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Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism



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Introduction

Over seven decades have passed since the publication of *Industrial Democracy*,¹ yet it is difficult to name any subsequent work with the breadth of vision and theoretical insight to stand beside the Webbs' pioneering study. Whatever the quantity of recent research in this field, in terms of quality the sociology of trade unionism remains an undeveloped area of study.

The limited progress of trade union sociology reflects in part the preoccupation of most industrial sociologists with problems of more immediate managerial concern. Accordingly, the post-war development of sociologically oriented trade union studies has followed in large measure the perspectives of political sociologists. As a natural consequence, such studies have almost exclusively provided merely partial analyses; the interpretation of the internal processes of trade unions is rarely illuminated by a concern for the specific external *purposes* of these bodies.

It is thus no accident that some of the most profound and enduring insights of trade union sociology derive from writers with less narrowly academic objectives. Socialists (and in particular revolutionary socialists), embracing the tasks of working-class mobilisation and social transformation, have of necessity confronted the theoretical problems posed by trade union activities—impinging as these so obviously do on their own objectives.

The perspectives which socialist theorists have generated may be roughly divided into two categories: those approaches which discern significant revolutionary potential in trade union activity; and those

1 S and B Webb, *Industrial Democracy*, 1897.

which argue that such activity does not in itself facilitate (or even that it inhibits) the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. In this respect, the development of socialist analyses of trade unionism has displayed a certain dialectic. The early writings of Marx and Engels articulated in a pure form the 'optimistic' assessment of unionism; subsequently they noted aspects of the British labour movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century which conflicted with this interpretation. In the present century, as trade unionism became extensively established without leading naturally to the overthrow of capitalism, various elements of a more 'pessimistic' theory were elaborated; these in turn have exerted considerable influence on current academic orthodoxy. An exposition of these contrasting perspectives is presented in the first two sections of this paper. The third section argues that the pessimistic theories, in ignoring important counter-tendencies to the processes they analyse, are as one-sided as the simple Marxian approach which they reject. A final section seeks to produce a synthesis of the rival traditions, drawing on the analyses of socialist writers who have been particularly sensitive to the dialectical nature of the interaction between trade unions and capitalist society.

1 THE OPTIMISTIC TRADITION: MARX AND ENGELS

The Early Analysis

Historically the most significant exponents of the optimistic interpretation (though their optimism was by no means unqualified) were Marx and Engels. Given their long joint involvement, both theoretically and practically, with the labour movements of Britain and Europe, a rigorous and sustained analysis of the role of trade unions would not have been unexpected. In fact, their attention to this question is remarkably slight; and their most detailed discussion is to be found in their earliest works. Nevertheless, Marx and Engels clearly wrote sufficient to be considered as a coherent theory of trade unionism.²

2 A comprehensive analysis and critique of the writings of Marx and Engels on trade unionism has yet to be published. While Lenin provided perceptive discussions of the available literature, none were intended as major studies: see, for example, V I Lenin, 'Karl Marx' (1913) and 'Imperialism and the Split in Socialism' (1916), in *Collected Works*, Vols. xxi and xxiii, 1964. A. Lozovsky, *Marx and the Trade Unions*, 1935, suffers both from an uncritical and eulogistic attitude to Marx, and from an involvement in contemporary Stalinist polemics. H Collins and C Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, 1965, provide a valuable study but confined largely to Marx's activities and writings at the time of the First International.

In economic terms, they saw the value of trade union action as extremely limited. Engels stated this point strongly in 1845:

The history of these Unions is a long series of defeats of the working-men, interrupted by a few isolated victories. All these efforts naturally cannot alter the economic law according to which wages are determined by the relation between supply and demand in the labour market. Hence the Unions remain powerless against all *great* forces which influence this relation. In a commercial crisis the Union itself must reduce wages or dissolve wholly; and in a time of considerable increase in the demand for labour, it cannot fix the rate of wages higher than would be reached spontaneously by the competition of the capitalists among themselves. But in dealing with minor, single influences they are powerful. If the employer had no concentrated, collective opposition to expect, he would in his own interest gradually reduce wages to a lower and lower point; indeed, the battle of competition which he has to wage against his fellow-manufacturers would force him to do so, and wages would soon reach the minimum. But this competition of the manufacturers among themselves is, *under average conditions*, somewhat restricted by the opposition of the working-men.³

This thesis was elaborated by Marx two decades later. The level of wages, he argued, was 'only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labour, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction'.⁴ In the absence of union organisation, the capitalist would cut wages during economic recessions even more severely than actually occurred, and would fail to restore these cuts when trade improved.⁵ In the longer run, collective action imposed some constraint on capitalist encroachments on the *conditions* of labour.⁶ Yet at the same time, 'in its merely economic action capital is the stronger side'; and 'the very development of modern industry must progressively turn the scale in favour of the capitalist against the working man'.⁷ Union achievements were also limited, for Marx and Engels, by long-run economic laws tending towards the increasing immiseration of the worker.

Despite – or, perhaps more correctly, because of – the restricted economic power attributed to trade unionism, Marx and Engels considered its *political* potential to be highly significant. For Engels, workers' combinations struck at the very fundamentals of capitalist 'Political Economy'.

3 F Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, English edn 1892, pp 216-7. In this, as in all other quotations in this paper the emphasis is in the original.

4 K Marx, 'Wages, Price and Profit' (1865), in K Marx and F Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 Vol edition 1958, Vol I, p 443.

5 *ibid*, p 440.

6 *ibid*.

7 *ibid*, pp 444, 446.

What gives these Unions and the strikes arising from them their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition. They imply the recognition of the fact that the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based wholly upon the competition of the workers among themselves; i.e., upon their want of cohesion. And precisely because the Unions direct themselves against the vital nerve of the present social order, however one-sidedly, in however narrow a way, are they so dangerous to this social order. The working-men cannot attack the bourgeoisie, and with it the whole existing order of society, at any sorer point than this. If the competition of the workers among themselves is destroyed, if all determine not to be further exploited by the bourgeoisie, the rule of property is at an end.⁸

Such a challenge to 'the rule of property' was, initially at least, unconscious and indirect: but Engels saw unionism as preparing workers for a direct onslaught on capitalist class society.

That these Unions contribute greatly to nourish the bitter hatred of the workers against the property-holding class need hardly be said. . . . Strikes . . . are the military school of the working-men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided; they are the pronouncements of single branches of industry that these too have joined the labour movement. . . . And as schools of war, the Unions are unexcelled.⁹

Shortly afterwards Marx, in his first detailed discussion of trade unions, defined precisely their role as integral to the process of social revolution. Analysing current British experience, he noted that the workers

have not stopped at partial combinations which have no other objective than a passing strike, and which disappear with it. Permanent combinations have been formed, *trades unions*, which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with the employers.¹⁰

Such organisation was seen as a natural consequence of the development of capitalist industry:

The first attempts of workers to *associate* among themselves always take place in the form of combinations. Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance – *combination*.¹¹

Marx argued that collective organisation, at first adopted merely as a means of defending wages, came to be pursued for its own sake; and that the ensuing conflict – 'a veritable civil war' – served to generate among workers a consciousness of class unity, transforming

8 *Condition of the Working Class*, pp 218-9.

9 *ibid*, pp 219, 224.

10 Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), 1955 edn, p 149.

11 *ibid*, p 150. The thesis that the 'concentration' of workers in large numbers encourages trade union combination recurs in more recent academic analysis: see for example D Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, 1958, p 141.

them from a class 'in itself' to a class 'for itself'.

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interest. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests.¹²

To underline the significance of this process as a preliminary to revolution, Marx drew an explicit analogy with the rise of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class.

In the bourgeoisie we have two phases to distinguish: that in which it constituted itself as a class under the regime of feudalism and absolute monarchy, and that in which, already constituted as a class, it overthrew feudalism and monarchy to make society into a bourgeois society. The first of these phases was the longer and necessitated the greater efforts. This too began by partial combinations against the feudal lords.¹³

In the *Communist Manifesto*, the separate insights of Marx and Engels were synthesised:

With the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level. The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (Trades' Unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there the contest breaks out into riots.

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate results, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralise the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarians, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years. This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers them-

12 *ibid.*

13 *ibid.*, pp 150-1.

selves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier.¹⁴

This analysis of the rise of the labour movement concluded with the famous assertion of the inevitable culmination of the process in social revolution.

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.¹⁵

The above analysis, developed by Marx and Engels during the 1840s, may be briefly summarised as follows. The evolution of industrial capitalism provides the preconditions of collective organisation by throwing workers together in large numbers, and creates the deprivations which spur them to combination. This unity, by transcending competition in the labour market, in itself threatens the stability of capitalism: it also develops workers' class consciousness and trains them in methods of struggle. The limited economic achievements of their unions lead workers to adopt political forms of action, and ultimately to challenge directly the whole structure of class domination.

The Later Reservations

One need scarcely document the failure of subsequent experience to validate this optimistic prognosis; yet Marx and Engels never produced a comprehensive revision of their early analysis. Rather, they tended to treat the development of trade unionism in the second half of the nineteenth century as a deviation from the natural course; a process occurring 'by way of exception, under definite, special, so to say local, circumstances'.¹⁶ As Marx and Engels experienced the various phases of the British labour movement's development – the collapse of the revolutionary hopes of Chartism, the consolidation of craft unionism, the broader perspectives of the 1860s, the demoralisation of the Great Depression, and the revival of optimism with the 'New Unionism' – their response varied; but three main arguments were used.

First, existing unions represented not the whole of the working

14 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', *Selected Works*, Vol I, pp 42-3.

15 *ibid*, p 45.

16 Marx, *Capital*, Vol II, 1957 edn, p 340.

class but 'an aristocratic minority' of 'privileged workers',¹⁷ able to achieve material concessions in principle unattainable by workers generally. This factor was seen as eventually self-correcting, as organisation was embraced by the lower-skilled, the conservative and inward-looking characteristics of minority unionism would be swept away. And indeed, Engels saw the 'New Unionism' as the proof of this assertion:

Unlike the old trade unions, they greet every suggestion of an identity of interest between capital and labour with scorn and ridicule. . . . Thus we see now these new Unions taking the lead of the working-class movement generally, and more and more taking in tow the rich and proud "old" Unions.¹⁸

The absence of revolutionary activity was also blamed on the corruption – material or ideological – of treacherous leaders: a charge based, with considerable justice, on the experience of the 1868 General Election.¹⁹

The leadership of the working class of England has wholly passed into the hands of the corrupted leaders of the trade unions and the professional agitators. . . . It seems to be a law of the proletarian movement everywhere that a section of the workers' leaders should become demoralised.²⁰

Insofar as any explanation was offered for such a development, it was that the corruption of the leaders was made possible by the passivity of the rank and file.²¹

This leads to the third argument of Marx and Engels: the embourgeoisement of the British working class, a consequence of the monopoly position of British capitalism in the world economy. 'The English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *as well as* a bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world

17 Collins and Abramsky, *Marx and the British Labour Movement*, p 51; Engels, letter to Bebel, 28 October 1885.

18 Engels, letter to Sorge, 7 December 1889 and Preface to the 1892 English edition of the *Condition of the Working Class*, p xix. Engels died before it was wholly apparent that such high expectations of the 'new unionism' were misplaced.

19 See R Harrison, 'The Reform League and the General Election of 1868', in his *Before the Socialists*, 1965.

20 Marx, letter to Liebknecht, 11 February 1878; Engels, letter to Marx, 30 July 1869.

21 Engels remarked that the leaders of the 'new unions' were themselves affected by 'bourgeois "respectability"', but insisted that 'it will not help the bourgeoisie much if they do succeed in enticing some of the leaders into their toils. The movement has been far enough strengthened for this sort of thing to be overcome.' (letter to Sorge, 7 December 1889).

this is of course to a certain extent justifiable.²² This situation too could be seen as essentially temporary: as the British economy faced increasing international competition, so the privileged position of British workers would be undermined.²³

Such special (and, it was assumed, transitory) factors were typically seen as explaining the absence of revolutionary initiative in the country where unionism had its deepest roots. Yet there are aspects of the writings of Marx and Engels which could be taken as evidence of a natural tendency for union activities to be restricted to those which posed no serious threat to capitalist stability.

The British labour movement is to-day and for many years has been working in a narrow circle of strikes for higher wages and shorter hours without finding a solution; besides, these strikes are looked upon not as an expedient and not as a means or propaganda and organisation but as an ultimate aim. The trade unions exclude on principle and by virtue of their statutes, all political action and consequently also the participation in the general activity of the working class as a class. . . . We must not pass in silence over the fact that at the present moment no real labour movement, in the continental meaning of the word, exists here.²⁴

Marx himself argued, before the International Working Men's Association in 1865, that organised workers 'ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady'.²⁵ In the following year he suggested, in draft resolutions for the Geneva Congress of the International, that the unions had unintentionally become focal points in the class struggle. But, he insisted, they

must now learn how to act consciously as focal points for organising the working class in the greater interests of its complete emancipation. They must support every social and political movement directed towards this aim. . . . They must convince the whole world that their efforts are far from narrow and egoistic, but, on the contrary, are directed towards the emancipation of the down-trodden masses.²⁶

That such exhortations were considered necessary was eloquent testimony that trade unions *could* forget that they were 'fighting with effects' and thus become accommodated to a restricted economic role;

22 Engels, letter to Marx, 7 October 1858.

23 As Engels argued in the same letter, 'the only thing that would help here would be a few thoroughly bad years'. He repeated this argument in several letters in the 1880s, as well as in the 1892 Preface to the *Condition of the Working Class*.

24 Engels, letter to Bernstein, 17 June 1879.

25 'Wages, Price and Profit', *Selected Works*, Vol I, p 446.

26 Cited in Lozovsky, *Marx and the Trade Unions*, pp 16-8; see also Collins and Abramsky, *Marx and the British Labour Movement*, pp 116-8.

and therefore that their 'local and direct struggle against Capital' did not lead automatically to a broader political movement. Another implication was that collective industrial action could be narrowly sectional in inspiration and thus in no way indicative of *class* consciousness.²⁷ Yet at the very same time that he was urging existing unions to raise their sights, Marx could still write that combination was the mechanism whereby 'capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation'.²⁸ At the level of general theory, their early revolutionary interpretation of trade unionism remained unquestioned by Marx and Engels.

2 THE PESSIMISTIC INTERPRETATION

Since the death of Marx and Engels, the development both of trade unionism and of capitalist society has further undermined the credibility of the simple thesis propounded in their early writings. It is true that the faith that trade union struggles can lead naturally and spontaneously to the overthrow of capitalism has remained central to certain forms of anarcho-syndicalism.²⁹ But the most influential currents of twentieth century socialist theory have focused on aspects of trade unionism which appear to *inhibit* any overt challenge to capitalism. Three distinct strands of analysis may be labelled the theories of integration, oligarchy and incorporation; their most prominent exponents are respectively Lenin, Michels and Trotsky.

Lenin on Economism: the Integration of Unions Within Capitalism

An important element in Lenin's contribution was his demonstration of the ambivalence underlying the writings on trade unionism of Marx and Engels: the contrast between the optimism of their early works and the pessimism often evident in their later correspondence. In his best known discussion of the trade union question – the pamphlet

27 This point has been strongly argued by Lockwood: 'It is important to realize from the beginning that action in concert, while obviously an expression of group consciousness, is not necessarily an expression of class consciousness. There is no inevitable connection between unionization and class consciousness.' (*The Blackcoated Worker*, p 137).

28 *Capital*, Vol 1, 1959 edn, p 763. On the following page Marx referred the reader to the section of the *Communist Manifesto* which was cited above.

29 Perhaps surprisingly, the same interpretation was embraced, in a weaker form, by the Webbs: 'the object and purpose of the workers, organised vocationally in Trade Unions . . . is no mere increase of wages or reduction of hours. It comprises nothing less than a reconstruction of society, by the elimination, from the nation's industries and services, of the Capitalist Profit-maker.' (*History of Trade Unionism*, 1920 edn, p 717). More recent Fabians have of course adopted the thesis that trade unions create a form of 'industrial democracy' *within* capitalism.

What Is To Be Done? – Lenin argued in effect that those factors viewed by Marx and Engels as exceptional were in fact characteristic of unionism: in other words, that the normal activities of trade unions as such posed no threat to the stability of the capitalist order.³⁰

One element emphasised in this argument was the sectional nature of the trade union struggle – following the industrial and occupational divisions of capitalism rather than uniting workers as a class.

The economic struggle is the collective struggle of the workers against their employers for better terms *in the sale of their labour-power*, for better living and working conditions. This struggle is necessarily a trade-union struggle, because working conditions differ greatly in different trades, and, consequently, the struggle *to improve* them can only be conducted on the basis of trade.³¹

This argument was subsequently to form an important part of Gramsci's case against the syndicalists:

Trade unionism is evidently nothing but a reflection of capitalist society, not a potential means of transcending capitalist society. It organises workers, not as producers but as wage-earners, that is as creations of the capitalist system of private property, as sellers of their labour power. Unionism unites workers according to the tools of their trade or the nature of their product, that is according to the contours imposed on them by the capitalist system.³²

For Lenin, however, the major point at issue was ideology. His central premise was that 'without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement'.³³ From this it followed that socialist revolution required the development of 'Social-Democratic consciousness': the recognition by workers of 'the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social

30 'What Is To Be Done?' (1902), *Collected Works*, Vol v, 1961. Lenin produced this polemic as part of an internal controversy within the Russian Social-Democratic Party, later insisting that 'it is false to consider the contents of the pamphlet outside of its connections with this task' (quoted in T Cliff, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 1959, p 48). In addition, he was concerned with the status of unions within Czarist Russia rather than within capitalism generally. Nevertheless, his arguments are widely cited as of more general relevance than Lenin himself intended. For a consideration of Lenin's writings with a very different orientation to that of *What Is To Be Done?*, see the concluding section of this paper. See also T T Hammond, *Lenin on Trade Unions and Revolution*, 1957, which despite its vehement cold war orientations provides a valuable account of the development of Lenin's views on this question.

31 *ibid*, p 404.

32 A. Gramsci, 'Sindacalismo e Consigli' (1919), in *L'Ordine Nuovo 1919-1920*, 1955, p 45.

33 *Collected Works*, Vol v, p 369.

system'.³⁴ Lenin argued that there could be no middle alternative between bourgeois ideology and Social-Democratic consciousness; and that the labour movement by its own efforts could develop only 'trade-union consciousness': 'the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.'³⁵ It followed from Lenin's assumptions that such consciousness did not transcend the hegemony of bourgeois ideology.

To belittle the socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology . . . ; for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism, is *Nur-Gewerkschaftlerei*, and trade-unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie.³⁶

Lenin's conception of trade-union consciousness extended, as is evident from the definition cited above, to cover political action by trade unions. Indeed, he devoted much space to the argument that 'trade-unionist politics of the working class is precisely *bourgeois politics* of the working class'.³⁷ This marks a significant (though unacknowledged) rejection of the views of Marx and Engels, who regularly argued that union involvement in political action represented a significant heightening of the class struggle.³⁸ In particular, the Ten Hours Act of 1847 was explicitly cited (in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, the *Communist Manifesto* and – at some length – in *Capital*) as a milestone in the progress of working-class organisation in Britain. In 1864, Marx went so far as to argue that the struggle for legal limitation of hours of work

told indeed upon the great contest between the blind rule of the supply and demand laws 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. Hence the Ten Hours' Bill was not only a great practical success; it was the victory of a principle; it was the first time that in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political

34 *ibid.*, p. 375. Lenin was of course using the label 'Social-Democratic' to mean 'revolutionary socialist' – its normal sense at that time.

35 *ibid.*

36 *ibid.*, p. 384. Lenin gave three distinct reasons for this argument: (a) bourgeois ideology had the advantage of traditional acceptance and superior means of dissemination: (b) the sectional rather than class nature of the trade union struggle: (c) the need for 'educated representatives of the propertied classes' to develop socialist theory and consciousness.

37 *ibid.*, p. 426.

38 See for example Marx, letter to Bolte, 23 November 1871.

economy of the working class.³⁹

The implications of this analysis (and in particular, its compatibility with the theory of revolution stated elsewhere by Marx and Engels) were never elaborated;⁴⁰ but it is clear that Lenin's interpretation of trade union politics is a contradiction of that of Marx.

Certain of the arguments which Lenin put forward in 1902 – for example, his assertion that socialist theory could be developed only by members of the bourgeois intelligentsia and must be brought to the workers from without, and that the socialist party must be directed by an exclusive cadre of professional revolutionaries – are not perhaps widely considered applicable outside the specific context in which Lenin wrote. But the analysis of trade unionism presented in *What Is To Be Done?* remains more extensively influential: it is a commonplace that trade unions, being able to achieve their economic objectives within the framework of capitalism, display a natural tendency to integration within the system.

Michels: The Iron Law of Oligarchy

Lenin's analysis of the role of unions within capitalist society coincided with Michels' interest in the internal functioning of labour organisations.⁴¹ The latter's *Political Parties* was of course explicitly sociological in intent, as its subtitle ponderously insisted: 'a Sociological Study of the Emergence of Leadership, the Psychology of Power, and the Oligarchic Tendencies of Organization'.⁴² While the central concern of Michels' major work is indicated by its title, his analysis covered all types of socio-political institutions of the working class, and considerable attention was given to trade unions. Indeed, he suggested that 'in the trade-union movement, the authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule democratic organizations on oligarchic lines, are even more pronounced than in the political organizations'.⁴³

39 'Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association', *Selected Works*, Vol 1, pp 382-3.

40 It could be argued that the *Inaugural Address* represented a new development in Marx's theory of the class struggle and the transition to socialism, which was cut short by the revolutionary experience of 1871: see R Harrison, 'The British Labour Movement and the International in 1864', in R Miliband and J Saville (eds), *Socialist Register*, 1964, and S Moore, *Three Tactics: the Background in Marx*, 1963. Some of the implications are considered in the final section of this paper.

41 Michels, when he wrote *Political Parties*, was an academic rather than a political leader, but he had previously been very active in left-wing socialist politics (as a result being thereafter black-listed in universities in his native Germany) and remained closely associated with European socialist movements.

42 R W E Michels, *Political Parties*, (1911), English edn 1915.

43 *ibid.*, p 143.

The basic thesis developed by Michels was that the labour movement, despite its democratic and anti-authoritarian origins and objectives, is as prone as other organisations to an 'iron law of oligarchy'. He argued, first, that it was impossible for unions to operate on the basis of 'direct democracy': the conduct of negotiations and strikes required an organisation, led by officials with specialised experience and knowledge; and the larger the union, the greater the need for bureaucratic leadership.⁴⁴

It was apparent that union leaders, even when subject to regular re-election, enjoyed virtual permanence of office.⁴⁵ Several factors combined to make this inevitable. The officials themselves became tied to their positions.

When the leaders are not persons of means and when they have no other source of income, they hold firmly to their positions for economic reasons, coming to regard the functions they exercise as theirs by inalienable right. Especially is this true of manual workers who, since becoming leaders, have lost aptitude for their former occupation. For them, the loss of their positions would be a financial disaster, and in most cases it would be altogether impossible for them to return to their old way of life.⁴⁶

In general the officials, having developed considerable expertise, 'become irremovable, or at least difficult to replace'.⁴⁷ And the rank-and-file membership tended to accept that incumbent leaders possessed a 'customary right' to office, feeling that they owed their officers a 'sacred duty' of gratitude, and often indulging in virtual hero-worship.⁴⁸

Enjoying this entrenched position, Michels argued, union leaders proceeded to impose their own policies on their organisations, even when their decisions were 'disapproved of by the majority of the workers they are supposed to represent. . . . They claim the right to decide the merits of the question on the sole ground that they know better than the workers themselves.'⁴⁹ This 'abuse of power' normally provoked little resistance. Ordinary members lacked adequate information and experience for critical appraisal of official policies: in general they were only too glad to allow someone else to take the difficult decisions. Thus oligarchic control was reinforced by mass apathy: 'the majority of the members are as indifferent to the organisation as the majority of the electors are to parliament'.⁵⁰

44 *ibid*, Part I, Ch 2.

45 *ibid*, Part II, Ch 1.

46 *ibid*, p 208.

47 *ibid*, p 101.

48 *ibid*, Part I, Chs 4-7.

49 *ibid*, pp 143-5.

50 *ibid*, pp 50-1.

Oligarchy was, for Michels, directly related to conservatism. Union leaders developed a 'petty bourgeois' life-style, and social differentiation from their members led to ideological differentiation: 'the leaders lose all true sense of solidarity with the class from which they have sprung'.⁵¹ The personal position of labour leaders tended to undermine any socialist commitment they might once have held: 'What interest for them has now the dogma of the social revolution? Their own social revolution has already been effected. At bottom, all the thoughts of these leaders are concentrated upon the single hope that there shall long continue to exist a proletariat to choose them as its delegates and to provide them with a livelihood.'⁵² Desire for public approval was an additional inducement to moderation in the union official: 'if he continues to express "reasonable opinions", he may be sure of securing at once the praise of his opponents and (in most cases) the admiring gratitude of the crowd'.⁵³

The implications of Michels' arguments for the classic Marxian analysis are obvious. The 'corruption' of union leaders which Marx and Engels identified as an obstacle to the revolutionary development of unionism, but never attempted to explain coherently, was interpreted in *Political Parties* as an inevitable consequence of psychological and sociological laws. Like Lenin, Michels based a number of his arguments on British experience as documented by the Webbs: they had emphasised, as an inevitable feature of developed trade unionism, the virtual irremovability of officials, the impossibility of direct rank-and-file control of policy, and the social and ideological separation of leaders from members.⁵⁴ But Michels added to earlier interpretations an insight which was to become a commonplace of subsequent organisational analysis: that 'institutional needs' can develop which act as major determinants of policy, supplementing and even displacing the manifest goals of an organisation, and conferring on it 'a profoundly conservative character'.

The . . . doctrines are, whenever requisite, attenuated and deformed in accordance with the external needs of the organization. Organization becomes the vital essence. . . . More and more invincible becomes its aversion to all aggressive action. . . . Thus, from a means, organization becomes an end.⁵⁵

51 *ibid*, pp 81-2.

52 *ibid*, p 305.

53 *ibid*, p 306.

54 *Industrial Democracy*: see in particular Ch 1. The Webbs did, however, insist that union democracy could be sustained by institutional arrangements such as operated in the contemporary coal and cotton unions: Michels ignored these arguments.

55 *Political Parties*, pp 369-73.

This thesis has been elaborated and refined by numerous post-war academic theorists of industrial relations. To survive and flourish as a collective bargaining institution, so the argument runs, a union must cultivate the goodwill or at least the acquiescence of employers and the state. Whatever the political objectives to which a union is nominally committed, if it is to be effective *as a union* it will in practice be drawn inexorably towards policies which are acceptable to these 'significant others'. Once the 'needs' of the organisation become recognised as a valid criterion of union policy, the officials can embrace the role of guardians of the organisational interests: this can provide a simple rationalisation for any policy against the wishes or immediate interests of the rank and file.⁵⁶

Trotsky: The Crisis of Capitalism and Incorporation of Unions

The analyses of Lenin and Michels focused essentially on the *unintended* consequences for the behaviour of trade unions of their internal organisational dynamics and their role within capitalist society. Trotsky, writing in a very different social and political context, added the perspective of an *active* and *deliberate* strategy by government and industry to emasculate the threat inherent in unionism.

Trotsky's first main contribution to the theory of the role of unions in capitalist society formed part of his penetrating analysis of the British labour movement in the inter-war period – the pamphlet *Where is Britain Going?*, written in 1925.⁵⁷ He began by asserting (as had Marx and Engels in their early writings) that workers' combinations presented an implicit challenge to the political stability of capitalism: 'the danger of trade unions [to the capitalist state] lies in the fact that they – at present gropingly, undecidedly, and half-heartedly – put forward the principle of workers' Government'.⁵⁸

He went on to argue that in the conditions of economic depression then prevailing, the scope for economic achievements by unionism was rigidly limited (a predicament which Marx had considered the norm); accordingly, workers' economic aspirations could be satisfied only through a fundamental transformation of society.

At the root of the radicalisation of the working class . . . repose those very principles which have dealt such heavy blows at the economic power of the trade unions. . . . It is just because there is no further prospect for the

56 For typical statements see W Herberg, 'Bureaucracy and Democracy in Labor Unions', *Antioch Review*, 1943; A M Ross, 'The Union as a Wage-Fixing Institution', in *Trade Union Wage Policy*, 1956; M Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 1965; A Flanders, *Management and Unions*, 1970. See also the discussion in R Hyman, *The Workers' Union*, 1971, Ch 7.

57 L Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?*, English edn 1926.

58 *ibid*, p 143.

trade unions within the framework of a capitalist society in Great Britain's present situation that the industrial workers' unions are forced to take the road of the socialistic reorganisation of industry.⁵⁹

At the same time – like Marx and Engels in their later years – Trotsky saw such a development obstructed by the conservative ideology of the union leaders.

The present officials and justiciaries are impregnated with the spirit of the bourgeoisie. . . In order to make the trade unions fit for their future role, they must be freed of conservative officials, of superstitious blockheads, who from heaven knows where expect a "peaceful" miracle, and finally they must be freed directly from the agents of large capital, renegades in the style of Thomas.⁶⁰

Such backwardness of the leaders of the labour movement, at a time when the radicalisation of the rank and file was assumed, was scarcely satisfactorily explained in *Where is Britain Going?* Elsewhere, Trotsky sought an explanation in the bureaucratic structure of trade unionism.

In the capitalist states, the most monstrous forms of bureaucratism are to be observed precisely in the trade unions. It is enough to look at America, England and Germany. Amsterdam is the most powerful international organization of the trade union bureaucracy. It is thanks to it that the whole structure of capitalism now stands upright, above all in Europe and especially in England. If there were not a bureaucracy of the trade unions, then the police, the army, the courts, the lords, the monarchy would appear before the proletarian masses as nothing but pitiful and ridiculous playthings. The bureaucracy of the trade unions is the backbone of British imperialism.⁶¹

Implicit in this argument is the thesis of incorporation: that union leaders, having acquired authority over their members, are used to assist capitalism in controlling the workers. This thesis was later developed explicitly, again in an analysis of the British situation.

The decay of British capitalism, under the conditions of decline of the world capitalist system, undermined the basis for the reformist work of the trade unions. Capitalism can continue to maintain itself only by lowering the standard of living of the working class. Under these conditions trade unions can either transform themselves into revolutionary organizations or become lieutenants of capital in the intensified exploitation of the workers. The trade union bureaucracy, which has satisfactorily solved its own social problem, took the second path. It turned all the accumulated authority of the trade unions against the socialist revolution and even against any attempts of the

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p 145.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p 146. J H Thomas, 'Dress Suit, MP' – General Secretary of the Railwaymen, Labour Cabinet Minister, and one of the renegades of 1931 – was a living caricature of the labour leader whose personal rise was reflected both in life-style and in ideology.

⁶¹ 'The Errors in Principle of Syndicalism' (1929), in *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, 1968, pp 58-9. Amsterdam was the headquarters of the 'yellow' International Federation of Trade Unions.

workers to resist the attacks of capital and reaction.⁶²

Trotsky's fullest exposition of the incorporation analysis was contained in an article on which he was working at the time of his death. 'There is one common feature', he began

in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organisations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power. This process is equally characteristic of the neutral, the Social-Democratic, the Communist and "anarchist" trade unions. This fact alone shows that the tendency towards "growing together" is intrinsic not in this or that doctrine as such but derives from social conditions common for all unions.⁶³

One reason for this process, Trotsky argued, was the monopolisation of capital: unions were 'deprived of the possibility of profiting by the competition between the different enterprises' and therefore looked to the state for assistance – a natural response, given the ideological and social position typical of union leaders.⁶⁴ But incorporation also reflected the initiative of the state itself, at the behest of the employing class, in a period when economic crisis precluded 'any serious and lasting reforms' by trade unions.⁶⁵ The survival of capitalism permitted only two strategies: either the physical destruction of union organisation, as in fascism; or its emasculation, by turning the union bureaucracy into agents of capital.

Monopoly capitalism is less and less willing to reconcile itself to the independence of trade unions. It demands of the reformist bureaucracy and the labour aristocracy who pick the crumbs from its banquet table, that they become transformed into its political police before the eyes of the working class. If that is not achieved, the labour bureaucracy is driven away and replaced by the fascists.⁶⁶

At one level, Trotsky's thesis involved an obvious denial of the continued validity of the Leninist analysis; in an 'epoch of imperialist decay', he insisted, even the traditionally modest activities of pure-and-simple trade unionism could no longer be absorbed by capitalism. Yet at a more fundamental level, elements of the perspectives of both Lenin and Michels were presupposed by Trotsky's argument. First, incorporation was a feasible strategy for monopoly capitalism only

62 'The Unions in Britain' (1933), in *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions*, 1969, p. 54. The phrase 'labor lieutenants of capital' was much used by Daniel de Leon, who attributed it to the prominent politician and spokesman of big business, Hanna (*The Burning Question of Trades Unionism*, 1904, p. 32).

63 'Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay' (1940), in *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, p. 5.

64 *ibid.*, p. 6.

65 *ibid.*, p. 9.

66 *ibid.*, p. 11.

because of characteristics developed by trade unions in their formative years 'during the period of the growth and rise of capitalism'; the fact that unions *had* in the past been able to raise 'the material and cultural level of the proletariat' accounted both for the strength of reformist ideology within the labour movement and for the 'tremendous authority' possessed by union leaders.⁶⁷ Thus incorporation could be viewed merely as an intensification of certain traditional aspects of the status of unions and their leaders in capitalist society. And secondly, it could be plausibly suggested that unions might perform the *repressive* functions which Trotsky detailed only on the assumption that the 'labour bureaucracy' was totally divorced from rank-and-file control.

Recent Derivatives: The Orthodoxy of Industrial Relations

The cataclysmic perspective of Trotsky is of dubious academic respectability in the context of what is conventionally typified as the 'affluent society': nevertheless, in a modified form his thesis has achieved considerable currency. Thus Wright Mills, in a highly influential early work, took up the theme of the 'growing together' of union bureaucracies and the controlling institutions of capitalism. He emphasised, however, that this process occurred not merely at the level of the state but also *within* industry.

Stabilization requires further bureaucratization of business enterprise and labor union. Given present industrial arrangements, it also involves amalgamating the union bureaucracy with the corporation's. This may occur either in the technical *place of work*, in the *economic enterprises* making up a given industry, or among the industries forming the *political economy* as a whole.⁶⁸

The need for incorporation, Mills argued, was recognised by sophisticated managers and union officials alike.

To the view that the interests of labor and business are complementary rather than contradictory, [they] add that labor and business must co-operate in the actual process of production and in the conduct of the political economy as a whole. To insure peaceful plants and profitable enterprises in a stable economy, the leaders of labor will deliver a responsible, which is to say, a well-disciplined, union of contented workers in return for a junior partnership in the productive process, security for the union, and higher wages for the workers of the industry.⁶⁹

67 'Unions in Britain', in *Leon Trotsky on the Trade Unions* pp 53-4.

68 C Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power*, 1948, pp 223-4. Mills in fact shared the cataclysmic perspective of Trotsky: writing in the immediate aftermath of the war (and before the economic role of the cold war and the permanent arms economy had become manifest) he assumed that capitalism would necessarily generate either mass unemployment or a new world war.

69 *ibid*, p 119.

It was at the workplace level that Mills viewed this process as most fully developed. 'Business-labor co-operation within the place of work', he argued, 'means the partial integration of company and union bureaucracies. . . . The union takes over much of the company's personnel work, becoming the disciplining agent of the rank and file. . . . Company and union . . . are disciplining agents for each other, and both discipline the malcontented elements among the unionized employees.'⁷⁰

Mills was one of the few prominent academic writers on industrial relations to display a basic sympathy for the underlying orientations of the Marxist tradition. He was also very much in the minority in his sensitivity to the dialectic between trade unions and capitalist society. More orthodox literature on industrial relations has displayed a resolutely one-sided approach to this relationship. It has been common, for example, to treat incorporation as one element in a syndrome of union 'maturity', reflected also in the decline of internal democracy and the increasing salience of 'organisational needs'. An unusually explicit presentation of this thesis has been provided by Lester:

As a union's growth curve begins to level off, subtle psychological changes tend to take place. The turbulence and enthusiasm of youth, the missionary zeal of a new movement, slow down to a more moderate pace. Increasingly, decisions are made centrally, as a political machine becomes entrenched, as the channels of union communications are more tightly controlled from the top, and as reliance on staff specialists expands. Along with these changes, the national leadership experiences some modification. As the organization enlarges, the problems of management multiply and the emphasis shifts from organization to administration, negotiation, and contract enforcement. The leaders of the formative years are succeeded by a second and a third generation leadership, who did not experience the early struggles and bitterness. Security for the top hierarchy and the good life on a sizeable salary . . . may be part of a group of corrupting influences. The democratic checks may have weakened with increasing size, centralization, and power in the hands of full-time functionaries. . . . Societal acceptance and partial absorption tend to accompany success in achieving some of the organization's goals. . . . With institutional security and additional bargaining experience, the amount of joint machinery increases, the union acquires respectability, and its interests broaden. The success that the union has in satisfying workers' non-wage desires tends to diversify and diffuse its goals.

To summarize, the processes of internal change develop long-run trends toward internal stability, centralization, and machine control; the processes of external integration encourage a long-range tendency toward accommodation, orderly and peaceful arrangements, and breadth and moderation.⁷¹

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, pp 224-5.

⁷¹ R A Lester, *As Unions Mature*, 1958, pp 160-7. For a very similar thesis see F H Harbison and J R Coleman, *Goals and Strategies in Collective Bargaining*, 1951.

It is evident that in the 'maturity' thesis a variety of insights are intermingled. As noted in the previous discussion of Michels, a range of institutional 'needs' can be seen as acquiring increasing salience over time, supplementing and even displacing the union's original purpose: 'unions as social organizations have developed a certain "functional autonomy", that is, their growth and integrity have become ends in themselves'.⁷² It is commonly argued that 'the old idealistic approach' cannot spontaneously persist, and that early militancy thus tends naturally to subside.⁷³ It is a commonplace that size accentuates the internal problems of bureaucratisation. And massively reinforcing these internal tendencies, the maturity thesis posits the external dynamic of incorporation.

Pressures for union-employer collaboration at the level of the individual company can be viewed as derivative from the goal of 'union security'. In the long term, a union's stability and growth appear to depend on its ability 'to convert temporary movement into permanent organisation . . . [and] to acquire sanctions strong enough to sustain continuous membership'.⁷⁴ For most unions, this has implied joint involvement with employers in job regulation: the pursuit of recognition of the union by the employer, the obverse of which is recognition of the employer by the union. More specifically, it is typical of any collective bargain that the union accepts some form of 'peace obligation': a duty at the very least to restrain its members from engaging in unauthorised conflict activities, implying a quasi-managerial function. As one writer has argued, 'in the evolution of the labor contract, the union becomes part of the "control system of management" . . . The union often takes over the task of disciplining the men, when management cannot'.⁷⁵ Such tendencies are augmented where sophisticated managements recognise the advantages of a collaborative relationship with the union, and offer to facilitate the requirements of union security in return for assistance in maintaining a tractable and predictable labour force. To summarise:

There are numerous ways in which a positive acceptance of the union, an effort to integrate it into the administrative structure of the enterprise instead of treating it as a thing apart, can contribute to efficient management. . . . This sort of relationship, in which union and management officials not only accept each other's existence but support each other's objectives, is fre-

72 A S Tannenbaum and R L Kahn, *Participation in Union Locals*, 1958, p 3.

73 See Herberg, 'Bureaucracy and Democracy in Labor Unions', *Antioch Review*, 1943.

74 Flanders, 'What Are Trade Unions For?', in *Management and Unions*, p 43.

75 D Bell, 'The Capitalism of the Proletariat', in *The End of Ideology*, 1961 edn, pp 214-5.

quently referred to as "mature collective bargaining".⁷⁶

It is also common to discern incorporating pressures at the level of the state, though in a less dramatic form than Trotsky depicted. If the stability and survival of union organisation is assisted by the acceptance of union legitimacy by employers, the same is true in respect of the agencies of political control. While unionism has typically emerged in the face of the active (and often brutal) hostility of the state, once organisation is established there is much evidence that both parties tend to seek a more amicable relationship. And it is a familiar proposition that the recognition of trade unions as bodies of standing within society induces a commitment, at leadership level at least, to policies of 'moderation' and 'responsibility'. In Britain, the preoccupation of the Trades Union Congress with the mechanics of political decision-making – an obsessive concern to make the unions' voice heard by the political establishment, to be consulted by people in high places, to be incorporated into the processes of government planning and administration – is manifest in the very chapter-headings of its centenary history.⁷⁷ The success of this objective, and the consequent obligation of loyalty to the existing society and its rulers, has been succinctly stated by the Labour Correspondent of *The Times*:

The unions had become in a very real sense a part of the "establishment". Their association with the Government and employers on scores of committees of all kinds and their accepted right to be consulted on any subject affecting their members directly or indirectly made them an important influence in the nation's councils and also, many people felt, imposed a responsibility on them. They had become a part of the body of the State in many of its intricate ramifications, instead of being, as they once were, something outside the State and in some senses a rival power. . . . Belonging, as they now did, implied loyalty.⁷⁸

An influential doctrine in modern social theory holds that the articulation of conflict can, paradoxically, increase the stability and cohesion of a society.

Conflict, rather than being disruptive and dissociating, may indeed be a means of balancing and hence maintaining a society as a going concern. . . . A flexible society benefits from conflict because such behaviour, by helping to

76 L G Reynolds, *Labor Economics and Labor Relations*, 1956 edn, pp 176-7.

77 L Birch, *History of the TUC 1868-1968*, 1968; typical phrases from the chapter-headings are 'the fight for the right to be heard' and 'the TUC is consulted by Ministers'. For details of the growth of union-state collaboration in Britain see V L Allen, *Trade Unions and the Government*, 1960.

78 E L Wigham, *What's Wrong with the Unions?*, 1961, pp 11-2.

create and modify norms, assures its continuance under changed conditions.⁷⁹

Such arguments owe much to the evidence of the history of industrial relations: the development of trade unions from apparent organs of protest and revolt into respectable components of the social fabric of capitalism.

Contrary to Marx, industrial conflict peaks early, not late, in the process of industrialization. Rather than facing greater and greater conflict ending in revolution, industrializing societies face more and more peace once the early period of industrial unrest has been passed. Problems get solved, attitudes get changed, mechanisms get developed.⁸⁰

Or to quote Dahrendorf: 'industrial conflict has become less violent because its existence has been accepted and its manifestations have been socially regulated. . . . By collective bargaining the frozen fronts of industrial conflict are thawed.'⁸¹

It is central to contemporary theories of maturity and incorporation that as trade unions gain acceptance by employers and the state, industrial conflict is rendered increasingly institutionalised, professionalised and more or less antiseptic.

That there are conflicts of interest in industry today seems scarcely questionable. That we have institutionalized the mode of this conflict through collective bargaining is also clear. We have thus built, in the institutional practice of collective bargaining, a social device for bringing conflict to a successful resolution.⁸²

For the typical academic analyst of industrial relations, this is a trend regarded both as an 'iron law' and as a source of unreserved satisfaction. What in the context of socialist theory represented pessimism has thus become the complacency of contemporary ideologues of 'the end of ideology'.

When the conflict of interest groups is legitimate, these "conflict" organizations contribute to the integration and stability of the society. Trade unions should not be viewed primarily in their economic-cleavage function. They also serve to integrate their members in the larger body politic and give them a basis for loyalty to the system. Marx's focus on unions and workers' parties as sources of revolutionary tension was incorrect. It is precisely in those countries where workers have been able to form strong unions and obtain representation in politics that disintegrative forms of political cleavage are least likely to be found. Communist movements have developed in countries

79 L A Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, 1954, pp 137, 154.

80 C Kerr, *Labor and Management in Industrial Society*, 1964, p xx.

81 R Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, 1959, pp 257, 260.

82 R Dubin, 'Constructive Aspects of Industrial Conflict', in A Kornhauser, R Dubin and A M Ross (eds), *Industrial Conflict*, 1954, p 47.

which were most inclined to deny legitimacy to unions and other democratic expressions of working-class aspirations.⁸³

3 PESSIMISTIC ONE-SIDEDNESS: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

So far this paper has concentrated on exposition: it is now necessary to consider critically the various theoretical revisions of the 'optimistic' interpretation of Marx and Engels. While the theses of integration, oligarchy and incorporation present a necessary corrective to the simplistic assumptions of early Marxian analysis, such theses in any unqualified form may themselves be regarded as a distortion. Any analysis which focuses exclusively on integrating tendencies is essentially one-sided, merely examining one moment in what may best be regarded as a dialectical relationship between trade unionism and capitalist society. As Anderson has argued,

trade unions are dialectically both an opposition to capitalism and a component of it. For they both resist the given unequal distribution of income within the society by their wage demands, and ratify the principle of an unequal distribution by their existence, which implies as its complementary opposite that of management. . . .

Whatever the degree of collaboration of trade union leaders, the very existence of a trade union *de facto* asserts the unbridgeable *difference* between Capital and Labour in a market society; it embodies the refusal of the working class to become integrated into capitalism on its own terms. Trade unions thus everywhere produce *working class* consciousness—that is, awareness of the separate identity of the proletariat as a social force, with its own corporate interests in society. This is not the same thing as a *socialist* consciousness—the hegemonic vision and will to create a new social order, which only a revolutionary party can create. But the one is a necessary stage towards the other.⁸⁴

In brief, it might be suggested that the same social conflicts which in the first instance generated unionism persist as counter-tendencies to the specific processes of integration, oligarchy and incorporation. It is indeed true that the primacy of integrative over oppositional characteristics of trade unionism is manifest in certain phases of the development of capitalism; thus integration theories present an accurate diagnosis of the dominant trends which confronted their

83 S M Lipset, 'Political Sociology', in R K Merton, L Broom and L S Cottrell (eds), *Sociology Today*, 1959, p 113. For an important critique of this school see S W Rousseas and J. Farganis, 'American Politics and the End of Ideology', in I L Horowitz (ed), *The New Sociology*, 1964, and R Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, 1969.

84 P Anderson, 'The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action', in R Blackburn and A Cockburn (eds), *The Incompatibles*, 1967, pp 264, 274.

originators. Yet the historically specific context of these analyses must not be ignored: what is illegitimate is to present as absolutely valid what are essentially conditional relationships.⁸⁵ The following discussion attempts to disentangle necessary from contingent relationships in the various 'pessimistic' theories previously outlined.

Lenin

In reviewing Lenin's arguments it is necessary to defer to a later section consideration of the complex problems of ideology and 'trade union consciousness'; the issue to be discussed here is the ability of the capitalist system to absorb unscathed the economic assaults of trade unionism.

Underlying Lenin's arguments in *What Is To Be Done?* is the assumption that the trade union struggle *can* enable 'the sellers of labour power . . . to sell their "commodity" on better terms', that capitalism *can* afford to offer economic concessions.⁸⁶ Against the background of the development of 'affluence' and 'welfare capitalism', it might seem fatuous to pause to scrutinise this revision of Marx's prognosis. Yet it is necessary to recognise that the validity of this assumption is dependent on the inter-relationship of two factors: the margin available for concessions within a specific economic context, and the level of aspiration and degree of organisation among the working population.

It is reasonable to argue that the integration of trade unions within capitalism is possible only where the available margin is sufficient to absorb the minimum concessions acceptable to organised workers. Undeniably, the requirements of this equation have in practice customarily applied. In periods of economic expansion, union gains have normally been confined to a portion of the increased production (more substantial 'achievements' in respect of money incomes have typically been negated by price inflation) – hence the often remarked stability in the share of the national income accruing to labour. In such circumstances, the potential bargaining power of labour has rarely been exploited by trade unions: one writer has indeed suggested that 'their industrial aims have been tailored so as not to disturb the capitalist system or even to upset unduly any indivi-

85 Such criticism is more generally applicable to functionalist theorists who (like Coser), in rejecting a conception of conflict as exclusively destructive, one-sidedly emphasise its integrative consequences. Cf A W Gouldner, 'Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy', in L A Coser and B Rosenberg (eds), *Sociological Theory*, 1964 edn, p 501.

86 *Collected Works*, Vol v, pp 398-408. Lenin was not wholly explicit on this point – referring, for example (p 406) to 'pseudo-concessions'; for a discussion of his views see Hammond, *Lenin on Trade Unions*.

dual employers'.⁸⁷ In periods of economic crisis – when, as Trotsky argued, the conditions of workers necessarily suffered attack – unions have eased the process by negotiating 'orderly' reductions. In both cases, institutional pressures appear important.

During economic growth the policy of 'moderation' and 'responsibility' tends also to represent the line of least resistance for the union official: when the point of confrontation is reached, it has not infrequently proved less difficult to persuade the members to accept what the employer is prepared to concede than to force the latter to improve his offer significantly.⁸⁸ This helps explain the 'myth of achievement' which Allen has noted: 'an illusion which magnifies fractional changes in wage rates or marginal improvements in employment conditions into resounding successes'.⁸⁹ In a recession, when the power of the union is in any case at its nadir, its 'institutional needs' reinforce the pressures to persuade the membership to accept deteriorating standards.

From the standpoint of the union, the purpose of agreeing to the cut is to maintain the bargaining relationship on as satisfactory a basis as possible. What appears as a danger is not that employment will fall off but that the employer will become hostile. It is the loss of friendly relationships, bargaining units, and collective agreements . . . which is most to be avoided.⁹⁰

In both situations, accommodation is facilitated by the fact that workers' economic aspirations, and their articulation by the unions, tend to focus on relative rather than absolute levels in income. It is inter-group relativities, rather than the division between wages and profits, which hold greatest salience. Thus the norms of 'fair wages' which typically prevail have essentially conservative implications.⁹¹

Yet it would be dangerous to regard this as an inevitable characteristic of trade unions in capitalist society, and indeed, in the current British situation the preconditions of trade union integration appear noticeably precarious. The economic context is such as to minimise the margin for trade union reforms. First, virtual stagnation entails that improved wages cannot be financed painlessly out of economic growth. Second, redistribution of income towards labour is unacceptable: the requirements of accelerated investment and the pressures of international capital mobility point rather to the need

87 V L Allen, *Militant Trade Unionism*, 1969, p 29.

88 For a relevant discussion see R E Walton and R B McKersie, *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations*, 1965 – in particular the chapters on 'intraorganizational bargaining'.

89 *Militant Trade Unionism*, p 30.

90 Ross, *Trade Union Wage Policy*, p 15.

91 For further consideration of these points see R Hyman, '“Fairness” in Industrial Relations: a Preliminary Discussion', *SSRC Industrial Relations Research Unit Discussion Paper 2*, 1971.

for an increase in the share of profits. And third, problems of external balance limit the opportunity to finance money wage increases out of price inflation. Thus it is arguable that even the traditionally limited activities of trade unions are no longer tolerable within British capitalism.⁹²

Concurrently, the ability of British unionism to contain workers' economic aspirations within 'realistic' limits would appear to have largely evaporated. 'Orbits of coercive comparison' have widened markedly, and previous diagnoses of 'the restricted and even illogical choice of reference groups'⁹³ have been rendered obsolescent. Thus there are significant indications of the disintegration of traditional normative consensus regarding a 'fair' structure of incomes.⁹⁴ At a more general level, there exists some evidence for positing an incipient 'revolution of rising expectations'. Of critical importance is the extent to which the official institutions of trade unionism have been willing (or else, unwilling, have been obliged) to articulate their members' heightened expectations, thus adding legitimacy to workers' demands. (The implications of this development for other aspects of the 'pessimistic' interpretation of trade unionism will be considered later.) The most obvious consequence has been the wage and strike 'explosions' of the last few years.

It is therefore necessary to question the continued validity of the integration thesis within the current situation. The conjunction of chronic economic malaise with sustained and even heightened trade union pressure has inevitably created a situation of radical instability.⁹⁵ Attempts at legal emasculation of unionism provide eloquent witness to the threat which even pure-and-simple trade unionism poses for contemporary British capitalism.⁹⁶

Michels

Michels' theory of the 'iron law of oligarchy' has attracted widespread acceptance, precisely because it does appear accurately to fit

92 For a detailed economic analysis which supports the above argument see M Kidron, *Western Capitalism Since the War*, 1968.

93 W G Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, 1966, p 218.

94 Compare here the argument of A Fox and A Flanders, 'The Reform of Collective Bargaining: from Donovan to Durkheim', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1969.

95 These developments are considered in more detail in R Hyman, 'Strikes in Britain: the Disintegration of Stability', in a volume on European strikes to be published by the *Centro di Documentazione di Torino*. They are also discussed in R. Hyman. *Strikes* to be published by Fontana.

96 This argument assumes, of course, a continued commitment to such dominant policy objectives as massive arms expenditure (including overseas 'defence' costs), relative freedom for capital exports, and the maintenance of sterling as a reserve currency within an irrational international monetary system.

the facts of the development of national union organisations. Repeated studies have appeared to underline his diagnosis: the virtual irremovability of even elected leaders; the effective control of policy by full-time officials; the minimal involvement of rank-and-file members in the formal channels of internal democracy. The one significant counter-example – a union with considerable membership participation and control – was acknowledged by its investigators as unique in many other of its characteristics: they concluded that 'the implications of our analysis for democratic organizational politics are almost as pessimistic as those postulated by Robert Michels'.⁹⁷

Yet it is arguable that recurrent emphasis on the formal mechanisms of decision-making has prevented adequate attention to certain countervailing tendencies to those discerned by Michels. Three in particular may be noted: the implications of workers' 'instrumental' attitudes to their unions, normative pressures towards democratic practice, and the distinctive contexts of different levels of organisation.

One element in Michels' explanation of oligarchical control and mass apathy was his analysis of 'the technical competence which definitely elevates the leaders above the mass and subjects the mass to the leaders'.⁹⁸ The conduct of the affairs of the organisation required specialised skills and experience, and the rank and file recognised its own incompetence to dictate – or even to judge – the policies of the officials. The implication of this argument is that workers' orientation to trade unionism is essentially instrumental: that they regard their unions as 'service' organisations, as *means* of providing restricted economic benefits.⁹⁹ Unionists are thus presumed to endorse the attitude commended by Allen:

Trade-union organization is not based on theoretical concepts prior to it, that is on some concept of democracy, but on the end it serves. In other words, the end of trade-union activity is to protect and improve the general living standards of its members and not to provide workers with an exercise in self-government.¹⁰⁰

It follows from this assumption, however, that rank-and-file apathy is dependent on the effectiveness of the leaders in providing the service desired. Accordingly, the decision-making autonomy of the leadership is subject to important constraints. This was clearly recognised by the American theorist of trade unions, Hoxie, who introduced the concept

⁹⁷ S M Lipset, M A Trow and J S Coleman, *Union Democracy: the Internal Politics of the International Typographic Union*, 1956, p 405.

⁹⁸ *Political Parties*, p 84.

⁹⁹ For a discussion of the 'instrumental orientation' see J H Goldthorpe, D Lockwood, F Bechhofer and J Platt, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, 1968, Ch 5. They assume (pp 107-8) that a purely instrumental attitude to unionism is an essentially recent characteristic.

¹⁰⁰ V L Allen, *Power in Trade Unions*, 1954, p 15.

of business unionism. He noted that where members defined the purposes of their union in purely business terms, it was 'prone to develop strong leadership and to become somewhat autocratic in government'; but, he added,

government and leaders are ordinarily held pretty strictly accountable to the pragmatic test. When they fail to "deliver the goods" both are likely to be swept aside by a democratic uprising of the rank and file.¹⁰¹

It is true that various strategies are open to union officials in order to escape such limitations on their freedom of action. Thus a collective agreement, like commodities generally, may be 'sold' on the basis of its packaging as much as its content. In the absence of clear criteria by which members can judge the effectiveness of union negotiators, the crucial test is often to *appear* to have extracted the maximum obtainable from the employers; to satisfy the rank and file it may be sufficient to go through the motions of tough bargaining.¹⁰² Yet image is not everything: while sophisticated tactics may reduce the dangers of membership dissatisfaction, they cannot eliminate these altogether. As Michels recognised, situations can occur in which the rank and file consider their interests neglected: 'it cannot be denied that the masses revolt from time to time . . .'. Yet he continued with the bald assertion that 'their revolts are always suppressed'.¹⁰³ Recent experience in Britain, where union officials have found themselves obliged to give backing to unofficial movements—or in the United States, where less flexible leaders have been ejected from office—surely contradicts this assumption.

A second factor the weight of which was insufficiently appreciated by Michels is the prevalence of assumptions that trade unions *ought* in some sense to operate democratically; it is arguable that this sets significant limits to the oligarchic tendencies in their internal processes. As one writer has suggested:

The union leader can identify at least three sources of pressure to make him conform to democratic practices in the execution of his duties. In ascending order of the urgency of their claims upon his attention, these sources are

101 R F Hoxie, *Trade Unionism in the United States*, 1923 edn, p 46. In the British context, the same point has been more recently emphasised by H A Clegg and R Adams: 'if the official union leaders do not deliver the goods, unofficial movements will spring up. . . . Indeed, this is one of the main guarantees of union democracy'. (*The Employers' Challenge*, 1957, p 15).

102 The ability to manipulate rank-and-file opinion by such means is widely discussed: see for example, C Kerr, 'Industrial Conflict and its Mediation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 1954; Ross, *Trade Union Wage Policy*; Walton and McKersie, *A Behavioral Theory*; A S Tannenbaum, 'Unions', in J G March (ed), *Handbook of Organizations*, 1965.

103 *Political Parties*, p 162.

management, certain sections of the public at large, and the membership.¹⁰⁴

Managements are often anxious to demonstrate that union leaders are unrepresentative of the wishes of their employees, or have become in some sense 'out of touch'; to protect himself against such charges, the official must be confident that he can carry his members with him. 'Public opinion' can be important because unions often welcome the goodwill of sections of influential opinion; and also because widespread public criticism or hostility might provide a basis for legislative attack. The fact that democratic practice is widely considered incumbent on officials of trade unions (a situation virtually unique within organisations) might be expected to influence their behaviour. Most immediately, norms of democratic practice are particularly common among rank-and-file union activists who interact regularly with their officials. This fact has been noted with regret by one British commentator.

A large proportion of active trade unionists are deeply suspicious of anything resembling "Business Unionism" on the American model, and would prefer to have an inefficient union system which remains true to its working-class socialist traditions rather than an efficient one modelled on the methods of capitalist industry (as the US unions are). As a result there is very deep-rooted hostility to any attempt to increase the salaries of union officials or to provide them with the means of building up efficient twentieth-century organizations.¹⁰⁵

Most leaders of British unions achieve office only after many years as lay activists; and those at least who have been accustomed to democratic control are likely to have been socialised to define their role in a manner which precludes the extremes of oligarchic practice. Thus it is likely that 'they will stop short of the excesses of cynical manipulation to which Michels assumes they will be prone. This internalization may even be strengthened by the general cultural values of the wider society.'¹⁰⁶

It is of course true – as Michels himself suggested – that officials may avoid conscientious doubts with the rationalisation that their actions are ultimately in the interests of the union. It is also true that the external constraints can be to some extent evaded. As Coleman recognised, the 'compulsive pressures of democracy' are often met

104 J S Coleman, 'The Compulsive Pressures of Democracy in Unionism', *American Journal of Sociology*, 1956, p 520.

105 M Shanks, *The Stagnant Society*, 1961, p 98. Shanks' characterisation of American unionism is somewhat misleading: here too, the full-time official's 'role-orientation in most cases deviates significantly from that of the bureaucratic professional' (H Wilemsky, 'The Trade Union as a Bureaucracy', in A Etzioni (ed), *Complex Organisations: a Sociological Reader*, 1961, p 233).

106 A Fox, *A Sociology of Work in Industry*, 1971, p 124.

in form rather than reality. Nevertheless, such 'mock democracy', to be convincing, must bear at least some relation to the real thing.

A third important criticism of Michels' thesis is his monolithic conception of union organisation: the limitation of his analysis to the formal, national channels of decision-making.¹⁰⁷ At this level, his assertion of the 'mechanical and technical impossibility of direct government by the masses'¹⁰⁸ possesses obvious cogency; yet the possibility of significant membership participation and control at other levels is not thereby excluded. It is true that the British union branch is notorious for its minimal involvement of ordinary members (though participation is normally greater in unions with a tradition of 'primitive democracy').¹⁰⁹ This could however be largely explained by the vestigial functions of the branch within most British unions: in the USA there is evidence of greater rank-and-file involvement in those local unions with important decision-making powers.¹¹⁰

Of far greater significance, however, is the experience of membership involvement in *shop-floor* trade unionism. In Britain, the emergence of workshop organisation (particularly in engineering) as the principal means of workers' economic struggles has been regularly emphasised.¹¹¹ Two major consequences are the phenomenon of 'wage drift' (i.e. increased earnings achieved within the factory) and the erosion of important areas of managerial control at the point of production. There is evidence of active membership participation in decision-making at this level,¹¹² and while workshop organisation normally has no formal relationship to the official structures of trade unionism, in practice the shop steward represents a crucial link between the membership at large and the union hierarchy.¹¹³ In this way, the rank and file may be able to exert considerable influence over (or else act independently of) leadership policies and actions – as recent British experience well demonstrates.

It is therefore necessary to conclude that Michels, in his neglect of these countervailing pressures, presented an overdetermined model

107 It may be significant that Michels drew his examples principally from the German unions, where centralisation was most highly developed.

108 *Political Parties*, Part I, Ch 2.

109 Among relevant studies are Political and Economic Planning, *British Trade Unionism*, 1948; B C Roberts, *Trade Union Government and Administration*, 1956; Government Social Survey, *Workplace Industrial Relations*, 1968.

110 See for example L R Sayles and G Strauss, *The Local Union*, 1953; Tannenbaum and Kahn, *Participation in Union Locals*; A H Cook, *Union Democracy: Practice and Ideal*, 1963.

111 Notably by the Donovan Report: Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, 1968.

112 See for example Goldthorpe et al, *The Affluent Worker*.

113 See H A Clegg, *The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain*, 1970, p 107.

of oligarchic development. As Gouldner has argued,

it is the pathos of pessimism, rather than the compulsions of rigorous analysis, that leads to the assumption that organizational constraints have stacked the deck against democracy. For on the face of it there is every reason to assume that "the underlying tendencies which are likely to inhibit the democratic process" are just as likely to impair authoritarian rule. It is only in the light of such a pessimistic pathos that the defeat of democratic values can be assumed to be probable, while their victory is seen as a slender thing, delicately constituted and precariously balanced.

When, for example, Michels spoke of the "iron law of oligarchy", he attended solely to the ways in which organizational needs inhibit democratic possibilities. But the very same evidence to which he called attention could enable us to formulate the very opposite theorem — the "iron law of democracy". Even as Michels himself saw, if oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men doggedly rebuild them after each inundation. Michels chose to dwell on only one aspect of this process, neglecting to consider this other side. There cannot be an iron law of oligarchy, however, unless there is an iron law of democracy.¹¹⁴

Trotsky

In considering the analysis of Trotsky it is necessary to distinguish between his prognosis of the attempt to incorporate the unions and his assessment of the chances of the success of this attempt.

The articulation of a strategy of incorporation in response to the chronic problems of the British economy clearly demonstrates the continued relevance of the first part of Trotsky's argument. The strategy however extends beyond the intensification of the already close relationship between the state and national union leaderships (through such developments as the NEDC, 'incomes policy', etc.) to the factory level, where unionism's main threat to the stability of British capitalism is perceived. Essentially, the aim is to exploit the ambivalence in the shop steward's position: his desire for a stable relationship with management (which might be jeopardised by demands which go 'too far'), his natural tendency to treat disputes as 'problems' to be solved, his exposure to precisely the same integrating pressures as operate on the full-time official.¹¹⁵ Incorporation at this level requires the formalisation of the steward's role, the substitution of 'joint regulation' for the areas of control exercised autonomously by workers through their organisation on the shop floor. One form of this process is the 'productivity' bargain, so rapidly embraced in the 1960s.¹¹⁶ The more general implications of this

114 'Metaphysical Pathos', pp 507-8 (see note 85 above).

115 For a fuller discussion see Hyman, 'Strikes in Britain' (see note 95 above).

116 See T Cliff, *The Employers' Offensive*, 1970.

strategy have been clearly stated by Flanders:

Management was in practice faced with a rival authority on the shop floor and had to come to terms with it and negotiate settlements. . . . The paradox, whose truth managements have found it so difficult to accept, is that they can only regain control by sharing it.¹¹⁷

This analysis underlies the central prescriptions of the Donovan Report. In brief, its definition of the central 'problem' of British industrial relations was the 'anarchy and disorder'—in other words, the undermining of *managerial* control—at factory level. To assist managements in recovering control, two main lines of attack were proposed: the greater involvement of full-time union officials (in conjunction with higher management) in supervising industrial relations at the point of production, and the closer integration of shop stewards within the official structures of trade unionism and the official institutions of collective bargaining. The current Industrial Relations Act, while rejecting the 'voluntarism' inherent in the Donovan proposals, and while motivated in part by straightforward ideological hostility to trade unionism as such, may also be viewed as a more forceful variant of the incorporation strategy: an attempt to compel union leaderships, on pain of severe financial penalties, to assume and apply powers to discipline and control their workshop representatives.¹¹⁸

If the operation of a strategy of incorporation seems evident, it remains to consider whether the acquiescence of the unions themselves can be assumed. It was suggested previously that Trotsky's argument on this score presupposed the acceptance of Michels' thesis—that union leaders enjoyed such immunity from rank-and-file control that they could with equanimity embrace the role of agents of an assault on their members' conditions. If the criticisms of Michels outlined above are valid, then the success of any attempt to render trade union functions unambiguously repressive must be regarded as problematic.

Again, recent British experience is of considerable relevance. One of the most frequently remarked of recent developments has been the emergence, within the two largest unions, of leaders¹¹⁹ offering explicit (though in important respects ambivalent) support for rank-and-file self-activity in the areas both of collective bargaining and of

117 A Flanders, *Collective Bargaining: Prescription for Change*, 1967, p 32.

118 Thus A Shonfield, who while signing the Donovan Report appended a 'Note of Dissent' urging greater legal compulsion, has suggested that the Bill is based on a belief that 'there is nothing much wrong with British industrial relations which a few effective unions exercising more authority over their members could not remedy'. (*The Times*, 6 October 1970).

119 Jack Jones, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, and Hugh Scanlon, President of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers.

internal union government. Almost certainly, this has reinforced the readiness of members of these unions to submit unusually ambitious demands and to back these by industrial action. In many unions with a traditionally passive membership, unwonted rank-and-file belligerence (spurred perhaps by the achievements of less restrained sections of the working class) has confronted officialdom with a painful choice: to adopt the uncharacteristic role (and attendant 'public' vilification) of the militant, or to risk losing control of members' actions. The determination of such labour barons as Lord Cooper of the General and Municipal Workers, who at first clung fast to the role of 'responsible labour statesman', has been largely eroded by such traumatic acts of defiance as at Ford Halewood and Pilkingtons.

Also worthy of note is the official union response to legislative measures designed to curb shop-floor militancy. In 1968, the hostile reaction to the relatively limited and probably unworkable 'penal clauses' outlined in Labour's White Paper *In Place of Strife* surprised observers by its vehemence, and played some part in obliging the government to retreat. It was only to be expected that official opposition to the far more draconian Tory Bill – 'as odious as it is dangerous'¹²⁰ – would, verbally at least, be stronger still. What is rather more significant is the endorsement given by some unions – even if only a minority – to demonstrations of industrial action: a virtually unprecedented step, even if modest and unenthusiastic. And the campaign of the TUC itself, even if almost consciously ineffectual (many union leaders may well regard the prospect of increased powers to control the rank and file as not unwelcome), nevertheless has two important by-products: adding a veneer of legitimacy to more vigorous resistance led by shop-floor militants; and undermining still further the ability of union officialdom to exercise its traditional restraining influence in respect of the general aspirations and activities of the membership.

The evidence of recent British industrial relations, then, lends considerable support to Trotsky's view that economic crisis leads to attempts to incorporate trade unions so as to neutralise the threat which they pose to the stability of capitalism. But the same evidence notably fails to validate his presumption that the unions – in the absence of the 'alternative leadership' of a revolutionary party – would automatically succumb to the incorporating embrace.

Industrial Relations Orthodoxy

Having considered critically the arguments of their (usually

¹²⁰ TUC, *Reason: the Case Against the Government's Proposals on Industrial Relations*, 1970, p 28.

unacknowledged) intellectual progenitors, it is now possible to examine more briefly the contemporary theories of union 'maturity'. One noteworthy feature common to virtually all such analyses is the passive role attributed to the rank-and-file trade unionist. *Prima facie* this might be considered odd – given the active initiative, often involving bitter and even violent struggle, of the workers who established trade unionism in the first place. It is, no doubt, by now a sociological commonplace that what was subjective creativity for one generation stands as objective facticity for those that follow.¹²¹ Thus the organisation established by workers in one historical period in opposition to the controlling structures of capitalism may come to constitute an element in a new framework of control over workers in a later period.¹²² Yet the most influential theories of current industrial relations appear to close the circle, ruling out the possibility of further working-class initiative to challenge the new equilibrium. Thus history is brought to a full stop.¹²³

Such a perspective, it was seen earlier, derives from an analysis which one-sidedly emphasises the integrative consequences of overt conflict. The articulation of antagonistic interests through institutions which are assigned legitimacy, so it is argued, necessarily renders conflict routine and innocuous. In applying this thesis to trade unionism, it is common to cite Wright Mills' characterisation of the union leader as a 'manager of discontent'. This phrase is however rarely placed fully in context.

During mass organization drives, the labor leader whips up the opinion and activity of the rank and file and focuses them against the business corporation as a pedestal of the system and against the state as the crown of the

121 See for example, P L Berger and T Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 1966; P L Berger and S Pullberg, 'Reification and the Sociological Critique of Consciousness', *New Left Review*, 1966.

122 Anderson ('Limits and Possibilities', p 276 – see note 84 above) has emphasised that at any point of time, the ability of a union to further its members' interests necessitates organisational discipline, which in turn gives union leaders power *over* their members which can be used *against* their interests. For this very reason, 'it becomes the natural objective of capitalism to appropriate [the union organisation] for the stabilization of the system'.

123 One of the authors cited previously in this context who must escape the above stricture is Dahrendorf. While he insisted that there has been a secular decline in the intensity and violence of industrial conflict, as a consequence of its institutionalisation, he concluded that 'as always in social affairs, however, development is by no means unilinear. There are undoubtedly counter-trends, also, and our analysis is not intended to suggest that all trouble in industry is past. For one thing, it is never possible simply to extrapolate social developments. . . . On the contrary, experience shows that in the history of specific conflicts more and less violent, more and less intense periods follow each other in unpredictable rhythms. It is certainly conceivable that the future has more intense and violent conflicts in store'. One reason cited was that the institutionalisation of unionism leads naturally to rank-and-file revolt, and 'it is hard to see how trade unions propose to check this development'. (*Class and Class Conflict*, pp 278-9).

system. At such time, he is a man voicing loudly the discontent and the aspirations of the people next to the bottom, and he is seen and recognized as a rebel and an agitator. Yet, in fact, all the time that he is the leader of a live and going union, the labor leader is in conflict with the powers of property: he is a rebel against individual business units and their unmolested exercise of the powers which property conveys. In his timidity and fear and eagerness to stay alive in a hostile environment, he does not admit this, and he often believes that he is not a rebel in the senses named, but the fact remains that he is. He is serving the function of a modern rebel by virtue of what his organization must do to live; modern rebels need not be romantic figures. Yet even as the labor leader rebels, he holds back rebellion. He organizes discontent and then he sits on it, exploiting it in order to maintain a continuous organization; the labor leader is a manager of discontent. He makes regular what might otherwise be disruptive, both within the industrial routine and within the union which he seeks to establish and maintain. During wars, he may hold down wildcat strikes; during upswings of the economic cycle, he may encourage sit-down possession of private property. In the slump-war-boom rhythm of modern American society, the labor union is a regulator of disgruntlement and ebullience, and the labor leader, an agent in the institutional channelling of animosity.¹²⁴

This passage highlights the ambivalence inherent in the trade union function. If excessive discontent and conflict is disruptive of established bargaining relationships, excessive passivity is equally unpalatable – depriving the whole institution of unionism of its basic *raison d'être*. The union official cannot suppress 'rebellion' entirely without rendering his organisation and himself redundant: his task is to sustain a delicate balance between grievance and satisfaction, between activism and quiescence. Potentially at least, this must surely be regarded as a highly precarious enterprise.

4 CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF TRADE UNION CONSCIOUSNESS

The argument of the previous section was that recent British experience reveals countervailing tendencies to those discerned by Lenin, Michels and Trotsky. Pure-and-simple trade union activity *does* pose a substantial threat to the stability of the capitalist economy in certain circumstances. The 'iron law of oligarchy' is subject to important constraints. Attempts to extend the process of incorporation *do* meet significant obstacles to success. To this extent, the 'optimistic' interpretation of trade unionism cannot be rejected *outright*.

The essential insight of Marx and Engels, the significance of which subsequent writers have tended to minimise, is that trade unionism necessarily articulates the conflicts generated by capitalist

124 *New Men of Power*, pp 8-9.

industry. More specifically, unionism can be seen as embodying workers' revolt (however tentative) against the deprivations inherent in their role: a revolt which can challenge the fundamental basis of capitalism on two fronts.

Firstly, unionism represents a reaction against economic exploitation: the extraction of surplus value from workers' labour. Unions have always conducted a struggle, within this economic context, to regulate and improve the terms on which workers are obliged to dispose of their labour power. Lenin's arguments on this score have already been critically evaluated: while it is true that workers' economic demands can normally be accommodated within the framework of capitalism, this is not universally the case.

Secondly, and less coherently, unionism also raises issues of power and control. At the very least, as Goodrich argued in a sadly neglected study, 'the demand not to be controlled disagreeably' – which can form the basis for far more explicitly 'political' demands – 'runs through all trade union activity'.¹²⁵ More generally, the recurrence in British industrial relations of disputes concerning 'managerial functions' indicates the extent to which union concern with issues of wages and conditions necessitates an interest in the question of managerial control.¹²⁶ In a pure form, it might be argued, business unionism is inconceivable; not merely because it seems improbable that workers' deprivations are ever experienced as exclusively economic, but also because the 'effort bargain' implicit in every employment relationship is a persistent source of 'political' conflict.¹²⁷

This is not of course to argue that the 'optimistic' analysis can be accepted without substantial qualification. Relevant here is a further aspect of the current British situation: the manifest gap between the activity and the consciousness of organised workers. While the day-to-day activities of trade unionism, particularly at shop-floor level, create a situation of dangerous instability for British capitalism, this consequence is wholly unintended.

Large numbers of workers are recognising for the first time the need for

125 C L Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control*, 1920, p 37.

126 See B Pribičević, *The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control*, 1959, pp 53-64. For a more recent argument that the essence of union activity is as much 'political' as 'economic' see Flanders, 'Collective Bargaining: a Theoretical Analysis', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1968.

127 H A Turner (*The Trend of Strikes*, 1963, p 18) has argued that disputes overtly involving issues of control have become increasingly prominent in British industrial relations. Other writers have insisted that such issues typically underlie wage disputes also; see for example K G J C Knowles, *Strikes*, 1952, pp 219-21; A W Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike*, 1954, pp 25-6; A Gorz, 'Work and Consumption', in P Anderson and R Blackburn (eds), *Towards Socialism*, 1965, p 319. This issue is examined in detail in R Hyman, *Strikes*.

collective self-activity to protect their living standards and working conditions; but this activity does not reflect any *general* questioning of the relations of production in capitalist society. The hegemony of bourgeois ideology is evident in the findings of "public opinion" surveys: the majority of trade unionists are willing to criticise the unions for economic difficulties, blame workers for most disputes, and support legal restrictions on the right to strike. Such findings follow naturally from the purely sectional consciousness of most organised workers: they are ready to accept the condemnation, by press and politicians, of *other* workers' strikes. Though they are unable to accept the dominant ideology in relation to their *own* activity, this activity is itself – whether or not it results in concrete gains – often transient; rarely does it result in any enduring revision of consciousness.¹²⁸

Another example of the uncritical acceptance of bourgeois ideology is the British labour movement's traditional reverence for parliamentarism, its fervent refusal – despite the virtual fusion of 'politics' and 'economics' in contemporary capitalism – to contemplate the use of workers' industrial strength in pursuit of 'political' goals.¹²⁹ In the current situation, such ideological blinkers allow a very real possibility that organised workers, meeting an increasingly concerted assault in a fragmented manner, may sustain a series of sectional defeats which could rapidly transform self-confidence into demoralisation. Through such a process, workers' shop-floor power could indeed be neutralised – with or without the collaboration of union officialdom.

Thus the question naturally arises whether the handicap of a partial and sectional consciousness is inevitable – whether all challenges which union activity may pose to the stability of the system (unless conducted under the direct leadership of a revolutionary party) are necessarily unintentional. Evidently the Leninist theory of trade union consciousness must be examined in detail.

Lenin's formulation in *What Is To Be Done?* has already been cited. Discussion of his arguments may however be facilitated by consideration of a recent presentation, ostensibly of the same thesis, by Hobsbawm:

The "spontaneous" experience of the working class leads it to develop two things: on the one hand a set of immediate demands (e.g., for higher wages) and of institutions, modes of behaviour, etc., designed to achieve them; on the other – but in a much vaguer form and not invariably – a general discontent with the existing system, a general aspiration after a more satisfactory one, and a general outline (co-operative against competitive, socialist against individualist) of alternative social arrangements. The first group of ideas is in the nature of things far more precise and specific than the second.

128 Hyman, 'Strikes in Britain' (see note 95 above).

129 See R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, 1961, p. 13. Conceivably the recent strikes against the Industrial Relations Bill, noted previously, represent an incipient freeing of this ideological blockage.

Moreover they operate all the time whereas the second are of little practical importance – though of immense moral importance – except at the comparatively rare moments when the complete overthrow of the existing system appears likely or immediately practicable. Under conditions of stable capitalism “trade union consciousness” is quite compatible with the *de facto* (or even the formal) acceptance of capitalism, unless that system fails to allow for the *minimum* trade unionist demand of “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay”. (When it does not, trade union consciousness appears automatically to imply changes of the second order.)¹³⁰

In the light of the previous appraisal of Lenin’s arguments, one question immediately suggests itself: what sets the parameters of workers’ conception of ‘the minimum trade unionist demand of “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay”’? If workers were to define ‘fairness’ in terms of ‘the full fruits of their labour’, a demand which is superficially purely economic would have obvious revolutionary implications. As argued earlier, the level of demands which can be accommodated varies according to the economic context. In some contexts, *any* demands for improvements are unrealisable; and in *any* situation, there will be some point in excess of which demands are intolerable. The essence of the Trotskyist conception of the ‘transitional demand’ is precisely the assumption that a struggle for objectively unattainable reforms will generate consciousness of the structural limitations of the capitalist system. History permits this thesis at least a certain plausibility.

This leads to a more specific criticism of Lenin’s analysis: his rigid dichotomy between trade-union and Social-Democratic (i.e. revolutionary socialist) consciousness, together with his insistence that there could be ‘no middle ideology’. The bizarre implications of this position are revealed – presumably unintentionally – in Hobsbawm’s formulation: for he accepts that ‘trade-union consciousness’ can extend to a generalised discontent with capitalism and the conception of and aspiration for a form of socialist society. Indeed, he asserts that ‘a vague – and consequently entirely ineffective – utopianism can be as “spontaneous” a product of proletarian experience as reformism. British craft unions are in this respect no more spontaneous than Spanish anarchism’.¹³¹ Yet in Lenin’s own terms, such ‘utopianism’ would of necessity be classified as the ideological enslavement of the workers to the bourgeoisie: a position which, it might be thought, even the most hostile critic of anarcho-syndicalism would hesitate to embrace explicitly. It seems reasonable, therefore, to question whether the assertion of ‘no middle ideology’ is in fact valid: whether, indeed, the dichotomy between trade union and revolutionary

¹³⁰ E J Hobsbawm, ‘Trends in the British Labour Movement Since 1850’, in *Labouring Men*, 1964, pp 334-5.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

socialist consciousness may mask a continuum along which escalation is in certain circumstances possible.¹³²

It might be noted that the inflexible position adopted by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?* accords ill with certain of his earlier and later writings, where the potential of the trade union struggle in raising workers' consciousness received considerable emphasis. His draft Programme for the Russian Social-Democratic Party, written in 1895-6, presented the straightforward 'optimistic' thesis of traditional Marxism;¹³³ while in his article 'On Strikes' in 1899 he went considerably further:

Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the worker's mind, thoughts of the struggle of the entire working class for emancipation from the oppression of capital. . . . A strike teaches workers to understand what the strength of the employers and what the strength of the workers consists in; it teaches them not to think of their own employer alone and not of their own immediate workmates alone but of all the employers, the whole class of capitalists and the whole class of workers. . . .

A strike, moreover, opens the eyes of the workers to the nature, not only of the capitalists, but of government and the laws as well. . . . Strikes, therefore, teach the workers to unite; they show them that they can struggle against the capitalist only when they are united; strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary, police government. This is the reason that socialists call strikes "a school of war", a school in which the workers learn to make war on their enemies for the liberation of the whole people, of all who labour, from the yoke of government officials and from the yoke of capital.¹³⁴

What Is To Be Done? of course denied absolutely that through experience in trade union struggles, workers' consciousness could develop spontaneously to such a degree; but Lenin's experience of the revolutionary events of 1905 turned him again towards his earlier 'optimistic' assessment. Workers' experience in a spontaneous strike movement at the Putilov Works he saw as generating a 'revolutionary instinct':

One is struck by the amazingly rapid shift of the movement from the purely economic to the political ground, by the tremendous solidarity and energy

132 It could indeed be argued that such a continuum is implicit in Lenin's own discussion in *What Is To Be Done?* In his first references to trade union consciousness he stressed its sectional nature, its inability to transcend individual trade interests. In his subsequent, and more detailed, consideration of socialist consciousness he emphasised the ability to 'respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected'. (*Collected Works*, Vol v, p 375); this emphasis might be considered particularly appropriate in the semi-feudal conditions of Czarist Russia. What Lenin failed to confront explicitly was the existence of an intermediate stage of consciousness: the recognition of the common interests of *workers* as a class and the opposition of these interests to the existing structure of society.

133 *Collected Works*, Vol II, 1960.

134 *ibid*, Vol IV, 1960, pp 315-7.

displayed by hundreds of thousands of proletarians – and all this, notwithstanding the fact that conscious Social-Democratic influence is lacking or is but slightly evident.¹³⁵

As the events of 1905 developed, Lenin went on to suggest that ‘the working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social-Democratic’.¹³⁶ And reviewing this same period in retrospect, he returned effectively to the classic Marxian position:

Capital collects the workers in great masses in big cities, uniting them, teaching them to act in unison. At every step the workers come face to face with their main enemy – the capitalist class. In combat with this enemy the worker becomes a *socialist*, comes to realise the necessity of a complete reconstruction of the whole of society, the complete abolition of all poverty and all oppression.¹³⁷

This interpretation was repeated on the eve of the 1917 revolution:

A specifically proletarian weapon of struggle – the strike – was the principal means of bringing the masses into motion. . . . Only struggle educates the exploited class. Only struggle discloses to it the magnitude of its own power, widens its horizons, enhances its abilities, clarifies its mind, forges its will. . . . The economic struggle, the struggle for immediate and direct improvement of conditions, is alone capable of rousing the most backward strata of the exploited masses, gives them a real education and transforms them – during a revolutionary period – into an army of political fighters within the space of a few months.¹³⁸

Ironically, these views represent a close parallel to Rosa Luxemburg’s theory of spontaneity – which is commonly presented as a total contradiction of Leninism. It is of interest that her own views owed much to Russian experience:

What do we see, however, in the phases through which the Russian movement has already passed? Its most important and most fruitful tactical turns of the last decade were not by any means “invented” by determinate leaders of the movement, and much less by leading organisations, but were in each case the spontaneous product of the unfettered movement itself. . . . Of all these cases, we may say that, in the beginning was “the deed”. The initiative and conscious leadership of the social-democratic organisations played an exceedingly small role. . . . Social-democratic action . . . grows historically out of the elemental class struggle. In so doing, it works and moves in the dialectical contradiction that the proletarian army is first recruited in the struggle itself, where it also becomes clear regarding the tasks of the struggle. Organisation, enlightenment and struggle are not separate, mechanical and also temporarily disconnected factors . . . but are only different sides of the

135 ‘The St. Petersburg Strike’, *ibid*, Vol VIII, 1962, pp 92-3.

136 ‘The Reorganisation of the Party’, *ibid*, Vol x, 1962, p 32.

137 ‘The Lessons of the Revolution’ (1910), *ibid*, Vol XVI, 1963, pp 301-2.

138 ‘Lecture on the 1905 Revolution’ (1917), *ibid*, Vol XXIII, 1964, pp 239-42.

same process.¹³⁹

Unlike the syndicalists, Luxemburg did not suggest that trade union struggles would in all circumstances lead naturally to revolutionary action: 'only in the strong atmosphere of a revolutionary period can every partial little clash between labour and capital build up into a general explosion'.¹⁴⁰ But her central argument remained clear: 'activity itself educates the masses'.¹⁴¹ As she insisted in her last major speech:

The battle for Socialism can only be carried on by the masses, directly against capitalism, in every factory, by every proletarian against his particular employer. . . . Socialism cannot be made and will not be made by order, not even by the best and most capable Socialist government. It must be made by the masses, through every proletarian individual.¹⁴²

The 'optimistic' alternative to the one-sided pessimism of *What Is To Be Done?* need not of course imply an acceptance of anarcho-syndicalism: the thesis that economic struggles can directly and exclusively generate revolution. The issue between Lenin and Luxemburg, or between the Lenin of 1902 and the Lenin of 1905, was essentially the question of the *limits* of trade union consciousness. The need for a revolutionary party to articulate workers' opposition to capitalism, to spearhead its overthrow, and to guide the construction of a new society was not in dispute. The difference was more subtle: a question of the *degree* to which trade union struggles rendered workers susceptible to a revolutionary broadening of consciousness; a question of the *type* of relationship to be established between the revolutionary party and spontaneous trade union activity.

This issue was central to the articles in which Gramsci, in 1919 and 1920, explored the ambivalence inherent in trade unionism.¹⁴³ On the one hand, he characterised unions as

types of proletarian organization specific to the historical period dominated by capital. It can be maintained that they are in a certain sense an integral

139 'Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy' (1904), published as *Leninism or Marxism?*, 1935. Luxemburg's views, and the extent of her 'latent agreement' with Lenin, are discussed by J P Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 1966; see in particular pp 286-93, 334-4, 496-503.

140 'Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften' (1906), quoted in Nettl, p 501.

141 Speech to Foundation Congress of the German Communist Party (1918), quoted in Cliff, *Rosa Luxemburg*, p 41.

142 *ibid*, quoted in Nettl, p 756.

143 *L'Ordine Nuovo*. A selection of these articles were published as 'Soviets in Italy', *New Left Review*, 1968 (and republished in pamphlet form under the same title by the Institute for Workers' Control, 1969). For a discussion of Gramsci's views see J M Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism*, 1967 and A Pozzolini, *Antonio Gramsci: an Introduction to his Thought*, 1971.

part of capitalist society, and have a function which is inherent in the regime of private property.¹⁴⁴

To the thesis of integration he added that of bureaucratisation:

The workers feel that the complex of "their" organization, the trade union, has become such an enormous apparatus that it now obeys laws internal to its structure and its complicated functions, but foreign to the masses. . . . They feel that their will for power is not adequately expressed, in a clear and precise sense, in the present institutional hierarchy. . . .

These *de facto* conditions irritate the workers, but as individuals they are powerless to change them: the worlds and desires of each single man are too small in comparison to the iron laws inherent in the bureaucratic structure of the trade-union apparatus.¹⁴⁵

Gramsci appreciated that such internal developments followed naturally from the external activities of unions in collective bargaining.

The union concentrates and generalizes its scope so that the power and discipline of the movement are focused in a central office. This office detaches itself from the masses it regiments, removing itself from the fickle eddy of moods and currents that are typical of the great tumultuous masses. The union thus acquires the ability to sign agreements and take on responsibilities, obliging the entrepreneur to accept a certain legality in his relations with the workers. This legality is conditional on the trust the entrepreneur has in the *solvency* of the union, and in its ability to ensure that the working masses respect their contractual obligations.¹⁴⁶

Necessary as this was to the unions' task of achieving concrete gains for their members, the order established by collective agreement came naturally to be regarded as good in itself.

The union bureaucrat conceives industrial legality as a permanent state of affairs. He too often defends it from the same viewpoint as the proprietor. He sees only chaos and wilfulness in everything that emerges from the working masses. He does not understand the worker's act of rebellion against capitalist discipline as a rebellion; he perceives only the physical act, which may in itself and for itself be trivial. . . . In these conditions union discipline can only be a service to capital.¹⁴⁷

Yet at the same time as Gramsci developed these arguments, he insisted that the same characteristics of trade unionism were of great positive value in their contribution to working-class cohesion and self-confidence: 'the union co-ordinates the productive forces and imprints on the industrial apparatus a communistic form'.¹⁴⁸ What was essential, from the socialist viewpoint, was that the *transitional* nature of trade union 'legality' should be recognised.

144 'Soviets in Italy', *New Left Review*, p 36.

145 *ibid*, p 35.

146 *ibid*, p 39.

147 *ibid*, p 41.

148 *ibid*, p 45.

The emergence of an industrial legality is a great victory for the working class, but it is not the ultimate and definitive victory. Industrial legality has improved the working class's material living conditions, but it is no more than a compromise – a compromise which had to be made and which must be supported until the balance of forces favours the working class.¹⁴⁹

Central to his analysis was the dialectical opposition between the institutionalisation inherent in the functions of official unionism, and the activities of the Factory Councils which had emerged in Italian industry. The latter, he argued, were 'proletarian institutions of a new type: representative in basis and industrial in arena'.¹⁵⁰

In so far as it builds this representative apparatus, the working class effectively completes the expropriation of the primary machine, of the most important instrument of production: the working class itself. It thereby rediscovers itself, acquiring consciousness of its organic unity and counter-posing itself as a whole to capitalism. The working class thus asserts that industrial power and its source ought to return to the factory. It presents the factory in a new light, from the workers' point of view, as a form in which the working class constitutes itself into a specific organic body, as the cell of a new State, the workers' State – and as the basis of a new representative system, a system of Councils. . . .

The Factory Council is the negation of industrial legality. It tends at every moment to destroy it, for it necessarily leads the working class towards the conquest of industrial power, and indeed makes the working class the source of industrial power. . . . By its revolutionary spontaneity, the Factory Council tends to unleash the class war at any moment; by its bureaucratic form, the trade union tends to prevent the class war ever being unleashed. The relations between the two institutions should be such that a capricious impulse on the part of the Councils could not cause a step backward by the working class, a working class defeat; in other words, the Council should accept and assimilate the discipline of the union, while the revolutionary character of the Council exercises influence on the union, as a reagent dissolving its bureaucratism.

The Council tends to move beyond industrial legality at any moment. The Council is the exploited, tyrannized mass, forced to perform servile labour; hence it tends to universalize every rebellion, to give a revolutionary scope and value to each of its acts of power.¹⁵¹

Gramsci's analysis of the Factory Councils possessed certain close affinities with the theories developed contemporaneously by the ideologists of the British shop stewards' movement.¹⁵² Murphy, for example, insisted that 'with the workshops . . . as the new units of organisation . . . we can erect the structure of the Great Industrial Union, invigorate the labour movement with the real democratic

149 *ibid*, p 39.

150 *ibid*, p 33.

151 *ibid*, pp 34, 39-40.

152 The parallels are considered by James Hinton in his forthcoming study of the shop stewards' movement, *Union-Militancy and the First World War*.

spirit, and in the process lose none of the real values won in the historic struggle of the Trade Union movement'.¹⁵³ With hindsight, the romanticism underlying many of the characterisations of workshop organisation then prevalent is undeniable;¹⁵⁴ given the turbulent social context, and the revolutionary leadership of the most prominent rank-and-file movements, a certain one-sided optimism was understandable. This was particularly evident in the case of Gramsci: his assertion of the immunity of the Factory Councils from the integrative and bureaucratic tendencies inherent in official unionism owed far more to aspiration than to reality.

Nevertheless, such theories possess continuing significance, and for two main reasons. In the first place, their assertion of a natural tendency for rank-and-file organisation to constrain leadership auto-cracy constitutes the first coherent statement of the 'iron law of democracy' which Gouldner, in the passage cited earlier, counterposed to Michels' more familiar analysis. But in some ways even more important is the challenge to the thesis of trade union integration contained in their discussion of the revolutionary potential of the power and control exercised by workshop union organisation.

This potential was explicitly asserted by Gramsci in his analysis of the Italian 'internal commissions' (which paralleled the British shop stewards' committees): 'today, the internal commissions limit the power of the capitalist in the factory and perform functions of arbitration and discipline. Tomorrow, developed and enriched, they must be the organs of proletarian power, replacing the capitalist in all his useful functions of management and administration'.¹⁵⁵ This tendency for 'orthodox' trade union activity within the factory to extend to the imposition of forms of workers' control¹⁵⁶ was noted even before the outbreak of war by Cole:

It is being realised that the method of collective bargaining can be applied, not only to wages and hours, but to every point of difference that can arise

153 J T Murphy, *The Workers' Committee*, 1918, p 8.

154 G D H Cole, the main academic theorist of the British movement, later dismissed as 'a good deal of nonsense' the argument he had expounded 'that trade unions, with all their shortcomings and limitations, could be converted into guilds animated by the highest social purposes and could take over the full control of industry by a process of "encroaching control" that would presumably render the employing class functionless and ready for supersession'. (Foreword to Pribičević, *The Shop Stewards' Movement*, p vii).

155 'Soviets in Italy', *New Left Review*, p 29.

156 The term 'workers' control' is here used in its traditionally precise sense of the *limitation* by workers of managerial autonomy: the surveillance and even the obstruction by workers as *subordinates* of the decisions taken by a management which retains ultimate sovereignty. The situation in which workers themselves possess sovereignty and collectively *initiate* all decisions in respect of production – in looser usage referred to as 'workers' control' – is more precisely classified as 'workers' management'.

in the workshop between employers and employed. Not only can it safeguard the standard of living for the workers collectively; it can also be used for the redress of individual grievances. Moreover, it can be used as a means of getting a share in the actual control of management. Discussion of wages inevitably leads on to discussion of management, and the right to discuss can be turned into the right to interfere. In the recent unrest the workers are demanding the extension of their industrial jurisdiction to cover new fields. Autocracy in the workshop is already breaking down. . . .¹⁵⁷

Subsequently the potentialities of such a process were explored in detail by a range of British theorists of workers' control, and in particular by the Guild Socialists with their concept of 'encroaching control'.¹⁵⁸

Integral to any theory of encroaching control is the conception of social revolution as a process rather than as an act. Or more accurately, while such theories need not exclude the perspective of a 'classic' revolutionary climax, they emphasise the possibility and even the necessity of inroads *within* capitalism as a basis for eventual transition to socialism. In this respect, a parallel may be noted with Marx's concept of the 'political economy of labour'. The novelty of the *Inaugural Address*, as Harrison has indicated, was that for the first time

Marx accepted that the proletariat might establish its own forms of property and principles of productive organization within the capitalist mode of production. . . . Consequently, the working class might precisely seek to secure, extend, fortify and generalize these achievements. Its advance is now measured not merely by *the perfection of its party organization*, but by *the inroads* which it can make on the existing mode of production.¹⁵⁹

This perspective, contrasting sharply with more cataclysmic theories or socialist revolution, has been termed by one writer 'the pattern of competing systems'.¹⁶⁰ The implication is presumably that every inroad made within the capitalist mode of production increases the strength of the proletariat and reduces that of the capitalist class, leading in the direction of a situation of 'dual power'—such as existed in Russia in 1917, between the February and October revolutions.¹⁶¹ There are echoes of the *Inaugural Address* in Trotsky's account of this period:

This double sovereignty does not presuppose—generally speaking, indeed, it excludes—the possibility of a division of the power into two equal halves, or

157 *The World of Labour*, 1913, pp 8-9.

158 For a selection of such theories see K Coates and A Topham (eds), *Industrial Democracy in Great Britain*, 1968. (Republished 1970 as *Workers' Control*.)

159 *Socialist Register*, 1964, p 305.

160 Moore, *Three Tactics*, p 58.

161 This was discussed in some detail by Lenin, 'The Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution', *Collected Works*, Vol xiv, 1964.

indeed any formal equilibrium of forces whatever. It is not a constitutional, but a revolutionary fact. It implies that a destruction of the social equilibrium has already split the state superstructure. It arises where the hostile classes are already each relying upon essentially incompatible governmental organisations – the one outlived, the other in process of formation – which jostle against each other at every step in the sphere of government.¹⁶²

Such a situation, in which ‘the political economy of the working class’ poses a comprehensive challenge to the hegemony of ‘the political economy of the middle class’, is necessarily unstable.

Society needs a concentration of power, and in the person of the ruling class . . . irresistibly strives to get it. The splitting of sovereignty foretells nothing less than a civil war. But before the competing classes and parties will go to that extreme . . . they may feel compelled for quite a long time to endure, and even to sanction, a two-power system. This system will nevertheless inevitably explode.¹⁶³

While the concept of dual power is customarily used in analysis of the control of the state, it is of relevance also in the context of the control of production within the factory. Trotsky himself appreciated this in his discussion of the situation in Russia in the summer of 1917, arguing that the factory committees had established a form of dual power within industry: ‘it was impossible . . . to do anything against the will of the workers’.¹⁶⁴ Elsewhere he considered in detail the relationship between ‘dual power in the factory and dual power in the state’.¹⁶⁵ Here, Marx’s own qualifications to his argument in the *Inaugural Address* are of relevance: ‘the lords of land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defence and perpetuation of their economical monopolies. So far from promoting, they will continue to lay every possible impediment in the way of the emancipation of labour. . . . To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes’.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, Trotsky insisted that

A bourgeoisie which feels itself firm in the saddle will never tolerate dual power in its factories. . . . Thus the regime of workers’ control is by its very essence provisional, a transitional regime, and can correspond only to the period of the shaking of the bourgeois state, of the proletarian offensive, and of the retreat of the bourgeoisie. . . . This means – the regime of dual power in the factories corresponds to the regime of dual power in the state. This relationship, however, should not be understood mechanically, that is, in the sense that dual power in the factory and dual power in the state see

162 *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 1932, Vol 1, p 222.

163 *ibid*, pp 222-3.

164 *ibid*, Vol II, p 325.

165 ‘Letter to Correspondents in Germany’, *The Militant*, October 1931. See also *What Next?: Vital Questions for the German Proletariat*, 1932.

166 *Selected Works*, Vol I, p 384.

the light of day on one and the same day. . . . Under certain conditions . . . workers' control of production can considerably precede political dual power in a given country.¹⁶⁷

This analysis provides a further link with Gramsci's writings. Noting the determined (and ultimately successful) efforts of Italian government and employers to destroy the growing power of the Factory Councils, he insisted that the autonomous operation of two systems of control could not long persist.

The present phase of the class struggle in Italy is the phase that precedes: either the conquest of political power by the revolutionary proletariat and the transition to new modes of production and distribution that will make possible a rise in productivity – or a tremendous reaction by the propertied classes and the governmental caste. No violence will be spared in this subjection of the industrial and agricultural proletariat to servile labour: a bid will be made to smash inexorably the working class's institutions of political struggle (the Socialist Party) and to incorporate its institutions of economic resistance (unions and co-operatives) into the machinery of the bourgeois State.¹⁶⁸

The current British situation cannot, of course, be readily interpreted in the terms of Trotsky and Gramsci; contemporary conflicts derive less from the fact of workers' encroaching control within the place of work as from the fact of *traditional* controls being rendered intolerable in a changing economic and technological context. Yet if the present stance of organised labour in Britain is defensive rather than offensive, the logic of the arguments cited still applies: in the last resort, workers' customary controls at the point of production can be sustained only by an aggressive strategy which extends to the broader structures of political and economic power.

167 'Letter to Correspondents in Germany' (see note 165 above).

168 'Soviets in Italy', *New Left Review* pp 51-2.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

Marx's most familiar conception of revolution identified the immiseration of workers with their radicalisation; his early theory of trade unions diagnosed their political significance precisely in their presumed inability to prevent deterioration in workers' economic conditions. The same equation of misery and revolutionary ardour has led 'orthodox' Marxists (as well as contemporary exponents of 'the end of ideology') to interpret the reality of trade union economic achievements as a fatal obstacle to the growth of revolutionary consciousness within the working class.

Yet Marx's own formulation of the 'political economy of labour', and the related theories developed by a subsequent generation of socialists, permit the alternative perspective of the concrete achievements of the working class as the basis for increasingly ambitious and importunate demands, culminating in the overt confrontation of two irreconcilable foci of class power. The question thus arises: in what contexts do material improvements serve as palliatives, and in what contexts do they act as stimulants? What gains represent inroads into capitalist control of production, and what gains lead rather to the incorporation of workers and their organisations within capitalist hegemony?

A factor of critical importance is the manner in which such reforms are achieved. Trotsky expressed this point succinctly when he distinguished participation in decision-making based on class struggle from that based on class collaboration. The latter posed no threat to the stability of the economic and political system: 'it was not a case of workers' control *over* capital but of the subserviency of the labour bureaucracy *to* capital. Such subserviency, as experience shows, can last for a long time – as long as the patience of the proletariat.'¹⁶⁹ A similar distinction was basic to the theories of the British shop stewards' movement: 'invasion, not admission, should be the trade unionist's watchword'.¹⁷⁰ What essentially distinguishes invasion from incorporation is the continuing existence of an independent power base, the mobilisation of which remains permanently on the agenda. In current industrial relations theory, the contrast between unilateral and joint regulation provides an important parallel. What so alarms employers, politicians and their academic advisers is the *autonomous* nature of the control exercised by workers' shop floor organisation. That managements should 'regain control by (nominally) sharing it' is, as has been seen, the natural incorporationist prescription. Hence the need to insist that

169 'Letter to Correspondents in Germany'.

170 Goodrich, *Frontier of Control*, p 253.

a share in control does not imply that the workers should enter into any sort of alliance with the employer, or incur joint responsibility with him, or be identified with him in any way. . . . We shall be obliged, indeed, to negotiate with him through his representatives in the daily routine of the workshop, but not to espouse his interests, or to advance them in any way when it lies in our power to do otherwise. Our policy is that of invaders of our native province of industry, now in the hands of an arrogant and tyrannical usurper, and what we win in our advance we control *exclusively and independently*.¹⁷¹

Also of great significance is a related but not identical factor which has received little systematic attention: workers' *perception* of the mechanics of material improvement. One illuminating insight into this dimension is provided by Lenin's discussion of the workers' bread:

In a small working-class house in a remote working-class suburb of Petrograd, dinner is being served. The hostess puts bread on the table. The host says: "Look what fine bread. 'They' dare not give us bad bread now. And we had almost given up even thinking that we'd ever get good bread in Petrograd again."

I was amazed at this class appraisal of the July days. . . . As for bread, I, who had not known want, did not give it a thought. I took bread for granted, as a by-product of the writer's work, as it were. . . .

This member of the oppressed class, however, even though one of the well-paid and quite intelligent workers, takes the bull by the horns with that astonishing simplicity and straightforwardness, with that firm determination and amazing clarity of outlook from which we intellectuals are as remote as the stars in the sky. . . .

"We squeezed 'them' a bit; 'they' won't dare to lord it over us as they did before. We'll squeeze again – and chuck them out altogether", that's how the worker thinks and feels.¹⁷²

While the actual disposition of power relationships is obviously of major salience in determining workers' perceptions, it is not the only factor: hence the gap between activity and consciousness which was considered earlier. In seeking to interpret this gap, it seems of particular relevance that the typical functions of trade unionism centre around routinisation and accommodation; an ongoing consciousness of 'invasion', it might be argued, will prove self-sustaining only in abnormal circumstances. It is not altogether irrelevant that 'defence, not defiance' stood as one of the most persistent slogans of British trade union history.¹⁷³

Thus the problem recurs: what type of relationship between trade union activity and revolutionary party is most likely to neutralise

171 W Gallacher and J Paton, *Towards Industrial Democracy*, 1917.

172 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?' (1917), *Collected Works*, Vol xiv, p 120.

173 Of obvious relevance here is Anderson's distinction between corporate and hegemonic class consciousness; see 'Origins of the Present Crisis', in *Towards Socialism*, pp 33-9.

the tendencies towards 'normalisation'? For Gramsci in the period of the Factory Councils, the prescription was clear: 'the Party is identified with the historical consciousness of the popular masses and governs their irresistible spontaneous movement'.¹⁷⁴ Its task was to 'transform the rebellious impulses produced by the situation capitalism has imposed on the working class into consciousness and revolutionary creativity'.¹⁷⁵ This function was conceived as ideological rather than organisational; like Luxemburg, Gramsci insisted that the party must not seek to *dominate* the spontaneous struggle. 'It would be disastrous if a sectarian conception of the Party role were to fix in mechanical forms of immediate power an apparatus governing the masses in movement, forcing the revolutionary process into the forms of the Party.'¹⁷⁶ Rather, the party was to interact with the spontaneous movement 'in a single dialectical process of development during which relations of cause and effect interlace, reverse, and interweave with one another'.¹⁷⁷

It is essential that the Party live permanently immersed in the reality of the class struggle fought by the industrial and agricultural proletariat, that it be able to understand its various phases and episodes, its manifold manifestations, drawing unity from this manifold diversity. It should be in a position to give a real leadership to the movement as a whole and impress on the masses the conviction that there is an order immanent in the present terrible disorder. . . .¹⁷⁸

Experience was soon to prove that Gramsci's assessment of the spontaneous movement was over-optimistic.¹⁷⁹ Events in Italy – and in Europe generally – in the 1920s clearly demonstrated the volatility of working-class consciousness and the transient nature of overtly revolutionary trade unionism. The conclusion to be drawn – as from the earlier consideration of the arguments of Lenin and Luxemburg – is surely that the limits of trade-union consciousness can vary markedly between different historical contexts and can shift radically with only a brief passage of time. Under specific objective conditions the educative potential of collective industrial action may be immense; in other, perhaps more typical circumstances the spontaneous development of workers' consciousness may fail absolutely to transcend the confines of bourgeois ideology. And involvement in a specific victory

174 'Soviets in Italy', *New Left Review*, p 43.

175 *ibid*, p 41.

176 *ibid*, p 44.

177 *ibid*, p 47.

178 *ibid*, p 52.

179 The collapse of the Factory Councils led Gramsci to a radical revision of his analysis of the role of the party, and the adoption of a position virtually identical to that of Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?*

or defeat, in itself of little obvious world-historical significance, may have critical consequences in terms of workers' subjective confidence and aspirations.

Hence no *general* theory is available to relate the struggle for material reforms to the development of consciousness. The current British situation, for the reasons discussed previously, can only in the most tenuous sense be regarded as a state of 'dual power'. But whether the circumstances are such as to permit a spontaneous bridging of the gap between activity and consciousness; whether exposure to co-ordinated attacks on long-established rights of trade union organisation may precipitate a natural heightening of critical social awareness; or whether the limited horizons which now prevail will persist to make inevitable an interaction of defeat and demoralization – must remain as yet an open question, which in the last resort can be answered not by theoretical speculation but only through practical activity and practical experience. The theoretical issue, in other words, can be resolved only through the *praxis* of the struggle itself.