

Organizations and Class Politics

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Abstract:

Debates on the nature of class politics tend to be organized around analyses of class structure, class experience, and the relationship between them. In this paper, I suggest that, when it comes to class mobilization in the formal political arena, these discussions fall short. Trade unions are the primary vehicle for the political mobilization of the working class. But the politics of trade unions are neither a function of specific industrial conditions nor reducible to the actual or perceived interests of their members. I argue that organizational sociology can help remedy these theoretical gaps. It holds three important insights for the study of class politics: First, it stresses that the identity and practices of organizations are formed in dialogue with a wider organizational field. Second, it highlights how the need for legitimation shapes the proliferation of particular organizational models. Finally, it posits that organizational forms in and of themselves serve as political frameworks that structure mobilization. I demonstrate the utility of this approach through a comparison of trade union politics in the US and the UK at the turn of the twentieth century.

Introduction

Studies of class have broadly fallen into three categories. The first is concerned with analyzing developments in *class structure*: these studies stress the inherent interests of different class actors and explain institutional development through the effective mobilization of those actors. The second places greater emphasis on the characterization of *class experience*. Though it may at times reflect class structure, the lived interpretation and conceptualization of political interest may or may not directly represent it. This may be, as EP Thompson suggests, because class identities reflect historical relationships, or because identities other than class more directly inform political consciousness in specific historical moments (Sewell 2005; Therborn 1999; Thompson 1966). Finally, an expansive literature aims to articulate how changes in class structure and class experience inform one another (McCarthy and Desan 2023; Wright 1997).

It is the contention of this paper that neither class structure, nor class experience, nor the relationship between them can adequately explain formal *class politics*. In line with the late Mike Davis's call to study labor movements from a sociological and historical, rather than deterministic, lens (Davis 1999), I start from the view that, at every historical period, overlapping and contingent structures generate a variety of contesting class identities and organizations. Neither the structure nor experience of class alone ultimately shape which of these models predominate at the national political level. Instead, the political arena calls forth a range of social, institutional, and economic developments that influence who effectively mobilizes and how. It highlights configurations of elite power and their influence on successful models of mobilization within a broader system of governance. And it draws us into a world of organisations—their structures, identities, and interactions.

As the organised representatives of workers, trade unions inhabit this world. Their strategies are not merely a reflection of the demands of their membership or industrial conditions but are formed in dialogue with a changing organisational context. Organisational sociology offers a meaningful lens for understanding this multi-layered political arena. I highlight three theoretical insights from organisational sociology that illuminate the study of organized class politics. The first is that organisations cannot be studied in isolation—instead, they must be situated within a wider organisational field. The second is that organizations depend on legitimization in order to survive, and thus, that they have an interest in embracing legitimating identities and practices. The third is that organisational forms are in themselves political signals, and thus structure the coalitional landscape in a given historical period.

This paper begins with an overview of the limitations of the frameworks of class structure and class experience for explaining formal class politics. It demonstrates how organisational sociology can contribute to the study of class politics. Finally, it illustrates the value of this framework through a historical example: Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the British and American labor movements shared a tradition of skilled craft unionism which viewed government insurance provision as a paternalistic intervention at odds with the integrity of independent working men. By the early twentieth century, the two movements had diverged—while the British Trades Union Congress came to support state health insurance and pensions benefits, the American Federation of Labor remained resolutely hostile to government intervention. The paper's closing section leverages an analysis of organisational fields, legitimating practices, and organisational forms to examine this divergence.

Revisiting the Study of Class Politics

The notions of class structure and class experience figure prominently across studies of class politics, including in the literatures on the welfare state, industrial relations, and class formation.

Drawing on social movement and trade union scholarship, however, I suggest that these notions are inadequate in explaining actual class based political mobilization. Instead, the political orientation of working class organizations must be understood in light of a wider social, institutional, and economic context.

Explaining diverse manifestations of working-class politics is of special interest in the present political moment, which sees the severing of postwar coalitions and the reconstitution of political identities. In many rich democracies, decades-old alliances have given way to the fragmentation of the working-class vote and rising support for welfare state expansion among members of the Right (Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger, and Mudde 2021; Bremer and Rennwald 2022; Gingrich and Häusermann 2015).

These contemporary developments are not unprecedented. In fact, the history of working-class mobilization is littered with examples of conservatism. One such example is the early American Federation of Labor. At the turn of the twentieth century, it deviated from its laborist counterparts in the Anglosphere by clinging to union benefit schemes and resisting Progressive Era campaigns for social insurance (Archer 2008). While the British Trades Union Congress shed its craft orientation and embraced universal health and pensions, the AFL actively campaigned against such proposals. Understanding the conditions behind trade union support for public benefits in the past can illuminate their strategic decisions in the present.

Class Structure as Class Politics

The study of class emerged roughly with the rise of industrial capitalism. Though he resisted the “crude materialism” of Feuerbach, Marx ultimately expressed faith in the notion that progressive proletarianization, resulting from the expansion of the market sphere and the socialization of

production, would generate unified resistance—that Capitalism would produce “its own grave-diggers” (Marx and Engels 2012 [1848], 84).

Marx’s conviction that the expansion of the working-class would lead to the socialisation of political and economic life has been embraced by a number of traditions that moved beyond abstract studies of class to the study of class politics. Key among these traditions is that concerned with the expansion of the welfare state. Theorists of welfare state expansion across the political spectrum have interpreted it as a result of structural class interests. Drawing on neoclassical economics, Allan Meltzer and Scott Richard’s 1981 model for social spending predicted that, in an industrialized democracy, the average income will always exceed the income of the median voter. This decisive voter will thus always vote for greater redistribution—thereby expanding the size of government (Meltzer and Richard 1981). Walter Korpi’s power resource tradition disputes the idea that welfare state expansion is a mechanical outcome of industrialisation or democratisation. Instead, Korpi explains welfare state development as a function of political contestation, where a stronger working-class leads to more developed welfare institutions. Korpi argues that “the distribution of power resources between the main collectivities or classes in a country affects the form and direction of public interventions in the distributive processes” (Korpi 2018, 195). Faced with powerful worker’s movements, employers can either occupy the position of antagonists to welfare reform, or, under pressure, they can come to occupy the position of consenters. The position of both employers and employees on welfare state expansion in Korpi’s model, however, is fundamentally determined by their economic interests (Korpi 2006; Rothstein 1998).

Despite their differing frameworks for understanding political change, the Meltzer-Richards model and the power resource tradition share an assumption that workers support the expansion of welfare services. Gosta Esping-Andersen’s seminal *Three Worlds of Welfare*

Capitalism somewhat complicates the classic power resource perspective by explaining welfare state development as a consequence of historically embattled “political class coalitions” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 13). Esping-Andersen argues that the sort of coalitions formed by organised labour—whether with the church or farmers associations—determine the sort of welfare state gained. In his account, the welfare state may not directly and exclusively reflect the interest of the working-class. But like Meltzer and Richards and Walter Korpi, Esping-Andersen ultimately assumes that organized labor is a key partner for welfare coalitions.

Rather than labor, Hall and Soskices’ 2001 framework positions employer interests at the heart of nationally bounded political and economic systems. The Varieties of Capitalism school constructs entire social and political systems based on these employer interests. Through “strategic interactions” between workers, employers, and the state, value-added industries demanding a skilled and well-maintained labor force generate a more equal society with better working conditions (Hall and Soskice 2001). Varieties of Capitalism embraces an “actor-centred” approach which envisions “the political economy as a terrain populated by multiple actors, each of whom seeks to advance their interests in a rational way in strategic interaction with others” (Hall and Soskice 2001, 4). While firms are attributed at least two different avenues of self-interest, however, labour is presumably attributed with one—the expansion of welfare benefits and melioration of working conditions. In this vein, a chapter by Kathlene Thelen devoted to exposing “Varieties of Labour Politics” argues that the trajectory of welfare state development relies on “the connection between national collective bargaining structures and plant-level strategies” (Thelen 2001, 72). But amid these strategies, labour support for welfare remains largely unquestioned.

Failing to distinguish between trade union power and trade union politics is therefore a recurring point of confusion within the welfare state literature. Across the major models for

welfare state expansion, workers are expected to either champion or, at the very least, support state benefits. In these models, class structure is positioned as a key determinant of class politics.

Class Experience as Class Politics

The notion that perceived class interests map in some linear way onto objective economic interests has come under question, not least within the Marxist tradition. In the 1920s György Lukács began to differentiate “ascribed” from “actual” class consciousness, distinguishing between class as an objective and descriptive notion and class as an actively formulated and felt identity (Lukács 2023). In Erik Olin Wright’s schema, individual consciousness is best explained through a given person’s specific “location” within a broader class structure. In the “conjunctural” understanding of class, lower levels of abstraction most closely correspond to perceived class identity and interests (McCarthy and Desan 2023; Wright 1997). They can also emerge out of interactions between class and non-class properties of an individual’s location. As Goran Therborn notes, “the ideological battle is always fought in a matrix of non-discursive affirmations and sanctions, past, and present, with a particular set of means and in a particular ecological setting of communication” (Therborn 1999, 81).

Following in the footsteps of EP Thompson, an expansive literature on class formation has rooted class consciousness in historical processes and the contingent experiences of workers. This literature gives greater agency to historical actors in the process of class formation and broadens the sites in which experiences of class take place. In their analysis of working-class formation, Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg conclude that patterns of urbanisation cultivated varied divisions between home, work, and community (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986). Across the literature on class formation, the political mobilisation of workers is examined through their experiences outside the shop floor. These experiences may be formed in pubs or neighbourhood groups, but they could also be informed by wider institutional factors. Alan Dawley’s notable

conclusion that the “ballot was the coffin of class consciousness” was based on the idea that early voting rights for propertyless white males encouraged political unity among native-born white men as against people of colour, women, and new immigrants (Dawley 2000, 70).

Patterns of immigration have also been widely attributed with creating practical barriers to solidaristic class politics through linguistic divisions and compounding patterns of ethnic, racial, and occupational hierarchies. A constant flow of immigrant workers, it is argued, enabled employers to easily undercut unionisation efforts and stoke ethnic hostility between sections of the working-class (Bridges 1986; Davis 1980; Lipset 1997).

Racial divisions, similarly, are thought to contribute towards a reactionary class identity. In the US, the systematic exclusion of Black workers from skilled occupations left them in lower grade work increasingly taken up by women and other “dependents”. Like low paid Asian workers, Black workers were consciously used to undermine unionised shops, further deepening existing racial tensions. Out of 1,200,000 unionised workers in the early twentieth century WEB Du Bois estimated that only 40,000 were Black (Du Bois 1906). The political elitism of the abolitionist movement and fierce racism of Jacksonian populism further divided Northern workers from Southern workers and Black workers from white workers. Du Bois writes,

“The Southern laborer and the employer have united to disenfranchise the Negro and make color a caste; the northern laborer is striving to make the whites united with the Negroes and maintain wages; the employer threatens that if they do raise labor troubles, he will employ Negroes. The Northern laborer sees here the danger of a disenfranchised, degraded, and yet skilled competitor, and raises the note of warning. Is not this a drama worth the watching?” (Du Bois 1906, 20)

In her work on the history of the US's welfare state, Jill Quadagno similarly argues that racial segregation in both workplace and community have hindered a unified class politics. Racial conflict informed American welfare politics into the New Deal and in its aftermath (Quadagno 1996). In Robert Lieberman's 2005 account, the US's racialised welfare infrastructure was both reflective of its coalitional landscape and conducive to its perpetuation (Lieberman 2011).

Further analyses of class experience emerge from the stratification school, which draws on a Weberian framework in describing the tendency towards group "closure" through markers of status and identity (Parkin 1979). Rather than a hierarchy in the control over people, this approach emphasises control over resources (Wright 2009), and accounts for cultural consumption, social networks, reputation, prestige, forms of authority, and symbols of expertise in generating a range of experiences and inequalities (Grusky 2019). Like studies of class formation, stratification approaches explain forms of political mobilisation through complex relational identities.

Class structure, class experience, and class politics

The literature highlighting class experience makes a meaningful critique of that which focuses exclusively on class structure: that is, that political identities are formulated along multiple axes that vary in different social contexts. In addition to relations of property, those of race, gender, nation, religion, status, and citizenship, among many others, also inform political life.

But by using the emergence of political identities to explain ultimate forms of political mobilisation, the literature on class experience can fall into its own sort of determinism. Processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, immigration, racialisation, and state repression have of course given way to a tradition of sectional politics among craft workers—not least within the US and the UK. But in both cases, the declining position of the artisan in production, changing composition of the labour force, and emergence of radical industrial unions also presented

ongoing challenges to this tradition. Radical critiques of the craft ethic emphasised working-class unity and integration along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and grade level. As Kim Voss rightly suggests,

“we should not expect workers in any particular country to always play the role of either craft radicals or labour aristocrats. Instead, we should investigate the conditions that encouraged alliances between craft and craftless workers, the frequency with which these conditions occurred, and the fate of any alliances that were forged” (Voss 1993, 9).

Diverse forms of working-class politics are widely identified within the trade union literature. In their early study of British trade unions, Sidney and Beatrice Webb identified three distinct functions of trade union organising: bargaining, consultation, and legal regulation (Webb and Webb 1896b). According to the Webbs, trade unions that pursue the first two functions tend to act as interest group actors, while those that pursue the latter are more likely to form coalitions in favour of universalistic demands. A wide variety of trade union types have been hypothesised since: Richard Hyman’s distinction between market and class unionism associates the former with exclusive bargaining and lobbying practices and the latter with campaigns for universal welfare reforms (Hyman 2001). Gary Marks similarly distinguishes between a craft strategy focused on service provision and business collaboration, and an industrial strategy which emphasises political participation and public services (Marks 2014). Mike Savage differentiates between mutualist strategies which emphasise the independence of labour, economic approaches that envision the state as the mediator in conflicts between employers and workers, and statist approaches which accept the role of government in managing economic gains (Savage 1987).

If multiple types of class identity and models of organisation can emerge simultaneously, what determines the political dominance of one type over others? A Gramscian perspective might expect parties, trade unions, newspapers, and other political agents to battle over the narratives held by the public. The importance of organisations in shaping the transformation of a class “in itself” to a class “for itself” has been taken up in much of the literature on class formation. Michael Mann notes,

“[socialism] does not suddenly and spontaneously explode within the working class; rather, it is the product of...the continuous experience of the worker in his productive life and the interpretation of this experience by organised groups over a considerable period of time” (Mann 1973, 71).

Similarly, Adam Przeworski’s classic assertion that “the ideological struggle is a struggle about class before it is a struggle among classes” depends on the observation that “Social differences acquire the status of cleavages as an outcome of ideological and political struggles” (Przeworski 1977, 370).

But these organisations themselves do not exist in a political vacuum. As a strategist, Gramsci recognised the importance of national histories, economic shifts, and cultural features in guiding modes of political organising (Aronowitz 2009). Moreover, working-class organisations operate at different layers of society simultaneously, and thus adapt their strategies each of these layers. Mike Savage’s distinction between “practical” and “formal” politics—where practical politics is concerned with everyday efforts to eliminate the status of labour as a commodity, and formal politics is directly engaged with the structures of the state, hints in this direction (Savage 1987).

Institutionalist accounts position the state as a powerful force structuring and defining not only the interactions between political players, but their own expressions of interest and the formulation of their own demands. Skocpol and Weir argue, “administrative, fiscal, coercive, and judicial arrangements of given states influence the conceptions that groups or their representatives are likely to develop about what is desirable or possible at all in the realm of governmental action” (Weir and Skocpol 2010, 118). According to this framework, the formulation of demands by employers and labour, as well as the interactions between them, depend on inherited institutions and political decision-making—“State structures help to inspire the very demands that are pursued through politics” (Weir and Skocpol 2010, 118). Market structures, policy ideas, and interest group strategies are all formulated within a terrain shaped by national governments (Hacker 1998).

Like other forms of political mobilisation, then, labour movements formulate demands within an institutional context. The manifestation of working-class politics cannot purely be conceived as an expression of class structure nor of class experiences—it is also the result of active engagement with a dynamic institutional setting. Literature on social movements and industrial relations has taken this point seriously. Social movement scholars have long recognised that states both make and are made by the social movements with which they engage. In order to gain power, social movements must navigate and adapt to a complex and changing institutional environment (Zald and Ash 1966). Carola Frege and John Kelly’s accounts of trade union strategy have paid special attention to this framework, explaining trade union organising through the interpretation of state and employer strategies, social and economic change, union structures, and institutional context (Frege and Kelly 2004). In the tradition of social movement scholars, they have argued that social and economic change influence union structures, framing processes, and strategic choices (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

This is also present in the work of Peter Boxall, who positions strategy and structure as interactive and co-constituting. Boxall calls attention to the network of actors informing trade union reasoning, as well as the economic, socio-political, and industrial relations context in which they operate. Trade unions adopt their definitive strategy once they graduate out of social movement models and into a ‘mature’ phase in which they can no longer rely on grassroots spontaneity and require some kind of permanent structure (Boxall 2008). One example of this sort of reasoning is James Cronin and Carmin Sirianni’s account of the “varieties of industrial unionism,” which considers the influence of economic organisation, politics and parties, and social composition in shaping industrial unions in France, Germany, Britain, the US, and Canada (Cronin and Sirianni 1983). The political orientation of trade union federations at a national level depends on their ongoing negotiations with the state—both a “relatively autonomous” entity and an institution composed of armies of interested bureaucrats and practitioners (Miliband 2009 [1969]; Poulantzas 2014 [1978]).

The emphasis on a wider social and political context contrasts with industrial relations accounts that focus on collective bargaining systems, sectoral structures, the timing and tempo of industrial development, labour market organisation, management practices, and strategies for workplace control in guiding the sectional or solidaristic nature of trade union politics (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000; Joseph 2016; Marks 2014; Streeck 2010; Kirk 1994; Haydu 1991; Clegg 1976). My own approach to explaining trade union strategies seeks to elaborate on the former—articulating how social, institutional, and political factors inform models of trade union organising. Organizational sociology presents one framework with which to analyze this context. Among its most useful features for the study of class politics is the capacity to dynamically link together associational practices in civil society with macro-structural processes of state formation through the concepts of organizational fields, legitimation, and organizational forms.

Introducing Organizational Sociology

In what follows, I suggest that organisational sociology can make a fruitful intervention into the literature on trade union strategies and, as a result, the question of class politics. Examining the organisational logic of trade unions enables us to observe how they integrate social and institutional values in their search for longevity and influence. Organisational reasoning takes us to the heart of political activity at both the popular and institutional level (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Likewise, the formation and perpetuation of particular organisational forms act as constraints on the decision-making of political actors, subtly structuring the shape that their convictions take in practice.

One of the advantages of organisational approaches to political life is that they open an analytical space between explanations exhibiting overdetermination by exogenous forces, and those which explain political outcomes as the sum of individual decisions (March and Olsen 1989). Rather than an exclusive emphasis on systems or agents, it enables a multidimensional approach to stability and change (Clemens 2007). For this reason, much work has been done to link together organisational sociology with the study of social movements (Minkoff and McCarthy 2006; McAdam and Scott 2005). Both fields take a multi-faceted approach to historical change, paying attention to existing repertoires, issue framing, the diffusion of organisational practices, the importance of normative and cultural principles, and the role of the state in channeling political movements (Campbell 2005).

However, thus far, the applications of this framework to the study of labour have been limited. In the study of class politics, the organisational approach becomes useful precisely because it allows us to avoid a wholesale characterisation of the working-class and gives us a lens with which to understand why some forms of working-class association became more politically dominant than others. Trade unions are organisations choosing between several

strategic models or “organisational repertoires” available within their field. The choice between these models depends not only on shop floor or sector level considerations, but also on a cultural dialogue with norm-setting groups. In choosing one model over another, trade unions make a statement about their political affinities and overarching intentions (Clemens 1996). The “organisational form” that a trade union takes reflects a series of claims about its membership, its purpose, and the tools it intends to use to achieve them (Haveman and Rao 1997).

Three particular insights from organisational sociology are meaningful for the study of class politics: The first is that organizations make strategic decisions in dialogue with a wide organizational field. The second is that organizations embrace models that legitimate them before governing elites and thus enhance their survival prospects. Finally and relatedly, the forms that organisations adopt situate them within a wider political arena and structure their coalitional prospects. In what follows, I examine each of these contributions in detail.

Organisational fields

Analyses of trade union strategy often emphasise sectoral and workplace considerations, interpreting trade union action narrowly through their function as representatives of labour. This perspective of trade unions neglects their organisational history. In practice, the identity, structure, and organising principles of trade unions emerge in dialogue with a wider social context. The field of organisational ecology is dedicated to understanding how this wider context shapes the evolution of new associations.

Scholars in this field have demonstrated that prior organisational foundings and failures influence the sort of organisational models adopted by emergent organisations (Delacroix and Carroll 1983; Carroll and Hannan 1989). Up until a certain saturation limit, organisational models proliferate due to the high cost and risk associated with experimentation. The prevalence

of a particular model renders it more appealing to members already familiar with the form and more reliable for organisers given its existing success (Singh and Lumsden 1990). Additionally, not having to defend or explain a chosen organisational form saves time, energy, and resources which could then be devoted to other causes (Hannan and Freeman 1988; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Organisations are likely to imitate one another to advance their legitimacy, and distinguish themselves when they seek an independent identity (Westenholz, Pedersen, and Dobbin 2006). Additionally, organisational models which have been proven lasting through time are more likely to proliferate (Singh, Tucker, and House 1986).

In their study of American trade unions, Michael Hannan and John Freeman find that increased density first reduces the disbanding rates of trade unions, but later (as competition for resources intensifies) increases them (Hannan and Freeman 1988). Likewise, Conell and Voss's analysis of Knights of Labor locals found that existing organisations of craft workers influenced the founding of industrial unions by less skilled workers—the founding of industrial unions increased exponentially once a few initial ones had been successfully established. Based on this, Conell and Voss argue that “the existing organisational field affected the selection of organising strategies more dramatically than it affected the rate of organisation” (Conell and Voss 1990, 264).

Organisational ecology is useful because it analyses organisations at the population level rather than attempting to understand them in isolation. In their choice of organising strategies, trade unions engage with the prevailing organisational models around them—they may mimic a form perceived to be successful or distance themselves from forms which are declining in popularity. In both cases, their strategies may be informed by their organizational context rather than industrial circumstances or their membership.

Organizational legitimacy

While organisations of workers often seek to subvert or alter existing relations of production, doing so depends on ensuring a stable organisational footing. *Legitimacy* is the organisational resource which enables long term viability, and it fatally links working class associations with governing elites and the state (Stryker 2000). By legitimating and delegitimizing particular forms of organisation, states influence economic and social action (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). Institutional forms are reproduced both actively and passively—either because alternatives are unrealistic, or simply because they are not on the table (Stryker 1994). In other words, in order to operate within a given political space, groups face pressure to embrace the models perceived to be legitimate within that political space (Clemens 1997).

Of course, the relationship between institutions and organisations is not unidirectional. But identifying normatively appropriate behaviour and embracing it is a crucial way in which political actors gain credibility as capable decisionmakers (March and Olsen 1989). Ultimately, access to resources and stability depends on a degree of “ceremonial conformity,” the performance of accepted and favoured behaviours (J. W. Meyer and Rowan 1977).

The importance of legitimacy in the making of organisational life has been documented in Debra Minkoff’s study of advocacy organisations in postwar United States (Minkoff 1994). David Gnes and Floris Vermeulen have applied the framework of legitimacy to voluntary associations in particular, arguing that it “help[s] us understand how voluntary organisations establish themselves, strengthen their position and survive over time” (Gnes and Vermeulen 2018, 189). The routines, procedures, conventions, and codes of political participation are, directly or indirectly, shaped by the institutional environment in which it takes place.

Organisations navigate these “repertoires” and adapt their operations in line with “logics of appropriateness,” mirroring dominant preferences (March and Olsen 1989).

Organisations depend on legitimacy not only to survive, but also to recruit key personnel and aid their interactions with other organisations in their field. Legal categories represent one key avenue for the codification of organisational forms (Suchman and Edelman 1996)—by shaping and reshaping the boundaries of legal association, governing elites are capable of influencing which types of working-class organizations perpetuate.

Organizational forms

In selecting a particular organizational model, then, working class associations equally make a statement on their political affinities and social values. As a result, organisational forms in and of themselves become avenues for coalition formation. Organisational forms unify actors behind a political identity and position them within an existing political matrix. They reflect values, priorities, and beliefs about who ought to organise and how. A common organisational form may facilitate alliances between structurally similar groups—as, for example, the fraternal form did between the Knights of Labor and the Patrons of Husbandry (Clemens 1996).

In some cases, organisational forms can prevent alliances which could, under different circumstances have persisted. Clarence Lo’s study of property tax revolts suggests that in the late twentieth century United States, the form of “community groups” failed to mobilise state-wide coalitions for tax reform (Lo 1995). Warren’s study of the Industrial Areas Foundation’s “congregation-based” format found that it alienated some coalition partners and appealed to others (Warren 2010). And Francesca Polletta shows that the model of participatory democracy in the 1960s Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) succeeded based on its symbolic associations (Polletta 2006).

But the struggle over organisational forms can also facilitate coalition formation. Existing organisations are more likely to form alliances with new organisations that echo their form and vice versa (Walker, McCarthy, and Baumgartner 2011; Delacroix and Carroll 1983; Singh and Lumsden 1990; Prechel and Morris 2010). Furthermore, one group's struggle for the perpetuation of *another* group's organisational form is a powerful demonstration of shared values and goals. This sort of struggle depends on an alignment between political aims *and* the organisational repertoires available to accomplish those aims (Clemens 1993). In structuring the avenues of coalition formation, organisational forms shape the political formation that class mobilization takes.

Organisations and class politics

In order to understand the politics of working-class organizations, organisational sociology therefore pushes us to look outside of them. The organisational perspective elaborates on existing theories on the relationship between class formation and class experience, as well as theories on trade union strategies. These contributions are demonstrated in Figures 2 and 3. The first is an adaptation of the framework proposed by Erik Olin Wright. Wright helpfully theorises the relationship between processes of class formation and processes of class consciousness.



Figure 2: Class Formation, Class Consciousness, Class Politics (adapted from Wright 1997)

What's missing in Wright's diagram, I argue, is a distinct framework for understanding class politics, rather than class as an abstract or lived phenomenon. The political realm is important not only because it mediates between the other two layers, but also because it introduces non-class developments into the processes of class formation and class consciousness. As Bill Sewell noted in his critique of EP Thompson, classed outcomes may not in all cases be caused by classed structures (Sewell 1986). Additionally, working-class formation and identity may be influenced by the formation and identity of other classes. In my adaptation of Wright's diagram, I introduce associational and institutional factors, as well as processes of legitimation required for political participation.

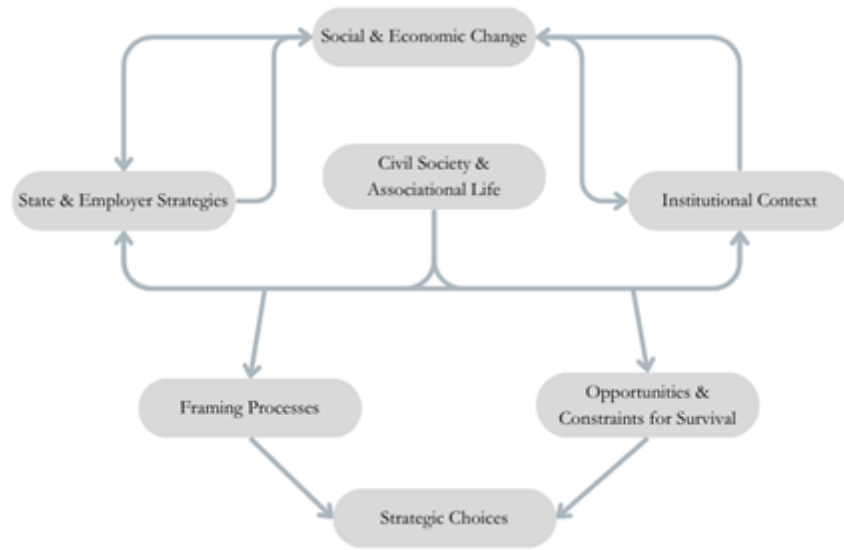


Figure 3: Social Movement Framework for Trade Union Strategy (adapted from Frege and Kelly 2004)

The organisational lens also builds on existing literature from industrial relations. In particular, it can expand on the “social movement” approach to trade union strategies put forward by Carola Frege and John Kelly (Frege and Kelly 2004). Frege and Kelly’s original framework argues that social and economic change, state and employer repression, and institutional context all shape the framing processes trade unions rely on and thus the strategic choices they make.

The AFL and the TUC at the turn of the Twentieth Century

The application of the organisational approach to the study of class politics is highlighted in a brief comparison between the British and American labour movements at the turn of the twentieth century. Historically, the two movements shared a resistance to state intervention in union affairs, including industrial arbitration, collective bargaining, benefit provisioning, and internal management. This voluntarist tradition in both cases came with a narrowing of union aims to “bread and butter” issues. Instead of socialism, social democracy, or corporativism, American and British workers united behind the notion that workers interests could best be served by their own independent institutions (Flanders 1974). Government aid, legislative or administrative, was to be resisted at all costs (Saposs 1954). The testimony of Samuel Gompers before the House Labor Committee in 1916 exemplifies this principle dramatically. Opposing unemployment insurance, Gompers declared that “sad as [he was] by the illness, the killing, the maiming of so many of [his] fellow workers” he would “rather see that go on for years and years...than give up one jot of the freedom of the workers to strive and struggle for their own emancipation through their own efforts” (Gompers 1916c, 333). A less extreme, but no less committed, expression of voluntarism was made by the soon-to-be TUC Parliamentary Committee Chairman Robert Knight in his 1870 objection to the statutory eight-hour day. He announced: “All we want is liberty of action. We want no Parliamentary interference...the power that Union gives us will enable us to obtain all that we can reasonably expect” (cited in Hinton 1995:71)⁸.

In both countries, voluntarism came hand in hand with the promotion of an expansive benefits infrastructure. Stressing the independence of the “skilled” artisan, trade unions offered a wide range of insurance benefits to cover expenses related to health, death, funerals,

unemployment, superannuation, as well as compensation for widows and orphans. The provision of insurance benefits was often expressed through the language of Victorian self-help, but it equally reflected a mutualist ethic that sought to empower the working-class through the construction of autonomous institutions. Echoing cooperative principles, the countries' first national craft unions advocated collectivist efforts at moral improvement. They did so, however, through a distinctly non-socialist lens which viewed industry as the only critical arena for the pursuit of class struggle. To that end, the two movements forsook "political" questions for "economic" ones—believing that disagreements over religion, abolition, or the monarchy would only serve to divide workers with otherwise unified economic interests.

By the early twentieth century, however, engagement with party politics and state institutions proved unavoidable. With the concentration of economic power, the expansion of the state bureaucracy, and highly competitive elections, the first decades of the new century would in both countries draw trade unions into formal political engagement. Both labour movements ultimately came to embrace the importance of legislative campaigns and the need for state intervention in industrial life. In the UK, this would manifest in the formation of the TUC-backed Labor Representation Committee in 1900 and the turn-of-the-century 'Lib-Lab' electoral coalition. Just over a month after the Labour Party's first ever Parliamentary campaign, the AFL circulated its own "Bill of Grievances" to President Roosevelt and members of the US Senate. After a series of appeals to both parties, the AFL embedded itself within the Wilson government and built close ties with the Democratic Party at the national level⁹.

The forms that this political engagement took, however, differed between the two federations. In the US, the AFL continued to encourage and pursue the proliferation of union-backed insurance benefits. When campaigns for social insurance emerged among Progressive reformers, AFL leader Samuel Gompers quickly broke ranks. Dismissing the compulsory

insurance as "undemocratic," "repugnant to free-born citizens," and "at variance with our concepts of voluntary institutions and freedom for individuals" (Gompers 1916b, 270), he insisted that "compulsion by legislative enactment for health insurance carries with it the stigma of the inability of the people to do it for themselves" (Gordon 2003, 275).

The TUC took a decisively different position. Already in the 1890s, it had renounced union-backed superannuation schemes in favour of universal non-contributory pensions. During the late nineteenth century, debates within the TUC would generate a gradual consensus around state health and pensions benefits for the country's neediest. Indeed, with the support of British trade unions, reformist elements of the Liberal Party successfully campaigned on the passage of key social insurance schemes—including free school meals, contributory health and unemployment benefits for low-income workers, minimum wage boards, and a national pensions programme. Whereas the US ended World War I without a single success in the introduction of state- or federal-level health, unemployment, or pensions benefits, the UK offered protection for health and unemployment through the National Insurance Act of 1911 and superannuation through the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 (Stears 2002).

In the following sections, I aim to demonstrate that organisational fields, legitimating avenues, and organisational forms were critical to understanding this divergence.

Organizational fields

Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century, the identity and function of trade unions in the US and the UK was informed by their organisational environment. Early trade unions in both countries mimicked the far more widespread and respectable friendly and fraternal societies. As I demonstrate elsewhere (Adereth 2024), the popularity of these benefit societies among workers continually informed the orientation of trade unions towards mutual benefits. Their benefit

systems, then, were not exclusively the product of sectoral structure, management strategies, or the grade level of their members—but part of a broader social, cultural, and institutional context.

British craft unions emerged on the heels of an incredibly popular and widely successful organisational model: that of “friendly” mutual benefit societies. First emerging in the 18th century, friendly societies had, by the mid-nineteenth century, come to occupy a central position in the country’s social, cultural, and economic landscape. Collecting regular dues for the provision of sickness, superannuation, funeral, widows, and orphan benefits, the societies represented a form of collective self-help for workers across grades and occupations—even spreading among rural labourers by the 1840s (Gorsky 1998; Gosden 1961; Cordery 2003).

The sheer popularity of friendly societies among Britain’s working-classes made benefit provision a natural starting point for trade union organisation. These geographically bound, class conscious bodies idealised the capacity of independent men to provide for themselves and their family without resorting to charity or the poor law. Early British craft unions absorbed the provision of benefits as well as the value system they represented—benefits were a symbol of working-class agency and collectivism against the aristocratic state and its degrading system of assistance (Chase 2000).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, friendly societies experienced a protracted decline. Their increasingly bureaucratised structure included a layer of paid administrators whose interests were perceived to differ from those of their membership. Increased life expectancy meant that workers spent more time old, sick, and out of work, prompting a wave of publicised insolvencies that reduced faith in the sustainability of voluntarist methods. Witnessing these repeated crises, young men ceased to join the societies, further burdening their financial imbalances (Treble 1970; M. Brodie 2014).

The working-class experience of friendly societies visibly informed trade union reasoning on the provision of benefits. Towards the end of the century, trade union leaders increasingly pointed to the decline of benefit societies in considering their own orientation towards the state. As benefit provision fell out of favour, they strategically drifted away from this organisational model. In turn, they gradually came to embrace a role for state aid.

Like their British counterparts, US trade unions emerged in an organisational field rife with mutual benefit societies. Especially in the aftermath of the Civil War, association for the purpose of self-help became increasingly popular among men and women of all races, ethnicities, and classes. The organisation of American fraternal societies differed from that of British friendly societies in two crucial ways. First, and most importantly, the overwhelming majority of fraternal societies were explicitly segregated along lines of race and ethnicity in addition to gender. Secondly, the class character of American fraternal societies was decidedly looser—rather than shunning charity, fraternal society members claimed to promote it. The largest and most influential fraternal societies positioned themselves as a direct alternative to trade unions, advocating benefits as a substitute to wage bargaining. Mobility within fraternal societies was viewed as a reflection of class mobility within American society, reflecting faith in US institutions and an openness to cross-class collaboration. By embracing the fraternal form, then, early American trade unions also inherited its segregated and class compromising character (Clawson 1985; Beito 2000; Kaufman 2002).

These tendencies would only become more pronounced as the nineteenth century came to a close. New waves of immigration prompted the proliferation of ethnic benefit societies in urban industrial centres, sustaining the sort of cross-class communities that were foundational to the social division between “work” and “home” described by Ira Katznelson (Cohen 2014; B. Hoffman 2003; Katznelson 1981). In the South West, fraternal benefit societies like the Sociedad

Proteccion Mutua de Trabajadores and the Union Protectiva Santa Fe proliferated among Hispanic farmers and workers (Rivera 1987). And most prominently, the network of post-civil war fraternal societies catering to white men consolidated into the National Fraternal Congress, advancing the cause of these fraternal societies and campaigning against state insurance at the federal and state level. In what has been widely termed the “Golden Age of Fraternalism,” (Harwood 1897) benefit provision remained a competitive arena within which trade unions had to compete.

Ongoing competition with fraternal societies is visible in trade union records from the turn of the century and the Progressive Era. Holding a still fragile position in national politics, key American trade unions feared losing members to neighbouring benefit societies and resolved to strengthen and expand their insurance features in order to compete in this space (Adereth 2024b). Developments within their organisational field thus informed their strategic decisions.

Organizational Legitimation

A rich literature has exposed how law shaped the boundaries of trade union organising in Both the US and the UK. By analysing the trajectory of labour law, this scholarship compellingly shows how the barriers to trade union organising evolved throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century—with British labour law recognising the legality of strikes between 1871 and 1876, while American courts remained hostile to strikes, boycotts, and pickets throughout 1890s and the early 1900s. This research clearly illustrates the continued barriers to industrial organising in the US, and therefore explains the labour movement’s reluctance to resort to mass mobilisation. It does less, however, to explain the opportunities that *were* available to US labour leaders, and thus the strategies that they *did* pursue. Benefit provision is key among these alternatives. Comparing the evolution of laws on trade societies with that on benefit societies instead reveals the sort of organisational models that were favored and encouraged by governing

elites at key historical turning points. It demonstrates how legal boundaries serve to legitimate and promote particular forms of unionism and “filter out” models deemed illegitimate.

In the late 18th century UK, elite fears of popular revolt in the aftermath of the French revolution saw the issuing of the Combination Acts, which infamously banned workers organisations (Orth 1987). Far less known is that the same period saw the issuing of the Rose Act, the first legislation recognising friendly societies. Even after the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1825, trade unions provided benefits in order to avoid accusations of “intimidation” or “obstruction.” The legitimating value of benefits is apparent in the defensive language of early trade unions, as well as in benefit granting rituals involving members of Parliament. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, friendly societies gained increasing legal recognition while labour associations remained largely outside the law.

The 1870s would dramatically alter this arrangement. By recognising the ability of workers organisations to lawfully strike and bargain collectively, the Trades Union Acts of 1871 and 1875 expanded the range of organising tools available to labour unions (D. Brodie 2003). At the same time, the Friendly Societies Act of 1874 subjected benefit societies to intense regulation. The result was a profound wave of successful strikes in precarious, poorly paid industries and a dramatic increase of unionisation, including but not limited to previously unorganised industries. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, trade unions shifted away from the emphasis on their benefit features and demonstrated a more agreeable orientation towards state benefits. This shift coincided with declining faith in voluntarism among elites facing pressure from economic instability and imperial expansion.

This process would come to a brief halt between 1901 and 1906, when the Taff Vale decision newly constrained the use of strikes. During this period, labour unions and their

representatives reverted to the emphasis on benefits in an effort to regain legitimacy. But after the Trades Disputes Bill protected them from liability for damages resulting from strikes, they gradually continued to shift away from this organisational model in line with the changing sentiments of the time.

Early American trade unions faced a legal environment which largely resembled that of their British counterparts: until the mid-nineteenth century, combinations of workmen to regulate wages or working hours were often charged with or indicted for criminal conspiracy. This persisted even after the ostensible legalisation of trade unions with the *Commonwealth v. Hunts* case of 1842. The legal environment would dramatically diverge by the turn of the 20th century. Just as strikes and collective bargaining came within the purview of the law in 1870s Britain, US employers waged a renewed offensive against workers organisations through the issuing of “yellow-dog” contracts banning unionisation as a condition of employment. The following decades would only bring more intensified repression. In 1877, the Great Railroad strike would be brutally suppressed by employer-funded militias in collaboration with federal troops and the National Guard. Less than a decade later, a rally in support of the eight-hour day would end in a bloodbath known as the Haymarket Affair. In the 1890s, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act designed to promote economic competition by prohibiting cartels and monopolies would be extraordinarily interpreted against organised labour. And in the first decades of the twentieth century, labour would experience continued defeats with the 1902 Anthracite Coal Strike, the 1908 *Loewe vs. Lawler* or *Danbury Hatters* case, and the 1911 case of *Bucks Stove Range & Co* in which Gompers himself was imprisoned (Hattam 1992; Forbath 1991b; Orren 1991; O’Brien 1998). Organised labour’s hard-fought amendment to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, the Clayton Act of 1914, would offer little respite. As argued by Daniel Ernst, the Bill ultimately served to “legalize lawful conduct” (Ernst 1995, 187).

The most consistent feature of such conduct was the provision of benefits. Throughout the nineteenth century, during the tumultuous period of the 1880s and 1890s, and into the Progressive Era, American courts time and again legitimated trade union benefits while closing alternative organisational avenues. Moreover, they strengthened and solidified the legal standing of mutual benefit providers precisely at the same time as they cracked down on workers associations (Adereth 2024a).

In both countries, then, the 1880s would bring a wave of experimentation with new, more inclusive models of unionism which stressed integration across grades, mass mobilisation, and an increased role for the state in the provision of public benefits. But in the UK, legal developments expanded the scope for strikes and wage bargaining while intensifying regulation on benefit provision. By contrast, in the US, radical unions were violently punished for their mobilising tactics. While injunctions continued to render strikes, boycotts, and pickets ruinous, benefit provision was repeatedly celebrated as a worthy trade union aim. As one of the only consistently legal features of trade union organising, benefits thus became the lifeblood of the American labour movement—and state provision a significant threat to this foundation.

This comparative account illuminates how nineteenth century governing elites made use of organisational laws to circumscribe the activities of a growing industrial working-class. In the UK, the shift away from benefits took place within a broader transformation of social priorities and values—away from voluntarism and towards more centralised state action. By the end of the nineteenth century, the pressures and riches from imperial expansion rendered the provision of centralised state insurance appealing to a governing class eager to tame industrial unrest. Voluntary insurance had proven ineffective at eliminating poverty among the country's workforce, while trade unions had proven their respectability through their cooperative attitude.

The promotion of voluntary benefits no longer constituted the key priority of nineteenth century governing classes.

In the US, voluntarism continued to offer an appealing organisational model into the early twentieth century. This was in large part a result of divided elite interests in the aftermath of reconstruction. Starkly differing political economies in the industrial North, agricultural South, and colonial West generated a range of regionally specific benefit models each of which catered to the interests of local elites. Voluntary benefits were an umbrella around which patrimonial, informal, and industrial labour relations could co-exist.

Organizational forms

Throughout the nineteenth century, then, the British and American labour movements exhibited key similarities. Both emerged within a legal context hostile to labour organising and amenable to working-class associations for benefit provision. Within that context, both embraced benefits as a means of attracting members and earning respectability before governing elites. This order would begin to fragment during the last quarter of the century: in both countries, profound challenges to the respectable craft model would emerge with radical industrial unions like the British Match Girls, Dockworkers and Gas Workers as well as the American Railway Union and the Knights of Labor.

But these upheavals took place in a diverging organisational arena: in the UK, trade unions had gradually earned the right to strike and bargain collectively, while benefit societies came under the increasing scrutiny of the state. Trade unions were able to embrace new functions without sacrificing their status of legitimacy, and the friendly society model lost appeal as working-class members increasingly voiced their dissatisfaction with voluntary benefits. In the US, by contrast, benefits remained one of the only legal functions trade unions could perform. With the explosion of fraternal benefit societies and the continued outlawing of strikes and boycotts, voluntary benefits remained a critical avenue for trade union survival.

How did these developments manifest in the political struggle for social insurance? In both countries, the early twentieth century saw the rise of a small but influential group of elite reformers who actively grappled with the question of social insurance. Sharing a technocratic predisposition, an extensive educational background in economics, medicine, and law, and ties to bureaucratic and party apparatus, figures like the Webbs, Charles Booth, Isaac Rubinow, and Louis Brandeis compiled careful studies of domestic social indicators as well as comparative

social policies. Their proposals for expanding the role of government in the economy were grounded in the language of economic efficiency, social harmony, and national strength (Rodgers 1998; Stears 2002).

The movements' respective platforms were both structured around the creation of a "minimum standard of life" through the expansion of educational opportunities, an extensive system of social welfare, and the democratisation of economic relations. In both cases, Progressives carefully tread the line between reducing inequality and advancing national, rather than class, interests. But they differed in one crucial respect: their relationship to organised labour. Whereas British reformers had long cultivated links with the labour movement, American Progressives had a more fraught relationship with the country's trade unions. Unlike their British counterparts, they were unable to successfully recruit labour into their technocratic coalition for social insurance (Forbath 1991a).

These differing outcomes cannot be attributed to outright hostility. Progressives on both sides of the Atlantic came to recognise trade unions as lasting and useful elements of industrial production. By the end of the century, the business unions of the 1860s-1880s emerged as respectable organisational partners for managing industrial affairs. Progressives sought to grant trade unions full legal recognition such that they could better advance the public good. If allied with government, trade unions could go far in raising standards of living, managing industrial disputes, and regulating prices.

But the organisational forms available to reformers decisively impacted their relationship to organised labour. Throughout the nineteenth century, trade unions had been in both countries categorised as voluntary associations. Akin to clubs, they were soluble associations of individuals which could form and disintegrate with little government oversight. The

organisations, in other words, had no legal status independent from that of the individuals who composed them. Voluntary associations benefited from limitations on the degree of state intervention and oversight they received—with no obligation to share their internal accounts, administrative records, and by-laws. On the other hand, the contracts they formed with their members had the same legal status as agreements between individuals, and thus were difficult to enforce in court. Moreover, as combinations of individuals, voluntary associations were susceptible to accusations of conspiracy in restraint of trade.

By the early twentieth century, it was difficult to equate the national amalgamated trade union federations to neighbourhood book clubs or debating societies. In the US, trade union membership ballooned from less than half a million in 1897 to more than two million in 1904. In the UK, trade unions reached two million members in 1900 (Wolman 1937). With coordination at the municipal, regional, and national level, benefit funds consisting of several million dollars, and infiltration across industries and sectors, late nineteenth century trade unions had become national political forces to be reckoned with (Commissioner of Labor 1908). A new legal framework indeed seemed fitting.

Reformers in the two countries had different menus to choose from. In the UK, trade unions could conceivably take the form of corporations *or* quasi-corporations. The first of these would grant trade unions a legal personality distinguishable from its constituent members. Since the seventeenth century, the British government issued special corporate charters as a mechanism of folding certain parts of the private sector into the state. As independent legal entities, corporations made legally binding contracts and could be sued in court. Their funds, agreements, and by-laws were regulated and enforced by the government. By the same token, they were subject to heavy state oversight of their administrative and financial accounts.

Special statutes of incorporation had to be granted by Parliament and as a result they were costly and bureaucratically burdensome. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the British government began to cultivate a range of “quasi-corporate” organisational categories which combined some protections of corporate entities *and* some freedoms of voluntary associations. This was the category allotted to mutual benefit societies. British friendly societies had the option to submit their rules for approval by a government authority who could merely verify the legality of their objects. In exchange for registration, they could hold assets, make binding contracts, and appear in court through appointed trustees. With no corporate charter, however, they could not be sued in court for the actions of their members.

In debates on the legal rights of trade unions, British reformers and trade union leaders joined forces in advocating the expansion of this quasi-corporate status to associations of workers. In 1867, 1894, and in the aftermath of Taff Vale, reformers defended trade unions from full incorporation, which would entail intense regulation and open the possibility for more frequent prosecution. Their defence of trade unions’ quasi-corporate status would facilitate a long-term coalition with labour (Dari-Mattiacci et al. 2017; Adams 1902; Butler 1986; Gower 1956; UK Parliament 1868; House of Commons 1894; Macdonald 1903; Webb 1911).

Reformers and labour leaders in the US had two alternatives to the category of voluntary association—trust or corporation. Since the country’s founding, incorporation was granted freely and widely to “benign” associations, including trade unions after 1886. As they grew, fraternal orders incorporated at the national and state levels (Bloch and Lamoreaux 2015).

Rather than voluntary associations or trusts, American reformers advocated for trade unions to embrace a corporate form. As corporate entities, they would be granted an independent legal identity that could make contracts, accumulate funds, and participate in industrial

arbitration boards. In short, they would be enshrined into the country's industrial relations infrastructure. But trade union leaders understood that a corporate status came with significant costs. As corporations, they would also be subject to direct state intervention in their constitutional rules and scrutiny of their financial accounts. Even more concerningly, they were liable to be sued for the actions of their members or officers. Given their experience with the courts, turn-of-the-century labour leaders were wary of granting any avenue for legal persecution. With incorporation, they feared, constant legal proceedings would deplete their funds and drive them toward extinction. Breaking with Progressive activists, they insisted on their voluntary status—sacrificing a critical opportunity for legal recognition in their struggle to avoid perpetual litigation (Gompers and Brandeis 1998; National Civic Federation 1903; Sklar 1988; Horwitz 1977).

The question of organisational form was thus an existential question for late nineteenth century trade unions in both the US and the UK. The position of welfare reform advocates on the question of trade union incorporation would inform their relationship to organised labour. In this way, inherited organisational forms shaped the boundaries of welfare coalitions.

Conclusion

I have argued that ongoing debates on the evolution of class structure, class experience, and the relationship between them are insufficient for explaining formal class politics. The political orientation of organized labour ought instead to be understood in historical and social context—accounting for the organisational repertoires available to workers associations as well as the organisational opportunities and constraints they face. Beyond responding to industrial circumstances and representing their membership, trade unions reason like organisations—embracing tactics and strategies that enhance their survival prospects both through competition within their organisational field, and through legitimation before governing elites. Trade union

strategies are the result of accumulated experience within a particular political-economic-social system, and this system is thus essential to understanding their behaviour. The specific political position that trade unions occupy is informed by the associational and legal legacy that they inherit.

In the comparison between the US and the UK at the turn of the twentieth century, the organisational lens places at the forefront developments within mutual benefit societies, associational law, and the corporate form. More broadly, the study presented here suggests that trade unions are more likely to support state insurance when their own survival does not depend in large part on the provision of benefits. The more legitimate is their role collective bargaining, the less likely they are to offer exclusive advantages to secure member loyalty. In the case of the US, it was not just the overlapping ethnic, racial, and occupational divisions that generated a sectional national labour movement in the early twentieth century; it was that catering to these divisions proved the only sustainable form of working-class organisation.

With respect to the contemporary realignment of class politics, the organisational perspective calls for an inspection of our own organisational context and the opportunities and constraints it presents. Building an inclusive and powerful labour movement capable of making political claims on behalf of workers—unionised and nonunionised alike—requires more than an assertion of principle. The effort would likely benefit from mapping the contemporary organisational field within which trade unions operate and restoring the organising rights that have been lost since the 1980s. It would also benefit from building coalitions around those legal rights and forms. In order to avoid a return to Gompers-style unionism, we ought to be conscious of the environment that produced it.

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