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## Talking about the same but different? Understanding social movement and trade union cooperation through social movement and industrial relations theories<sup>\*\*</sup>

### Abstract

In the context of continuing political, social, and economic crises, trade unions in most European countries are seen as weakened, protest as having little influence, and the solidarity between European populations as damaged. Under these circumstances, scientists and practitioners have placed hope in the cooperation of social movements and trade unions in order to revitalise trade unions and achieve common goals. However, the conditions for forming alliances between trade unions and social movement organisations have, thus far, been primarily researched, and partially theorised, from the point of view of different disciplines. In doing so, approaches that emphasise the strategic alignment with resources and context diverge from approaches that highlight the relevance and necessity of shared ideologies or identities. This contribution aims to bring existing approaches from movement and industrial relations research into dialogue with each other and calls for a further integration of both perspectives. It contributes to a more holistic understanding of joint movement and trade union action current concepts such as social movement unionism cannot provide. It uses two examples to show that instrumental, strategy-driven modes and identity-based, culturally-driven modes of cooperation are not contradictory. There are situations in which strategic decisions on resources and political influence are more decisive than ideological proximity and vice versa. These findings are of social and scientific relevance for understanding mechanisms of solidarity construction and processes of bridging differences even in increasingly fragmented and unequal societies.

Keywords: Social movements, trade unions, cooperation, cross-organisational cooperation, transnational cooperation (JEL: J51, J59, Z13)

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## Sprechen wir über das selbe, nur anders? Wie Bewegungs- und Industrielle-Beziehungs-Forschung Kooperationen zwischen sozialen Bewegungen und Gewerkschaften erklären.

### Zusammenfassung

Im Kontext anhaltender politischer, sozialer und ökonomischer Krisen gelten Gewerkschaften in den meisten europäischen Ländern als geschwächt, Protest als wenig einflussreich und der Zusammenhalt zwischen europäischen Bevölkerungen als beschädigt. Um Gewerkschaften zu revitalisieren und gemeinsame Ziele zu erreichen, wird von Wissenschaft und Praxis Hoffnung in die Kooperation von sozialen Bewegungen und Gewerkschaften gesetzt. Allerdings wurden die Entstehungsbedingungen von Allianzen zwischen Gewerkschaften und sozialen Bewegungsorganisationen bisher nur aus der Sicht der jeweiligen Disziplin erforscht und theoretisiert. Dabei stehen sich Ansätze gegenüber, die entweder strategische Ausrichtung auf Ressourcen und Kontext betonen oder die Relevanz und Notwendigkeit geteilter Ideologien oder Identitäten hervorheben. Dieser Artikel bringt Bewegungs- und industrielle Beziehungsforschung miteinander in Dialog und fordert eine Integration beider Ansätze. Er leistet damit einen Beitrag zu einem holistischeren Verständnis von gemeinsamem Bewegungs- und Gewerkschaftshandeln, was von bisherigen Konzepten wie dem „social movement unionism“ nicht geleistet wird. An zwei Beispielen zeigt der Beitrag, dass instrumentelle, strategie-zentrierte und kulturbezogene, identitätsbasierte Kooperation keine Gegensätze sind. Es gibt jedoch Situationen, in denen strategische Entscheidungen über Ressourcen und politischen Einfluss entscheidender sind als ideologische Nähe und vice versa. Erkenntnisse über Mechanismen der Solidarisierung und Überbrückung von Unterschieden sind gerade in zunehmend fragmentierten Gesellschaften von wissenschaftlicher und gesellschaftlicher Bedeutung.

Schlagwörter: Soziale Bewegungen und Gewerkschaften, Kooperation, gewerkschaftliche Revitalisierung, kollektive Identität, Austeritätspolitik, Handelspolitik

### Talking about the same, but different?

Why do trade unions and social movement organisations work together? Social movement organisations and trade unions have organised joint protest events, shared campaigns, or worked together using a variety of strategies of political influence. These often have been labelled social movement unionism (Ford, 2009; Mathers, Upchurch & Taylor, 2019; Nowack 2017; Zajak, Piper & Egels-Zanden, 2017). Still, there have also been occasions where they have competed with each other; organising separate events (e.g. the May 1st trade union demonstrations or alternative social movement demonstrations) or reaching out to the same target group (e.g. precarious workers or the unemployed) (Choi & Mattoni, 2010). For the most part, however, they ignore each other. They operate in different spheres (the industrial sphere versus the public sphere) and usually have neither incentive nor necessity to work together. They differ in their organisational structure (bureaucratic and hierarchical versus networks based on informal and decentralised participation), underlying democratic principles (representative democracy versus undertakings in direct democracy),

or motives of collective action (material and employment related concerns versus post-materialist values) (Grote & Wagemann, 2019). Indeed, both social movement and industrial relations literature have stressed that trade unions and social movements represent distinct organisational forms. It is against this background that social movement and industrial relations theory developed rather independently and have followed “their own avenues” (Grote & Wagemann, 2019, preface), despite having shared roots in Marxist thinking (Yon, 2016).

Industrial relations scholars take the inherent conflicts of interest between employers and employees as a basic starting point for their analyses. They study the diverse institutional arrangements that shape the employment relationship, ranging from norms and power structures on the shop floor to collective bargaining arrangements at different levels (Dunlop, 1993 [1958]; Jackson, Kuruvilla, & Frege, 2013; Pries, 2010; Müller-Jentsch, 1995). Social movement scholars, on the other hand, explicitly distance themselves from explanations grounded in class relations as a sufficient condition for mobilisation and protest, arguing that factors such as resource mobilisation, political opportunities, framing, and identities are paramount (Della Porta & Diani 2010; Rucht, 2017; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). Touraine (1984) linked the decline in prominence of Marxist theories to the emergence of new post-industrial social movements in Europe and to the fact that trade unions had, to a great extent, been incorporated in the (neo-) corporatist structures of the state. This led to a decreasing interest in trade unions in social movement theories. Despite this, empirical studies began to explore the relationship between social movements and trade unions, but they did so from the perspective of either social movement studies or industrial relations (IR), or to be more precise from the field of labour studies within IR.<sup>1</sup>

For social movement scholars, the temporary neglect of trade unions changed when researchers re-discovered and re-included capitalism in their analysis (della Porta, 2015; Barker, Cox, Krinsky, & Nilsen, 2013). Especially in the context of the European economic crisis, studies began to re-consider trade unions as relevant actors (Kanellopoulos, Kostopoulos, Papanikolopoulos, & Rongas, 2017; della Porta et al., 2012).<sup>2</sup> Social movement scholars started looking into the development of cooperation across organisational differences from the cultural perspective, which has become dominant in social movement theories, focussing on processes of brokerage, bridge building and the construction of a joint identity (Baumgarten, 2014; Flesher Fominaya, 2010)

Among industrial relations scholars, the interest in social movement-trade union cooperation developed in the context of the trade union revitalisation debate (Schmalz & Dörre, 2013; Rehder, 2008; Frege & Kelly, 2003). Taking into account the decline of unionisation and collective bargaining, social movements have increasingly been considered as strategic partners who could compensate for the loss of structural, associational and institutional

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- 1 A lot of work on trade unions has been done in the “sociology of work“, “industrial sociology“, “political economy” and “labour history“, which could also add valuable perspectives, concepts, and empirical evidence, especially concerning cultural aspects. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper (for example Bieler et al. 2015; Gallas 2015; Jansen 2013).
  - 2 Yon speaks of a “long-awaited homecoming” of the labour movement in social movement studies (Yon, 2016, p.82). Empirically, trade unions have (historically) always been part of social movements. For example, in a longitudinal study of protest events in Germany, Rucht showed a significant amount of trade union participation (2007).