ResearchOnline@JCU

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

This is the author-created version of the following work:

Le Queux, Stephane, Cox, Anne Ngoc, and Sainsaulieu, Ivan (2024) ***Researching trade union movements through the lens of social movements and shades of activism: fault lines, industrial guerrilla and spontaneous disruption from below.*** **In: Parker, Jane, Donnelly, Noelle, Ressia, Sue, and Gavin, Mihajla, (eds.) Field Guide to Researching Employment and Industrial Relations. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, United Kingdom. pp. 175-190.**

Access to this file is available from:

https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/84240/

© The Editors and Contributing Authors Severally 2024.

Please refer to the original source for the final version of this work:

https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035313891.00026

Researching trade union movements through the lens of social movements and shades of activism: fault lines, industrial guerrilla and spontaneous disruption from below

Stéphane Le Queux, Anne Cox & Ivan Sainsaulieu

Abstract

This chapter is about researching at the crossroad of organized labour and social movements. It does so through three shades of activism: alterity, industrial guerrilla and spontaneity. The first section focuses on anti-globalisation movements leading to the identification of fault lines in the contest of globalisation. The second examines how workers' militancy comes to challenge official unions and the prospect of independent workers' representation in Vietnam. The third is looking at the effervescent yet paradoxical relation between unions and social-movements in the context of social-unionism in France, with a vignette on the emergence of autonomous grass-root based trade unions. The conclusion reflects on the need to accept that social relations and activism can transgress our sociological categorizations. it is less so looking at people through systems, organisations and structures, however important they are, than people as structure; that is a methodological posture that accepts that social relations can escape determinism.

Key words: social movements, activism, trade unions, spontaneity

Introduction

This chapter is inspired by some twenty-five years of fieldwork in the Americas, Europe and the Asia-Pacific, looking at emerging forms of activism, with an emphasis here on their interface, intersection, mismatch, collision or even conflict with institutionalised form of representation, trade unions in the first instance. Our reckoning is that as much societies evolve, so should our objects of inquiry and heuristics. Activism is occurring in many shades inside out social structures and institutions, sometimes across social movements themselves, in a mode for example of 'discrete mobilisations' (Sainsaulieu and Talpin, 2023). Our presentation will proceed along three shades: *Alterity*, *Guerrilla* and *Spontaneity*. The study of these shades was carried out as they occured empirically in the form of social evanescence evolving aside and against existing frames, each in their own way but altogether inherently counter-hegemonic. Each of them illustrate the capacity of self-determined, autonomous and horizontal forms of social contention as well as their limits which, in the interstice of the 'possibilities and impossibilities of autonomous practices' as referred to by Böhm and al. (2010), much in the same vein, echoes contemporary debates about the modality, effectiveness and lasting change to be brought about by renewed forms of collective leadership, as a matter of 'assembly' for instance as per Hardt and Negri's heuristics (2017).

Of Alterity. We revisit the study of anti-globalisation movements, which erupted around the turn of the 21st Century. Alterity, in essence, as those movement were precisely asking for

another world, an alternative to neo-liberal market-driven globalisation, but also as they substantially emerged outside and in protest against institutions of (global) governance, of which (international) trade unions were part. Thus came the assumption that looking at fault lines, this alterity could provide insights for a revitalisation of organised labour (Le Queux, 2005).

Of industrial guerrilla. We turn to another geo-political context looking at workers' activism under tight social control, which is a common feature in Asia. The emphasis is on enduring wildcat strikes in Vietnam, all illegal strikes led by unofficial workers' representatives (UWRs), successfully by-passing trade unions and a failing system of collective representation (Cox and Le Queux, 2023). It is argued that the inherent function of direct, spontaneous and unchartered action explains in significant part the shortfall of the recent legal attempt to officialise the unofficial, an attempt one may consider to 'regain power by sharing it'.

Of Spontaneity. We shift to the effervescent context of French social-movement (and political) unionism (Le Queux and Sainsaulieu, 2010). This third section starts with some theoretical account on advances in social inquiries regarding evolving activism. We then put the attention to splits from (the rise of autonomous unionism) and clashes with (the recent Yellow Vest movement) established union organisations. We emphasize that rather than a 'function' or 'functionality' of social-movement unionism, social movements and activism often operate in a complex, sometimes contradictory or even contrary relation with organised labour and that needs to be methodologically taken into account when conducting field work beyond and across unions' borders.

The conclusion is providing further methodological considerations on the very principles guiding the analysis and discuss prospects. We note that while spontaneity, network-based and self-organisation has been attracting increased attention, very few studies have made it a framework for understanding social struggles (Cervera-Marzal and Sainsaulieu, 2023). Or, as pointed out by Della Porta and al. (2022: 3): "Indeed, if social movement literature has traditionally ignored mobilization dynamics in the world of work (…), industrial relations scholarship has for too long adopted a narrow institutionalist agenda, focused on collective bargaining, the workplace, and traditional trade unionism (…)".

Identifying fault lines: back to anti-globalisation movements

Whilst trade unions were in decline in most developed countries and in search for avenues for renewal, notably in Anglo-Saxon countries, the turn of the 21st Century saw the spark of new social movements in protest against globalisation. The research question that came to fore was to know as to whether these movements had something to bring about to unions: the 'revitalization' thesis. On both side of the Atlantic, leading scholars were urging trade unions to engage beyond organizing strategies. Turner (2005) saw the activation of a social movement by and within unions as the precondition for a democratic counterweight in an environment that was hostile in all respects. In this regard Turner noted: "ongoing global liberalisation has weighted the odds heavily against organizing, bargaining and legislative success, unless such efforts are part of rank-and-file based mobilizations that attract broad social support in campaigns framed as battles for social justice" (Turner, 2005: 21). According to Hyman (2001), unions needed to commit themselves once more to the battle for ideas and retake the ideological initiative by embracing the demands for global justice.

Unions had to “win back their legitimacy' (Hyman, 2007: 207), and a major way of achieving this was, in his view, by defining 'alternative ways of connecting economy and society, work and life”. Unions needed a “new vision, even a new utopia if they are to become subjects and not objects of history” (Hyman, 2007: 208).

The link with the anti-globalisation movement - whether the link took the form of a platform, coalition, merger, assimilation or rejection - was then an entirely empirical question. However, there was the view that the trade union movement needed to establish itself in a central position among the radicals (Hurd and al., 2003). In other words, the union movement was to succeed in reaffirming its core role in the whole gamut of struggles (Harman, 2000). Yet, it could not be taken for granted that the protest movements would readily accept trade union leadership; this requiring an effort of mutual apprenticeship and taming. Negri (2003), for example, concluded with deep pessimism as to the possibility, if not the usefulness, of building bridges with trade unions. What is more, one could wonder about the possibility of adapting the pluralism of social movements to trade unions’ own pluralism.

So, while the research question was simple – in which ways these movements can be a source of union revitalization? – answering it was challenging. The problem was compounded by the fact that these movements were marked by a remarkable diversity, hence inherent problems of generalization. The approach was then to think in terms of *alterity*, by identifying *fault lines*, a method inspired by the constructivist approach used in comparative labour politics (Locke and Thelen, 1995). The idea was to put side by side the problems faced by organized labour as identified in the literature and the dominant features of new social movements.

The cross-examination of the literature on new social movements (see for example della Porta, 2007) and problems inherent to union renewal (Fairbrother and Yates, 2003) revealed that the former challenged organised labour at three levels. First, these movements generally rejected 'rules and leadership' in favour of embracing protest, and a demand for a return to participatory democracy. More precisely, rather than worrying about the power of institutions, it was a matter of exercising a balance of power that could enable a (re)institutionalisation of the power of the people from below. Second, protect movements sought to foster organic solidarity by broadening their social bases, using renewed modes of affinity-based organisation, e-savvy communication and coordination, and a taste for direct and symbolic actions. Third, in the act of reviving social contention and the promotion of counter-hegemonic ideals, they sought to bring back a radical humanism into every sphere of the public life. These three principles mirrored three fundamental problems faced by organised labour: the legitimacy of representative democracy; declining mobilising capacity; and, a lack of political alternative (see Table 1). Those three problems were recurring themes in the literature on union renewal and they can be match with the operating principles of the protest movements.

Table 1

Fault Lines: Problems faced by organized labour as reflected by the new social movements

Problems faced by labour	Social movements operating principles
1. Labour elitism, demobilising social	The questioning of governance, from

partnership and fragmentation of solidarity	institutional (corporatist) regulation to social protest. The importance of a horizontal levelling of power and networking
2. Declining mobilising capacity	The renewal of social activism with new constituencies and methods of (direct) action, coordination and leadership
3. Lack of political alternative	Politics bringing utopia, humanist and universalist values back on to the agenda, including strong ecological commitments

Using this heuristic following these three fault lines helped providing tentative answer to our research question. Has there been any 'revitalization'? To some extent, in varying degrees depending on union organisations and national contexts, but very little if anything overall. Most union confederations in the developed world, Anglo-Saxon countries making no exception, failed to venture beyond their institutional anchorage. There has been no reconversion, a retreat instead to their core constituencies and (industry) strongholds, within the boundaries of bargaining systems and trades.

Besides, a decade or so after Seattle, some would argue that protest movements have not been able to achieve much themselves, irrespective of how committed and inspiring they might have been. This view was stated by Tarrow (2005), who contended that: "transnational activism does not resemble a swelling tide of history but is more like a series of waves that lap on an international beach, retreating repeatedly into domestic seas but leaving incremental changes on the shore" (Tarrow, 2005: 218). Tarrow's pessimism was shared by Burawoy who noted that "counter-hegemonic globalisation ... clutches at straws" (Burawoy, 2010: 302).

However, there has been a sensible shift in labour internationalism in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008. As noted in the 2009 ILO Bureau of Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) special issue on trade union responses to global capital strategies, Keune and Schmidt outlined that alliances with global justice movement represented an opportunity for unions to reach out to a new public, to act in innovative ways and to strengthen their mobilisation capacity, in particular transnationally (Keune and Schmidt, 2009: 17). The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) thus asserted the need for a broad alliance of social forces in its statement to the 2009 World Social Forum: "We are here to exchange our views with civil society. Together, we must prove capable of formulating proposals to change the current paradigm of economic growth. We want to see an economic model based on redistribution, respect for the environment and fair relations between rich and poor countries" (ITUC, 2009). However, the much-expected shift of paradigm did not happen. If anything, banks have been bailed and working families have been failed (Le Queux and Peetz, 2013). Despite unions' concerns and renewed statements (Global Unions, 2010), the 2010 Toronto G-20 rather decided to shift from fiscal stimulus to 'sustainable public finances' and austerity measures, letting unions with the challenging and contradictory task to strike a balance between 'those too big to fail' and 'those (they have regarded) too small to matter', in the words of John Monks, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, 2010).

Since then, international trade unions have embraced what has become labelled the 'Global Movement for Social Justice'. However, this stance mostly stays in the realm of the discursive arena since International unionism is mediated by national constituencies. Rising inequalities and pauperisation are making the split in solidarities increasingly overarching; the social landscape lying fallow and open to new forms of mobilisations, and populism.

Industrial Guerrilla: the case of unofficial workers' representatives in Vietnam

The rise in power of workers' grassroot militancy over the last fifteen years in Vietnam has taken place outside the framework of official trade unionism. The multiplication of wildcat strikes is the result of workplace activists organising in a form of industrial 'guerrilla' in the vein, some argue, of a culture and practice of resistance and clandestinity inherited from the war of independence. Remarkably, all the strikes taking place are strikes being led by unofficial representatives, therefore all illegal in the sense that unions are not involved (Tran, 2020: 88). The majority of these are short strikes, lasting between one and three days, and it has been found that workers were successful in 90 percent of cases (Schweisshelm and Do, 2018). They can extend to an entire industrial cluster, depending on the coordination of the informal activist networks involved (Do, 2017).

The weaknesses of the system, from the lack of effective trade union representation to deficient inspection and enforcement mechanisms, are well known and the need to address them has always been controversial within the Vietnam Communist Party. On the one hand, Vietnam, like most countries in the South Asian region, needs foreign investment for its development. In order to attract international capital, the country provides a reservoir of low-wage labour and a legal framework where it can be exploited without too many problems. Thus, as elsewhere, the 'pacification' of industrial relations (Ford and Gillan, 2016) is a strong imperative. The case of Vietnam can indeed be framed through the prism of labour subordination under state authoritarianism and state-controlled unionism, a common feature, to varying degrees, in East/South-East Asia (Ford and Gillan, 2016: 174-176) and historically prevalent in labour intensive, export-oriented industries (Deyo, 2012). This is a shared feature with China where challenges for labour reform and accommodation have been at the centre of a growing number of critical studies suggesting that the situation is fluid, with 'shades' and 'trade-offs' taking place (Hui and Chan, 2011; Howell and Pringle, 2019; Froissart and al., 2019).

As stated above, spontaneous labour protest has grown strongly on the back of the absence of an effective representative capacity from the trade union apparatus (Schweisshelm and Do, 2017). Nguyen et al. (2023) find that union coverage negatively affects both sexes in terms of earnings and labour supply. There are two major constraints on the development of trade union activity in Vietnam. The first is the subordination to the Vietnamese Communist Party, who holds a strong stance on maintaining a "harmonious" relationship with employers. The subordination of trade unions to the Communist Party and the imperative to maintain harmonious labour relations are enshrined in both the Labour Law and the Trade Union Law. The second is the lack of financial and human resources for direct representation. Burdened by these constraints, unions are limited to a function of relaying management decisions, occasionally intervening to cool things down. Functionally, the role of trade union officials has therefore remained virtually unchanged since the period of the

centralised economy which prevailed until the mid-1980s. Rather,their focus has changed: the function of supporting Party cadres has been replaced by that of supporting management. It is into this representative vacuum that workers' collective action developed.

Endemic industrial conflicts ultimately prompted the Communist Party to act. The 2019 Vietnamese Labour Law, coming into effect on 1st January 2021, allows for the establishment of workers' representative organisations, namely Internal Employee Organisations (IEOs), *tổ chức của người lao động tại doanh nghiệp*, independent from official trade unions of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour. It also partly reflected external pressures from international organisations such as the ILO and members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. The legislation sets out a legal perimeter for IEOs, at equal footing with unions albeit bound to the local level. A step towards industrial democracy? Whether and how IEOs would eventuate is uncertain. Thus far, it has not. As noted by Buckley: "Since existing, wildcat forms of resistance have worked, workers are not demanding independent unions or IEOs; such demands have come from capital" (2021: 88). He concludes on a sobering note: it has "(…) not come from the grassroots, has not been a development building on wildcat militancy, but is a reaction against such militancy. The excitement and optimism about the proposed reforms from pro-labour quarters may, therefore, be misplaced" (2021: 90).

One question arising is indeed to know as to whether this is an institutional trap. The aim is non equivocally to subsume conflict. IEOs will have to abide to the same constraints as unions do when it comes to strike. Buckley (2021: 79) thus concurs with Ca Dao (2019) and reaches the conclusion that "rather than being a progressive step forward, freedom of association reforms are an attempt to reduce labour militancy". It is about control, not only in regards workplace activism but beyond to make sure it does not spill over and affect the political order. In their own words, the Communist Review (2022) advised that "it is necessary to have a good solution to control the scope of operation of IEOs in terms of space (within each enterprise) and activities that must be limited in labour relations. Do not allow these organisations to develop into political forces, especially opposing political forces". In fact, Pham (2023) argues that dissident labour activists, although currently have negligible (or even no measurable) impact on labour relations, pose a potential threat to the political legitimacy of the party-state and, by extension, may impact the utilisation of capital and disrupt established order. They have experienced imprisonment, arrest, threat, or police harassment (Ibid).

As identified in previous research on UWRs (Cox, 2015), there are other sociological factors at play. Wildcat strikes allow for *ad hoc* mobilisation, fast and responsive to shop-floor realities. The transition from a spontaneous, *ad hoc* mode of collective action to the setting up of structures may turn out to be problematic, without organisational skills - these are workers with low levels of education - it also entails the risk of exposing militants. Informal leaders generally choose not to expose themselves publicly for fear of reprisals (Tran, 2020: 89), or to be seen co-opted if not corrupted.

Moreover, it is not certain that setting up structures is useful as the tactic of direct-action has been shown to work. And according to recent news releases, it seems that, to date,

workers persist in conducting such direct-action tactics. UWRs manage to mobilise workers effectively, and collective action makes it possible to satisfy their demands, sometimes with the benevolence of union officials, who are themselves employees, who may incidentally benefit from the gains obtained by the strike; the downside, however, may be that these gains do not find formal inclusion into collective agreements.

It should also be noted that this is usually a transitional workforce. In the case of the textile and garment factories analysed by Cox (2015), 70-75% of the workers are migrant workers who change jobs regularly in search of better pay and return to their home region as soon as they have earned enough money to buy a piece of land oropen a small business. For many, they had to leave their families behind because of the constraints of the residence permit system (*hộ khẩu*). It is also common for them to give up their work seasonally to help with agricultural work, as highlighted by Do (2012) in her report to the ILO. Thus, the turnover rate of the workforce is high and does not facilitate the maintenance of stable structures. Likewise, the existing informal movements lack stable leadership as a result. Last, Tran (2020: 88) denotes a 'cultural' factor: Vietnam is home to a long tradition of underground organising and revolutionary culture, a tradition of informal actions outside the legal framework known as the '*Le*' (autonomous ruling) (Tran, 2013; Däubler, 2018), upon which workers - migrants sharing a community of existence and a strong identity bond - can easily be mobilised and where informal leaders find organic legitimacy.

The conditions of emergence, development and impact of IEOs constitute a wide-open research agenda ahead. Can we identify factors that lead to the establishment of IEOs or instead, as we outlined, explain why workers and UWRs decide not to. IEOs may take different forms and perform different functions: can we make a typology? How will IEOs evolve over time: will they merge with VCLG trade unions? Or, if they keep their ground, how are they going to co-exist with unions? Many practical issues may arise: for example, who has more power in bargaining? Will they be able to organise some form of pattern bargaining? Will the new system effectively curb labour disputes, yet be effective in advancing workers' demands?

Spontaneous disruption in the context of French social movement unionism

France is notoriously renowned for the effervescence of social movements and French unionism often branded as a model of social-movement unionism, however complex and contradictory the dialectic between the two can be. Researching in this context hence requires an underlying understanding of the nature and implications of the spontaneous character of protest. For sake of illustration we will be looking at the late 'yellow vest' movement and provide a vignette on the emergence and rise of autonomous unionism (*Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques*, SUD) from the 1990s onwards. Beforehand, we need to discuss the notion of 'spontaneity'.

Beyond social movements, ordinary forms of struggle have received new attention, inspired by approaches to the arts of resistance (Gaventa and Scott, 1992), such as the concepts of lifestyle as politics (De Moor, 2017). The notion of spontaneity is herein being approached with a view to rebalancing a perspective that is too focused on organisational voluntarism (Snow and Moss, 2014; Sainsaulieu, 2020). Organisational reductionism, it is argued, leads to the replacement of the density of social ties by 'organizational density' (Sampson and al., 2005), or even to the reduction of the organisation to the dynamic of leadership and

'leadership capital' (Nepstad and Clifford, 2006). Social struggles can have strong overtones of 'spontaneity' and 'immediacy'. Unpremeditated, spontaneous action characterised by both self-organisation and disruptive forms of action (Péchu, 2020) may take place in a context of de-legitimisation of institutions, including unions, or even a process of de-politicisation.

Spontaneous struggles imply that the actors involved express a distance from organisations, the desire to do without them, or even to constrain them (Cress and Snow, 2000). *Ad hoc* networks are sometimes at the forefront, made up of experienced but poorly organised individuals. These networks can nevertheless be structured internally and show a hierarchy within them, raising the question of the degree of horizontality and the definition of possible self-proclaimed leaders. Uncertainty, ambiguity and indeterminacy are inherent to spontaneous action (Snow and Moss, 2014). The unfolding of spontaneous action leaves room for initial emotions, anger, moral shock or personal courage (Galais and Lorenzini, 2017). The dynamic process of struggle can occur in a changing configuration of alliances and counter-movements, of close relations with the media and the state that influence its subversive content.

The 'yellow vest' movement that erupted in 2019 is emblematic of such spontaneity. In a reminiscence of the movement of the '*sans*' (unemployed, homeless, without ID) of the 1990s, it was all about reclaiming social citizenship and visibility, hence the yellow vest. It started in protest to a hike in fuel prices. With no organisational base except Internet social network it had all the features described above: a clean break with the trade union leaders (who often disavowed the movement), and even with the media; emerging spontaneous leaders; and a spectacular outpouring of activity, first on the roadside roundabouts and then in a series of demonstrations. The nationwide occupation of the roundabouts was unprecedented in French history. The demonstrations were particularly disruptive, including confrontation with the police and the looting of shops. The flirtation with violence should not however obscure the self-organisation on the roundabouts or the coordination in three national conferences, attended by hundreds of delegates, with the rising demand for more direct democracy, like the recent claim for a people's initiative referendum (*Référendum Initiative Citoyenne*, RIC). The social base was also original, a mix of workers from small businesses and self-employed, and less so the usual categories of protesters (employees of large companies, particularly public companies, or young people from the suburbs), in a specific social space too, the outer suburbs or semi-rural areas, where the question of fuel prices was particularly relevant. Age was less of a factor than gender, insofar as the demonstrations were distinctly led by males, unlike the occupation of roundabouts which had a more mixed gender character. A short period of 15 days of occupation of roundabouts across France was followed by a long period of weekly demonstrations, every Saturday for six months. The French government took notice: on February the 1st 2022, it introduced a tariff shield in explicit reference to the yellow vests. The trade union common front against pension reforms at the end of 2022, so rare in the French trade union landscape, was also motivated among other things by a concern not to cut itself off from the rank and file and to restore the image of the unions. Their failure to oppose the reform did not fail to make some people regretting the spontaneous nature of the yellow vest movement that incidentally came to clash with unions' own security forces during national protests.

For social-movement unionism to thrive, you need active social movements in the first place. But the observation is that, somewhat paradoxically, social movements are neither a function nor a functionality of unions, such as a functional relation does not compel functionalism. Assuming it is the case would be methodologically mistaken. It can, but it is circumstantial however one can be instrumental to the other. This observation was corroborated earlier on when researching the emergence of autonomous (unaffiliated) unions, such as SUD in vignette below.

Vignette: Researching New Generation Trade Unionism (SUD)

SUD emerged on the French scene in the early 1990s, in the form of independent or autonomous trade unionism, after an initial breakthrough in the post and telecommunication sector. Interestingly, its foundation was a result of a split from major union confederations, which were seen by SUD supporters as too deeply involved in social partnership and, by corollary, too complacent with capital. Although of minor importance in quantitative terms, SUD trade unions constitute a significant radical pole, in qualitative terms. Not only are they to be found in all of the most combative union strongholds, such as the railways, hospitals, social and cultural services, the education sector, and the metal industry, they also go hand in hand with militant groups, be they the unemployed, temporary workers, the alter-globalists, and so on. They are also used to being at the forefront of social causes, such as women's rights, migrants' issues, or housing rights. As such, they stand in a straight line with the French anarcho-syndicalist tradition, radical and avant-garde, rather than having a presence through the weight of numbers.

How can this radicalism be explained? It has been argued that it is rooted in the eventful times of 1968, something like a resurgence and a melting pot of the various radical currents of the time (Sainsaulieu, 1998). Indeed, the militant cohort of that time, lacking experience, found itself readily muted by the trade union apparatus and remained on the back foot in a context of lessening social conflict after 1976. Twenty years later, conditions had changed. This generation of activists had matured. Concurrently, in a context of membership decline, the social-liberal and consensual orientation pursued by top union leadership was increasingly challenged by the bases in the public sector (and in the private sector). As social benefits and labour conditions were declining under the reformist agenda, so was the trade-off for industrial peace and union power over its constituents. Social struggles led by rank-and-file activists were launched in ways that positioned these developments outside trade union control.

There is an obvious connection between the rejection of a reformist agenda, social agitation, and the foundation of SUD trade unions. Led by a militant generation "trained by and for collective action," they give priority to local action, grassroot unionism and decentralized decision making (Demasin and Denis, 2005). As in many countries, the demise of socialism coupled with a fragmentation and differentiation of the working class has had its ideological toll. As a consequence, contestation has become more social than political. SUD politics thus evolved in a paradigm of "pragmatic contestation" (Sainsaulieu 2000), geared to the fight for social and labour standards and especially the defence of universal and free public services.

As leaders whose ideals and practices stem from the radical left, these 'social entrepreneurs' (Denis, 2003) hold a strong and distinctive cultural capital, which they reinvest into the union and new social movements. However, new members attracted by this union credo did not necessarily bring such political experience with them. The challenge to SUD trade unions was therefore to pass on their militant culture. This problem of generational transfer was not unique to SUD. However, it seems that it appeared to be less acute for SUD, as the intensity of interactions among militants helped sustaining a kind of organizational mould: the more interactions, the more militancy. Yet if the young newcomers were catching up with SUD culture, they rarely seemed to innovate, either because of their lack of symbolic capital or because they have learned to fit very quickly into a world driven by fast adaptation rather than counterculture. After an initial period of growth, there was a question as to whether SUD grassroots organizational model may have been reaching its limits; SUD trade unions facing a process of internal differentiation. Yet, it has remained the most combative, contestation-driven advocate of strike action. SUD organizing efforts might not reach full potential due to the absence of a coordinated and resourceful union apparatus. However, empirical research on joining patterns showed that SUD organizing model was able to attract swinging union activists, ex-unionists, and others who never thought of joining a union before and therefore suggested that militant but pragmatic idealism was also vital for the prospects of union revitalization.

SUD has made limited progress since the sparks of the 1990s. Yet, it is still of force to be reckoned with and was involved in the late union common front during the 2023 mass mobilisation in France. Emblematically, SUD embodies a model of social-movement unionism that tries to reach out but as such, analytically, it is indicative of the limits of synergies between social movements.

Conclusion

Researching through the muddy, multi-faceted and effervescent world of social activism is challenging. In our experience, it requires empathy and inductivity. How to achieve representativeness? If qualitative analysis does not claim to be as representative as a quantitative approach, what then is the relevant case or unit of analysis, like in the case of anti-globalisation movements, a 'collective of collectives'? One way around is to use empathy, beyond yet a necessary close rapport with militants and causes, as an epistemological posture and translate it into heuristics by means of methodological *mimesis*. If anti-globalisation is informed by a radical humanism, let's take it seriously in the analysis and see holistically in the revolt of one the indignation of all. If social activism overflows, escapes, transcends or transgresses our explanatory models and categorisations, be they class, structures and functions, so be it and let's explore the tenets of spontaneity, which in our experience is better served by an ethnographical inquiry and field immersion providing a deep qualitative approach (Cervera Marzal, Sainsaulieu, 2023). In an axiological inversion, it induces looking at *people as structure sui generis* more so than looking *at people through structures*: in other words, understanding autonomy necessitates a methodological posture that views people not solely through systems and structures but as dynamic structures themselves. This ontological stance acknowledges the potential for social relations and activism to transcend

deterministic categorisations. It too relates to past methodological controversies concerning the 'micro-foundations' of social explanation and methodological individualism (Little, 1991).

There are still, of course, important factors of path-dependency at play in terms of referents and militant practices, as for the case of clandestinity in Vietnam, May 68 in France, etc. Contexts matters and generations of activists often overlap. Cross-dissemination and the building of collective identities through collective action are a constant. It is then interesting to think in terms of genealogy. The voices against the 'brutality' of today's world (Huët, 2023) reflect the early voices against social exclusion that gave impetus to the protest movements in the 1990s, and the criticism of capitalism is everything but new. The movements for action against climate change are in many ways renewing, reinventing or extrapolating the former repertoire of contention, universalist and counter hegemonic practices and principles of the anti-globalisation movements (Del Fa, 2023). In extenso then, a relevant question to ask is as to whether history will repeat itself and whether institutionalised forces will stay (or be kept) at bay? Whether unions for example will keep on trying to perform an increasingly difficult balancing act between economy and nature, between past and future, between 'opposition, hedging and support' (Doerflinger and Thomas 2020)?

The alchemy of counter forces to capital is a complex one and does indeed manifest in many shades. After sustaining either a moderate or radical agenda for a long time, the political alternative to capital has found itself bare: reformist and revolutionary strategies alike are floundering. In the meantime, one can be struck by the inventiveness of spontaneous revolts. While the failure of alter-globalism seems, in retrospect, to have nailed down a generation of radicals, all over the world the wealth of spontaneous movements shows that activism remains creative and generates new forms of protest. This is congruent with the notion of 'prefigurative politics' as advanced by Monticelli (2021) and comes along with contemporary discussions on the conditions, praxis and prospects of emancipatory post-capitalist futures (Wright 2019), in which, looking forward, climate action will indeed fuel new firing front lines of contention. We have perhaps looked too long at the two traditional components of collective action, that is programme and organisation, however important, when their capacity for renewal is weak, in contrast to activism from below, in all shades, which in turn may carry valuable lessons for ways forward.

References

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2017). *Assembly*. Oxford University Press.

Böhm, S., Dinerstein, A. C., & Spicer, A. (2010). (Im) possibilities of Autonomy: Social Movements in and beyond Capital, the State and Development. *Social Movement Studies*, *9*(1), 17-32.

Buckley, J. (2021). Freedom of Association in Vietnam: a Heretical view. *Global Labour Journal*, *12*(2): 79-94. https://doi.org/10.15173/glj.v12i2.4442

Burawoy, M. (2010). From Polanyi to Pollyanna: The False optimism of global labor studies. *Global Labour Journal*, *1*(2). https://doi.org/10.15173/glj.v1i2.1079

Ca Dao (2019). 'Công đoàn trong luật Lao động mới có thật sự độc lập ?' [Are unions in the new labour code really independent?], Tiếng Dân, December 14, https://bit. ly/3B8wuzb

Cervera-Marzal, M., & Sainsaulieu Ivan. (2023). L'art du spontané disruptif. Vers une reconfiguration des luttes sociales. *L'Homme et la Société,* 23/2, n°219.

Cox, A. (2015). The pressure of wildcat strikes on the transformation of industrial relations in a developing country: The case of the garment and textile industry in Vietnam. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *57*(2), 271–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185614564378

Cox, A., & Le Queux S. (2023). Towards an independent workers' voice in Vietnam?. *Labour and Industry*, https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2023.2244218

Cress, D. M., & Snow, D. A. (2000). The outcomes of homeless mobilization: the influence of organization, disruption, political mediation, and framing. *American Journal of Sociology*, *105*(4), 1063–1104. https://doi.org/10.1086/210399

Damesin, R., & Denis, J. (2005). SUD trade unions: The new organisations trying to conquer the French trade union scene. *Capital & Class*, *29*(2), 17–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/030981680508600103

Däubler, W. (2018). Trade union pluralism in Vietnam – Coping with informal associations. Traub-Merz R., Pringle T. (Eds.), Trade Unions in Transition. From Command to Market Economies, Berlin, Friedrich-Ebert- Stiftung, 149-162, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/14633.pdf.

Della Porta, D, ed., (2007). The global justice movement. Cross-national and transnational perspectives. Boulder/London: Paradigm Publishers. https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/6966

Della Porta, D., Chesta, R. E., & Cini, L. (2022). *Labour Conflicts in the Digital Age*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529228267

Denis, J. (2003). Les syndicalistes de SUD-PTT : des entrepreneurs de morale ? *Sociologie Du Travail*, *45*(3), 307–325. https://doi.org/10.4000/sdt.31773

De Moor, J. (2017). Lifestyle politics and the concept of political participation. *Acta Politica*, *52*(2), 179–197. https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2015.27

Del Fa, S. (2023). https://theconversation.com/comment-les-soulevements-de-la-terre-federent-une-nouvelle-ecologie-radicale-et-sociale

Deyo, F. C. (2012). *Reforming Asian labor systems: economic tensions and worker dissent*. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB09741214

Do, C. Q. (2017). The regional coordination of strikes and the challenge for union reform in Vietnam. *Development and Change*, *48*(5), 1052–1068. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12326

Nguyen, D. K., T. B. Tran, M. T. X. Nguyen & A. T. M. Pham (2023). Trade unions and workers' welfare in Vietnam. *Post-Communist Economies*, DOI: 0.1080/14631377.2023.2262670

Fairbrother, P., & Yates, C, eds. (2003). Trade Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study. London: Continuum.

Ford, M., & Gillan, M. J. (2016). Employment relations and the state in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *58*(2), 167–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185615617957

Froissart, C., Liu, Y., & Meng, Q. (2019). Trade-offs between state organisations and workers' organisations: Chinese unions in search of authoritarian collective bargaining. *China Perspectives*, (2). 29-38.

Galais, C., & Lorenzini, J. (2017). Half a loaf is (not) better than none: how austerity-related grievances and emotions triggered protests in Spain. *Mobilization*, *22*(1), 77–95. https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671x-22-1-77

Gaventa, J., & Scott, J. C. (1992). Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. *Contemporary Sociology*, *21*(3), 344. https://doi.org/10.2307/2076266

Global Unions (2010). Take action on jobs to sustain the recovery. Global Unions' Statement to the G8/G20 Ontario Summits, June 2010.

Harman, C. (2000). Anti-capitalism: theory and practice. *International Socialism*. http://www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net/StudiesInAnti-Capitalism/Documents_files/Anti-Capitalism%20Theory%20and%20Practice.pdf

Howell, J., & Pringle, T. (2018). Shades of authoritarianism and State-Labour relations in China. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *57*(2), 223–246. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12436

Huët, R. (2023). https://theconversation.com/reforme-des-retraites-a-t-on-atteint-notre-capacite-collective-a-supporter-la-brutalite-du-monde-199736

Hui, E. S. I., & Chan, C. K. C. (2011). The "harmonious society" as a hegemonic project: Labour conflicts and changing labour policies in China. *Labour, Capital and Society/Travail, Capital et Société*, 44(2), 154-183.

Hurd, R. W., Milkman, R., & Turner, L. (2003). Reviving the American Labour Movement: institutions and mobilization. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, *9*(1), 99–117. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959680103009001453

Hyman, R. (2001). European Integration and industrial Relations: a case of variable geometry? *Antipode*, *33*(3), 468–483. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00194

Hyman, R. (2007). How can trade unions act strategically? *Transfer*, *13*(2), 193–210. https://doi.org/10.1177/102425890701300204

ITUC (2009). World Social Forum: Trade Unions Call for a New Growth Model. ITUC online 28-01-09.

ITUC (2010). Massive Protest March in Brussels Rejects European Austerity Plans. ITUC online 29-09-10.

Keune, M., & Schmidt, V. (2009). Global capital strategies and trade union responses: towards transnational collective bargaining? *International Journal of Labour Research*, *1*(2), 9–26. https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/1020745/83812_325802.pdf

Le Queux, S. (2005). New protest movements and the revival of labour politics - A critical examination. *Transfer*. https://doi.org/10.1177/102425890501100407

Le Queux, S., & Peetz, D. (2013). Between "too big to fail" and "too small to matter." *International Journal of Manpower*, *34*(3), 198–212. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijm-04-2013-0077

Le Queux, S., & Sainsaulieu, I. (2010). Social movement and unionism in France: a case for revitalization? *Labor Studies Journal*, *35*(4), 503–519. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449x10379644

Little, D. (2011). *Varieties of Social Explanation – An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science*. Westview Press: Boulder. San Francisco. Oxford.

Locke, R. M., & Thelen, K. (1995). Apples and Oranges Revisited: Contextualized Comparisons and the Study of Comparative Labor Politics. *Politics & Society*, *23*(3), 337–367. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329295023003004

Monticelli, L. (2021). On the necessity of prefigurative politics. *Thesis Eleven*, *167*(1), 99-118.

Negri, T. (2003). Introduction. In W. F. Fisher and T. Ponniah (eds.) Another World is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum, London: Zed Books.

Nepstad, S. E., & Bob, C. (2006). When do Leaders Matter? Hypotheses on Leadership Dynamics in Social Movements. *Social Science Research Network*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=913744

Péchu C. (2020). Spontanéisme. Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux, Fillieule O., Mathieu L., Péchu C. (Eds.), SciencePo Les Presses, 517-524.

Pham, S. (2023). Rights-Based Resistance of Dissident Labor and Land Activists. In: Vietnam's Dissidents. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-4606-8_4.

Sainsaulieu, I. (1998). La Fédération Solidaires unitaires démocratiques des PTT (SUD-PTT) : creuset d'une contestation pragmatique. *Revue française de science politique*, 48, 121-141. https://www.cairn.info/revue--1998-1-page-121.htm.

Sainsaulieu, I. (2000). La contestation pragmatique dans le syndicalisme autonome. La question du modele S.U.D.-P.T.T. L'Harmattan, Logiques sociales.

Sainsaulieu, I. (2020). Petit bréviaire de la lutte spontanée. Editions du Croquant, Vulaines-sur-Seine.

Sainsaulieu, I., & Talpin, J. (2023). Introduction to special issue 'The discreet mobilisations of working class and subaltern groups.' *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, *10*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2023.2179209

Sampson, R. J., McAdam, D., MacIndoe, H., & Weffer-Elizondo, S. (2005). Civil society reconsidered: the durable nature and community structure of collective civic action. *American Journal of Sociology*, *111*(3), 673–714. https://doi.org/10.1086/497351

Snow, D. A., & Moss, D. M. (2014). Protest on the Fly: Toward a Theory of Spontaneity in the Dynamics of Protest and Social Movements. *American Sociological Review*, *79*(6), 1122–1143. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122414554081

Schweisshelm, E., & Do Q.C. (2018). From harmony to conflict. Vietnamese trade unions on the threshold of reform. Traub-Merz R., Pringle R. (Eds.), *Trade Unions in Transition. From Command to Market Economies*, Berlin, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 109-147, https:// library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/14633.pdf.

Tarrow, S. (2005). *The new transnational activism*. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511791055

Thomas, A., & Doerflinger, N. (2020). Trade union strategies on climate change mitigation: Between opposition, hedging and support. European Journal of Industrial Relations, 26(4), 383-399. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959680120951700

Tran, H.V. 2020. Strikes in foreign direct investment enterprises in the southern key economic region of Vietnam. *International Journal of Financial Research*, 11 (5): 79-92.

Tran, A.N. (2013). *Ties that Bind: Cultural Identity, Class, and Law in Vietnam's Labor Resistance*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

Turner, L. (2005). From Transformation to Revitalization: A New Research Agenda for a Contested Global Economy. *Work and Occupations*, *32*(4), 383–399. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888405279071

Wright, E. O. (2019). *How to be an anticapitalist in the twenty-first century*. Verso Books.