

The return of the moral economy in trade union studies. A critique from anthropology

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Although the terms ‘community unionism’ and ‘social unionism’ are not synonymous, the emergence of community unionism is part of the broader process of socialisation of industrial trade unions that took place in America and Britain during the 1980s. The paper firstly discusses the theoretical and political context in which ‘social unionism’ emerged in Britain. Secondly, it provides an ethnographic description of ‘community unionism’ a trade union model introduced in Britain by the TUC under the social economy agenda of New Labour. Community unionism was implemented by the ISTC steel union (now ‘Community’) and rejected by the AEEU steel union (now ‘Amicus’), who subscribed to the model of economic unionism instead. Finally, it provides an ethnography of the experience of trade union politics by the workers of two steel factories in Sheffield. The paper does not intend to provide a critical evaluation of the social unionism model, but to show the common assumptions underpinning both social unionism and economic unionism and the gap existing between these theoretical assumptions and the reality of everyday labour politics.

The 1980s have been crucial years for the global labour movement. The radical macro-economic changes of the 1970s – labour and capital deregulation and the informalisation and flexibilisation of production – and the consolidation of transnational capitalism (TNC) pushed industrial unions to the brick of extinction and prompted a debate on labour movement renewal. For many labour scholars ‘social unionism’ promised to revitalise the labour movement by adjusting it to these changes in the political and economic landscape. Broadly speaking, social unionism rejects the purely corporate focus of traditional unionism and mobilises labour outside the narrow boundaries of the factory walls, among public officials, community groups, religious leaders, and human right activists. Besides, social unionism rejects the bureaucratic and formalistic approaches to labour mobilisation and relies on alternative forms of political activism such as media pressure, corporate campaigns, and community organisations. Thirdly, social unionism extends labour representation to women, minorities, immigrants, and informal sector workers, thus, rejecting the male, working class ethos of traditional labour movements. Fourthly, it forges transnational advocacy networks (TAN) to counteract the spatial mobility of global capitalism. Finally and more importantly, social unionism relies on new leaders able to interpret the current situation with a new language and new values, and to reconstruct working class solidarity not on the ground of narrow economic interests but on the base of a renewed labour culture.

There are two main traditions of studies on social unionism. Polanyian or institutionalist labour studies look at trade unions as mechanisms of labour market regulation, whereas Gramscian labour scholars look at the capitalist factory as a space both of state ‘regulation’ and of workers’ ‘freedom’. Within the institutionalist tradition, neo-Marxists scholars claim that trade unions must undergo organisational

change and restructuring in order to adapt to the ‘socialised’ⁱ nature of class relations under post-industrial capitalism. Global capitalism – based on sub-contracting, flexible production, trans-national workplaces and precarious and flexible labour – creates fluid and mobile class relations which expand outside the factory gates, into the realm of society. If the workers of industrial capitalism were subsumed to capital inside factories, the post-industrial workers are subsumed to capital in society, hence they are ‘socialised workers’. Among the neo-institutionalists, Peter Waterman (2002) discusses Negri’s notion of socialised labour in a polemical pamphlet against Chris Harman, the leader of the Socialist Worker Party. Waterman criticises the ethnocentric, bureaucratic and productivist logic of traditional socialist labour movements and suggests fluid and horizontal political institutions to capture the multitude of political subjectivities – of factory workers, rural labourers, indigenous people, and sexual minorities – emerging in post-industrial societies. In another article, Watermann (1999) challenges the Leninist notion of the ‘purely political’ trade union and sketches the profile of New Social Unionism (NSU) based on anti-hierarchical, antiauthoritarian and anti-technocratic principles; articulated within other non-unionisable working class categories and with other non- or multi-class and pluralistic movements; encouraging direct horizontal relations both amongst workers and between the workers and other democratic/popular forces; active on the terrain of education, communication, and popular culture; and open to networking both within and between organisations, understanding the value of informal, horizontals and flexible coalitions, alliances and interest groups.

Within the Polanyian tradition are those world-historical perspectives which emphasises the inter-dependence between labour relations in the North and the South. David Harvey (2003) discusses how the imperialist dialectics of accumulation and dispossession prevents the emergence of trans-national labour movements. Arrighi and Silver (2000) and Silver (2003) focus on the structural conditions of labour internationalism and argue that the de-socialisation of the state in the North and the relocation of industrial production to the South have increased, rather than diminished, fragmentation between labour movements in the North and in the South. Hensman (2003) shows that the inclusion of workers’ rights in WTO trade agreements can, paradoxically, increase fragmentation between labour movements in the South and the North. A culturalist variant of the Polanyian tradition claims that labour movements must adapt to the collapse of the modernist ideologies of labour developed under Communism and Keynesian Capitalism. For instance, Andre’ Gorz, claims that early trade unions shared with their capitalist counterparts an ideology of commodified labour and that the deregulation of capital and labour, ‘the collapse of the Third World’, and the emergence of trans-national capitalist elites and structures of governance have made modernist ideologies of work, class and labour obsolete. He suggests that new social unionism should fight for the right of freedom from work, rather than for the right to work. Some revisionist scholars auspicate the return to grassroots labour activism that existed before the incorporation of the labour movement into the hegemonic and bureaucratic structures of industrial trade unions. For instance, Craig Calhoun (1991) suggests that 19th century labour movements in Europe and America had many characteristics of the ‘new’ social movement of 21st century, including concerns about religion, lifestyle, gender and culture, and that the economic understanding of class relations predominated when the labour movement became institutionalised. On a similar line, taking a Polanyian perspective on the ‘dis-embeddedness of political consciousness from society’ under industrial trade

unionism, Burawoy (2005) opposes the 'political' nature of early working class movements to 'the purely economical' basis of contemporary class politics and shows continuities between the grassroots activism early trade unions and contemporary social movements.

Some of the Gramscian contributions in trade union studies draw on NSM theory to discuss the articulation of 'class' and 'identity' in contemporary politics and the role of 'organic intellectual' of the new trade union leaders. According to this view the organic intellectual is a leader able to expand political consciousness outside the narrow economic boundaries of class relations and to provide a symbolical and cultural understanding of class struggle which is in tune with the imagination of the whole of society, rather than being strictly working class oriented, and hence, which is potentially revolutionary. Scholars who emphasise intellectual leadership in new trade union movements also criticise the narrow economic focus on wage bargaining and shopfloor relations of so-called business unions and discuss labour mobilisation as a process of cultural and symbolical production. For instance, Rick Fantasia in his *Cultures of solidarity* (1989) suggests that the successful renewal of the American trade union AFL-CIO under the leadership of John Sweeny was linked to his strategy of incorporating different cultural identities – black, indigenous, gay, feminist – within the traditionally white working class movement. In a similar way, for Anna Maria Catalano (1999) the labour movement must adapt to the networked, temporary and fluid nature of contemporary politics and identities by rejecting mechanical notions of class solidarity and forging a new political imaginary and new communicative praxes, for instance, through web-based activism. If the target of institutionalists labour scholars is 'the purely political', Gramscian labour scholars reject instead the 'purely economic' logic of so-called business unionism. For instance, drawing on the New Social Movement (NSM) literature, Kim Scipes (1992) criticise the 'business unions' which 'accommodate themselves to and are absorbed by the industrial relations system of their particular countries and engage in political activities only for the immediate interests of their members' and suggests that they are subjected to state hegemony and to the logic of capitalist institutions. Scipes shows that the Philippine trade union *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (KMU) remained autonomous from capital, the state and from party politics and set its own agenda from its own particular cultural perspective. As for the making of the Thompsonian British working class, Scipes claims that the making of the Philippine trade union entailed a complex process of creation of a collective social identity through group cultural experimentation and cultural translation by charismatic, educated and militant leaders. Drawing on the work of Guy Seidman (1994) Scipes suggests that Philippine, Brazilian and South African unions challenged the status quo on an emotional and cultural level, through street carnivals, education and popular culture, rather than on a narrow political or economic basis as for traditional business union. He claims that in Brazil the national labour strike organised by the PT in 1983 was supported by the church-organisations, women, squatters, intellectuals and human right activists protesting against the military rule and that the rapid rise to power of the metal workers union (the CUT) was linked to its roots in civil society. Scipes is right in stressing the powerful effects of combining community and factory politics in Brazil and South Africa, but he overlooks the class dimension of this combination. In fact Guy Seidman claims that 'the alliance between the trade unions and civil society was not populist, in the sense of subsuming specific class-based goals under general demands, but it took an explicitly working class stance' (ibid:). She also shows that the unusual level of labour militancy and of broad alliances between the industrial

working class and marginal social formations in Brazil and South Africa were the result of structural dependency (which prevented the formation of a labour aristocracy) and of poverty under military regimes. Drawing on the neo-Gramscian theories of Laclau and Mouffe and on their discussion of the contingent and open nature of contemporary political identities, Ronaldo Munck (2004) suggests that radical politics should abandon a narrow productivist logic and adopt a broader strategy aimed at articulating new democratic political identities across society. He advocates a new pluralist politics based on heterogeneous political subjects: NGOs (Clean Clothes Campaign; Labour behind the label), church-based organisation, fair trade shops, women's associations and consumer groups.

Another Gramscian strand of labour studies looks at the role of hegemonic institutions in shaping productive relations and forms of labour mobilisation. For instance, Waddington (1999) shows the negative impact of shifts in global production and regulatory regimes on the strategies of labour worldwide. Huw Beynon (2003) and Peter Evans (2000) present examples of counter-hegemonic globalisation based on the transnational alliance of trade unions and social movements against MNCs, international agencies and the state (for instance in Britain between miners and environmentalists). Anner (2003) shows the collaboration between the German and the Brazilian autoworkers unions that followed various production relocations by Mercedes-Benz and changes in the labour legislation under Cardoso. John Kelly (1990) challenges the argument that links the decline of British trade unions to changes in the workforce composition and contraction in the manufacturing industry and discusses it as a consequence of anti-union legislation, inadequate recruiting activity by the unions themselves, and to their 'pragmatic' acceptance of state control.

British anthropologists have never been involved in trade union studies; a field which they believe belongs to 'the sociological tradition'. From the 1980s onwards, they broke away from the tradition of the anthropology of labour pioneered by Malinowski, Firth, and the Manchester school and focused on exchange, money and consumption. But new anthropological work on trade union is now emerging which critically assesses the Marxist and Polanyian sociological traditions and combines the institutional and ideological views of labour relations and mobilisation. For instance, Jonathan Parry's (2006) discussion of the rise of the charismatic union Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) in the Indian steel industry. Parry discusses the hegemonic role of the main steel trade unions in India – the INTUC and AITUC – in reproducing structural division within the industrial working class created by the state through labour legislation, industrial policies and the ideology of labour commodification. Unlike these unions, the counter-hegemonic CMM articulated the interests of the under-privileged segments of Bhilai working class together with the interests of other political coalitions, for instance the Naxalite movement, tribal and environmental groups and high profile civil society organisations. The author describes the charismatic leader of the CMM as an organic intellectual able to combine and articulate local cultural symbols taken from different political registers – communist, tribal, environmental – into a new revolutionary discourse. Parry suggests that the role of the 'organic' leaders is to challenge the ideology of labour commodification by extending political consciousness outside the narrow boundaries of class relations and 'to forge alliances with other classes on issues that are not 'purely economical' and have to do, for instance, with civil liberties or national liberation' (ibid:). Thus, in this

perspective the truly Gramscian leader is a cultural *bricoleur*, able to articulate a revolutionary discourse by stepping outside the narrow economic boundaries of class relations. Similarly, anthropologist Christena Turner (1995) documents the process through which some Japanese workers develop a common consciousness of their practical world and identities by ‘learning to protest’ – through demonstrations, meetings, educational and leisure activities, and campaigning. Turner looks at the trade union as both a site of revolutionary consciousness and of ‘governmentality’. Taking an historical perspective, Susana Narotsky (2006) shows the structural conditions that affect the articulation of class, gender and migration in the experiences of labour activism of women in Vega Baja del Segura, Spain. Like Seidman, Leslie Gill (2006) looks at the link between dictatorship and labour mobilisation and shows the beneficial consequences of combining traditional factory-based labour activism, human right activism and anti-corporate campaigns by international layers and pressure groups in Columbia, where the Coca Cola management uses paramilitary forces to repress local trade unions. Sian Lazar (2006) shows the resurgence of class politics among Bolivian *cocaleros* and street vendors and the increased power of their trade unions vis-à-vis the historically militant miners’ unions.

Following these recent strands of trade union studies, the paper discusses the practices and institutions through which trade union leaders construct and maintain political consciousness among some steel workers of Sheffield and focuses on their experience of labour mobilisation. It looks at labour as both a site of consciousness and commodification – of ‘freedom’ and ‘regulation’ⁱⁱ – and combines a view of trade unions as mechanisms of labour market regulation and agents of revolutionary consciousness. More generally, the paper argues for an articulation of ‘class’ and ‘identity’ in labour activism and suggests that the politics of ‘recognition’ and the politics of ‘redistribution’ (Frazer, 2000) are two sides of the same experience of labour and cannot be separated. Thus, the paper considers the discourse of social unionism and the discourse of business unionism – and the opposition between the ‘purely social’ that inspires the former and the ‘purely economical’ that motivates the latter – as two complementary ideologies of labour mobilisation under contemporary capitalism and suggests ways in which these two moralities can be articulated.

Community unionism first emerged in America in the 1990s when the Amalgamated Federation of Industrial Organisation (AFL-CIO) reacted to membership decline and internal fragmentation with a new platform for the labour movement. Under the conservative industrial relations legislation of the cold war, American trade unions had a narrow corporate focus, hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, formalised carrier and recruitment strategies, and sectional and individualistic practices of mobilisation and representation centred on the male, white industrial worker. In the 1990s, thanks to the help of a new breed of union activists – anti-productivists, egalitarian, anti-imperialist, with a background in civil right and anti-war activism, and experience in community organising – the AFL-CIO shifted its political focus from the factory to the community, reaching out to peripheral workers, ethnic minorities and marginal social categories traditionally excluded from the struggles of wage workers. The AFL-CIO won important struggles, for instance for the Hotel and Restaurant workers, Janitors, street vendors, and service workers. Faced with the spatial mobility of corporate capital the AFL-CIO also rescaled its political scope and developed trans-national alliances and strategies. For instance it developed a complex network of NGOs, human rights activists, maquiladoras and textile workers unions,

and corporate campaigners between North America, Mexico and Canada to oppose the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Finally the AFL-CIO shifted its focus from political representation to service provider, offering a wide range of financial, legal, health and educational services to its members.

The TUC imported community unionism into Britain, during the crisis of the labour movement under the Thatcher government. Since the post-war years British Keynesian capitalism relied on a reciprocal exchange between industrial workers and the state. The former were guaranteed legal rights and welfare provisions in exchange for wage restraints and economic collaboration. But in the 1980s the new dogma of economic monetarism demolished the already shaky edifice of Keynesianism by showing that inflation could be controlled through labour and capital deregulation rather than through social partnership. If Keynesian capitalism saw industrial relations as the solution to labour market rigidity, post-Keynesianism sees them as the cause of labour rigidity. This monetarist dogma inspired the anti-labour legislation of Thatcher government which led to the defeat, retreat and decline of labour militancy in Britain. It was in this context of attack to the rights of labour that the TUC took the pragmatic decision of retreating from shopfloor militancy and to get involved in social partnership and community politics.

In 1996 TUC produced a document entitled: 'New Unionism: Organising for Growth: Organisers with Attitudes: The USA experience'. The document highlighted two means of trade unions renewal: organisational change and social partnership. Unlike American community unionism which insists on leadership and cultural change, the TUC document highlighted the centrality of organisational change. In the context of bureaucratic, sectional and hierarchic labour movements the document suggested a return to the spirit of 19th century trade union activism based on grassroots movements within civil society and on greater involvement of peripheral and marginal sections of the working class. According to the document horizontal, democratic and participative organisational structures optimised membership recruitment and retention in unorganised areas of employment, particularly among part-time workers, women and young workers. The New Unionism Task and the New Organising Academy – a training body sponsored by 16 unions for the recruiting, mentoring and training young and dedicated union organisers – were put in charge of reforming the TUC organisational structure. Secondly, in 2001 the TUC funded the Partnership Institute to provide training, information and best practices on social partnerships. Partnership agreements were made between the TUC and businesses – Ford, Rover, Tesco, Sommerfield, and British Telecom – based on greater involvement of the unions in managerial decisions and on the creation of best employers' practices. Finally, in line with the government shift towards the third economy, which entails the externalisation of welfare services to the voluntary sector, the TUC advocated a union shift toward the provision of social services to the workers, especially in matters of pension, health, education. Some political commentators reacted with scepticism to the introduction of the European model of social partnership in the British context (Martinez-Lucio and Stewart 2000). Others believe that social partnership entails a return to neo-corporatist politics and is in fundamental conflict with organisational decentralisation and grassroots mobilisation characteristic of social unionism (Fairbrother, 2000 and Fairbrother and Stuart, 2003, Willis, 2001). My position is that the TUC was forced to adopt the model of community union by the shape of the new geography of labour in Britain, or to the

geography of New Labour, revolving around the 'social' or 'third economy'. In other terms, 'community unionism' was a return to the 'New realism' of the 1980s.

Transmutations of Labour representation.

In 1999, after ten years of decline in militancy and a 30% decline in membership, the ISTC started its mutation into a community unionⁱⁱⁱ, of the kind of the American AFL-CIO. Organisational restructuring was central in the new ISTC political manifesto. The new ISTC was moving away from traditional hierarchical relationships between the factory branch and the regional and national offices and constructing horizontal networks between regional and divisional offices on the one hand, and between these and voluntary groups, churches, local councils, human rights groups, the local media and employers' associations on the other hand. In the light of trans-national capitalism and globalisation, the political power traditionally held by the branch officer was now transferred to the divisional officer and the focus of political action was widened from the shopfloor to the community. The manifesto also expanded political representation from its traditional working class base to different segments of civil society, including women, disabled and ethnic minorities. As part of this movement of reconnection with civil society the ISTC merged with the National League for the Blind and Disabled, with the National Society for the Prevention of Children Cruelty and with other small unions, incorporating plastics, electronic and food producers unions. This strategy of concentration had recently led to an increase of 15% in trade union membership of non steel and metal workers in traditional industrial regions, (Scotland, Yorkshire and West and East Midlands), even though it conflicted with the union's goal of organisational decentralisation and horizontal co-ordination. Side-by-side with these organisational goals, the ISTC was also re-branding itself as a 'service union', mainly providing legal, educational and health and safety services to steel workers.

For instance, the Steel Training Partnership (STP) promotes lifelong learning within the steel communities displaced by plant colures and unemployment through partnerships between employers, colleges and other training providers. Drawing on European and UK funds the STP has multiple objectives: it gives to redundant steel workers skills transferable to other sectors; it provides long life learning to redundant workers with no re-employment prospects and re-trains the workers within the existent workplace. Unlike 'corporate learning' which is controlled by employers and coordinated by the DTI, the STP remained under the umbrella of the union and of the department for education DfES. Some trade union scholars (Emma Wallis, Mark Stuart, and Andrew Murray, 2005) believe that the STP hides issues of labour deskilling and factory re-organisation behind the agenda of 'community education'. But others have supported the scheme because it allows the trade unions to co-ordinate educational projects for steel workers independently from the employers and outside the hegemonic spaces of corporate learning^{iv}. The second important commitment of the ISTC is on health and safety. Following the Health and Safety at Work Act in 1974, which provided a legal framework for the regulation of health and safety at work, the Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulation (SRSC) of 1978 established the role of union health and safety representative at work. The law de facto provided an additional mechanism of labour representation, in that it gave to union reps the power to challenge managerial decisions on shopfloor organisation on

the ground of health and safety. The ISTC was promoting a proactive attitude towards health and safety, based on 'safety management' – rather than a reactive one focused on industrial compensation – and re-scaling its political activity from factory-based issues of labour representation to a more encompassing notion of 'safety and health representation', which also included 'the disabled', 'the unemployed' and 'the psychologically unstable' ex-industrial workers of the community. As I show below, these organisational changes gave greater power to the divisional officers but weakened political activism on the shopfloor. Here, 'health and safety representation' was the only political tool left to trade union representatives to challenge company re-organisation. But the union representatives' health and safety activism and their involvement in the medicalisation of manual labour mainly legitimated company closures and redundancies.

The Phoenix flies on the ISTC divisional offices.

The ISTC divisional office is located in Phoenix House, a modernist building sandwiched between the A61 road and rows of empty council flats, cul-de-sacs and roundabouts. In Greek mythology 'Phoenix' is a mythical bird that reproduces itself at the end of each life. In the 1980s Phoenix was the name given by the conservative government to a series of joint ventures between the British Steel Corporations (at the time public) and the private sector for the restructuring of the steel industry. The 1980s were magical years for the steel industry, when three consecutive Phoenixes transformed the steel industry through mergers, plant closures, strikes, re-organizations and redundancies. To many observers the Phoenixes looked like monstrous double bodied creatures, with an overgrown and decaying public body due to cuts in jobs, welfare provisions and labour representation and an healthy private body constantly rejuvenating through public subsidies, tax cuts and labour deregulation. For others the Phoenixes of the 1980s were small, sleek and flexible animals, ready to undertake the heavy nationalized industrial creatures of the 1970s and to make an evolutionary leap into the post-industrial economy. The conservative government also introduced public-private partnerships in the local government, aimed at re-generating areas of Sheffield affected by industrial decline. Like the Phoenixes these local bodies had a double nature, regenerating the communities that they destroyed and fuelling funds to private developers and leisure capitalists in the attempt of increasing public wealth. But for optimistic 'others' these were experiments in participatory politics at the dawn of the Keynesian century.

Phoenix House was built to celebrate the new community unionism of the ISTC and the rise of yet another dead bird for the steel industry, the New Labour government. Today, inside the glass building of Phoenix House the offices are silent and calm, and only occasionally inhabited by three secretaries and Bernard Bates the political officer. Following the transformations of the steel industry, Bates also underwent a long personal mutation. A migrant son of an Irish catholic farmer, he started working at the BSC Coke Cavern in Port Talbot when he was 16 years old. At the time Coke Cavern workers had low occupational status in the plant due to their renowned political docility. Given that stoppages of the Coke Cavern created blackouts not only in the plant, but also in the entire region, the management selected un-unionised workers – migrants, ethnic minorities and Catholics – to work in the Coke Cavern department. But Bates became involved in labour activism. He led two legal actions against the company and organized a plant strike on health and safety ground,

becoming shop-stewards at 35 years of age. Shortly after, a pulmonary emphysema due to fumes inhalation forced him to quit the job and to embark in the carrier of trade union officer. This happened during the second Phoenix, when the BSC made 56,000 redundancies and cut its productive capacity by 1 million tones per annum. At the time trade union membership was sharply declining and the ISTC decided to cooperate with the management on organizational restructuring whilst stepping up its political pressure on matters of industrial compensations, redundancy packages and health and safety. Bates's campaigning on safety at work was in tune with the greater commitment of the unions and the government on health and safety issues and he soon became divisional officer. With the rise of New Labour to power, Bates was put in charge of developing a new community strategy for South Yorkshire and of turning the local industrial communities into the post-industrial formations described by Tony Giddens in his book *Third Way* sandwiched on Bates's bookshelf between Shakespeare and the biography of Nelson Mandela. Always elegantly dressed with black suits and flamboyant cufflinks, always good humored, always flirting with the female secretaries, Bates is the living symbol of the transformative power of the new trade unionism in the post-industrial age and of the mythical properties of the Phoenixes that flied through successive neoconservative governments.

The ISTC on the Shopfloor

UNSOR is located between the A57 and the M1 roads south east of Sheffield in Kiveton, an ex-mining village of about 9,000 inhabitants. With no fence or gate, UNSOR is surrounded by the beautiful Welbeck Estate and crossed by a public footpath leading to the Chesterfield canal, which runs by the company's acid treatment pond. The white minimalist architecture of the company's offices on the top of the hill contrasts with the Victorian red bricks and dark metals of the shopfloor downhill. Corn flies, rabbits, cravens and the pointers dogs of the estate's gamekeepers follow the cold northern wind through the opening of the corrugated aluminium wall disrupting the operations on the shopfloor for a short while. CCTV cameras are located at the four corners of the long yard that connects the shopfloors to the offices. From the gatehouse – which the workers call 'the doghouse' because it is used the security guard and his dog at night – Mr. Garrett, the Health and Safety manager, monitors the images of the workers walking in the yard and into the company warehouse.

UNSOR is a steel mini-mill that combines 'steel making' in its small Electric Arc Furnace (EAF) and 'steel finishing' into an integrated production process. Integrated production gives to UNSOR greater organisational, technological and market flexibility vis-à-vis the steel conglomerates. For instance, thanks to its in-house production of steel UNSOR is untouched by the aggressive pricing policies of the main steel producers. Besides, the small dimensions of its EAF allow just-in-time, small-batch production of both high-quality and lower quality steel and hence diversification between the aerospace, mining and the automotive sector and the building and industrial sector. Denis Mac Shane, steel expert and MP for Rotherham, extensively documented the spread of mini-mills in Japan, America and Korea and their efficiency in dealing with volatile steel industry vis-à-vis conglomerates organisational structures. The production process of UNSOR is as follows. In three

heats, 348 ingots of steel are melted by the 11 workers of the melting shop. During the day, 14 workers of the rolling mill roll the ingots into billets on two shifts. The billets are left in the cooling bank for half a day, and then turned into steel rod in the rod mill. Some rods are cleaned in the nitrogen tank then coated and turned into wires. Other rods are strengthened into bars and ground by the 13 young grinders working on three shifts in Bay 3.

When Corus was formed in 1999 from the merger of Hoogovens and British Steel, UNSOR felt the competitive pressure and was forced to cut cost. The re-organisation was negotiated with the ISTC divisional offices and entailed 60 compulsory redundancies in the furnace and rolling mill, the introduction of a single night shift at the furnace, and of teamwork in the finishing department. The situation after the reorganisation was as follows:

(1) The cold department worked on three shifts; the rolling mills on two shifts and the furnace on one shift.

(2) If overtimes are considered, the grinders of the cold department earned almost twice as much as the workers of the hot department and as much as some managers, supervisors and members of the staff.

(3) The workforce was stratified into young, literate and unionised workers in the cold department and older, less skilled and un-unionised workers in the hot department. (During my fieldwork some of the workers in the furnace and the rolling mill moved from the GMB to the ISTC.)

Overall the company had decided to underutilise the furnace and the rolling mill, buying steel outside, and of intensifying the finishing operations, through of over-time and team-working. Economically, this was clearly the wrong strategy, because it brought UNSOR in direct competition with Corus on low quality steel bars and wires, and destroyed the firms' competitive advantage that was in the melting of high quality steel in small batches and in the craft skills of the smelters. (The EAF is basically 'a big crucible', and requires very skilled smelters). But politically it was the right decision because the younger and more docile – and financially indebted – workers of the grinding department welcomed the prospect of intensifying production and increasing their bonuses. The ISTC also supported teamwork and 'functional flexibility' being satisfied enough to have avoided redundancies of its members in the re-organisation. But not all the workers of the cold department were happy with the change. For the wire workers of Bay2 the change meant intensification of labour without increases in wages. It was at this post-reorganisation stage that the ISTC put me in contact with the company's owners. During my job interview, the five general managers and the owner in turn explained me their problem of 'having to convince the guys of Bay2 to work flexibly' and suggested that I could conduct my 'anthropological study of human behaviour' there. The following day Lind, the ISTC safety rep of Bay2 welcomed me with a worried smile and led me to my desk - with a 'Max Mollona' batch on the top – located a few meters away from the wire machines.

Lind, the shop steward and union rep of Bay2 was the 'human problem' that the owners wanted me to study. He opposed the introduction of teamwork for two reasons. First, because teamwork reduced his authority over the rest of the workers.

Secondly, because labour intensification forced the workers of Bay2 into dangerous working practices. Lind told me of the long history of industrial accidents among wireworkers involving decapitations, blindness and mutilations. Wireworkers, a traditionally unskilled section of the working class, struggled throughout history to have their unions recognised and had been badly affected by their recent amalgamation into the ISTC. According to Lind, the ISTC agreed with the management that the wire workers would have to put up with unpaid intensified labour, whilst negotiating paid overtime for the grinders and the other skilled workers. The ISTC showed no sign of safety consciousness. For instance, the ISTC had agreed to the re-organisation of Bay2 in spite of the fact that it entailed greater occupational hazards for the wireworkers. In December one of the guys of Bay2 was almost strangled by a loose wire hanging from a crane and he was so bullied and vilified by the other workers for the accident that he ended up hanging himself.

Lind considers his role of ISTC health and safety representative as an important form of political activism. He comes from a traditional mining family dominated by the fear of industrial death. His grandfather, father-in-law and uncle died in industrial accidents and from childhood he remembers his father's distress in witnessing the deaths of several of his workmates as miners' rescuer in Aston. When he applied for a job at Aston colliery the personnel manager told him: 'Lind you are a nice lad and I wouldn't mind giving you the job, but if I did your father would never forgive me'. Thus, he became a wire worker instead. Lind has been a member of the ISTC for 25 years and he totally subscribes to the ISTC shift towards community unionism and especially the union's emphasis on safety at work. Lind reads the traditional lack of safety consciousness among the working class as an evidence of its lack of labour consciousness. According to him 'manual workers self-exploit themselves in the knowledge that dangerous working practices are generally better remunerated by the capitalists than safer ones.' Lind has a painful memory of this split within the working class on matters of safety at work. During the 1984 miners strike his father broke the NUM picket line screaming that 'danger never goes on strike' and as a consequence his family was stigmatised by the whole community and it had to move to a near-by village. In my presence, he criticised the materialism of the traditional labour movement that fails to realise that 'health' not 'wealth' or 'money' is the root of social inequality. He said angrily 'if you are a member of the working class your life expectancy is 4 or 5 years less than someone who has been brought up as a member of the upper class. It is obscene to think that the position in life where you have born should have a direct correlation to how long you live'. But when I noted that this inequality was, in fact, economically motivated, he blamed culture instead. 'Manual workers have a macho attitude at work' he said 'they are too ashamed to admit that they are afraid or tired on the shopfloor'. Lind believed that 'illness' was a real taboo among working people. For instance he never told to his workmates of his son's dementia. 'They would not understand and would not know how to cope with me', he added whispering.

As health and safety representative Lind opposed several attempts of labour re-organisations in the past. For instance increased manning levels were rejected when Lind produced for the Health and safety Committee an 'octave band analysis' that showed that the sound level of the bay was already close to the pain threshold and he avoided further redundancies in the rolling mill by arguing that the department's manual handling equipment was inadequate to the increased workload. But Lind's

health activism faced several obstacles. First, the ISTC regional officer was not keen on confrontations with the management on safety issues related to labour re-organisations. Second, Lind lacked of formal qualifications. Although the SRSCR emphasises the importance of the education of health and safety representatives and their entitlement to paid educational leave from work, the ISTC did not agreed to fund to Lind the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety & Health (NEBOSH) diploma. Without formal qualification his role as safety rep. was ineffectual. In fact, Mr Garrett took advantage of his specialised knowledge – he had a Degree in engineering and a NEBOSH diploma – to twist the legislation on safety at work to the advantage of the company with the consequence that the ‘Health and safety Committee’ become a mechanism for legitimising difficult managerial decisions. For instance, it used the ‘Environmental Protection Act’ to shutdown the furnace due to ‘warnings of refractory ceramic fibre in the furnace lining being categorised as carcinogen 2 substance’; and introduced overhead cranes and standardised and intensified the packing operations of the men due to ‘unsafe handling practices’ and following the rules of the ‘Manual Handling Operations Regulations’. Lind saw his role as safety rep. as a form of labour representation, whereas Garret – who gave up his role as personnel manager to become Health and safety manager – saw it as a tool of managerial re-organisation. An ex-communist shop-steward of the BSC who was converted into Christianity by an Irish workmate on the day his father died in a car accident, he is now politically active member of the Doncaster Citizens Advice Bureau, the Knights of Saint Columbus and the Royal society for the Prevention of Accidents. Once he told me that ‘on the day he became Christian he realised that freedom is an individual state of mind, and it is not inscribed in the objective structures of society’. Garrett is convinced that steel work is dangerous, wearing, unsafe, and ultimately ‘uncivilised’ and is determined to uses his role of Health and Safety manager to cut jobs at UNSOR, through the latest Swedish ergonomic principles, ‘human friendly production cells’ and old fashion mechanisation. Outside work Garrett is engaged in helping ‘the disadvantaged’ thought the institutions of civil society but he fiercely opposes class-based political activism in UNSOR. In addition to pressure to resign from the union by the general manager and stigma by his mates for his opposition to overtimes, Lind also faced constant attacks by Mr. Garrett at the health and safety committees.

One day in March 2001 I found the shopfloor silent and the workers standing still by their machines. A month earlier, Sir Brian Moffat, the new chairman of Corus had announced 6,500 redundancies at Corus. On the following week the shares of Corus had almost doubled so that the company was able to cut its prices of raw steel putting small producers like UNSOR out of the business. As a consequence, the company froze its pensions and was put into administration. ‘Don’t worry’, I said unconvincingly to Lind, ‘we will go to the ISTC’.

Political meeting at the ISTC or Community Unionism in action

Having attended several political meetings at Phoenix House, I had realised the importance of the divisional office in liaising between national policies and factory issues. Mr. Bates, the divisional officer, was very skilled in bridging these two levels in his daily activities, but the political meetings at Phoenix House always showed how ‘the national’ and ‘the local’ still remained disjointed. When national officers or MPs came to Phoenix House, they would mesmerise the audience with Soviet-style

bureaucratic language and spellbinding political visions. For instance, the National Political Officers would minutely debate on the bureaucratic mechanisms required to implement the platform of the ISTC National Seminar at local level. Social movement scholars and visionary MPs would speak of basic human rights, workers' control over the means of production and global working class consciousness. At the wake of the 2001 general election, Labour MPs talked about Labour values and screened propaganda videos with engaging titles, such as 'Holding back the years' and 'Lets work together'. The abstraction of the propaganda of national politicians and national union leaders strikingly contrasted with the immediacy of the problems – such as redundancies, illnesses, bankruptcies – affecting the local members attending the meetings. But Bates was able to switch between these two perspectives and to combine political vision, local activism and bureaucratic behaviour. At the local level, he organised raffles to raise money for local charities, made speeches at local schools and children's hospices, shook hands with junior football talents, ate sausages at the ISTC-sponsored stalls at the local farmers' markets, and attended graduations of long life learners. But when in the office, he arranged industrial compensations, discussed optimal returns on workers' pensions, and lobbied against companies involved in environmental pollution. Bates had also a broad political vision. For instance, when we visited the BSC Coke Cavern in Scunthorpe and I realised that most of the unskilled jobs were performed by contractors, he told me of the difficulties he encountered in integrating contractors into the labour movement due to their stigmatisation by the traditional working class. He also admitted to feel uncomfortable with the hierarchical way in which the decision had been taken by the general secretariat to bid for the buyout of the Llanwern steel plant in Wales of Corus and with the fact that workers' money will be used to finance a partly private enterprise. He was also aware of dilemmas and contradiction of community unionism. For instance, of the fact that the ISTC in-house training offered to health and safety rep was not adequate and it risked to be subcontracted to private providers; that increased redundancy packages and industrial compensations increased the likelihood of company re-organisations; and that ISTC members needed legal advice and protection on the shopfloor, rather than paid leave and re-training to set up community activities^{vi}. He was also sceptical about the possibilities of reconciling community unionism and de-industrialisation. 'Community unionism is about reconstructing communities but where are these communities? He told me one day. 'People with redundancy packages think that they have become middle class but they have no shop where they can spend their money. They have no community.'

Thus, I was very hopeful when Mr. Bates agreed to put on the agenda of the next divisional meeting the issue of UNSOR's administration. The topic of the divisional meeting was 'what is a community union?' With the prospect of 180 redundancies at UNSOR the title was timely. Denis MacShane, a Corus research and development manager, a STP officer, and a union representative of a plastic factory in Rotherham sat around the table together with Bates, myself and Lind, who was wearing a grey shirt, red tight and black leather jacket. The ISTC responsible for the negotiation with UNSOR was on holiday. At the start of the propaganda video, a voiceover claimed authoritatively: 'We created 1 million jobs. 'And we bloody lost another million' was Lind's not so subtle comment. During the meeting it became clear the each of us had a different idea of community unionism. The Research and development manager lamented the fact that his department was split between Britain and Holland and ultimately under the control of the Dutch partners and that he had become 'a

foreigner' in his own company. He suggested that community unionism should aim at reconstructing a British identity (or community) in an increasingly globalised industry. For the STP officer the relevant community are the part-time women workers, unemployed, disabled from poor background who attend his 'return to learn' classes, consisting of readings, discussions and exchanges of personal histories. He said that adult learning can succeed only outside the working community because 'working class people don't like to look clever' and in fact, one on three steelworkers was illiterate. MacShane objected to these partial views of political communities and supported a global unionism able to challenge trans-national capitalism. Maggie, the union rep of a plastic factory, highlighted her concerns for the way in which the deaths of five of her co-workers who had come in contact with Acrolein, a poisonous plastic substance, had remained un-investigated. The plastic factory was developed 20 years ago on an ex-mining village near Doncaster and employed mainly women. According to Maggie, the village was still under the strong influence of the NUM and thought about itself as a mining community. Whilst it was active on matters of miners' pensions or industrial compensations, it was unwilling to mobilise itself on these industrial deaths. The ISTC was also in denial of the exploitation and unsafe working practices taking place in Maggie's plastic factory, missing the important political point that 'plastic sector is the new steel industry', that is, is the new arena where old struggles have to be fought. Maggie's clarity and charisma grew with her anger and silenced the audience. Maggie opposed the ISTC idea of community unionism – revolving on a small group of Oxford College boys and of retired male manual workers – and proposed an alternative vision of community unionism based on new political subjects, including women, foreigners and informal workers. Encouraged by Maggie's suggestion that foreigners should be allowed to have a political voice, I raised the matter of UNSOR's administration and of its imminent closure. The ISTC had failed to inform the workers' of the employers' intention of putting the firm in administration and had been co-opted into the company's re-organisation in 1999. In spite of Mr. MacShane's enthusiastic endorsement of the American and Japanese mini-mill organisations, he was now failing to oppose the closure of UNSOR in the interests of old fashion, British Steel led, corporate capitalism. I suggested that the imminent closure of UNSOR was a demonstration of how community unionism weakens factory militancy and workplace democracy. MacShane accused me of narrow political vision but nonetheless agreed to meet the management of UNSOR. Lind stepped in and said that Corus and UNSOR are competitors in the steel market and that the ISTC had decided to side with the interests of the workers of Corus and against the interests of the workers of UNSOR. Deep down, according to Lind, this was an economic decision. Someone cynically suggested that Leahy's involvement in Corus was motivated by the fact that his son's was employed in the Llanwern BSC factory.

Bates resisted these objections and said that he would protect the interests of the ISTC members of the cold department and make sure that redundancies would be limited to the hot department. Lind seemed satisfied with the commitment, but I pointed out that some workers of the rolling mill had recently switched from the GMB to the ISTC and that they would be made redundant too. Bates believed that job losses in capital intensive departments, such as furnaces, smelting shops and rolling mills, were the inevitable consequence of productivity increases and technological innovation, echoing the point of view of the management. He thought that the precariousness of capital intensive jobs was not a political matter but a 'pure economic' fact. Bates had

a clear commitment to cut what he considered dangerous and unhealthy manual jobs, like the jobs at the Coke cavern in Scunthorpe, which we visited together one day. Getting dressed at the security gate, his body – previously disguised under a loose black suite – emerged through the tight fit of the protective overall, suddenly revealing its sturdy and solid silhouette. At the coke cavern he discussed with the workers about wages, working conditions, and trade union representation with excitement and nostalgia. But descending with the lift from the black metallic tower of the coke cavern towards the company quarters, he whispered bitterly ‘Nothing is changed at the Coke caverns. It is still a bloody Victorian job’. In a way, Bates was the living symbol of the early ideals of the ISTC. Born as a union of unskilled and migrant foundry and metal workers, the ISTC shared the collaborationist views and the ideals of working class respectability and self-improvement of the Labour party. Past ISTC leaders, often of Wesleyan background, regarded working class consciousness as a matter of religious morality as well as of economic interest and mixed labour mobilisation at the factory level with neighbourhood or church-based forms of political activism. Thus, Bates’s faith in community unionism was a return to the morality of labour of some early industrial trade unions and to their ethic of self-improvement through labour regulation. But Bates was also attuned to the pragmatics of modern politics. He dealt with the regional division as a transmission belt of the national direction and as nodal point of horizontal networks with the community. Through the versatile skills of Bates, who was equally at ease among bureaucrats, unskilled workers and families at the farmers’ market, the ISTC was able to bypass the factory level of labour mobilisation and to prevent the formation of horizontal networks between factories.

UNSOR. The Epilogue

In April 2001 the melting shop, billet and rolling mill of UNSOR were closed and the company reduced its operations to grinding and coating coils purchased from the small wire-making factory opposite UNSOR. The new buyers turned out to be the old owners who, thanks to the help from the ISTC and to a special aid package from the government, gave a £4,000 redundancy package to each worker and £15,000 to each manager, and focused on the grinding business with 30 young grinders.

The same Phoenix, different trajectories

The Sheffield Engineering United (SEU) is one of the main UK producers of crankshafts for the automotive industry. The company was funded in 1869 by Andrew Marlowe – an entrepreneurial grinder whose automated cutting machine was exposed at the Crystal Palace Universal exhibition. At the beginnings the company consisted of a small workforce of highly skilled engineers making grinding machines, oil and gas engines and performing plant repairs for factories in Sheffield. The company expanded and mechanised rapidly as it moved into crankshafts production. In 1895 it employed 57 people and in 1900 it became a limited company employing more than one hundred people. SEU was renowned for the great skills and political consciousness of its workers. The company had the biggest communist branch in Sheffield and was at the forefront of the shopsteward movement: a series of blockades and strikes to protest against the first imperialist War led by the Amalgamated Engineers Union (AEU). Indeed looking at the reports of the meetings of the company

communist party branch, skills and politics seemed to go hand in hand so that the most skilled engineers also were the most vociferous and charismatic trade union leaders. These leaders were modernist and productivist and they agreed with the managers that high productivity was beneficial for both the workers and the company. They saw an inextricable link between 'work' and 'politics' and supported the mechanisation of labour in the factory in the belief that mechanical precision, numerical standardisation, and group co-ordination were pre-conditions of class consciousness. Indeed when in 1917 the trade unions agreed with the management to introduce American machinery and principles of scientific management for the production of crankshaft for the legendary Ford T, Fordism and Communism seemed to go hand in hand.

During the War the company produced crankshafts for the 'Spitfires' and became the exclusive supplier of micrometers to the government. A small portable tool used by skilled workers to check the standard specifications, the micrometer decentralised quality control to the shopfloor and hence represented the symbol of the workers' autonomy and self-determination through the use of standards and precision. Under the paternalist management of Ambrose Marlow, the son of the founder, state-of-the-art welfare facilities— exclusive sport grounds, nurseries, and company clubs – and harmonious industrial relations were introduced. Even the most contentious of issues for the workers, the piecework system introduced in the 1950s, was resolved through dialogue between the shopstewards and the management and with the creation of the 'pool system', which insured the workers of departments hit by low production, and at the same time, rewarded the most productive workers. In 1962, five years after the owner, Marlowe, at the time the largest and most up to date factory in Europe in machining of crankshafts, was bought by the GKN group. In 1985, under the Phoenix plan of privatisation, Marlowe was incorporated into the forging division of United Engineering Steel (UES), the giant group created by the merger of British Steel Corporation and GKN. For Marlowe, whose main business was precision machining, the incorporation into a public forging group was detrimental. In fact, privatisation split the steel industry into a low value steel making sector controlled by the BSC and a high-value, privately owned, engineering sector. Under the Phoenix subsidies flew from the public to the private sectors and Marlow found itself on the wrong side of the spectrum. In 1997, following the trajectories of the low-cost forging division, Marlowe was sold by the BSC to Prudential Venture Ltd. a venture capitalist owned by Prudential Insurance. The prudential management made several 'voluntary' redundancies, closed down the forge, and created two divisions – one specialised in civil engineering and aerospace engineering and the other specialised in the automotive industry.

Re-organisation of the shopfloor

The management of new venture capitalist employed a consultancy firm for re-organising the company in order to convince IVECO, the Italian carmaker, to invest in a new joint-venture. The consultant reorganised the production process into a 'general area' – where all the crankshafts were 'roughed' and ground – and a dedicated 'product area' where the Bentley, Ford, and IVECO crankshafts were fitted, balanced, ground, and set-up according to the manufacturers' specifications. One of the aims of the new system was to cut labour costs by forcing each worker of the general area to work on two different crankshafts and two different machines at the

time. More generally the new Total Production Management (TPM) 'philosophy' was based on two principles: the introduction of 'the market' into the production line and team-work. The introduction of the market principle on the shopfloor entailed giving greater power of labour supervision to the firm's customers. For instance, the Roll Royce kept the workers of the Bentley line under constant pressure through sudden changes of standard specifications – communicated daily through the computer terminal located on the line; unannounced visits of its engineers; and time-consuming quality checks to be performed with complex tools designed by RR for the purpose. Similarly, Ford operated with a zero-stock policy, that is, it forced the line to adapt to daily changes in orders and standard specifications. These constant variations frustrated the workers' attempt to control production, or minimise its variations, by cumulating stock (a minimum of two-day stock = 90 crankshafts). Under the new production regime the line workers were fully exposed to the pressures of the market and had become, in the word of the quality manager, 'the first communication point with the customers'.

The second principle of the re-organisation was team-working, which entailed the decentralisation of control and supervision to the line. For each production line a dedicated team was responsible for maintenance, cost accounting; process control; logistical plans; and training. The team was supervised by a team co-ordinator who liaised with production managers and with other teams and communicated briefings of these meetings to the line workers. In this way team co-ordinators created a channel of communication between the production managers and the line which was traditionally performed by the union. Secondly the co-ordinators were in charge of training their teams. Individual skills – represented in the shape of empty boxes in the 'skills matrix' posted in the communication area – were constantly updated with the ultimate aim of multi-skilling the workers. First, operators were trained to perform ancillary tasks, such as fork-lift truck driving, polishing and fitting. Secondly, they were trained to perform different operations simultaneously, for instance, grinding and turning. Thirdly, they were trained to use Computer Numeric Machines, that is, to programme the operations which they previously performed manually on small computers retro-fitted onto the machines. Finally, they were trained to make cost accounting plans and to compile a Process Control Chart (PCC) containing standard costs, quantities and wastes. Multi-skilling not only de-skilled and commodified production on the line, but it also destroyed the fitters' control of the production process. Formally educated, politically militant, with a long pedigree of skilled labour and in control of the factory's machines, the fitters represented the aristocracy of labour in the factory. Their offices located on the shopfloor were quite and private, inhabited by young apprentices sweeping the floor and learning to labour, and filled with pencils, drawings, books, wooden desks and other objects revealing the power of knowledge, seniority and tradition. The fitters were active union members and politically aware of their strategic role in the labour process. Thus the managers' attempt to make their knowledge obsolete was also an attempt to break the union's control of the production process. In fact, re-organisation undermined the fitters' power in two ways. First, it mechanised the setting up of the machines and hence shifted the ground of labour control from mechanic to electronic knowledge. Secondly, the company externalised the maintenance of the machines to the engineers of the manufacturers, who were on-duty on the shopfloor.

More poignantly, the commodification of the production line gave to the teams different status, identities and informal cultures. The Bentley workers produced an elite' crankshaft, valued £300 in the market and targeted to a sophisticated class of consumers – male, middle aged city workers and their blond, elegant female partners – whose images were captured in promotional posters scattered on the walls of the communication area. Stronger market pressure on the Ford line motivated its workers to intensify production in order to 'hit the target' and reduced their factory consciousness by making them aware of the wider competitive forces which were responsible for downturns, short-times and wage reductions. Team work also fragmented the workforce along generational lines. The younger workers, more favourable to changes and less politically motivated, were put to work on the more prestigious lines; the elder workers and 'trouble makers' were dislocated into peripheral lines. One of these was the European Engine Alliance (EAA) line which produced crankshafts for a European car, which was said to be a joint-venture between Fiat, Ford and Rover, but that nobody knew how it looked like. The European line was the lowest ranking in the factory, constantly under the shadow of the uncertain future of the economic partnership and of the uncertain status of the European Union.

The AEEU factory Branch

'we tried hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be re-organised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by re-organising and what a wonderful method it can be for crating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation'. Gaius Petronius Arbiter. (Nero's administrators)

Note posted on the AEEU company office.

The union room was located on the first floor, opposite to the offices of the logistical and production managers and overlooking the beautiful garden that was said to have been planted by the founder himself. Ancient wooden desks, chairs and cabinets filled the room. High on the wooden shelf the bust of Lenin loomed over a pile of company records, trade union journals and photographic albums. The 15 albums preserved untouched the visual history of the products, people and buildings that had connected the workers and their families to the company for more than a century. Ancient grinding machines, the swimming team; the women's turning section; children ready for a summer trips; bowling at the evergreen association; a workers' demonstration in front at Sheffield City Council; the old boss on a bicycle; different generations of trade union representatives discussing; the last crankshafts forged in the plant; a trade union trip to Rimini; the closure of the turning section, the new consultants shaking hands with Steve on the shopfloor with a tense smile. Close by, another folder contained local and national newspaper cuttings documenting the history of the company since its foundation, some of them, dated back to the early 19th century. History was also visually represented in the banners hung up on the walls, whose people, symbols and colours had changed through time reflecting wider histories of amalgamation, conflicts and mass-mobilisation. Through these banners, photos, newspaper cutting, and archival resources young trade unions members learned to make connections between the history of the shopfloor – of its managers, bosses, workers, and families – and the history of the British steel industry, the trade union movement and the state. Steve (the branch officer) and Gary (the deputy officer) had different styles and philosophies of labour representation. Gary was a traditional AEEU communist leader. Historically, the AEEU – the union of the skilled

engineering class – was productivist, hierarchical and collectivist. It viewed production as the site of working class struggle and ‘efficiency’ in the production process – based on mechanisation, inter-changeability and synchronicity of human and machines – as a reflection of class consciousness. Developed at the time of Fordism, productivism was a central ideology of communism and capitalism. From the communist perspective, greater mechanisation entailed greater control over the capitalist process by skilled workers and hence, greater workers’ power. From the capitalist perspective industrial efficiency was directly related to democracy. These two opposite and interlocking perspectives shaped industrial relations in the engineering sector in post-war Britain, based on the collaboration between the Human Relation management and the trade unions. The AEEU hierarchy revolves around the national direction which sets the standards for collective agreements and for political action at the factory level. Following the principle of business unionism, the national direction only supports those strikes and slowdowns which are substantiated by efficiency or economic concerns. For instance when the carmaker Rover was sold to the Phoenix consortium and 600 hundred workers made redundant, the workers of SEU were told not to strike in support the TGWU because the Rover was not among SEU’s customers. Similarly, under business unionism, factory union officers must act as facilitators of re-organisations, re-training, and voluntary redundancies by the management and oppose organisational change only if it entails compulsory redundancies. Thus, business unionism entailed of labour mobilisation centred on the economic interests of the plant, rather than of the workers, and based on collaboration with the management.

Under business unionism trade union representatives and human relation managers were equally involved in the pursuit of profit and efficiency so that their roles and carriers often blurred. For instance, Jack Darling, in 1961 the young secretary of the communist party branch of Marlowe (the biggest in Sheffield) and trade union convener was promoted to the post of Human relation manager in 1975. Darling was a mythical figure in the company, equally revered and criticised by everyone. As young convener, in the 1960s he fought against the introduction of the ‘maximonster’ a big grinding machine that would mechanise and de-skill the production of heavy engines. As Human Relation manager, he passed the ‘average earning’ system to avoid wage inequality between departments in the 1980s and abolished piecework in 1995 because he believed that it was widening the gap between the wages of the skilled and those of the semi-skilled workers. Nonetheless, according to many, he betrayed the communist cause by increasing his salary and power well above his fellow workers. This continuity between the organisational function of the management and of the trade union was demonstrated by the fact that Steve was taking a diploma in labour organisation and was ready to step in as personnel manager in case of deterioration of the financial conditions of the firm and of leadership vacuum. Gary had a traditional business union mentality and he supported the lean production system, especially the multi-skilling of the line workers. He believed that through cost accounting, production control, and marketing, the workers were getting in control of the line and taking the place of the middle management. From Gary’s point of view, lean production meant ‘production with fewer managers’ and with the workers closer to the top. In fact, Gary worked with the team co-ordinators to turn team work into a tool of skill re-composition and of workers’ participation rather than of social fragmentation.

Younger than Gary, Steve had less faith in 'efficiency' and shared the pragmatic business ethos of the AEEU of collaborating with the management on increasing productivity and profitability and, at the same time, of opposing wage cuts and compulsory redundancies. Married and with two children, his boyish smile betrayed a style of leadership different from the machismo of earlier trade union leaders who modelled their charisma on 1940s American gangsters. With his knowledge of labour organisation and experience of past attempts of Toyotism and lean productions in the company, Steve was aware that the re-organisation plan was aimed at cutting labour and weakening the power of the union, but also compelled by the union ethos to embrace change as long as compulsory redundancies were avoided. In a private meeting with the general manager, he promised to increase the productivity of the shopfloor by 10%. In a union meeting he brainstormed the workers on ways of cutting transport time between the general area and the lines and of improving co-ordination between shifts. He fed these suggestions back to the general manager and, as a result, production standards improved. But it was the poor management of the company and the irrationalities of the lean production system that convinced Steve and other workers to collaborate in the re-organisation. For instance, the lack of co-ordination between the workers of the general line and the product-specific teams – and between night and day shifts – was creating delays and confusion and could be easily solved through a shift co-ordinator. The general line struggled to keep up with the rhythm of the lines and an investment in a new automatic grinding machine was required. Thus, for some workers the trade union provided a context for taking control of the production process and for increasing its efficiency against the poor management of speculative owners, inexperienced managers and technocratic consultants. But Steve was conscious of the dangers for the workers to think in 'pure economic' and efficiency terms and often reminded them that productive issues were also political matters. For instance, were not the grinders aware that their suggestion of investing in a new automated grinding machine would de-skill their own labour? What were the boundaries between productivity and exploitation? The AEEU office was also a place where workers looked for explanations and reassurances. Some workers thought that the division of the line into a general area and a product specific area was 'irrational' and 'economically illogic', because crankshafts had to be continuously transported between opposite sides of the shopfloor. Some did not understand the logic lying behind the aesthetic changes – re-painting, refurbishing, and shifting machines – of the factory. Other believed that the *kanban* system was a total waste of money. In time of organisational change gossips and rumours quickly spread on the shopfloor. Is it true that Airbus, one of the potential clients of SEU, is gone bust? Did not the company make 1 million losses last year? Were redundancies discussed in the last company meeting? And is it true that an Italian firm is buying the place? (In fact was not the Italian researcher a disguised manager?). In difficult times of re-organisation the AEEU factory branch distributed information among the worried workers and had the role of guarantor against compulsory redundancy. In the history of Marlowe there had never been compulsory redundancies and Steve made clear that this tradition would continue. Finally Steve and Gary organised political events and demonstrations which 'socialised' the workers into the hierarchies of the company and of the trade union and increased their perception of Marlowe as a cohesive family. For instance, the 20 workers who joined Steve in the demonstration against the closure of corporate pension funds in London learned the hierarchies between local, regional and national AEEU leaders and between different AEEU factories and workers from the march order, the speech sequence and their informal interactions in Trafalgar Square.

Sharing drowsiness early in the morning, political excitement among the crowd, friendly euphoria in the pub, and desultory comments on the bus returning to Sheffield at night they felt happy to belong to the union and looked positively at the changes taking place in the factory. These relations of hierarchy, friendship and social cohesion were 'collected' by Steve in photographic snippets to be added in the company album and discussed with the other workers during the break times. Thus as guarantor of the workers' employment, catalyst of their political commitment, insurer against the risks of change, and expert in labour organisation the AEEU created trust, social stability and consensus among the workers and facilitated the restructuring of the company. Steve was conscious of his ambiguous role in the company re-organisation and often troubled by the possible social consequences of the AEEU's business pragmatism. More importantly he was aware that lean production was breaking the power of the union and its control on the shopfloor. First, it broke the channel of communication between union representatives, production managers and line workers. Now information flew directly from the management and from the customers into the line, without passing through the trade union offices. Secondly, it removed training from the control of the trade union and decentralised it onto the shopfloor. This decentralisation also changed the nature of the skills required. The AEEU trained its workers to the 'hard skills' of turning, fitting, grinding, and turning; whereas the team-leader trained them to the 'soft skills' of communication, sociability, flexibility, mobility. For the AEEU training was a formal system of education based on improving the workers' manual skills; for the general manager training was aimed at 'changing the workers' mindsets'. Thirdly, lean production replaced the fitters and the workers of the tool room, politically militant and members of the AEEU, with the engineers of the machines manufacturers^{vii}. Finally, with the commodification of the line, the young workers identified more with the exclusive lifestyle of the drivers of luxury cars appearing on the posters of the communication areas, than with AEEU's sober anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist ethic.

Business unionism in times of re-organisation

When, in February 1999 IVECO invested £9m in a new line, the attack on the AEEU intensified. Even if the union was acting as social stabiliser and facilitator of organisational change, the management believed that the AEEU was a liability for the company and that 'the Marlowe labour mentality' scared investors and clients off. Thus, the company was re-named Sheffield Engineers United (SEU), in order to break the association between Marlowe and the company's militant political past. Following the change of name, the shopfloor was painted in orange, the communication areas improved, and a small gazebo displaying crankshafts and promotional videos built on the line. The production and logistical managers were made redundant and Steve's office was re-located from the first floor onto the shopfloor, where according to the new general manager 'it belonged'. On the day of the move, the general manager told to Steve to clean up the rubbish in the office and Steve replied 'this is not rubbish this is our history'. New investments were made into a new line, but the overall production process remained unchanged. With the recession in the automotive industry and without the protection of the middle management the lines were put under strain by even more aggressive customers. In December 1999 Equitable Life, which managed the workers' pension funds, declared insolvency and cut the policyholders' payouts to stay afloat. The workers panicked about their pensions and

about rumours that were spreading that Prudential was selling SEU to acquire Equitable. Steve kept the company together in the midst of financial losses, anarchy and fear on the shopfloor, and of successive buy-outs bids by TNCs. First, he gathered information from national and international trade union representatives, MEPs, journalists and the Web on two steel groups – one Indian and the other German – which had bid to buy SEU. He gathered enough information on the speculative intention of the two groups, and support from managers and the workers to revert Prudential's decision to go along with the Indian bid. He also lobbied local and national MPs in favour of a counter-bid by a consortium of steel makers led by Corus and based on an ambitious plan of integration between steel making and engineering. The counter-bid was supported by five MPs and the general manager but opposed by the AEEU general secretariat and it did not succeed. Having protected the firm from risky take-overs by multinational corporations, Steve organised a meeting with the miners of the Tower colliery, who had successfully buy-out the South Wales colliery in 1995, to explore the possibility of workers' buy out. MPs, SEU workers, miners, NUM and AEEU trade union representatives attended a secretive meeting in Worthley Hall, an ex aristocratic mansion owned by the AEEU and used for education and political campaigning. The buy-out proposal and the suggestions by the Tower miners were circulated and discussed in SEU and received a cold reaction by the workforce. Sheffield has a painful history of attempted workers' buyout in the steel industry. Production collectives failed following similar patterns: enthusiastic workers living on a fraction of their salary for months were overtaken by middle management and private businessmen who stepped in to help with the administration and distribution. Thus, at the meeting, most of the SEU workers showed an instrumental attitude towards work which ruled out greater personal engagement or involvement in managerial tasks. When politically committed, they believed that 'workers' ownership' was a political oxymoron and that 'a workers' company in a capitalist world' would not last a week.

Following the failure of the two attempted bids, the management communicated to Steve its intention to take the company into administration. In response, Steve organised a demonstration together with community groups and the Caribbean councillor of the area where SEU was located and most of the workers lived. The demonstration took place outside Sheffield City Council and brought to the public attention the threat of closure of SEU and the problems of unemployment and social exclusion of the local Caribbean community. Besides, he organised a trip to London together with non-manufacturing and private unions, legal activists and anti-corporate groups to demonstrate against a court ruling that Equitable acted lawfully in cutting policyholders' bonuses and which threatened the SEU workers' pensions. Thus, in spite of his formal subscription to the ethic of business unionism, Steve was constantly expanding labour mobilisation outside the boundaries of the factory, connecting class politics with community, ethnic and legal activism, and translating local economic issues into broader political alliances between workers of different companies, sectors and countries. Unlike most of trade union leaders who declare themselves 'useless with the Internet', Steve spent long hours on the computer, campaigning, searching information and networking on the Web. He was also unconventional in his drawing informal political networks outside the traditional labour movement, with MPs, journalists, lawyers, intellectuals and progressive capitalists. It was through one of these networks that a new buyer was found, the Italian firm Bifrangi, and closure avoided. In the company Steve constantly

challenged the mere economic logic of the managers and always looked at the social consequences of re-organisation. For instance, when the logistical manager was sacked and left without support by his colleagues, Steve found him a job on the line. In a trade union meeting he presented his decision by saying 'as long as I am convener, no worker will be made compulsorily redundant and this also applies to managers, even if they don't work as hard as we do'. He also fought to keep the disabled son of Jack Darling in employment against the personnel management's claim that 'the guy was a waste of money.' Against the general manager's proposal of closing the 'Evergreen club' because of its economic costs, Steve emphasised the importance of 'its social function'. The Evergreen club met in a 1950s neo-classical building with a theatre, a billiard room, a dancefloor, a kitchen and a big dining area with view over two bowling greens, a tennis court and secular trees descending towards the Yorkshire moors. In the meeting of the club past and present workers, clerical staff, and trade union representatives played snooker, BINGO and lunched together in monthly meetings and in the company Christmas party. Most of the evergreen members retired after having spent the whole working life at Marlowe. They remember the time of mass production, the War, nationalisation and the transformation of people, pay scales and production that followed the arrival of the Phoenix, a mythical time which also signalled the time of their 'voluntary' retirement. Embodying the social memory of Marlowe, male and female ex-workers displayed a fashion; a confrontational political language and a confidence in the manufacturing industry that both amused and galvanised the present workers. Hardly recognisable, their faces appeared on the company's photo albums, embodying the authority of Marlowe's political past and giving new life to its troubled present. Steve was aware that the Evergreen club increased social cohesion among the workers of SEU and reproduced the paternalistic views of the company 'like a big family' perpetuated by old management. But he also feared that the 'pure economic focus' of the speculative managers in charge of the company was undermining the very social consensus that kept the company going in these difficult times. But it was not for pragmatism that Steve cared for the family-company. Entered in the company when he was fifteen and become skilled worker and political activist through apprenticeship with experienced workers and trade union representatives, he saw the union company branch as a pedagogic institution that reconciled professional, political and personal development in a 'total way', unlike other institutions such as friendship, school or family.

CONCLUSION

The framing of economic unionism and community unionism as two opposite forms of labour mobilisation reflects, on a broader level, two antagonistic views of capitalism within the Western left. Institutionalists and Polanyian scholars consider capitalism as a form of labour commodification, whereas Gramscian analysts see it as a pattern of labour exploitation. At the macroeconomic level, this split between the 'market' and the 'production' views of economic value is reflected in the different agendas of anti-globalisation movements and policies of global financial institutions, for instance in the focus by the OECD on trade regulation and by the ILO on labour standards, and in their lack of co-ordination.

Drawing on social movement theory social unionism scholars emphasise the 'expressive', 'experiential' and 'heterogeneous' nature of contemporary labour and politics at condemn the 'pure economical' view of Marxist labour activism and

traditional trade unions. The evidence that I have presented turns the opposition between ‘the pure economic’ vision of business unionism and ‘the pure social morality’ of community unionism upside down. The community unionism of the ISTC was inspired by a mixture of business pragmatism, technological determinism and monetarism that saw redundancies and the closure of the Electric furnace at UNSOR as the natural outcome of the trajectory of mechanisation, economic profitability and the obsolescence of industrial capitalism vis-à-vis the financial economy. Following the monetarist logic of New Labour, the ISTC made sure that the financial revenues from the steel workers’ pensions would compensate them for their job losses together with the resources released from the government’s ‘supply-side’ interventions. Whether the workers’ pension funds are another incarnation of Hegemonic capitalism^{viii} or a new instance of ‘market socialism’^{ix}, the ISTC considered the workers’ redundancies a ‘pure’ matter of money transfer or transformation – from wages to pensions or compensation – and ignored precisely the experiential aspects of labour. Besides, under community unionism, the ISTC consolidated and expanded its organisational structure, rather than decentralised it, incorporating smaller unions and associations; performing welfare services previously performed by the state and forging one-way communication lines between the national and the factory level with horizontal networks developed only at the divisional level. This hierarchical structure was reflected in the way the owners’ decision of closing UNSOR was communicated to the ISTC divisional officers and to local MPs only long before the company’s financial problems started. Besides, in the negotiation with the management the ISTC did not protect the furnace workers or the wire workers, but the ‘narrow’ interests of its traditional members. Whereas contrary to its business ethics, the AEEU branch officers carefully assessed the social and experiential consequences of economic re-organisation and pushed politics beyond the boundaries of class and the factory. Under the charismatic leadership of Steve, redundant managers were given a job on the shopfloor; workers demonstrated together with the black, community and anti-corporate activists; and retired workers and their families spent time together with the rest of the company/family. If the language of ‘the community’ disguised the economic pragmatism of the ISTC; the language of profit covered the AEEU’s communitarian morality. Considering the role of history in forging contemporary perceptions of class relations, the paternalist, communitarian and internationalist ethos of the AEEU in SEU reflected the middle class morality of the skilled engineers, radicals and intellectuals who founded the early Communist Party in Sheffield. Whereas the economic pragmatism of the regional officer of UNSOR reflects the union’s roots in the marginal sections of the working class – migrants, unskilled, rural – and the economic nature of its struggles for political emancipation.

This paper argues the importance of anthropological approaches to labour studies. My ethnography shows that today, as in the past, the trade union movement under capitalism is split into two divergent moralities of labour – one economical and one social – and suggests that a truly new social unionism must reconcile these two labour perspectives and forms of labour mobilisation, rather than emphasise their differences. For anthropologists familiar with the formalist/substantivist debate in the 1960s and the ‘moral economy’ debate in peasant studies in the 1980s the opposition between ‘purely social’ and ‘purely economical’ trade unions is not new. Indeed in a famous essay anthropologist Marilyn Strathern suggests that the invention of society by social scientists was the flip side of the economists’ invention of ‘the economy’ under the

neoconservative regimes of Reagan and the Thatcher. In similar vein, it can be argued that community unionism is the flip side of the monetarism and technocratic capitalism of the New Democrats in America and of New Labour in Britain. More broadly, anthropology questions ethnocentric views of labour mobilisation based on homogeneous notions of class, labour and politics and suggests alternative models of labour mobilisation in the South for working class struggles in the North. For instance, June Nash (1993), in her study of labour responses to the privatisation of the Bolivian mining industry in the 1980s, shows the mixture of cosmological beliefs, traditions, practical customs and communist ideology constituting the political consciousness of the Oruro miners. Similarly, Kearney's (1996) study of peasants' mobilisation in Oaxaca, Mexico, deals with the articulation of 'class' and 'identity' in contemporary forms of labour mobilisation. The author discusses the fluid identities of the people of San Jeronimo, in Oaxaca, Mexico, who are at the same time as peasants in their town, informal labourers in Californian agro-businesses, urban migrants in the shantytown of Mexican cities and proletarians in American cities. Kearney suggests that the people of San Jeronimo live in fluid social and economic spaces – where land, labor power, finance capital, the household, global corporations and ancient Mixtec knowledge and rituals are mixed together – and develop fluid strategies to cope with global capitalism. Kearney suggests that unlike labour movements in the North, which have a traditional white working class base, the Oaxaca peasants develop effective anti-capitalist strategies by combining class consciousness with indigenous consciousness, human rights consciousness and ecological consciousness. The indigenous rebellion against Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) in Ecuador discussed by Sawyer's (2005); the re-peasantisation of Bolivia, from tin miners to coca farmers described by Laurie et al (2002); and the opposition of the indigenous communities against the BHP Ok Tedi gold and copper mines discussed by Hirsh (2002) are all instances of labour mobilisation based on 'hybrid', 'post-national', 'indigenous' and 'communitarian' political beliefs and praxes which challenge traditional forms of labour mobilisation in the North. Nevertheless, with their focus on identity and 'cultural recognition' these anthropological studies overlook the structural context of indigenous politics and the class basis of capitalist globalisation.

In fact, this paper also stresses the importance of trade union and labour studies for anthropology. Anthropological studies of globalisation increasingly focus on 'the political' and dismiss the material and historical contexts of labour mobilisation and the capitalist framework of 'subaltern' politics. This re-moralisation of peasant politics by anthropologists might reflect their de-legitimisation as 'technical experts' in development that followed the incorporation of the development function into the logic of corporate capitalism – under the various labels of 'corporate responsibility'; 'ethical development', or 'social accountability'. Having been left without voice in economic matters, anthropologists are forced to look at the political as it unfolds outside the factory walls and at the role of political leaders, shamans and indigenous activists in abstraction from the capitalist social relations in which they are embedded. As Tom Brass (2000) has argued, the anthropologists' return to the 'agrarian myth' can de-localise and de-politicise labour struggles and bring peasant politics in line with the politics of the new right.

In conclusion, this paper argues that the material and the experiential – the social and the economical – are two sides of labour which cannot be separated and that studies

on globalisation must recognise this dialectical aspect of labour. The split between social and economic trade unionism reflects the same phenomenon of working class fragmentation, or alienation, rather than different views of labour mobilisation. Similarly, the anthropological turn towards the 'purely political' and away from class relations reflects the discipline's own economic marginality rather than greater political engagement.

ⁱ This term was firstly introduced by Toni Negri in his discussion of Mario Tronti's 'Operai e Capitale'.

ⁱⁱ This dialectics of freedom and regulation is central in the work of Gavin Smith (2000 and 2006)

ⁱⁱⁱ Willis (2001) gives a detailed description of the ISTC's move towards community unionism.

^{iv} Especially if the push towards corporate learning by the DTI secretary of the time, Richard Caborn, is considered.

^v Health and Safety Committee minutes.

^{vi} See the Questionnaire of Paul Kent on ISTC the Community. 2000

^{vii} Under the new financial regime of management, machines were not bought but taken in leasing, which included free assistance by the manufacturers' engineers

^{viii} Dumenil and Levil (NLR 2004)

^{ix} Peter Druker