand with employee strategies of coping and balance in their increasingly diverse social lives on the other hand, provides important opportunities for trade unions. The question of how we work is also a question of how we live (Hart 1992.1). The increasingly complicated nature of work experiences- whether of it's hierarchical, gendered nature, it's unpaid nature, it's caring nature, it's co-operative nature - addresses immediate concerns with broader questions about life, work and citizenship. So what might be some of the union learning activities and practices informed by citizenship concerns?

First, a union education that contextualises local issues against a background of economic globalisation challenges the logic of 'there being no alternatives'. As the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions recognises, globalisation has presented 'the biggest challenge to the free trade union movement in its long struggle on behalf of working women and men around the world' (ICFTU 1997.4). Learning programmes that explore the changing contexts of employee employment and work experiences against a globalisation background encourages the formulation of union policies and practices that engage with the dominant discourse of 'inevitability'. Similarly, developing ICT skills by union members can be situated within projects designed to critically examine company performance or to establish linkages with other international groups of employees or trade unionists.

A second major area relates to the issue of democracy and economic decision-making. Despite the historical experiences around this topic in the east and the west being profoundly different, both were inspired by an underpinning belief that the 'anarchy of production' under capitalism could be influenced or changed by democratic measures of the economy (Pierson 1993.183). Politically, things are different today but as Usher et. al. ( 1997.47) argue, instead of the crude socialisation process into workplace discipline or an uncritical assertion of human capital theories, there might be an emphasis on

democratisation 'in work' and 'of work'. Union learning programmes that aim for a more informed, skilled and participatory workforce contributes both to industrial democracy as well as improved economic effectiveness. Old fashioned union concerns of 'democracy at work', 'job design' and 'worker directors' might once again be an important theme in union education programmes.

A third area of union learning and practice informed by citizenship concerns might focus on divisions and difference - within the workplace, over gender and ethnicity - might encourage practices that involve broader constituencies, partnerships and fresh alliances around common agendas. A learning perspective informed by 'divisions and difference' for example, provides more imaginative and politically innovative basis for anti-racist campaigns. Linking, exploring and supporting workplace union learning strategies to combat racism with outside communities offer fresh opportunities that could incorporate learning around different histories, cultures and wider societal issues, such as xenophobia, identities, tolerance and human rights. The joining of 'workers' with 'citizens', conceptually and organisationally, strengthens the critical and political opportunities for trade unionists to deepen and broaden their existing anti-racist activities.

## **Conclusions**

Within the precarious times of the enlarged Europe, this paper has focussed on the troubled circumstances of European trade unions. A number of acute strategic problems of an economic, social and political character has resulted in a mood of uncertainty and prevarication within many of the trade unions and within the region. This loss of confidence in the nature and direction of the enlarged Europe perhaps is not surprising given the momentous implications resulting from the first, the breakdown of the post-1945 'settled compromise' and secondly, the emergence of the new democracies in eastern and southern Europe (in some cases, through violent change). Again perhaps not surprisingly, there is evidence of a rediscovered interest within the new Europe in the understanding and practices of 'citizenship'. The complex and problematic character of subjectivity within the economic and social domain it has been suggested in this paper, provides a possible and fruitful avenue for trade unions to address their changed circumstances of today while at the same time, answer the question of 'relevance'. Linking the economic to social and cultural considerations becomes possible and necessary when considering the often contradictory processes of self-formation and the

contribution of 'work' as a primary or at least contributing, basis for this self-formation. As Hyman (1997. 521) concludes 'there is a widespread consensus that trade unions face qualitatively new problems in defining and pursuing a solidaristic project'. A move away from productionist issues to a focus on the contested area of subjectivity it has been suggested, might point unions towards new practices of solidarity and new forms once again, of egalitarian commitment at both the economic and societal level.

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