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Labour and place : trade union organisation in the British steel industry.

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Labour and Place:

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Abstract

Labour and Place: Trade Union Organisation in the British Steel Industry

John Thompson
MPhil Thesis, University of Durham, Department of Geography, 2004

Regional geography was once described as the highest form of the geographer's art. The recent and far-reaching re-orientation of human geography has largely concerned a re-focus on space and place. This self-questioning has largely been focused around a recognition that an analysis of the complex interactions that take place between social, economic and cultural factors is important to augment comprehension of regional difference. Combined with this re-invigoration of place-based analyses, there has recently been growing attention paid within human geography to a perceived shortcoming in explanations of uneven regional development: the relatively limited attention that has been paid to date to the role of organised labour. This thesis proposes that the region provides a window through which the social relations of production can be explored, arguing that accounts of uneven development are deficient if they do not recognise that there is a labour geography which needs to be taken into consideration.

After a comprehensive review of the varied scales of trade union action, the thesis proposes that a non-reductionist Marxist methodology is a pertinent analytical tool with which to examine the social relations of production in two regions of Britain – north east England and south Wales. Using data from in-depth interviews with union members, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation – the largest trade union representing workers in the British steel industry – is portrayed as an active agent which has aided the evolution of two distinctive regional industrial cultures.

The case of the ISTC demonstrates clearly that regional industrial culture is not something to be read directly from the strategies of capital. Instead, this thesis concludes that localised cultures of labour help shape place, but in a non-determinate fashion. If the social, economic and cultural attributes of a particular place are viewed collectively, new and innovative ways of analysing regional economies become possible.

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Most importantly, I would like to express gratitude to my supervisors, Dr. David Sadler and Professor Ray Hudson. David and Ray have been endless sources of inspiration, offering much advice, encouragement and motivation. As well as supervising this thesis over the last few years, they have proved to be excellent and much appreciated mentors during the time in which I have experienced my first tastes of undergraduate teaching and contract research within higher education. To both David and Ray I offer many congratulations as I can not think of many other people who could have managed several years of patience with my writing 'style'!

A great deal of thanks are also due to the members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation and other trade unions who took part in the research process. Each and every one of the contributors to this thesis has given me a fantastic insight into how trade unions are organised and how important they are to the lives of working people. I sincerely hope that my prose does sufficient justice to their thoughts and beliefs – without them this thesis would not exist. An extra special mention must go to Mick Adams, John Batstone, Tommy Fellows, Dai Ferris and Gareth Howells from the ISTC for establishing many of the contacts which were so vital to my research. Additionally, Sylvia Rooney and Nicola Vinter at the Teesside ISTC office never tired of my endless telephone calls and for this I shall remain eternally grateful.

I would like to thank my family and friends for their unwavering support over the last four years. My grandfather, Douglas Hook, deserves an individual mention. It was his financial assistance that made my extended stays in south Wales and the many thousands of miles I covered between interviews possible, although I can not envisage he will ever agree with my political persuasions! My parents and sister – David, Margaret and Katy Thompson – have always been close when it has mattered, as has my grandmother. Of friends and colleagues – Rich Bromiley, Louise Bracken, Jo

I confirm that no part of the material presented in this thesis has previously been submitted by me or any other person for a degree in this or any other university. In all cases, where it is relevant, material from the work of others has been acknowledged.

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Signed: ....

Date: ....June 2004.................

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

Trade unions have existed in Britain for over one hundred years and they have traditionally attracted attention from a wide range of scholars, especially those working in the field of industrial relations. Industrial relations analyses, however, have given scant regard to the inherently geographical structure of the principal regulatory institutions of industrial relations, except in so far as they have allowed for variations at the national scale. Equally, the varied impact of trade union strategies at a range of spatial scales has remained largely under-researched (especially within the confines of the geographical discipline) and it has only been in the last ten years or so that a distinct field of 'Labour Geography' has emerged, due largely to the recognition that significant regional and sub-regional variations exist in union recognition, membership density and traditions of industrial relations practices (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1994, p 457).

There is a distinct spatiality to the trade union movement. More than this, however, the inclusion of a geographically-sensitive appreciation of labour permits academic study to go beyond simple economic determinism. It is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that trade unions are spatially constituted (no less than any other social practice), thereby increasing understanding of how institutions of organised labour contribute to the formulation of distinctive industrial cultures. In so doing the thesis also aims to contribute to the renaissance and refashioning of regional geography that began during the late

1970s (see for example Gregory, 1978; Gilbert, 1988; Pudup, 1988; Sayer, 1989). As Gregory argued:

> *Ever since regional geography was declared to be dead – most fervently by those who had never been much good at it anyway – geographers, to their credit, have been trying to revivify it in one form or another. ... We need to know about the constitution of regional social formations, of regional articulations and regional transformations.*
>
> Gregory, 1978, p 71

Griffiths and Johnston (1991) argued that such calls for the refashioning of regional geography were not fully realised until the work of Massey and Allen (1985) and the historico-geographical methodology mapped out by Pred (1984). Subsequently, economic geography appeared to shift towards an inclusion of an ever-increasing range of socio-cultural factors (see for example Amin and Thrift, 1994; Lee and Wills, 1997; Storper, 1997). This work added to an important debate concerning the construction, development and modification of distinctive regional cultures. This object of analysis is partly attributable to the cultural turn in social science as a whole, but it also reflects growing awareness that there are real and quite tangible cultural aspects to regional economies (see Saxenian, 1994; Sayer, 1997; Schoenberger, 1997; Sadler and Thompson, 2001).

Nevertheless, there has been relatively little agreement on what exactly constitutes or creates a distinctive regional culture, let alone the mechanisms by which that culture might contribute to variations in regional development trajectories. Whilst cultural studies have recently returned to mainstream human geography, its exact role has often remained vaguely defined. Oinas argued that the theoretical grasp on the cultural dimensions of social and economic change remains 'relatively poor' (1998, p 16, see also Jackson, 1991).

This debate may also be fuelled by the perception that analyses of uneven regional development often fall short because of the relatively limited attention that has been paid to the role of organised labour (see for example Herod, 1998c). In short, accounts of production's many and varied spatial forms – or more simply of the interaction of capital and labour across space – are deficient without recognising that there is also a labour geography that needs to be explored, analysed and taken into consideration.

How might these varied labour geographies be explored? Rather than taking a simple snap-shot of a particular region, trade union or firm – a practice which tends to freeze actions in time and space – I depict and analyse trade unions using a historical and evolutionary methodology; one that analyses the paradoxical, fluid, processual and even 'messy' nature of the conventions being researched. Such an approach is similar to that advocated by Tilly and Gérôme (1992). They argued that the historical study of social tradition should endeavour to comprehend the ways in which groups (whether these be communities, classes, families or trade unions) 'formalise, symbolise and interpret the past – and how such visions shape the ways in which people interpret, accept or resist present conditions and influence behaviour in the future' (Tilly and Gérôme, 1992, p 1). This approach, therefore, is one that recognised the significance of culture and tradition. I propose that cultural studies can also be augmented through an examination of organised labour.

I argue that through an examination of past and present traditions, expectations and practices of institutions of organised labour in particular places, this thesis aims to address the knowledge gap that currently exists in the lack of labour-sensitive accounts of regional uneven development. It will argue that trade unions have often been characterised as

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passive, rather than active agents in accounts of the social, cultural and economic atmospheres of regions and that an examination of these phenomenon can offer a far more comprehensive analysis than that offered by capital-led analyses that have – for the most part – failed to recognise the agency of labour. This will be done by developing a theoretical framework that draws upon critical realism, Marxian political economy and recent developments in cultural geography. This structure will be employed in a detailed case study of the role of the main steel workers' union in Britain, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) in two separate regions, Teesside and south Wales.

This chapter therefore seeks further to introduce institutions of organised labour and situate them in place, whilst providing an introduction to the argument that trade unions play an important role in the institutional and cultural fabric of regions. Subsequently, the chapter turns towards the epistemology of the thesis, through a discussion of how the study of two separate regions permits detailed analysis of local specificities and broader trends of social processes and working cultures. The chapter then examines the practicalities of interviewing key informants of the case study union and regions, before discussing some of the potential hazards that the researcher must be aware of. Finally, the chapter provides a preview of the subsequent nine chapters that form the remainder of the thesis.

Trade unions, local labour markets and regional cultures

Defining what constitutes a trade union opens a vast debate. An early definition is as follows:

A trade union, as we understand the term, is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.

Webb and Webb, 1894

This definition was used by Sydney and Beatrice Webb in the introduction of their classic work on the *History of Trade Unionism*. In 1920, it was re-edited and the term 'working lives' was proposed instead of 'employment', as a response to criticism that the original characterisation assumed the inevitable acceptance of an ongoing capitalist mode of production. Whilst the use of the term 'working lives' does provide a more open definition of the activities and practices of trade unions, British trade unions have seldom challenged the fundamentals of the capitalist employment relationship. For example, early British trade unions were engaged in campaigns to shorten the working day, with the effect of changing the ways in which work was carried out as labour power was more intensively utilised with more machinery and systematic organisation. Therefore, trade unions seem to have been occupied with safeguarding the protection of their members *within* the capitalist mode of production. Thus, perhaps the definition of Ackers et. al. (1996) is of more relevance. They stated that trade unions tend to defend the interests of workers within the wage labour system and seek changes in the nature of control within the firm by a variety of techniques, such as mass collective bargaining, strike action and collaboration with employers.

Whilst the definitions of trade union activity outlined above are open to debate, they retain considerable salience for the purposes of this thesis. This thesis will demonstrate the self-evident geographical significance of labour, whilst arguing that trade unions themselves have had (and continue to display) significant influence upon varying regional industrial cultures. Such regional cultures are of vital significance when it comes to accounting for

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patterns of uneven regional development, and part – but only part – of that culture involves the often under-acknowledged traditions, expectations and capacities of labour to act in its own individual and collective right.

McDowell (1994) argued that whilst cultural geography is 'one of the most exciting areas of geographical work at the moment' (p 146), it [culture] remains, however, a 'notoriously slippery concept, difficult to pin down and define' (p 148). McDowell's (1994) definition of culture is as follows:

> *Culture is a set of ideas, customs and beliefs that shape people's actions and their production of material artefacts, including the landscape and the built environment. Culture is socially defined and socially determined. Cultural ideas are expressed in the lives of social groups who articulate, express and challenge these sets of ideas and values, which are themselves temporally and spatially specific.*
>
> McDowell, 1994, p 148

As the last part of the above quotation demonstrates, cultural traditions and ideals are linked to power relations. Certain groups in society produce and reproduce culture through social practices that occur over a variety of spatial scales. Trade unions are no different to any other institution in that their cultural and social identities are linked to place and these characteristics are similarly evident at a variety of spatial scales.

Hobsbawm (1998) also recognises that custom, tradition and historical experience play a large part in the formation of institutional cultures:

> *Men [sic] live surrounded by a vast accumulation of past devices, and it is natural to pick the most suitable of these, and to adapt them for their own purposes. The historian ... who traces these processes must not forget the specific function which the new institutions are expected to fulfil; neither must the functional analyst forget that the*

specific historical setting must colour (and perhaps assist, hamper or divert) them.

Hobsbawm, 1998, p 59-60

In other words, I argue that an historical examination of trade union traditions may provide a window onto broader cultural processes and practices. Williams (1989) argued that culture is 'the lived unity of experience' and is a useful tool with which to examine the specific social, political and historical contexts that combine together to add to the distinctiveness of place. Culture is significantly bound up with local ways of living and working, and without an appreciation of the part played by organised labour, accounts of regional culture are deficient in nature.

Why has the geography of labour (until recently) been ignored? Trade union membership throughout the western world has been falling for almost thirty years, and labour markets throughout capitalist societies are increasingly characterised by insecurity and turbulence. The era of almost full employment for men (at least in northern Europe and North America) appears to be over. Of those in employment, around one third find themselves engaged in miscellaneous forms of unstable work. Individuals engaged in employment change their jobs more frequently, new patterns of part-time and seasonal work have proliferated, and women constitute an increased proportion of the workforce. Such processes have assumed an uneven geographical expression across Europe to reinforce a complex mosaic of labour market structures (Hadjimichalis and Sadler, 1995).

Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) argued that such phenomenon pose great challenges to trade unions, yet render their continued survival increasingly vital to working people and their communities. Moody (1997) wrote that trade unions were of paramount importance to

a growing number of workers throughout the world, not because the world was becoming increasingly integrated, but because of the increasingly capitalist nature of the planet. Walker (1998) argued that after the so-called triumphs of neo-liberals such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the time is right for a revival of labour studies. Academics such as Andrew Herod, Doreen Massey, Jamie Peck, David Sadler and Jane Wills (to name but a few) appear to have launched a whole new generation of labour studies that use Marxian political economy as their departure point. Walker proposed that this new emerging style of labour geography was one that was re-inventing itself as a radical geography and a political economy of place, and one that might help to make a difference to millions of working people in their quest for a better life in a hard world of hard work (1998, p xvii).

This thesis therefore seeks to explore the role of organised labour in the continual and ongoing creation and re-constitution of regional industrial culture, and the ways in which that culture is in turn implicated in the specific experiences of labour organisations. The cultures, traditions and expectations of labour have all too often been ignored. Organised labour is one factor that contributes to regional industrial culture. Such factors need to be conceptualised and structured together with other processes in an interactive, two-way and multi-layered fashion. Whilst it is now widely accepted in critical debate that the traditions, legacies and expectations of capital vary significantly over space due to the nature of capitalist development, it is far less frequently acknowledged that it is the same for trade unions and their members. For example, the operation of labour markets and cultural qualities created in and through the engagement between unions, capital and place, are all spatially variable. In order to understand the nature and practice of trade unionism, it is crucial to appreciate the spatiality of social life and recognise that unions are

social entities that constantly shape landscapes of capitalism (Herod 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Therefore an historico-spatial approach to an understanding of trade union strategies will add much to the debate about understanding diverse regional industrial cultures.

Some labour geographers such as Doreen Massey, Joe Painter, Ron Martin, Peter Sunley and Jane Wills have begun to explore (using largely quantitative methodologies) how the absolute and relative strength of trade unions has varied over space and time in the UK. Massey and Painter (1989) argued that the so-called heartlands of British trade union activity had declined and other newer areas of representation were in the ascendance. On the other hand, the accounts of Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993, 1996) tended to argue that the traditional areas of British trade union activity (for example the north, Scotland and south Wales) remained dominant regions of representation. These conclusions were arrived at using different methodologies, although it was agreed that these notable regional variances evident throughout the British trade union movement reflected varied trade union cultures and traditions. This thesis seeks also to add to this debate, employing a quantitative analysis of ISTC membership density over space and time in the UK as an initial starting point for further investigation into the relationship between local cultural factors and organisational changes.

There are thus three main conceptual threads running through this thesis. First, I argue that organised labour should be conceptualised as an actor in its own right. Second, there is an inherent spatiality to organised labour, reflecting regional differences in union membership, density, and propensity to take collective action. Third, these variations are a product of (and help to create) specific historico-geographical traditions, constructed

over time to create distinctive regional industrial cultures. The traditions and expectations of both capital and labour need to be given equal weight in providing explanations of the socio-cultural and industrial atmosphere of specific localities. Through the use of intensive interview and extensive quantitative analysis, the thesis aims to outline the key characteristics of the role of the ISTC over time and space in two separate regional cultures within the UK, and the ways in which the union might be implicated in the formation, maintenance and dissolution of such cultures.

Research into regions

The use of two regions as case studies necessitates discussion and analysis of local specificities. However, whilst some of the research findings are unique to either Teesside or south Wales and demonstrate the complexities of regional industrial culture, others point towards broader trends in the operation of social processes and working cultures. The analysis of social attitudes and activities in locality research has all-too often been used by researchers to produce a 'snapshot' of a current state of affairs, whilst the evolutionary nature of cultural change has been forgotten. Groups of actors and institutions which combine together to constitute the geography of particular regions should be viewed as dynamic processes that are constantly changing. The examination of discontinuity and contradiction is of vital importance to construct a dynamic picture of regional evolution. However, understanding of local trade unionism is also augmented by looking into larger scale processes of political economy. Case studies may be employed as a window with which to view wider social processes. Similarly, on a meta-theoretical level, the reproduction of capital and labour requires an understanding of the use of space

and the production of space. Whilst this thesis analyses the specifics of one trade union, one industry and two regions, it also recognises that labour, labour organisation and the politics and culture of the workplace are place-sensitive and that they all play a part in the continual re-fashioning of regional geography.

Some commentators have argued that research into localities is, or should be, intrinsically postmodern (see for example Cooke, 1987; Lash and Urry, 1987). It has been claimed that a non-totalising, postmodern approach should supercede traditional meta-theories such as Marxian economics (see also Lyotard, 1984). Marxism, according to Bhaskar (1979) and Outhwaite (1987) is devoted to the scientific development of concepts which can be related to real social structures, and as a result is unquestionably realist and modernist. Postmodern geographies, on the other hand, according to Jameson (1984), are more interested in evoking and celebrating experience, but are suspicious about the prospect of understanding it. Marxism, in the eyes of Lovering, is often seen as being 'dry and dusty, old and European, [and constantly seeking] scientific explanation' (1989, p 4).

Graham (1988) proposed that an 'alternative' Marxism is needed, one that draws upon Marxism and postmodernism, encompassing both their advantages. What Graham (1988) failed to make clear, however, was how postmodernism was to be used to develop this 'alternative' Marxism. Postmodernism seeks to describe real-world events, but finds the analysis of these difficult because of an over-reliance on individual events. Marxism, on the other hand, romanticises collectivities and ends up reifying social structures (Sayer, 1984). Neither, according to Sayer (1984), can reveal sufficient detail about how the individual and structural components of a regional economy combine and interact together. Bringing certain aspects of postmodernism and Marxism together to form a critical realist

framework may however provide a sound departure point. Critical realism, in the eyes of

Lovering, is:

> ... neither incompatible with Marxism (as is implied by Harvey), nor is it a feeble disguise for Marxism (contrary to Williams and Saunders). It is rather, ... an essential foundation for a non-reductionist Marxism. At the same time, it is sympathetic to those insights which have been assimilated to the less naïve versions of postmodernism. Critical realism aims to provide a framework within which the contributions of Marxism and postmodernism can be brought together without eclecticism.
>
> Lovering, 1989, p 7

Indeed, the resurgence of academic interest in labour geography appears to have rejuvenated interest in whether Marxian political economy and postmodern approaches to research can be married together (perhaps because of increased contact between scholars and working class struggles – see Beauregard, 1988). If one recognises that social systems are always open and are usually complex and messy (Sayer, 2000, p 19), critical realism may be viewed as a pertinent departure point, as it is a useful analytical tool for the study of people, economies and places. As Lovering (1989) stated, the regional economy is, after all, made up of people, who themselves are affected by local cultures and traditions. The need to understand both the people and the collective culture (or structure) of a given locality therefore requires theoretical constructs that relate to small-scale processes and mechanisms which help explain how production and its geographies are organised in varying ways (Hudson, 2001). Such constructs must take into account both how key causal mechanisms and processes act, the variability of these processes over time and space, and how they are acted out in capitalist social relationships. Such methods of enquiry need to go beyond a structural analysis of capital – it is necessary to understand how individual and collective human agency is both enabled and constrained

by structures and how these agencies are capable of reproducing them (whether this is intended or not).

The continuing salience of comparative local studies thus provides a useful empirical framework with which to explore how different people live their lives and interact in their locality, but also provides a window onto wider economic, social, political and cultural processes. By studying two localities, this thesis recognises that Marxian political economy provides an insightful and powerful tool for understanding the geographies of uneven regional development without reducing diverse events into a totalising theory. Whilst by no means proposing that a single meta-narrative could ever advance the debate into the wide variety of issues involved in understanding geographies of economies, it does appear that the retention of some form of structural determination, and the acceptance that social relations of capital are reproduced by both the intentional and unintentional effects of actions, are necessary (Hudson, 2001). Critical realism recognises that particular regions and societies encompass a multitude of causal structures, all of which operate at varying strengths at varying spatial and temporal scales. As Marx told us, people themselves construct their lives, but not wholly following their own personal desires. The social and cultural construction is influenced by factors that often lie beyond individual control (for example the social atmosphere of a region, firm or trade union).

I argue that an examination of key causal mechanisms, and the acceptance of temporal and spatial variability in the ways in which capitalist social relations are constituted and reproduced, is a pertinent departure point for this thesis. A simple analysis of capital falls some way short of understanding the individual and collective agency of labour. Whilst Thrift (1996) called for 'modest theory', I argue in this case that any model must

incorporate social phenomena, not just the traditions and expectations of capital. Such a theory must therefore revive a 'certain kind of Marxism, but one neither so modern nor so post-Marxist that it is non-Marxist' (Castree, 1999, p 154).

Case study rationale

This thesis concentrates upon one trade union, the ISTC, and two regions within Britain. The selection of the ISTC as the case study union was partly due to several practicalities. First, a single-sector union was sought, and one that had been single-sector since its foundation. The benefits of this are as follows. The ISTC was formed in 1917 as an amalgamation of the vast majority of trade unions representing workers in the iron and steel sector, and has only witnessed two acts of merger since this date. Therefore the detailed membership statistics of the ISTC can be directly related to regional employment data in order for union density measurements to be carried out. Other multi-sector general unions, or unions that have experienced a multitude of mergers, would have proved unsuitable for quantitative analysis (particularly of membership densities) because of difficulties in identifying relevant sectors of employment. An examination of the ISTC alleviates these problems.

A second reason for selecting the ISTC was its well-established position in providing workplace representation in iron and steel producing regions of the UK, where the influence of the union is visibly imprinted on the cultural landscape. Whilst its single sector nature allows quantitative analysis to be undertaken of varying levels of regional membership density, its representation in iron and steel producing areas provides several

suitable case study regions. Two of these regions were chosen for detailed intensive investigation – the north east of England and south Wales. These two regions demonstrate certain similarities and contrasts. For example, steel has played an important – although not overarching – role in contributing to the industrial heritage of both regions. Coal-mining and chemical industries have also left significant impressions. For the majority of the last one hundred years, being a member of a trade union was expected of men working in these industries. Whilst these two regions may have shared similar evolutionary characteristics, they can be viewed as separate and contrasting entities, due to cultural differences, varied working practices, wide-ranging trade union traditions, sentiments of regional difference and so on. Therefore, rigorous use of comparative case studies can provide a framework for doing research that allows empirical investigation of varying phenomena within real life contexts using multiple sources of evidence. Both of these regions have drawn heavily upon the iron and steel industry as mainstays of their economic and cultural evolution, but neither can be characterised as classic 'one industry' regions. Both have also relied heavily on the coal mining industry, whilst many jobs in the north east of England were in the shipbuilding trade. Thus these regions have – as the thesis goes on to demonstrate – been shaped by the steel industry and this industry has in turn impacted on, and been influenced by, the experiences of other traditional sources of employment.

The time-span chosen for study was also compatible with the history of the ISTC and the British steel industry. Identifying potential interviewees who had worked in the steel industry before 1960 proved difficult. Coupled with the 1967 nationalisation of the British steel industry (an event which changed the nature of the industry and the ISTC), it was decided that the mid-1960s provided a useful starting point for empirical investigation.

Whilst there has never been any doubt that the ISTC has been overwhelmingly the most significant union to provide representation to workers employed in the British steel industry, the ISTC has also been an exceptionally moderate trade union, on the right wing of union politics, limited in political ambitions and predominately concerned with wages and conditions rather than broader social and economic issues. Nonetheless, this very moderation has led – indeed arguably enabled – the union to play a conscious, willing and influential role in the shaping of place. Thus, an examination of nationally-led centrist labour politics and localist forms of self-identification may indicate how the ISTC aided the shaping of two distinctive regional industrial cultures.

Interviewing methodologies and positionality

How would a critical realist methodology fit in with the objectives of this thesis? Quantitative approaches have lost a position of ascendancy within human geography, and non-positivist methodologies which draw upon political economy have moved to the fore (Barnes, 1995). Consequently, geographers have progressively turned towards intensive interviewing as a means of data gathering (Herod, 1999). In-depth intensive interviewing provides a study of individual agents in their causal contexts, providing a view on how particular processes work in particular settings (Sayer, 1992).

Within human geography, much has been written in recent years about the 'open-ended' or semi-structured interview (Herod, 1999, p 313). Such methodologies have been used to great effect in corporate interviews (see for example Schoenberger, 1992; McDowell,

1992; Herod, 1993; Katz, 1994). Relatively little mention has been made, however, of the use of the semi-structured interview in the expanding field of labour geography. I believe that they offer a powerful analytical tool to understand the spatiality of trade unionism and how trade unions and their members live their lives in the contemporary capitalist economy.

Sayer (1992, 2000) proposed that the use of semi-structured interviews has both advantages and disadvantages. Intensive research, according to Sayer, is 'strong on causal explanation and interpreting meanings in context, but tends to be very time consuming, so that one can normally deal with a small number of cases' (2000, p 21). Interviewing a relatively small number of trade unionists in two localities in Britain may lead to questions being raised about the representative nature of the research, but the adequacy of the analysis of these two localities need have little to do with how many other cases (similar or not) there are (Sayer, 2000).

The choice of the semi-structured interview was made on the following basis. A fully-structured interview would have proved too confining. Similarly, an unstructured interview would not have revealed key causal mechanisms from respondents. I assumed the role of guiding and taking control of the direction of the interview, through the use of an interview checklist. Broad topic outlines were offered for discussion and comment, whilst the respondent was encouraged to offer his or her thoughts that were seen as being pertinent to the question. If one word answers or unclear responses were offered, the respondent was strongly encouraged to elaborate. I always attempted to be guided by Jackson's suggestion:

The best interviewers somehow make the difference between conversation and interview as unobtrusive as possible.
Jackson, 1987, p 80

Each interview was intended to last between forty-five minutes and one hour, although in practice some were much longer, others shorter, depending upon the amount of information that was offered. Each interview was tape recorded and comprehensively transcribed. A total of seventy one semi-structured interviews were conducted. Four full-time ISTC officials were interviewed who had national responsibilities. In the two case study regions, twenty seven union members based in the north east and thirty five based in south Wales were questioned, including several members of other trade unions that represented in the steel industry. There was an approximate 50:50 split in numbers between retired and economically active respondents. 5 other interviews were conducted with ISTC members (especially full-time officials and EC members) who had lived and worked in both regions featured in this study. In these instances, questions were posed in an attempt to tease out further detail of differences and similarities between the two localities. A full list of contributors to the thesis can be found in the appendix. The end result from these semi-structured interviews provided a resource rich in empirical material. Similar to the research experiences of Waller (1983), I found all respondents to have a particularly keen interest regarding the history of their region, union and industry. Whilst some memories may have faded over the years, it was not uncommon for an interviewee to telephone me some days after our meeting to confirm certain details. However, whilst not doubting the overall authenticity of data collected, I always intended the interview data to be viewed as a type of oral evidence, rather than oral histories. Respondents, on the whole, had never considered writing down their personal experiences and contributions to union activity. Therefore, it must be remembered that interview data was based on both

the respondent's interpretation of the question and (perhaps more importantly) the researcher's interpretation of this. As social scientists become ever more critical of their own stance, I constantly reminded myself of Jane Wills' self questioning during her PhD research in the early 1990s. She believed that her interpretation of the thoughts of others could be viewed as 'naïvely putting my words next to those of workers' (Wills, 1995, p 89-90). In other words, is the exercise of this thesis representing or constructing some phenomena that are somewhere 'out there'? (for more detail see Pahl (1984) and his description of 'researching others').

The research conducted with ISTC members did not raise any un-resolvable ethical issues, although some need to be highlighted here. First, and most importantly, it could be perceived by the researched that the researcher in this instance used the knowledge, experience and time of others for his own personal gain. In the case of my personal experiences, I did not consider this concern to be problematic, apart from the minor points highlighted later in this section. Second, as Herod stated:

> *Much of the work written on the process of conducting research on elites and others has tended to assume that there exists a simple and clearly discernible dichotomy concerning the researcher's positionality – either the researcher is an 'outsider' or s/he is an 'insider'. ... I have come to think, however, that the issue of validity and one's positionality – that is to say whether one is (perceived as) an 'outsider' or an 'insider' – is more complex than this dualism would initially suggest.*
> Herod, 1999, p 320

In the case of my research, a simple dualism between 'insider' and 'outsider' does not take into consideration the complexities of case study selection. For example, in terms of an overall racial and gender category, I could be classed as an 'insider', as I am both white and male. I interviewed only white males, most possibly due to the nature of the British

steel industry. However, in terms of age I was almost always a definite 'outsider', as I concentrated on interviewing a wide range of workers who were employed in the steel industry – some of whom had been employed for over fifty years.

When one considers positionality, there are many variables that need to be taken into account. As I was born and brought up in the north east of England, some may claim that I felt a certain closeness to interviewees who themselves live and work in the north east, and as a result of this find interviewing in south Wales (a relatively unknown environment to me) somewhat more challenging. Whilst practicalities such as understanding colloquial speech in both my home environment and in south Wales were not a problem, respondents may have biased their reactions to certain questions because of my personal background. For example, because of the internal politics of both the ISTC and British Steel[1] as institutions, and possible cultural differences between south Wales and the north east of England, my ability to conduct research into regional difference may have been compromised by respondents knowing where I came from. Whilst I was attempting to be detached from any regional bias, people's perceptions of my outlook may have affected their responses. For example, people in south Wales may have felt uncomfortable discussing intra-union differences with someone from the north east, whilst respondents in the north east may have relaxed talking to someone who lived and worked in the same region as them. Additionally, trade unionists may have viewed any form of academic enquiry with suspicion. Herod (1999) however discussed how the opposite may be the case. Interviewees can regard someone from their own locality as a threatening 'domestic'

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[1] Whilst British Steel and Hoogovens of the Netherlands merged in October 1999 to form Corus, the fieldwork for this thesis was carried out before the amalgamation. Therefore, British Steel will be the term used throughout this thesis.

investigator, rather than a harmless 'academic' working in a region or country far removed from their own (Herod, 1999).

There were differences in the way I was treated as a researcher. For example, whilst the address and telephone numbers of both my workplace and home permitted the interviewees to realise that I resided in the north east, I was often of the opinion that I was made to feel more welcome when I was carrying out my work in south Wales. This might be attributable to the popular perception that the Welsh place a higher value upon education than the English, or because I was someone 'out of the ordinary' who had travelled a reasonably long distance in order to 'learn' from them. I was always referred to as a 'Mr. Thompson who works at the University of Durham'. Conversely, union officials in the north east occasionally appeared to view me as an intrusive local student who simply was one of many that possessed an interest in trade unionism. Nevertheless, once I had conducted a five or ten minute one-to-one conversation with the interviewee and established a degree of rapport, the vast majority of interviews were conducted to the highest standard on the behalf of the respondent, and almost always concluded with an exchange of home addresses to facilitate further contact. Whether these points stemmed from the innate local industrial culture or my own personal status I do not know, but I do not believe that such issues affected the quality of the research adversely. The point to make is that there was a distinct difference in the way I was initially scrutinised, and the lesson to learn from this is that it is both impractical and undesirable for a researcher to become totally transparent (Herod, 1999). A detached researcher would, in my opinion, miss out on the rapport that is often built up during the interviewing process. Certain supplementary interviews in both south Wales and on Teesside were conducted in pubs and clubs after one hour or so of interviewing had passed during working hours and British

Steel management would not allow further time. Without rapport and trust being built up, I do not envisage that these beneficial additional interviews would have taken place.

In this brief section, I have attempted to reflect upon how the use of the semi-structured interview proved a useful research tool. Whilst more general texts concerned with interviewing methodologies have tended to stress their suitability because of their 'insider' status, Herod (1999) commented upon how being perceived as an 'outsider' can also have benefits, such as the researcher being able to manipulate his or her 'outsider' status into being an advantage, in that a critical distance between the researcher and the researched may be maintained. Whilst the 'insider – outsider debate' has no hard and fast rules, it is perhaps more prudent to follow Herod, who has claimed that instead of thinking in terms of a dualism, it would be more pertinent to consider the relationship between the researcher and the researched as one involving a 'sliding scale of intimacy' (1999, p 326), one that perhaps maps out a middle ground, from which the researcher can deviate, should circumstances dictate. If the need arose during the course of interviews I conducted, I varied the amount of emphasis I placed upon my roots and upbringing, depending upon the interviewee in question.

The extensive quantitative methodology employed in the thesis is concerned with illustrating the heartlands of ISTC activity, in terms of absolute regional membership, and regional membership density. The ISTC is one of the few trade unions that keeps exceedingly detailed records of regional and national membership from 1917 to the present. These were acquired from a visit to the office of the General Secretary. Coupled with regional labour force survey data of the number of workers employed in the iron and steel industry, it has been possible to construct a picture of the percentage of workers

employed in this sector who were ISTC members. Such quantitative evidence aims to further the debate as to whether the British trade union map is flattening out into new regions of representation (such as the south east), or whether the areas of traditional high union density (such as south Wales) continue to illustrate such trends.

Although the methodologies used in calculating density measurements will be explained in greater detail in subsequent chapters, it remains to be stated here that some compatibility problems were experienced between the dates of measurement of both the labour force surveys and the ISTC membership statistics. Nevertheless, the results illustrate important trends and their discussion does shed some interesting light on the debate over the supposed 'flattening' of the map of British trade unionism.

Summary and chapter outlines

This introduction has demonstrated that both the theoretical departure point and the choice of methodology are not simple and clear-cut decisions. However, the theoretical grounding (that will be built upon in chapters two, three and four) has set out a method to understand processes and mechanisms which themselves explain how labour, production and their geographies are organised in varying ways, through a detailed intensive examination of two regional industrial cultures. As Hudson stated:

> *Justification of a theoretical position inevitably involves reference to the assumptions upon which the theory is founded and the values and norms in which it is grounded. Just as history and geography have to be made, so too do theories that seek to comprehend these processes have to be constructed.*
> Hudson, 2001, p 10

The construction of a class-based theory that is grounded in Marxian political economy may seem to be intentionally confrontational, especially to ardent postmodernists. Nevertheless, as the following chapter will argue, capitalism is here, class and class inequalities remain, and wealth distribution matters (Castree, 1999, p 154). I argue that intensive analyses of capital – labour relations and how these interactions contribute to forming local industrial cultures still have an important role to play within the geographical discipline, and the chosen methodologies are the appropriate ones to aid this process of enquiry.

The remainder of this thesis is structured around a further nine chapters. Following this introductory chapter, chapters two, three and four comprise the theoretical backbone of the thesis. Chapter five provides a brief introduction to the ISTC and the two regions in question. Chapters six, seven, eight and nine draw upon the empirical work conducted on Teesside and in south Wales. The thesis is concluded in chapter ten to reinforce the argument that there is a definite sub-national geography to trade union organisation.

Chapter two has three sections. First, it critically examines a wide range of literature concerning the social production of space and place, arguing that space is both historically and socially constituted. Second, it reviews more recent literature concerning the 're-discovery' of the region and models of regional success and failure. These two sections are based around a two-stage argument. First, I make a case that early accounts of regional development lacked an appreciation of both culture and labour, and were therefore deficient as a result. Second, I propose that more recent research into regional development – whilst claiming to incorporate a cultural element – still has a tendency to under-prioritise the role played by labour. The chapter concludes by proposing that an all-

encompassing class-based Marxist approach to explaining regional difference could – and indeed should – incorporate the inherent cultural attributes of place.

Chapter three is concerned with an analysis of the spatiality of the trade union movement, and is split into four sections. First, the question of scale is tacked through a brief review of recent theoretical developments of the importance of scale to contemporary geographical research. I argue that scale as a concept should be viewed as part of the analytical process, rather than being taken for granted. The remainder of the chapter considers three scales of trade union activity – the national, international and local and the relationships between them. The second section therefore concentrates on a review of industrial relations literature, arguing that its tendency to view labour organisations as largely national institutions is often misguided. Similarly, the third section takes issue with contemporary research that has often (normatively) viewed the internationalisation of trade union activity as a desirable or inevitable future path. Instead, the fourth section argues that more localised forms of analysis permit research into the importance of place and local context. The chapter concludes by returning to the question of scale, arguing that future trade union strategies are likely to benefit from a greater understanding of the inherited traditions and practices which come from gaining an understanding of the localised linkages between culture and labour.

Chapter four provides a background to the British trade union movement through four sections. First, a geographical history of the British trade union movement is documented, emphasising that the structure and actions of trade unions have been inherently local. Second, recent quantitative geographical debates concerning the varied spatial composition of the British trade union map are reviewed. Third, two case studies of British

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trade union activity (coal mining and financial services) are considered, demonstrating prevalent localised forms of activity. The chapter concludes by linking together culture and labour, proposing that a pluralistic and localised understanding of the linkages between capital and labour will go some way towards addressing the knowledge gap that currently exists in accounts of regional industrial culture.

Chapter five provides further information regarding the case study union and the two regions. A comprehensive history of the ISTC is offered, together with two portraits of the historical evolution of Teesside and south Wales, outlining both similarities and contrasts.

Chapter six is the first of four chapters based upon empirical research carried out in the two regions. It focuses on capital – labour relations throughout the British steel industry. Three key events are documented. First, the 1967 nationalisation of the British steel industry is discussed and the ways in which the union (as both a national and regional institution) reacted to this monumental change. Second, the prolonged and bitter national strike of 1980 is analysed, alongside a discussion of the structural changes that affected the union during the immediate aftermath. Finally, the 1988 re-privatisation of the industry is described and analysed by union members.

Chapter seven reviews and analyses the relationship of the ISTC with other trade unions that represent workers in the steel industry. Interaction between the ISTC and the British Trades Union Congress are analysed from national and regional points of view, as are relationships (and conflicts) between the ISTC and other trade unions. The merger activities of the ISTC are also scrutinised. The chapter also concentrates on how recent

working conditions (called teamworking) have affected inter-union and capital – labour relationships.

Chapter eight concentrates on the intra-union relations and organisational structure of the ISTC. The evolution of the local branch configuration of the union is analysed, alongside discussion of how each branch interacts with its divisional office and Executive Council members. Levels of inter-divisional co-operation are charted and the consequences of these analysed. The overall theme of this chapter is one of intra-union rivalry and conflict as local union cultures and highly fragmented patterns of ISTC activity are illustrated in abundance at a variety of spatial scales.

Chapter nine begins with a quantitative analysis of regional ISTC membership density over time, through a return to the debate that is introduced in chapter four. It argues that the ISTC – at least in numerical terms – retains a relatively strong presence within the works. The chapter moves on to consider the role of the ISTC in the community and its so-called 'Fresh Start'. This union renewal programme is some eight years old and was launched in 1992 as a (somewhat belated) scheme both to retain existing and recruit new members. Because of the disastrous loss of membership the ISTC faced during the 1980s and early 1990s, the decision was taken to break with a near century-old tradition of focusing exclusively on the steel industry. Instead, the union decided to broaden out its membership base, whilst remaining focused exclusively on steel (or ex-steel) producing regions. The ISTC has since attempted to re-brand itself as a 'community union', with varying degrees of success. This chapter analyses the evidence of national, regional and local ISTC officials, many of whom are less than comfortable with their new role.

Additionally, attitudes of other unions towards the re-branding of the ISTC are presented in an attempt to provide a balanced set of perspectives.

Chapter ten concludes the thesis, and has two aims. First, it argues that trade unions are characterised by strong regional identities and that in this case the ISTC has shaped – and been shaped by – the nature of work in the steel industry. The ISTC has been (and remains) an active participant in the two regional cultures analysed throughout the thesis. Second – and perhaps more importantly for wider debate – the concluding comments seek to emphasise that regional industrial culture is not something to be read from the strategies of capital, but in part involves the nature and traditions of labour organisation. Finally, limitations identified during the research are presented, along with ideas for future research strategies.

Chapter Two: Cultures of Capitalism

Introduction

As chapter one introduced, this thesis is concerned with the analysis of trade union traditions, legacies and policies. Trade unions (at least in the western world) have operated – and most likely will continue to operate – *within* capitalist modes of production, which themselves are characterised by class inequalities and uneven wealth distribution. The chapter will argue that the space and place that these institutions operate in may be understood by adopting Marxian and cultural viewpoints. Such a stance may prove to be a powerful analytic tool for understanding geographies of economies and production (Hudson, 2001).

Throughout the social sciences, there have recently been tentative steps taken towards an acknowledgement that there are genuine and definite cultural aspects to regional economies, and debate has proliferated as to how the role of culture might adequately be specified and analysed. This chapter seeks to place this so-called cultural turn alongside other debates which have sought to re-invigorate class-based analyses using Marxian political economy as a departure point. The chapter will argue (using examples) that the combination of Marxist and cultural theories of regional change may provide a comprehensive understanding of the varying factors that combine together to produce (and constantly modify) places. Alongside these developments, there has been growing attention within geography to another perceived deficiency in explanations of regional uneven development; that of the relatively limited attention that has been paid to date to

the role of organised labour. Therefore the standpoint I adopt in this chapter is one of how an all-encompassing examination of Marxian political economy may be used to further analyses of the complex mosaic of cultural and social characteristics that define and constantly re-shape regional economies.

In order to achieve this, the chapter presents a two stage argument, through three sections. First, I propose that a deficiency of cultural attributes and a similar lack of an acceptance of the geographically uneven nature of organised labour characterised many traditional accounts of regional development. Second, as accounts of regional development have proliferated and have begun to take (albeit slowly) an interest in culture, there still remains a scarcity of labour-sensitive analyses. These two beliefs are explored within the three sections of this chapter.

The first section concentrates on the social production of space and place, employing a critique of Marxian political economy. It argues that contemporary Marxist analysis is a valuable analytical tool that may be employed to explain and analyse how regions are historically and socially constituted. Recent developments in Marxist thought have highlighted how regions are shaped by complex and multiple causal structures, and have gone on to argue that these structures can only be recognised in specific space-time contexts. By proposing that the understanding of uneven development must incorporate a belief that social processes actually construct place and space, I argue that places become emblazoned with their own distinct cultural meanings, and therefore interact with other places in a variety of different ways.

The second section of the chapter reviews recent literature that has sought to understand regional economic success and failure. In doing so, it provides a comprehensive critique of how commentators have sought to account for the varying development trajectories of regions, whilst largely failing to consider in any detail the role played by organised labour in shaping the patterns of uneven regional development. It charts how cultural regional analyses have asserted themselves within the geographical discipline, and how these recent developments still demonstrate methodological fragility.

The third and final section of the chapter concludes by arguing that the inclusion of a class based analysis of the role and historical evolution of organised labour into cultural accounts of regional change would add greatly to the debate concerning uneven capitalist development. It will call for a re-casting of enquiry toward the local scale in order to examine how nationally-organised trade unions take shape from – and help fashion – patterns and processes of uneven development over space and time.

The continued salience of Marxist class-based approaches to providing explanations of regional development

Marxist geography and regional enquiry

Contrary to popular belief, Marxian economics forms much more than a guide to revolutionary practice. Instead, Marxist thought can be viewed as a body of theory that seeks to explain how an economy functions, through an examination of the relations of production that include all the fundamental relations between men and women in the

production of their material life (Mandel, 1978, p 352). The form of Marxist analysis that I subscribe to in this chapter is one that recognises the linkages between localised experiences of power and inequality, through an examination of broader system-wide processes. In addition, the incorporation of history alongside a Marxist analysis allows the changing traditions and expectations of the regional atmosphere to be examined over time. As Cloke et. al. (1991, p 28-56) argued, the adoption of such viewpoints proved to be fundamental for the geographical discipline, as increasing numbers of human geographers began to call for a radical agenda.

Whilst the study of the region has been central to the geographical discipline (see Paterson, 1974 and Hart, 1982), it was not until the 1960s that geographers began to question the very nature of their subject, through debates as to exactly how regional difference could be both explained and analysed. At the time, certain commentators such as Burton (1963) claimed that geography should align itself with more quantitative disciplines, permitting a radical reform of the discipline. Many geographers followed this route, seeking to employ spatial models through a positivist framework of analysis (see for example Chorley and Haggett, 1967).

Marxist geography became increasingly fashionable during the early 1970s partly as a critique of this quantitative revolution, seeking to place traditional geographical questions (such as the study, comprehension and analysis of regional difference) in a broader social and political context. Whilst this emergence may have come about as a set of responses to the so-called quantitative revolution, it still holds much credibility both within the contemporary geographical discipline and for the purposes of this thesis. Nevertheless, Marxian political economy has not remained static during the last thirty years, and more

recently it has once again been at the forefront of the self-questioning of the geographical discipline.

Consequently, I consider that Marxian political economy remains a highly useful analytical tool for the understanding of the geographies of places, economies and production. Commentators who continue to argue that Marxian analysis is outmoded tend to refer to more structural interpretations of Marx (for example Althusser (1969), who placed little emphasis on the role of historical human agency and human consciousness), often ignoring more localised historical accounts (see for example Thompson, 1963). Additionally, the strength and dominance of capitalism can not be underestimated – especially since the history of the past thirty years has demonstrated the firmly entrenched nature of the capitalist market economy throughout the Western world. In simpler terms, however, capitalism is here, class matters, class inequalities are often seen to be widening, the pursuit of profit within firms and global corporations is becoming more obvious and wealth distribution does matter. Consequently, as Hudson (2001) argued, the use of Marxian political economy has become more (rather than less) relevant for understanding modes of capitalist production. The form of analysis he proposes is one that recognises that the culturally- and socially diverse forms of economies that exist are varieties *of* capitalism, rather than trends that are in some ways *detached from* capitalist production.

Marxism as an open and fluid epistemology

In this sub-section, I briefly review how Marxist thought can be used as an open-ended methodology. During the last three decades or so, there has been increasing recognition

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from geographers and other social scientists that capitalism can be portrayed as a fluid and permanently shifting system. Consequently, it has been established that theories with which to examine capitalism must also be constantly refined and questioned to respond to these changes.

The term 'historical materialism' was originally coined by Engels and is often associated with Marxist thought (for a thorough review, see Marx and Engels, 1970). It rose to prominence in geographical research during the 1970s largely due to attempts to explain varying patterns and processes of spatial and environmental change as part of the uneven social relations of capitalism. This perspective was employed as a critique of positivism and called into question the conceptions of both space and history employed in geographical research. Marx and Engels (1970) argued that historico-materialist investigations are opposed to idealism, and assume the importance of ideas and pluralist theories. They suggested that human beings are seen to develop 'their material production and their material intercourse [and thereby alter] their history and the products of their thinking'. Thrift (1983, p 34) believed historical materialism allows 'conscious, directed and reflexive human agency to become the social structure'. Therefore historical materialism remains an acceptable tool to understand how capital – labour relations play an important role in the constant making and shaping of place because it allows the input of human structure and agency within the capitalist arena of production.

Similarly, Ernest Mandel sought to recast the scale of enquiry of the works of Marx towards the local (see Mandel, 1968). Hudson and Sadler (1983, p 407) argued that the work of Mandel was an 'important exception' to the neglect of the spatial dimension of social development within social theory during the early 1980s. Hudson and Sadler (1983)

argued that a class-based analysis of regions provided a useful departure point to further

the comprehension of how capital – labour relations play important roles in the shaping of

place. Mandel's first publication, *Traité d'economie marxiste* (Thesis on Marxist

Economics) was intended to re-invigorate Marxism, which the Stalinists of the time had

'petrified and twisted out of shape' (Achcar, 1999, p 5). Part of his attempts to distance

himself from Western Marxism involved a semi-rejection of Althusserian thinking, in order

to move on from the then historico-empirical school of Western Marxists. He did this by

the adoption of the following statement:

> [The method of enquiry] *has to appropriate the material in detail, to*
> *analyse its different forms of development and to track down their*
> *inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real*
> *movement be appropriately presented.*
> Marx, 1976, p 102

Mandel sought to provide a Marxist explanation of the causes of the prolonged post-war

wave of rapid growth in the international capitalist economy, which he argued had taken

both Marxist- and non-Marxist economists by surprise (Mandel, 1978, p 7). He did this

through the recognition that Marxism is not a dogmatic and unchanging system, but learns

from practice, is influenced by it and is in continuous development (Albarracín and Montes,

1999, p 39). Mandel termed this system 'Open Marxism', arguing that similar to other fluid

disciplines, Marxism should continually incorporate the advances from a wide range of

social sciences, which in turn contribute to the understanding and irregular evolution of the

world and its varied societies. Whilst the works of Mandel did not call for the same degree

of a pluralist approach that I argue is necessary to understand uneven development (his

syntheses often failed to incorporate certain social phenomena such as the local traditions

of organised labour, for example), Mandel contributed heavily to the recasting of Marxism

that involved a radical break from its traditional objectives. This recasting permitted an

analysis and comprehension of present-day capitalism that was so lacking (and often remains lacking) from other, more totalising versions of Marxism. The conceptual framework proposed by Mandel allows the interrelation of multiple economic, political, technological and social variables and factors in the context of the internal dynamics of historical capitalism (Albarracín and Montes, 1999, p 52). In practice, Mandel's work tended to avoid the rationalistic mistakes of much mainstream Marxist inquiry, through a use of theoretical advances within mainstream social science.

His work however may be considered as a crude tool with which to view class difference over time and space. During the 1970s, Mandel sought to distance himself from the fashionable historical determinism that believed 'late capitalism' to be a 'final stage', standing on the brink of imminent disintegration. Instead, he argued that an understanding of the economic system that would follow Fordism would be best served by a re-appropriation of Marxism that took on board a pluralist, exploratory and non-deterministic approach (Husson, 1999, p 101) one adapted by Hudson (2001) to aid the understanding of space and the construction of place.

These brief examples have demonstrated that the boundaries of Marxian political economy are fluid, as are the interpretations of the subject. The accounts outlined above have, however, proposed that Marxism after Marx may be characterised as a non-totalising discipline. Before further developing the theme of how a particular form of historico-geographical Marxism provides a pertinent departure point for this thesis, the chapter turns to how other theorists have utilised developments directly relating to Marxian political economy to view how space and place are constructed.

The construction of space and place

Until the early 1970s, established forms of regional literature were radically different to the regional geography that currently pervades the geographical discipline. During the 1950s, the orthodox approach to regional economic disequilibrium was dominated by Perroux (1950) and Myrdal (1957). These two commentators considered the mechanisms by which uneven regional development could be explained.

François Perroux (1950) based his account of regional variance on a theory of growth poles. The assumption in this case was that growth occurs neither ubiquitously, nor does it spread out evenly, but occurs at key points at varying intensities within a region (see Cooke, 1993, for a thorough review). In addition, Perroux broke economies down into spaces, or fields of endeavour, attributing these spaces to the existence of varied densities of non-traded types of common knowledge or similar types of machinery. Such beliefs stemmed from an acceptance that economic, cultural and social activity is not often codifiable, and can be related to wider convictions of locally or nationally defined norms, routines and practices. Gunnar Myrdal, on the other hand, saw regional difference through a lens of cumulative causation. He argued that (what he termed) superior regions would 'continue their upward growth spiral at the general expense of economically less advanced regions' (Myrdal, 1957, p 27). He argued that a spiral of decline for certain regions through the out-migration of capital, labour and trade would characterise a pure capitalist landscape, leading to increased regional inequality.

These early types of regional geography tended to view the conceptualisation of place through a conviction that places were encircled and closed provinces, perhaps internally

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consistent in respect to some characteristics or perhaps internally varied. These regional geographies tended to describe and assume, relying heavily on limited spatial and temporal contexts, and rarely taking into account wider, dynamic and fluid processes. Nevertheless, as Hudson (2001) proposed, there was a tacit recognition that the boundaries of regions were defined in relation to specific purposes, and as such there were no 'essential places' (p 256).

In recent years, there has been growing attention paid within geography to how space and place may be conceptualised. In particular, interest has tended to turn to how relationships between space and place are constituted (see Johnston et. al., 1990; Thrift, 1994). Alongside the developments of the 1970s within Marxian political economy, debate also proliferated as to how space is constructed and analysed.

Similar to the timing of the work of Mandel, there had been comparatively few voices until the late 1980s within human geography that had broken through or successfully challenged the often taken-as-read descriptive hegemonic historicism that seemed to pervade the discipline. However, one of the so-called 'spatialising voices' that appeared was that of the French Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre. His views concerning spatial thinking and the theorisation of the social production of space had far-reaching consequences within the field of human geography.

> *The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know,*
> *history, with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis*
> *and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past. ... The present*
> *epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.*
> Foucault, 1986, p 22

During the last twenty years, Foucault's assumptions regarding the emergence of an 'epoch of space' have assumed some credibility, especially in the field of human geography. As later sections of this chapter will demonstrate, the much-debated concept of the globalisation of the world economy may conversely have brought about a need for a conceptual reconsideration of how space and place are constituted through societal forces. Foucault's mention of the 'ever-accumulating past' also assumes greater significance later in this chapter (and thesis as a whole) in terms of the diverse layers of development that characterise the making and re-making of regional cultures.

The work of Lefebvre remains highly influential in studies of human geography, throughout social science in general, and especially within the field of modern Marxian political economy. According to Soja (1989), he remains today the 'original and foremost historical and geographical materialist' (p 42). His work influenced the thoughts and writings of many other socio-spatial commentators, from Giddens (1979, 1981, 1984); Harvey (1973, 1985); Massey (1984, 1995); Peet and Thrift (1989); and Soja (1989) to Smith (1984). In order to explore this legacy the chapter turns to a brief discussion of the main arguments made by Lefebvre in his *La Production de l'espace* (trans. 1991), and how these beliefs form part of the conceptual threads that characterise the theoretical framework of the thesis.

Lefebvre was influenced by a wide range of philosophical thinking from the 16th to the 20th century. For example, Kant argued space to be a fluid entity, its boundaries and edges being blurred:

> ... *not something objective and real, nor is it a substance or an*
> *accident, or a relation, but it is subjective and ideal and proceeds*

from the nature of mind by an unchanging law, as schema for co-
ordinating with each other absolutely all things externally sensed.
Kant, from Richards (1974)

Whilst largely accepting these ideas, Lefebvre's (1991) work also drew heavily on the work of Marx, Engels, Hegel and Nietzsche, arguing that space could be constructed using a Marxist critique of class struggle *within* the capitalist mode of production (a similar argument to Hudson and Sadler, 1983). Space, in the eyes of Lefebvre, has often mistakenly been viewed as a defined area, instead of a field where ever new geographies are constructed:

Not so many years ago, the word 'space' had a strictly geometrical
meaning: the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty area. ...
To speak of 'social space' ... would have sounded strange.
Lefebvre, 1991, p 1

Lefebvre proposed that historical representations of space could be connected to specific modes of production and uneven capitalist development, arguing that space should be viewed as a fluid arena where complex and spatialised social interactions are carried out. Such theories retain considerable salience in the understanding of how capital – labour relations play an important role in the shaping and continuous re-making of place.

Giddens (1984) proposed that places should be considered as complex and unbounded lattices of articulations constructed through and around internal relations of power and inequality. This lattice, according to Hudson (2001) should be viewed as discontinuous, punctured by structured exclusions. Within this lattice, intraplace variation exists 'because of the uneven nature of the overlay of different [defining] criteria' (Allen et. al., 1998, p 55-56). The concept of space and place being multi-layered, 'torn' or 'ragged' (Painter, 1998, p 11-24) is similar to Lefebvre:

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We are ... confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on.

Lefebvre, 1991, p 8

Spaces are consequently produced, not only in terms of spaces of ideas, but as social and material space, in which the uneven production of capitalist societies takes place. Representations of space and representational spaces contribute in a variety of different ways to the production of space, depending on their qualities and attributes, the society or mode of production in question, and indeed the historical period. Lefebvre (1991) argued that constructed social space is multi-faceted, abstract and social, immediate and mediated. As such, as Hudson (2001) proposed, the issue is not how to – and indeed whether to – draw lines around places, but to 'seek to understand the processes through which places are (re)produced – though this cannot be divorced from questions of how the variable geometry of places is conceptualised' (p 257).

Marxism and geography during the 1980s

As the above interpretations of Marx and Lefebvre have demonstrated, the conceptualisation of space and place remains a contested issue within the geographical discipline. Recent years have often seen Marxist geography remaining at the forefront of academic endeavour. By the early 1980s, Marxist geography had become a broader and more flexibly-defined discipline, although debates concerning its alleged pluralist categories and postmodern leanings appeared to both have a destabilising effect and to stimulate debate. In response to these arguments, David Harvey (1982) called for a wide-

ranging paradigmatic shift from the traditional heart of Marxist geography to an all-encompassing Western Marxism and modern critical theory. This call translated to a proposal for an increasingly spatialised Marxism that offered a critique of uneven capitalist development. Harvey (1982) reinforced his position by arguing that the addition and analysis of space and place *within* a historical Marxist framework would not lessen the academic worth of geographical materialism. On the contrary, he argued, a spatialised version of Marxian political economy would create an open-ended and less positivist historico-geographical materialism that would prove to be a radical break with more traditional and totalising interpretations of Marx.

Hudson and Sadler (1983) argued that the application of an open-ended and fluid Marxist analysis would allow the geographical discipline to analyse how class, class boundaries and their location could be conceptualised. They argued that this system of analysis could be used to stress the crucial role of the relations of production, alongside capturing essential points about the real nature of social relationships in capitalist societies (Hudson and Sadler, 1983, p 24). Thrift (1983) subscribed to a similar attitude, calling for a re-casting of Marxist enquiry away from its traditional totalising roots:

> *... it is possible to produce general knowledge about unique events, but ... this is best achieved through the interpenetration of these structurationist concerns with existing, specifically Marxist, social theory, because Marxism, for all its very definite sins and omissions, has a strong notion of determination.*
>
> Thrift, 1983, p 24

The cautious approach advocated by Thrift was necessary for several reasons. He argued that 'jumbo Marxists' would object to the recasting of the scale to the local as Marxism (in their opinion) was under no circumstances intended to be applied to the small scale or the

unique. Thrift proposed that it was impossible simply to combine a structurationist approach alongside Marxism. Instead, he argued that through a meticulous reworking of Marxism, class-based analyses of scale (which itself is socially constructed) would permit new forms of analysis into the many varied geographies of the organisation of capital *and* labour.

Thrift was not alone in concentrating on the revitalisation of Marxism within human geography. Geographers during the 1980s appeared to agree that the traditional argument that space merely reflects society was becoming outmoded (see for example Smith, 1984). Consequently, it was argued that geographical enquiry could be conducted at the intersection of geographical and Marxist traditions (Harvey, 1982; Carney et. al., 1980; Dunford and Perrons, 1983).

The analysis of spatial difference between regions, cities and industry suddenly assumed increased importance. Massey (1984) argued that the composition of local economies (and therefore places) could be traced back through time and could therefore be scrutinised as the historical product of the combination of layers of activity which in turn have been constructed through wider national and international structures, through the use of the geological metaphor of sedimentation and layering. This move, according to Gibson-Graham (1996, p 82), followed the earlier example set by Lefebvre and has been highly influential in hypothesising the effectivity of socially produced space:

> ... no space disappears completely, or is utterly abolished in the course of the process of social development – not even the natural place where that process began. 'Something' always survives or endures – 'something' that is not a thing. Each such material underpinning has a form, a function, a structure – properties that are necessary but not sufficient to define it.

Massey (1984) further developed this theme, arguing that social and spatial changes are both integral to each other and partly the product of historical linkages – largely the underlying structures of society:

> *What takes place is the interrelation of the new spatial structure with the accumulated results of the old. The 'combination' of layers, in other words, really does mean combination, with each side of the process affecting the other.*
>
> Massey, 1984, p 121

Massey saw economic space as the product of the differentiated and intersecting social relations of the economy, arguing that the slogan 'space is relational' had not been examined or taken on board by social science, even within geography, the most 'spatial of disciplines.' Cochrane (1987, p 357-8) strongly supported Massey's claims. He believed that analyses of regional space and the actors contained within would provide greater understanding of how members of institutions are constantly making and remaking themselves as a class through changing sets of relations.

Massey (1984) argued that the pluralistic approach that she advocated was suitably equipped to recognise underlying causal processes, but additionally recognised that these processes do not operate in isolation. She proposed that only through a recognition and analysis of both the general and the specific could an understanding of how particular forms of economic activity affect different places be gained. Instead of looking for generality by adoption of a positivist stance, or by accepting that regional differences are simply deviations from the average, Massey (1995) argued that it is important to acknowledge that – and question why – regional variance exists. Whilst Massey's 1984 research was primarily based on the economic, it did not focus primarily on strategies of

capital. Instead, it took inspiration from the belief that localised economic relations are themselves constructed from a far wider mosaic of social, political and ideological relations. A variety of social forms of capital, labour and gender relations were all incorporated into a wide-ranging enquiry that included what would soon become fashionable debates of difference, place and locality.

<u>Summary</u>

This section of the chapter has sought to conceptualise spaces and places within the uneven structures of capitalism. It has argued that capitalism remains a highly fluid and slippery system, and that the development of a theoretical framework to interpret and analyse this economic paradigm is not a straightforward task.

Proponents of a historico-geographical Marxian approach face many challenges to its validity. First, such an approach must recognise that capitalism is both temporal and spatial. Second, whilst it is necessary to comprehend the intricacies and varied nature of space and place, there must also be an adequate conceptualisation of the underlying social processes that exist and their relation to spatial differences and differences between places (Hudson, 2001). Marxist analyses therefore ought not degenerate into what Foster-Carter (1978, p 75) termed 'little rock pools increasingly unconnected to one another'. Put more simply, Marxist analysis should not just concentrate on Sève's (1975) science of the singular or Layder's (1981) science of the specific, but should recognise the importance of scale to geographical enquiry. Marxism should therefore not be rejected as a

metanarrative, but instead should recognise its own weaknesses and attempt to redress them.

Harvey (1996, p 9) argued that there were dangers in viewing Marxist meta-theory as a tool with which to view spatio-temporality. Similarly, the dismissing of a totalising system is also dangerous. Hudson (2001, p 7) proposed that 'no single theoretical system can provide a complete and satisfactory set of answers, we must find ways of living – critically and creatively – with some degree of theoretical dissonance'. Given that the geographical discipline finds itself currently in a state of 'epistemological relativism and methodological pluralism' (Gregory et. al., 1994, p 5), it would appear that critical self-appraisal is far more preferable to the endless (and indeed fruitless) search for a single new all-encompassing paradigm (Hudson, 2001, p 6).

The chapter now turns to an examination of recent geographical literature on the re-discovery of the region, demonstrating that whilst regional analysis retains considerable salience, there has only recently been recognition of cultural attributes to regional economies. As such, research has only rarely included any mention of the role played by organised labour.

Regions and regional culture

This section of the chapter has three distinct threads. First, I summarise why and how the region has recently assumed increased importance within geography, providing a summary of why studies at the regional scale have recently proliferated. Second, I

demonstrate that many of these recent accounts lack a cultural input, and provide an introduction to how culture could – and should – make up an important component part of regional enquiry. Third, through an examination of wide-ranging contemporary literatures that include cultural attributes, I critically identify the problems that still exist within geography due to the lack of labour-sensitive accounts that also focus on culture.

The re-discovery of the region

Whilst intensifying globalisation and the increasing domination of capitalism are amongst the prime features of the age, other questions such as how globalisation may have increased the value of space, place and territory have begun to be posed. Many questions that challenge the devaluation or increase the significance of space and place within the global economy aroused the interest of a diverse group of academics and commentators:

> *Something funny happened in the early 1980s. The region, long considered an interesting topic to historians and geographers, but not considered to have any interest for mainstream western social science, was rediscovered by a group of political economists, sociologists, political scientists, and geographers.*
> Storper, 1997, p 3

Put more simply, the region as a source of geographic, economic, social and political vitality, and the phenomena of uneven regional development, are two inter-related areas which since the early 1980s have been the subject of increased academic interest (Storper, 1995, 1997; Hallin and Malmberg, 1996; Maskell and Malmberg, 1998). Whilst the world was becoming increasingly inter-connected, these forces appeared to have reinforced the significance of place. Such increased attention to the role of space and

place has often been called 'the re-discovery of the region', or 'the resurgence of regional economies' (Storper, 1995).

Many commentators saw the advent of globalisation as a phenomena that actually increased the significance of place, rather than one which merely devalued it. The well-documented shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist paradigm appeared to have important ramifications for both the form and location of economic and social life after mass production (Storper, 1995, p 191). Whilst Amin and Thrift (1994, p 1-24) stated that transnational companies have been able to dictate flows of production (and in particular capital) due to the increases in volume of international trade, they also later proposed that:

> ... the pressure posed by globalisation is to divide and fragment cities and regions, to turn them into areas of disconnected economic and social processes and groupings.
> Amin and Thrift, 1995b, p 97

The processes of globalisation are thus believed to have sanctioned a comprehensive reshaping of existing viewpoints of both time and space. As Amin and Thrift maintained, places continue to possess specific identities, whilst the networks that exist between regions are also assuming increased importance (1995b, p 97).

The question that the re-discovery of the region poses, then, is to further the comprehension of how some places and regions remain winners – and others losers – in the globalised economy. This question recognises the arguments presented by a number of commentators (see Cooke, 1997; Giddens, 1998, Hutton and Giddens 2000; Amin, 1997; Amin and Hausner, 1997; and Storper, 1995 and 1997) that the processes unleashed by globalisation have somewhat ironically served to increase the importance of

space and place and of tangible and intangible institutional characteristics. In other words, the increasing localisation of economic activity within the world economy may require attention to regional economies, in terms of examining the region as a source of competitive advantage. Amin (1997) argued that the region should be viewed as a territory in its own right, giving rise to increased importance to economic and social space, and the very nature of individual, regional and local economies *within* nation-states. Cooke (1997) called for a re-think of how critiques of globalisation should be structured. Instead, he argued that the adoption and analysis of the term 'glocalisation' could begin to examine the region as a source of competitive advantage.

The analysis of the region and regional difference has a conceptual base in terms of its role in the global economy. For example, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a plethora of publications that explored the obvious 'geography of inequality' that global capitalism was producing. Such commentaries focussed upon the increasing levels of economic and social disparity both between and within regions (see Dunford, 1994; Hadjimichalis and Sadler, 1995; Begg and Mayes, 1993).

Massey suggested that the older style of regional geographies reviewed earlier in the chapter often sought to place fault for regional difference within the region, rather than attempting to understand the multitude of processes with which a region must contend:

> *Regional problems [were] conceptualised not as problems experienced by the regions but as problems for which somehow these regions are to blame.*
> Massey, 1994b, p 63

Put more simply, Massey believed that older accounts of regional description tended to rely too heavily on limited spatial and temporal contexts, rarely taking into account networks of wider dynamic processes. These accounts, in her opinion, often cast regional problems in a fixed light that did not evolve or transform over time, and often portrayed trade unions as passive actors (indeed if they were mentioned at all):

> *It is important to recognise that the* [regional] *problem will change in both nature and geography. To see regional policy and regional problems as simply questions of spatial distribution is completely inadequate.*
>
> Massey, 1994b, p 64

In addition, the early 1990s were characterised by accounts of regional literature that often argued that blueprints for regional success could be 'taken off the shelf and applied universally to all types of regions', since at the nucleus of each successful region lies a 'set of common factors' (Amin, 1998, p 1). Accounts such as these generally failed to recognise however that regions possess divergent economic, cultural, social and physical attributes.

If regional success (whatever the term denotes) can not be simply picked up and transposed to other locations, geographers were obliged to look elsewhere for a more comprehensive review of regional economics. Literature relating to the rediscovery of the region has often been associated with the 'new endogenous growth theory'. This approach comprises two (inter-linked) arguments. First, it proposes that both institutional and evolutionary economics have a place in regional analysis. For example, regional development should take into account wider social, cultural, political and historical perspectives (similar to historico-geographical materialism), rather than assuming a relatively narrow economic standpoint. Second, it assumes that identification and

examination of these wide-ranging factors provides a key to the understanding of how they may combine together to contribute towards economic success (or failure). Grabher (1993) and Grabher and Stark (1997), distinguished between regional *adaptation* and regional *adaptability*. In their view, regional *adaptation* involves the capacity (of a region, firm or institution) to change incrementally within a framework of narrow and unquestioned parameters. *Adaptability*, on the other hand, is seen to relate to the capacity of a firm or institution to respond, to ask different questions, encourage change in either the internal or external environment and encourage dynamic growth:

> *Adaptation leads to an increasing specialisation of resources and a pronounced preference for innovation that reproduces existing structures. The system thereby loses its ability to reorganise its internal structure to cope with unpredictable changes in the environment. Adaptability depends therefore on there being uncommitted resources that can be put to a variety of unforeseeable uses. ... It is this kind of self-questioning ability that underpins the activities of systems capable of learning to learn and self-organise.*
> Grabher, 1993, p 265

Theories such as that of Grabher may be related back to the Marxian approaches that were introduced in section one of this chapter. Regions are to be seen as spaces of varying economic, social, political and social potential. Given the particularly fluid and slippery conditions that characterise the new global economy, the capitalist mode of production must generate preconditions for its own continuity and expansion. Regions which display a high degree of adaptability may demonstrate higher forms of regional success, and – conversely – in old industrial regions, the apparent lack of adaptability may lead to 'institutional blockage', a process by which institutional structures have evolved which, over time, become a mechanism for the suppression of alternative development paths.

The literatures reviewed in this section of the chapter have so far largely failed to make any detailed mention of how culture may be incorporated into contemporary regional enquiry. I maintain that without an examination of the inherent cultural characteristics of the places in question, they remain somewhat deficient. The chapter now turns to a discussion of how culture has been recently integrated into accounts of regional performance, but also seeks to point out deficiencies within these accounts.

The region as a cultural entity

Cultures are produced and reproduced through social practices that occur at a wide variety of spatial scales. In other words, culture has different meanings to different groups in society. Culture is constantly shifting over space and time, and central hegemonic meanings may be challenged and overthrown (McDowell, 1994). Growing interest in the social nature of production systems during the 1990s witnessed a new significance being attached to the social and cultural characteristics of regions, firms and institutions by economic geographers (Storper 1992, 1997; Schoenberger, 1997; Saxenian, 1994; Sayer and Walker, 1992); industrial economists (Lundvall, 1992); political economists (Putnam, 1993); and management theorists (Kanter, 1995). Whilst class-based analyses have often fallen under increased attack, cultural accounts have entered the debate on regional and national competitiveness. Whilst there has been increasing recognition that there are cultural aspects to the regional economy, there remains little agreement as to how culture should be analysed, or how culture affects regional performance. The term 'culture' is frequently misunderstood. This point is summarised by Gertler:

> *... the role of culture in this debate has not been adequately specified, on either a theoretical or empirical level. ... I hope to demonstrate the need to examine the process by which industrial cultures – whether at the level of the workplace, the region or the nation – are themselves constructed by social practices.'*
>
> Gertler, 1997, p 47

Gertler argued that the role of culture is important both at the regional and the national scales, and is important in shaping practices, customs and norms of economic behaviour and even individual traits. The processes from which industrial practices are produced are complex, involving forces of regulation operating at levels of individual workplaces, corporations, communities and regions. In addition, Gertler criticised analysts who resort to "cultural' influences to explain the behaviour of managers, firms and workers when in reality these explanations are 'tantamount to an admission of ignorance' (1997, p 48). Gertler instead proposed that:

> *... the motivations underlying many of these practices within and between individual firms can be seen to arise quite directly from the structure of the macroregulatory environment in which these entities function.*
>
> Gertler, 1997, p 48

In doing so, he argued, the process of demystification of contemporary industrial relations would begin, through an analysis not only of the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of management and workers (often the limit of academic enquiry), but also of the broader systematic characteristics of the regulatory environment. Oinas (1998) agreed, claiming that:

> *Cultural embeddedness refers to the involvement of economic actors in sets of social relations representing particular cultural domains which results in the transfer of cultural ideas and practices.*
>
> Oinas, 1998, p 14

She stated that firms are embedded in the wider regional culture, and part of this involves input from local trade unions that themselves are actors in the local labour market. Consequently a revolving cycle of interaction between institutions is apparent. For example, trade unions are bound up in terms of locally legitimised routines and procedures that are demonstrated through ever-evolving industrial practices. Such habits stem from the knowledge and skills related to local traditions that form localised forms of capital – labour relations (Oinas, 1998, p 13). Therefore, class-based analyses of localised capital – labour relations are necessary to understand historically contingent social, economic and cultural practices.

Cultural accounts of regional performance

The chapter now provides a critique of recent accounts that seek to examine and evaluate regional success and failure in the wider context of social and economic change. These commentaries seek to place the cultural and behavioural attributes of firms, regions and institutions in the wider context of contemporary social and economic change.

During this era of so-called methodological pluralism, research into the culture of firms, regions and institutions has become increasingly fashionable. Whilst having a cultural input in common, these accounts have tended to exclude an analysis of the role played by organised labour.

The so-called 'cultural turn' in human geography has not replaced traditional methods of geographical enquiry, nor has it been a radical departure. Instead, as Wills and Lee

(1997) argued, it has simply reshaped the ways in which research is conducted. Studies that incorporate the role of culture tend to stress that the economic, the social and the cultural are interdependent, although many accounts have made sweeping claims concerning regional industrial culture when a great deal remains taken for granted and unquestioned. Similarly, many of these narratives have come about due to a concern to explain the reasons behind the success of certain newly-emergent agglomerations in the later years of the twentieth century. Work carried out by Amin and Thrift (1995a, 1995b) and Amin and Thomas (1996) examined social and cultural characteristics of successful regions. Economic success was often traced through to high levels of social solidarity and institutional pluralism, rather than more familiar statist forms of intervention. This 'third way' proposed the democratisation and decentralisation of decision making, the preservation of collective solidarities, an emphasis on inter-institutional dialogue and a shift towards relations of reciprocity and trust between governance institutions (Amin and Thomas, 1996, p 255). A belief that successful industrial agglomerations at local or regional level can not be reduced to a set of restricted economic factors characterised the work of Amin and Hausner, (1997). Whilst they did not play down the importance of economic dynamics, they argued that social and cultural factors also lay at the heart of institutional success. Regional success, according to Amin and Thrift (1995b), depended upon 'institutional thickness'. This term, they conceded, is not an elementary notion to comprehend. Nevertheless, they proposed that the academic worth of institutional thickness is increased by these wide-ranging concepts and may hold the key to the understanding of the global and local economy. Their definition of institutional thickness can be split into four factors:

1. The most obvious factor is the need for a strong institutional presence. For example, firms, financial institutions, local chambers of commerce, training agencies, trade

associations, local authorities, development agencies, innovation centres, clerical bodies, unions, government agencies providing premises, land and infrastructure, business service organisations, marketing boards and so on – when combined together – may provide a basis for the growth of particular *local* practices and collective representations in social networks (Amin and Thrift, 1995b, p 102)

2. High levels of interaction amongst the network of institutions in the local area is required. These institutions must be actively engaged and conscious of each other, demonstrating high levels of contact, co-operation and information exchange (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991);

3. Resulting from point two, sharply defined structures of domination and / or patterns of coalition resulting in both the collective representation of what are normally sectional and individual interests, and the socialisation of costs and the control of rogue behaviour (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991);

4. The development of a mutual awareness amongst the participants that there is a commonly held industrial agenda which the collection of institutions both depends upon and develops (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991).

These, and other factors, according to Amin and Thrift (1995b), all combine together and constitute a local institutional thickness, composed of inter-institutional interaction and synergy. Relations of co-operation and trust through a common regional or industrial purpose are developed through collective representation by many bodies. This so-called "thickness" 'establishes legitimacy and nourishes relations of trust' (p 102).

These ideas of institutional thickness were exemplified through an examination of the state and civic institutions in Denmark (Amin and Thomas, 1996). The principles that underpin

the negotiated Danish economy can be characterised by the balance of power that has existed between labour, capital and the state, and the mutual regard for co-determination. This economic and social success may be traced back to the development of the co-operative movement and the labour movement after the end of the nineteenth century. Amin and Thomas claimed that Danish business life is 'dominated by small enterprises, and is rooted in the institutional legacy of the hundreds of co-operatives that were formed in the last century to resolve the problems of small farmers' (1996, p 259).

However, work carried out by Amin and Thrift (1994, 1995b) and Amin and Thomas (1996) generally concentrated upon the institutional thickness of more advantaged cities and regions (for example Denmark, the City of London and Route 128 in Boston). They readily admitted that they understood less of the institutional requirements for economic regeneration in the context of less advantaged cities and regions – or indeed the cultures that perhaps had contributed to the decline of these regions (Amin and Thrift, 1995b). Nevertheless, their broad argument simply stated that the idea of an economy being 'embedded' in a society (the root of the traditional socio-economic approach) fails to acknowledge anything but the dualism between economy and society. Instead, Amin and Thrift (1995b) called for an adoption of a new 'cultural' approach to further understanding of 'the economic' and economic governance, arguing that doing so would advance the embryonic debate into both socio-economics and the politics of association. Amin and Hausner (1997, p 6) stated that the new 'complex' economy, accordingly, is a 'microcosm of criss-crossing organisational and institutional forms, logics and rationalities, norms and governance structures' that is difficult to grasp in its entirety. As they stated, each economic (or regional) system appears to possess a 'paradoxical unity of diversity' (1997, p 6) that requires open-ended methodologies of investigation.

As societal traits, culture and local economic activity are understood to be linked, a significant question which arises from and is addressed by this research is, why should it be that some regions and firms are able to adapt more rapidly and more effectively than others? How, in other words, can we understand the mechanisms by which one firm, institution or region gains competitive advantage over another, or by which one region adopts a different path of transformation from others which – superficially at least – possess similar, shared characteristics? For instance Saxenian (1994) explained the contrasting economic performance of Silicon Valley and Route 128 in terms of their differing capacities as a milieu for the generation of inter-firm trust and collaboration – in other words, culturally different contexts. Saxenian's argument was multi-layered in its approach:

> *It is helpful to think of a region's industrial system as having three dimensions: local institutions and culture, industrial structure and corporate organisation. ... The three dimensions are closely interconnected. No single dimension adequately accounts for the adaptive capacity of a regional economy, nor is any single variable prior to or causal of the others.*
> Saxenian, 1994, p 7

Saxenian's analysis produced two broad conclusions. First, she argued that there exist strong connections between the internal structure of firms and the broader structure of the region in which they are embedded (and conversely, the structure of the firm reflects the organisation of the region). Second, she proposed that an analysis of the boundaries between firms (i.e. their porosity) and the kinds of relationships between firms would permit an all-encompassing investigation into local industrial systems and would consequently provide a key to the further understanding of production systems in general. Saxenian (1994) believed production systems to be constituted by local institutions and

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culture, industrial structure and corporate organisation. Gertler (1995) argued that a critical examination of these strands would provide a useful window onto the shared practices of the social division of labour.

Other comparatively recent work on the success of particular regions has focused on the varied nature of civil society (Putnam, 1993). This research sought to understand the efficiency of democratic institutions, through long-standing empirical investigations into the importance of civic tradition and community in Italy. Putnam (1993, p 8) argued that the 'practical performance of institutions is shaped by the social context in which they operate'. The rules, practices and norms that make up institutions leave their imprint on political outcomes by structuring political behaviour. In other words, institutions shape politics. In addition, Putnam (1993) argued that institutions are shaped by history. Institutions have character, inertia and robustness. As a direct result of this, their historical evolution must embody distinct historical trajectories and turning points. Therefore, Putnam viewed regions with enhanced social capital as places where democracy could thrive and better economic performance could be observed, although his focus was relatively narrow, and could be interpreted in a normative manner:

> Should [we] expect to find a history of communal autonomy and flowering mercantile life everywhere that we encounter contemporary civic competence? And a history of communal weakness and centralised autocracy wherever we find civic incapacity?
>
> Tarrow, 1996, p 395

Similarly, Amin (1996) argued that civil society is as much an arena of contest as the workplace, and that there is no automatic translation from the strength of democratic institutions to regional economic performance. On the other hand, Putnam's work does

provide a valuable contribution to the emerging debate as to the role of culture in defining regional performance. It points again to the validity of a pluralist methodology through its call for political life as a cultural factor to be considered in accounts of regional performance.

Complimenting Saxenian's work, Schoenberger (1997) sought to focus on the level of the firm, rather than the region. She concentrated on the failure of many American corporations to change successfully during the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that an explanation for this was to be found in corporate culture and the fashioning of managerial identity, which structured and narrowed the possibilities of transformation. Similar to other accounts, Schoenberger (1997) employed an open methodology that examined the inter-relationships of competition, through windows of historically-specific strategic problems for the firm. Thus her focus was on the culture of the firm as a means of understanding its strategy, and on the use and selection of information and knowledge. The firm was seen as a product of the identity of its senior managers, who are caught up in the exercise of power, whilst scant attention was paid to other actors, such as that of the collective or individual action of blue collar workers.

Summary

These varied accounts have many common themes. Amin et. al. concerned themselves with the negotiated economy and the need for institutional thickness, whilst freely admitting that their research did not focus on less-advantaged regions. Schoenberger's account provided a useful insight into the ways in which the internal workings of the firm might be

theorised in order to explain corporate success or failure, yet it did not attempt to embed the culture of the firm in territory. It placed great store in senior managerial identity but yet saw little place for regionally-specific cultures or the role of other actors, in particular labour. Whilst Saxenian examined regional contrasts in terms of the creation of networks of trust and co-operation, she did not seek to understand the mechanisms of change as they might affect relations between capital and labour. Yet such interactions remain of significance in terms of the understanding of the dynamics of regional transformation and regional industrial culture (Sadler and Thompson, 2001).

This section has established certain concerns that exist throughout recent culturally-informed accounts of regional analysis. There remains a great deal which is simply assumed and unquestioned, particularly when it comes to specifying the role of culture (Gertler, 1997). Regional culture has been often identified and then held responsible for the predicament of particular places. Consequently, cultural change has often been prescribed in terms of regions becoming reflexive, associational and learning regions. The substantial limits to learning regions have been considered in depth (see for example Hudson, 1999), but as Sadler and Thompson (2001) argued, it is irrational to reduce regional industrial culture to a concern with mechanisms of trust and learning, or believe that it stems largely from the strategies of capital.

Cultures of labour

Regional industrial culture

So how might regional industrial culture be identified? Sadler and Thompson (2001) viewed regional industrial culture as being in tune with Storper's (1995) proposal that the region could be seen as a source of becoming; as a construct in and of a series of untraded interdependencies which include taken for granted conventions and routines. Regional industrial culture is thus seen as a fundamental component part to an understanding of the complex mosaics of uneven regional development. As earlier sections of the chapter have demonstrated, the region is not a static bounded entity, but is multi-layered, fissured and fluid, constantly taking shape in relation to processes operating at a variety of spatial scales from both within and outside. Industrial culture is therefore not simply a property of a given region, but is instead grounded in particular regions at certain moments in time. This culture is essentially dynamic, both product and constituent of negotiated social activities (both between and within capital and labour) which are constantly being made in and through practice (Wills, 1998). Part – but only part – of that culture involves the traditions, expectations and capacities of labour as an actor in its own individual and collective right (Sadler and Thompson, 2001).

Regional cultures of labour

This chapter has discussed the re-invigoration of Marxism within human geography and the rediscovery of the region, and situated them alongside the recent stimulating

development of cultural accounts of regional performance. The chapter has also demonstrated that organised labour has often been overlooked in accounts of the continual and ongoing creation and re-constitution of regional industrial culture, even in recent geographical writings. Accounts of production's many and varied spatial forms – of the interaction of capital and labour across space – are noticeably deficient without recognising that there is also a labour geography which needs to be explored and taken into consideration. The varied – and indeed inherent – historical impacts of workers actions over time and space can not be ignored, due to the economic, social and cultural landscapes that either constrain or enable their actions (Herod, 1998c). Whilst the next chapter will seek to review the emerging literature on labour geography, it remains for this chapter to discuss how a class-based Marxist approach to explaining regional difference may incorporate the inherent cultural attributes of the places in question.

So how might an examination of varied labour geographies help? Organised labour should be viewed as a geo-historical agent, simply because the habits, norms and expectations of workers are all spatial and temporal in their formation. To return to Massey's geological metaphor, trade union organisation has been – and continues to be – multi-layered, processual and evolving over time through interaction with other institutions and traditions that operate over varied spatial scales, the practices of which can change over short periods of time (see also Rees, 1986; Fantasia, 1988). Trade unions therefore should be recognised as active organisations that have evolved in different ways over time and space, rather than simply being cast aside as passive and historical products in space. Wills (1998) proposed that trade unions can not be oversimplified; similar to social processes they may not be viewed as a frozen snapshot in time. Instead, they should be understood as 'simultaneously spatialised in the construction, rather than being a passive

historical product in space' (Wills, 1998, p 130). Similarly, Williams (1989) claimed that cultural dynamism is a necessary part of the historical process.

As I argued in chapter one, the history of the last thirty years or so should have provided geographers (as well as others) with an even greater impetus to study the uneven landscape of organised labour. As Peck (1996) explained, trade unions have recently been increasingly affected by capital mobility, state reregulation and deregulation, and extensive economic restructuring. Trade unions have therefore not been able to remain passive to these changes as their raison d'être has been constantly changing (Wills, 1998, p 131).

Class-based analyses of regional labour cultures

Herod (1988c) argued that traditional neo-classical and Marxist accounts failed in their quest to understand uneven regional development because both methodologies tended to lack an understanding of the complex methods in which social actors organise their spatial relations, and consequently, the cultural, political and economic environment in which they operate. Instead, my position here follows that of Allen et. al. (1998) and Sadler (1999), in believing that class-based analyses allow scale to be examined as a socially produced and a contested process (see also Swyngedouw, 1997). In addition, for those places in the world left behind by the comings and goings of this slippery contemporary capitalism, a class-based interpretation appears even more pertinent (see Dandaneau, 1996, for a poignant case study). Interpretations such as these view class as a process that can be

grounded in the history of place and also the historical ties that bind different scales together.

I side with Wills (1995, 1998), by asserting that a detailed conception of capitalism is not possible without an appreciation of the constant modification of place and a spatialised understanding of class. Marxist methodologies often attracted criticism during the 1990s, perhaps as a response to the postmodern and cultural geographies that intensified association with the local (see Sadler, 1999). I have critiqued Schoenberger's (1997) 'Cultural Crisis of the Firm', yet it was one of the few works that have recently attempted to bridge the gap between a Marxist, class-based approach and cultural analysis. I propose that operating alone, neither class-based nor cultural lines of enquiry provide a sufficient theoretical grounding of how regional dynamics can be understood. Combined together – at least for the purposes of this thesis – these two complementary approaches retain considerable salience. A class-based analysis based upon Thrift's (1996) call for 'modest theory' allows scale to be examined as a socially produced and contested process (Allen et. al., 1998; Sadler, 1999), whilst cultural studies can contribute much to regional research by 'bringing the role of shared representations, collective identity and the social construction of hegemonic concepts with which we understand and reflexively act back upon and change our institutions and norms' (Shields, 1998, p 3).

Oinas (1998) took issue with Saxenian's (1994) slant on regional culture by claiming that it refers only to the elite of regional industrial cultures and organisational cultures. Instead, Oinas (1998) – in similar fashion to Shields (1998) – argued that regional culture should refer to shared ideas and social practices that remain relatively persistent over time in a [regional] spatial identity. Gregson, Simonsen and Vaiou (1999) argued that the cultural

analyses presented by Hudson (1994) in his critique of the old industrial areas of Europe included a consideration of labour. This culture, according to both Hudson (1994) and Gregson, Simonsen and Vaiou (1999), led to the evolution of attitudes, beliefs and practices on the part of the workers, and also to the creation of 'mechanisms and institutions sustaining production and particular lifestyles'. If Wills (1998) was correct in her assertion that the spatialising of class analysis is a project still awaiting completion, then the blend of a class-based, cultural Marxist methodology may go some way towards revealing the varied causal mechanisms and processes that interact within regions, whilst remaining sensitive to the specificities of time and space.

Conclusion

This chapter has identified how certain forms of Marxist enquiry may be used to understand and analyse varied regional economies. First, it has argued that Marxism – if used appropriately – can be employed to examine the specific, whilst still recognising that common themes may run through several particular case studies. Second, regions have been identified as a pertinent scale of research with which to examine localised cultural practices. Third, it has proposed that labour – as well as capital – demonstrates significant potential to influence the evolution of regional industrial culture. In doing so, it has argued that methodologies that concentrate only on the actions of capital are fundamentally deficient. As capitalism seemingly asserts itself with increased dynamism over the globe, I argue that localised labour-sensitive accounts have become increasingly necessary to complement existing investigations, in order to provide an improved comprehension of the uneven nature of this economic system. The thesis now turns to examine the spatial

nature of organised labour, through a comprehensive review of trade union literature from both within and beyond the geographical discipline.

Chapter Three: the Spatiality of Trade Unionism

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyse recent debates concerning the spatiality of organised labour, placing them alongside the conceptual threads concerning the importance of class-based regional analysis that were introduced in chapter two.

The previous chapter placed emphasis on how Marxian political economy may be used to further analysis of the complex mosaic of cultural and social characteristics that continually define and re-shape regional economies. However, in terms of studies of organised labour, the region has often been overlooked as a primary scale of enquiry. Accounts of industrial relations – the most established form of trade union study – and studies of labour history have habitually taken the national scale to be their departure point. More recently – perhaps at the same time that trade unions are facing unparalleled challenges – research has tended to turn towards how these institutions may realign themselves with the implications of economic globalisation through the internationalisation of labour.

This chapter seeks to explore the relative merits of all three geographical scales of enquiry, although proposing that regional, national and international scales are not necessarily fixed entities, and the boundaries between them are being constantly modified, contested and restructured. I follow the line of MacLeod and Goodwin (1999), and argue that scale is not and can not be the starting point for socio-spatial theory, and that the three scales I have outlined so far should not be interpreted as ontological or epistemological 'givens'.

This chapter has four sections. First, I briefly outline some of the recent geographical debates concerning the process of scaling, arguing that scale is becoming an increasingly important concept to the geographical study of trade unions. Second, I review literature on industrial relations theory, which traditionally has taken (or in many cases assumed) the national scale of enquiry to be the most appropriate. The boundaries of the industrial relations discipline have never been 'fixed' and as a result it has tended to be an interdisciplinary field, drawing upon theories from other subjects. These differing viewpoints will be outlined in this section. Part three of the chapter considers the internationalisation of labour. Tendencies towards globalisation have fundamentally restructured the economic, political and geographical contexts within which unions must operate (Herod, 1998a). These developments have pressurised some trade unions into dealing with these new geographical realities, and in turn have encouraged research into the activities of unions in the international arena. Similar to my criticism of the epistemology of industrial relations literature, I argue that much research into international trade unionism appears to have assumed that the globalisation (or Europeanisation) of labour is both desirable and inevitable, and that little critical thought has been given to the complex processes of scaling.

Part four of the chapter turns to trade unions as local actors in regional labour market structures. Herod (1998c) argued that of the little writing within geography that has engaged with trade union activity, the vast preponderance has viewed unionism at the local and regional scales (see for example Hudson and Sadler, 1986). Geographical literature that examines the restructuring of national union structures (see for example Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1993, 1996) has generally incorporated some form of regional

analysis. This section of the chapter argues that the analysis of union strategies at the local, community or workplace scales provides useful insight into why there is an inherent spatiality to trade union activity, and how this spatiality translates over different places. As Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) argued, there is a key role for local traditions and expectations in explaining divergent regional patterns of trade union membership: 'the attitude, expectations and behaviour of employees and employers in other industries in the region are influenced by the historical and contemporary proximity of ... locally dominant industries and their workforces' (p 119). The chapter concludes by arguing that geographical scales are fluid, and are represented at global, national and regional levels, and that cultural, political, economic and sociospatial activity should be seen as constructed processes, viewed in context-specific settings (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999).

Place, scale and the spatiality of industrial relations

Scale has never been more important to human geography. The recent revival of regional geography, the continued salience of the nation-state and the increasing internationalisation of the world economy have ensured that scale remains at the forefront of the constant epistemological self-questioning of the geographical discipline.

The landscape of Western capitalism between 1945 and the early 1970s was dominated by Fordism (see Amin, 1994). Whilst trade was becoming increasingly internationalised, this so-called 'golden age' (Dunford, 1994) viewed the national state as the pivot to its ongoing development (see Swyngedouw, 1997 and Lipietz, 1993). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the Keynesian macroeconomic policies that were employed to

redistribute wealth were based at the national scale. However, as MacLeod (1999) argued, this Fordist 'institutional fix' ran out of regulatory steam. By the early 1970s, global, national and regional economies in the Western hemisphere were all suffering major crises. Widespread deindustrialisation, fiscal crises of various states and growing unemployment were causing major structural problems to the world economy. Tickell and Peck (1992) argued that the virtuous cycle of Fordism and its nationally-based compromise between capital, labour and the state had turned sour. Swyngedouw (1997) proposed that this institutional meltdown posed many questions regarding how geographical scales should be constituted, in terms of the regulation of production, money, consumption and welfare. The traditional national Fordist spatial and 'scalar fix' (Harvey, 1989) was facing searching questions of legitimacy.

During the 1990s, the question of scale returned to the fore within the geographical discipline. In addition to much academic endeavour being devoted to the so-called globalising postnational era, regional or locality research also gained in popularity. As MacLeod (1999) argued, there no longer appears to be a relatively privileged level in and through which scales are managed (see also Jessop, 1998, Peck and Jessop 1998). Collinge (1996) termed these developments the 'relativisation of scale'. Goodwin and Painter (1996) proposed that debate should turn to how the modern state is being reconfigured at local, regional, national and supra-national levels.

So far this section has identified three broad scales of geographical activity – the regional, national and international. I believe that these are not mutually exclusive, and scale as an abstract concept should not be seen as a normatively-defined starting point. Instead, it is far better employed as a fluid tool for analysing social change, whether this is at the

regional, national or international scale. The boundaries of these three scales should be blurred and viewed as fluid and non-fixed. Swyngedouw (1997) and Sayer (1991) both argued that spatial scales are constantly being redefined, contested and restructured. If this is so, as MacLeod and Goodwin (1999) proposed, scale can not be the starting point for socio-spatial theory. Instead, the problem is to theorise and understand processes that operate at a variety of spatial scales, rather than taking for granted the spatial context of each particular enquiry (see also Taylor, 1981, 1982). Consequently, MacLeod and Goodwin (1999) proposed that multi-scaled analysis is becoming increasingly relevant in the post-Fordist era, due to the increased meaning attached to space and place. Amin and Thrift (1994) argued that 'living in the global' was increasing the importance of the region. Put more simply, geographical analysis must pay close attention to the new global order and the new geographies of governance that this entails. This is not to say, however, that the national scale is losing its importance. Jessop (1997) proposed that the influence of the state is still important. He argued that state power is constantly moving upwards, downwards and sideways – a phenomenon that in reality presents many opportunities and challenges for both regional, national and international institutions.

So where do trade unions and systems of industrial relations fit into this complex and fluid web of interactions? Scale matters to trade unions, because of their inherently spatial nature. For example, developments in the global steel industry in 2001 were likely to have profound changes on several regions in Britain. Up to 18,000 jobs were under threat in the UK due to stringent new trade proposals being drawn up by the US President, George W Bush. This new danger to European employment came from the United States International Trade Commission (ITC), which was considering whether the US should impose severe import quotas on steel imports. Corus (itself an international company

since the recent amalgamation of British Steel and Hoogovens) warned that plants in Rotherham, Stocksbridge, Teesside, Scunthorpe and Ijmuiden all faced drastic cutbacks in capacity. Cases such as this demonstrate how a multi-scale analysis is required to fully understand these circumstances. For example, at an international scale, the International Metalworkers Federation could become involved, as could the European Trade Union Congress. At national level, the British and Dutch governments could apply pressure to the administration in Washington. The national trade unions in the UK and the Netherlands could work together. Individual divisions or even branches of these trade unions could create pressure groups. Localised trade union activity in Rotherham could work closely with counterparts in Ijmuiden to form a protest movement with common goals, thereby stimulating an international – but yet a highly localised – chain of events. The point to note here is that scale should be considered as an open-ended concept. Scale matters to trade unions, industrial relations, national governments, supra-national institutions – even individual people. It should be viewed as a key component part towards the piecing together of conceptual frameworks that link new complex global scale processes to economic and social change in specific localities (Sadler and Fagan, 2000).

The chapter now turns to providing a critique of the three scales that have been introduced so far. Despite the remainder of the chapter being split into three sections before concluding, I do not propose that the three scales in question can be viewed as exclusive phenomena. As the chapter has argued, they are fully interdependent, and their boundaries are blurred, and it is only for the purposes of analysis that they are presented separately.

Industrial Relations – the 'national' discipline?

Despite the self-evident geographical significance of organised labour, the disciplinary divide between economic geography and the field of industrial relations has often hindered the development of a comprehensive labour geography. The latter has often taken the national state as its presumed point of departure (McGrath-Champ, 1994), and has rarely investigated the capacities of labour to organise over space.

In terms of theory and practice, European trade unionism has traditionally been rooted in the constituent nation states. In recent decades, structures of individual trade unions throughout the European Community have been shaped along branch and / or occupational groups, organised along regional and / or national lines. Significant variations between the percentage of workers belonging to trade unions exist between member states (Jensen, Madsen and Due, 1995), as well as within them.

The earliest studies of trade unions were conducted by industrial relations theorists. In a similar vein to the geographical discipline, the boundaries of industrial relations are difficult to specify. Kochan (1980, p 1) argued that:

> industrial relations is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses the study of individuals, groups or workers who may or may not organise into a union or an association, the behaviour of an employer and union organisations, the public policy or legal framework governing employment conditions, the economics of employment problems, and even the comparative analysis of industrial relations systems in different countries over different time periods.

Adams (1993) argued that industrial relations is a field of social science inquiry which has taken shape only during the past 60 years or so. He believes labour to be the 'central

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focus of the discipline, and views labour as a movement, labour as a commodity for which there is a market, labour as a workforce to be managed and labour as a working people seeking security, challenge and self-fulfillment' (Adams, 1993, p 1). Industrial relations theory is linked to disciplines such as economics, history, law and sociology. Geography is a notable absentee from this list, which perhaps goes some way to account for the customary lack of a spatial focus within industrial relations.

Due to the broad and blurred boundaries of the discipline, Adams (1993) offered an alternative definition. He claimed that industrial relations theory might be defined as that which industrial relations theorists do. This claim is similar to the oft-used term 'geography is what geographers do'. In some respects, the fluid nature of the discipline has been an advantage in that it has not been constrained by a strictly delineated boundary. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace out the roots and evolution of industrial relations as a disciplinary project, and it is to this topic that the chapter now turns.

Marx and the Webbs – the beginnings of a discipline

Social attitudes to the role of work within society have never been constant over space or time. Ancient Greeks viewed work as a form of drudgery for the lower classes, whilst early Catholicism depicted work as being vital to a healthy soul. Lutheranism and Calvinism developed this theme, arguing that work was necessary for a fulfilled and rewarding life. Kochan (1980) proposed that the Protestant work ethic – and the Calvinist emphasis on discipline – laid the moral foundations for the discipline and class division of labour that was required for the authoritarian structure of industrialisation. Many commentators

argued during the 1800s that the market economy would serve the best interest of the largest number of workers and society as a whole.

During the late nineteenth century, the work of Karl Marx and Sydney and Beatrice Webb sowed the seeds of the industrial relations discipline. Marx was highly critical of the classical labour theory briefly outlined in the previous paragraph. He resented the notion that the working class should suffer the consequences of the uneven market economy, arguing that the injustices of manipulation by the capitalist classes would eventually lead to the revolutionary overthrow of the system. The problem of what he termed 'class consciousness' would eventually empower workers to struggle for a solution to their problems – in the form of a Marxian economic and political system (Kochan, 1980). Marx supported early trade unions in their repeated claim for higher wages and improved conditions, but was adamant that revolution was the only long-term option. Similarly, Lenin argued that any form of dialogue with the capitalist ruling classes would simply reinforce the status quo, rather than challenging it.

Marxism provided the first challenge to these accepted labour theories, and such assertions have been summarised by Kochan (1980). First, workers should not be required to live with the consequences of a market economy. Second, class difference and the associated conflict of interest was endemic to capitalist society. Third, negotiations with employers could (at best) only provide temporary benefits to workers. Fourth, trade unions were viewed as collective organisations with the goal of improving working conditions within capitalism, before being used as an instrument for the overthrow of that system. Therefore, Marxism provided a conflicting set of normative assumptions to

those (similarly normative ideals) espoused by Malthus, Ricardo and Marshall (see for example Marshall, 1919).

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, two British economists – Sydney and Beatrice Webb – joined Marx in challenging the embryonic discipline of labour studies. Their book, *The History of Trade Unionism*, was published in 1894. Although the Webbs subscribed to a completely different school of political thought and action to Marx, they found some common ground in agreeing that conditions for the working classes were unacceptable and that increased bargaining power of the individual was desirable. The Webbs proposed that through constant pressure and gradual progression (as opposed to revolution), social change could occur. Trade unions were thus viewed as institutions of social change, through schemes of mutual insurance, collective bargaining and legal endorsement. The fundamental difference between the two schools of thought are that the Webbs argued that trade unions should operate *within* the boundaries of capitalist activity, whilst Marx dismissed the capitalist paradigm out of hand. Indeed, the Webbs proposed that trade unions initiate social improvement and working conditions for their members, and argued that trade unions needed a capitalist system to survive (Webb and Webb, 1894, p 559).

Chapter one argued that British trade unions have sought to protect their workers within the capitalist mode of production, as proposed by Sydney and Beatrice Webb. Their work, according to Kochan (1980), aided the development of industrial relations in three ways. First, their (admittedly normative) structure was used by others as a tool to challenge the arguments of classical economic theorists. The theories of the Webbs appeared to invigorate a movement with the express aim of improving the often-appalling working

conditions of the British working class. Second, they were the first to develop a theory of how trade unionism should operate. They proposed that through collective bargaining, common ground could be reached between employers and employees. Third, they strongly believed in the importance of first-hand, empirical research. They proposed that research should be based on real-world events and historical analysis, rather than on deductive theories or laws of economics.

The legacy of the Webb contributions to industrial relations can not be underestimated. The skeleton of industrial relations summarised above provided the theoretical framework from which the discipline as we know it today evolved. Indeed recently Barbash (1993) and Palmer (1983) argued that industrial relations remained a practical discipline that had stayed in touch with the real world, largely due to the shunning of 'hard' theory and following an original remit of seeking to understand, describe and solve labour problems. However, as a result of the insistence upon focusing upon legislation concerning workers rights (largely due to the Webbs), Adams (1993) argued that industrial relations had failed to question why its scale of enquiry had remained nationally-based.

The development of contemporary industrial relations theory

From the early 1900s to around 1950, industrial relations theory tended to place an emphasis on an institutional and factual approach. Because of the lack of engagement with theoretical literatures, authors tended to concentrate their efforts on descriptive approaches. Authors used the remit of describing real world events as an excuse to describe the situation as they saw it (see Jackson, 1977 and Palmer, 1983). The discipline assumed a middle-ground stance, continuing to reject Marxism on the one hand

and economic determinism on the other. Instead, industrial relations moved towards the institutional school of economics, emphasising negotiations and compromise. As a result, Jackson (1977, p 11) argued, 'guide books' to current systems of industrial relations were produced, rather than seeking common ground in terms of theories and explanations. The Oxford group of institutionalists had far-reaching effects on British industrial relations. This group tended to be obsessed with detail and fact, rather than analysis, and paid little attention to sub-national concerns, as well as dominating the Donovan Commission[2]. In the United States, the economist Dunlop (1958, p vi) argued that industrial relations research lacked both 'intellectual rigour and discipline' and dismissed it as 'fact gathering'. Dunlop (1958) challenged the paradigm of industrial relations, arguing that it should remain an independent discipline and allow systems to be tested and research results accumulated. He recognised the need for more psychology and sociology of worker behaviour, combined with the traditional legal, economic and historical context, which in turn continued to promote the national nature of the discipline.

During the post-1945 period of Fordist prosperity, industrial relations as a discipline gradually evolved. During the late 1950s, employer – employee relationships in the Western world were relatively calm, due to the seemingly ever-increasing levels of production. As a result, industrial relations scholars appeared to lose interest in collective bargaining and instead turned to indices of employee performance and job satisfaction. The Keynesian welfare state and the Fordist compromise ensured that the national scale remained at the forefront of research.

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[2] This Royal Commission was charged with producing a report on British trade unions and employers associations. It was published in 1965 and is outlined in more detail in chapter four.

By about 1970, the field of industrial relations remained under the heavy influence of behavioural scientists and neo-classical economists, two distinct groups that did not further the integration of a fluid subject. However, the publication of *A Sociology of Work* (Fox, 1971) hinted that a more cohesive discipline was possible. Fox argued that individuals and firms are shaped by societal values, their cultural heritage and past experiences. Fox based this premise on a belief that labour – as well as capital – brings its own needs and goals to the workplace and in turn recognise that the owners of capital also have values, heritage and past experiences. This belief that a two-way system exists is similar to the aims of this thesis – that labour, as well as capital, plays a large role in the shaping and constant modification of space and place.

By about 1990, industrial relations theorists had begun to recognise that much could be gained from recognising that industrial relations could remain a fluid discipline. Katz and Kochan (1992) argued that industrial relations should never forget that labour has been – and always will be – more than a simple commodity. Both Marx and Fox agreed that the worker is a vital part to the production process and society as a whole. Whether acting individually or collectively, workers have needs, goals and expectations that have been moulded by past events and experiences.

Marx, the Webbs and Kochan believed that there is a conflict of interest between capital and labour. Within a capitalist mode of production, capital and labour need each other in order to survive. Fox (1971) recognised that details of these conflicts can not be generalised. For example, not all workers are in conflict with their employers. Similarly, some workers may see conflict but are not sufficiently motivated to react. Additionally, other workers may use strategies to overcome conflict, such as individual bargaining,

leaving their place of work, engaging in collective action or the utilisation of a legal framework. Conflict varies over time and space, and occurs at varied scales.

Do national systems of industrial relations exist?

Does it make sense to talk about national systems of industrial relations? Has this scale ever been a suitable departure point? Due to the importance of national legal systems and methods of collective bargaining and the lack of any theoretical impetus to question the future direction of the discipline, it is plain to see how industrial relations has often assumed the national scale to be its theoretical departure point, even though there has been some work which has had much to say about the workplace level, such as Beynon (1984).

It was not until the mid 1990s that further questioning within the industrial relations discipline took place. Locke, Kochan and Piore's 1995 edited volume (which was comprised entirely of separate contributions on national systems of industrial relations) concluded with a thought-provoking question:

> Given the tensions, contradictions and variations within, and not simply across the different nation-states covered in this volume, does it still make sense to speak about national industrial relations systems, or should we think about national employment arrangements as composites of different sub-national patterns? ... Does it still make sense to speak of a distinctive Italian or American industrial relations system if there is wider variation within each of these countries in terms of employment relations than there is between the practices characteristic of each country?
> Locke and Kochan, 1995, p 380-381

Each chapter in the book argued that the sub-national or regional patterns were worthy of future study, and how these complex mosaics of local labour market structures should not

be dismissed as exceptions or outliers to dominant national models (Locke and Kochan, 1995). The authors concluded that it remained for industrial relations theorists to adapt their common analytical framework used to fashion national studies into one that could examine and account for sub-national differences.

It therefore appears as if certain influential industrial relations theorists have finally recognised that scale does indeed have an important role to play. Locke and Kochan (1995) argued that fieldwork into regional systems of industrial relations is of vital importance for both the furtherance of the industrial relations discipline and also to engage with practical policy debate. Their argument is one of viewing scale as a pluralistic concept. For example, they propose that fieldwork into regional industrial relations is best carried out by those who have an intimate knowledge of their local cultures – but those who also have working knowledge of comparable developments or equivalent practices and institutions found in other parts of the world. This multi-scaled approach would, in the eyes of Locke and Kochan (1995) permit industrial relations research to move away from the desire to conceptualise and compare national systems to one that would question why common patterns and variations are evident both within and across nations.

This section has demonstrated that industrial relations theory has been a constantly-evolving discipline. From its beginnings as a largely descriptive subject, it has recently recognised that scale should not be viewed as a pre-determined concept, and that national frameworks of analysis – at least in isolation – are methodologically lacking. Before turning to an examination of sub-national union activity, the chapter now moves to consider the supposed internationalisation of trade union activity.

A new international order for organised labour?

Processes of globalization are radically reforming the world in which we live. Yet, the more that is written on the topic, the less clear we seem to be about what it represents and what it entails. Amin (1997) classified the opposing interpretations into three groups. First, globalisation is the triumph of capitalism on a world scale over national autonomy and identity; either to be resisted through trans-national anti-capitalist or social-democratic forces, or not to be stopped if you side with neo-liberalism. Second, and less radically, globalisation is nothing more than the strengthening of exchange between distinct national social formations which are still governable through the inter-state system. Third, and somewhere in the middle of the two former theories, globalisation signifies the blurring of traditional territorial and social boundaries through the mixing of local and distant cultures, therefore requiring multi-scaled and hybrid solutions.

I side with the third of these interpretations. As stated in the introduction, the viewing of scales with the local and the global at separate ends of a stick – with the national floating around the middle – misses out on the overlapping and mutually influential nature of contemporary social processes. Globalisation does not represent the extinction of the national or local – instead it poses new challenges to many institutions. Globalisation is rapidly changing the rules of the capitalist game in a variety of different ways and in a variety of different places. Throughout the neo-liberal Western world globalisation is gathering speed, posing fundamental questions to new and existing forms of governance, and reterritorialising geographical identities, places and spaces (Herod, Tuathail and Roberts, 1998). For institutions of organised labour, the internationalisation of the world

economy and the increased mobility of labour is posing fundamental questions to the current predicament and future direction of the organised labour movement.

Trade unions operating in an international arena is not a new concept. Examples of trans-national trade union activity can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century (see Southall, 1988), and the forty years of the cold war witnessed the initiation of different blocs of international trade union activity (see Radosh, 1969; Windmuller, 1980 and Herod, 1997). More recently, Herod (1998a) argued that globalisation has already fundamentally restructured the economic, political and geographic contexts within which unions must operate. Current communications technologies and modern transportation methods have spectacularly reduced relative distances between places. As a result, some old regional and national market boundaries no longer hold the significance that they once did. Globalisation and the increased internationalisation of trade is a permanent feature of the lives of workers, whether employed as a steel worker in south Wales or a Nike employee in south east Asia. As a result, some unions have begun to consider some of the geographical realities that the new world order has introduced. These realities can be seen as either opportunities or threats.

This section of the chapter is divided into two sections. First, I explore literatures that suggest ways in which trade unions may become international pressure groups in an attempt to ameliorate the conditions of workers affliction under transnational capitalism. Second, I review literatures concerning how the Europeanisation of trade union activity remains in an embryonic state, despite the claims of many commentators. I conclude this section by arguing that whilst trade unions most certainly do have an international platform on which to build, such moves remain in their infancy.

The 'glocal' worker?

Herod (1998a) argued that the end of the cold war heralded a new era for trade unionism and the nature of labour governance throughout the globe. During the cold war, international trade union federations tended to busy themselves with the intense political rivalries of the East-West divide. However, since 1989, the geography and ideology of international trade unionism has become much more fluid and heterogeneous. Transnational corporations are taking advantage of immense differences in wages, working conditions and labour laws, especially between less economically developed countries and the capitalist Europe and North America. The activities of transnational companies appear to be reinforcing the highly uneven nature of economic development over a wider proportion of the globe. Herod (1998a) argued that both the activities of transnational companies and the subsequent activities of trade unions is leading to a glocalisation of many regions. As global capitalism becomes increasingly dominant, trade unions are having to adopt new strategies as their historical spatial rigidities are being broken down. Herod (1998a) proposed that trade unions must become more flexible, more quick-acting, as the speed of communication and capital accumulation accelerates. He claims that the internet is a particularly suitable method of aiding unions in their organising strategies. News and information can pass from one locality to another in seconds, leaving more traditional forms of media behind. It therefore provides a whole new range of possibilities to trade union activity. Traditional methods of union organising and recruitment such as the printing of newsletters and the leafleting of workers at factory gates need a high degree of organisation. Flexible working hours, part time working and anti-union campaigns practised by management make such methods of union communication difficult. On the other hand, workers at newer, hi-tech industries that rely

on the internet and e-mail may find electronic means of communication suits their needs. In addition, electronic communication may aid campaigns through the linking together of regions or plant-level trade unions throughout different nation-states on different continents.

Trade unions may find it beneficial to embrace the very types of technology that has made the capitalist classes even more authoritative. Using the technology described, unions in two regions could mobilise support over vast distances, for example. ISTC members belonging to the crane-drivers branch at Lackenby, Teesside could perhaps discover that their compatriots in Ijmuiden, Holland had similar problems with their respective management committees. Similarly, successful new working practices could be passed on between the two branches. Put more simply, scale in this instance has become virtual as well as physical.

However, discussion of such phenomena remains somewhat optimistic. Within the steel industry for instance, little communication exists between branches within the same division, let alone between two regions of Britain. Little dialogue (if any) exists between workers in the UK and those in continental Europe or the United States, for example. Employees of Nike in China and Cambodia are unable to afford the means with which to communicate to mobilise popular support. It is evident that modern-day political, economic and technological changes have fundamental implications and pose enormous challenges to trade unions. Whilst I do not doubt the desirability and the benefits that would result from the further empowerment of exploited labour forces, I believe that to discuss the 'virtual' trade union in the ways that have been briefly outlined here is allowing prescription to run ahead of what is actually happening on the ground (see also Castree, 2000). There

are still considerable barriers in the path of a 'virtual' trade union organisation strategy, when research into local courses of action is still largely in its formative years.

Trade unions in the 'new' Europe

This section seeks to review and analyse literatures that have proposed a Europeanisation of trade union activity. In recent years, there has been an abundance of industrial relations literature that has attempted to forecast the changes to national systems of industrial relations that will take place within the single market of the European Union. During the early 1990s, the height of optimism over the European Union – at least seen from a neo-liberal perspective – many commentators argued that the birth of a single European market would lead to a breakdown of national corporatist systems of industrial relations, and their replacement by a looser form of transnational pluralism (Streeck and Schmitter, 1991). Throughout the 1990s, the question of whether there really had been a collapse of nationally-based bargaining systems remained largely unanswered. Ferner and Hyman (1992) argued that European economies were converging, through ongoing structural transformation (for example the transition from manufacturing towards services). Every country in the European Union was witnessing declining employment in heavy industry and agriculture. At the same time, it was argued that the individual European economies were being increasingly integrated into a new global economy dominated by large multinational companies. Phenomena such as these led to other questions, such as whether European transnational collective bargaining was possible – or even necessary (Lecher and Platszner, 1998). Industrial relations commentators often argued that the

quest for flexibility and the decentralisation of industrial relations would increase the importance of transnational collective bargaining.

The increased internationalisation of capital and labour has posed questions to European trade unions. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, British trade unions (viewed as national institutions) tended to consider increased European integration with considerable suspicion (Teague, 1989). However, the British Trades Union Council (TUC) was forced to abandon this traditionally hostile stance during the mid-1980s, largely because increasing European integration was increasingly seen as a route to promote progressive social legislation (which was not possible at the national level). Since this watershed date, TUC policy regarding the so-called 'European question' has become more positive, more and more encouraging towards furthering British integration into the European community, and more latterly, the single currency. Particular EU initiatives such as the social charter and the Maastricht social chapter have proved appealing to British trade unions (see Rosamond, 1993 and Strange, 1995). The TUC has tended to view the platform of increased European integration as an increased opportunity to influence future EU law, as well as providing important new institutional mechanisms such as European Works Councils (EWCs) and transnational 'social partner' framework agreements. In 1996, the TUC's annual conference overwhelmingly passed a motion in support of Britain joining the EMU, thereby becoming the first major corporate body in the UK to declare itself in favour of the single currency (Strange, 1997).

As trade unions throughout Europe embarked on supporting European directives, normative accounts that stressed the importance of transnational collective bargaining proliferated, assuming that the Europeanisation of industrial relations would follow on from

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the strengthening of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and European

Works Councils. Visser (1996) claimed that unions throughout Europe had evolved from

local into national organisations, and now concern themselves with national – rather than

local – forms of collective bargaining. Their future path, he claimed, must be to 'take the

step of creating international organisations and co-ordinate their activities across the

borders of national labour markets (Visser, 1996, p 36-7). Whilst this account (and many

others) stressed the desirability of European-wide industrial relations, large hurdles would

first have to be overcome, as trade unions throughout Europe often held little common

ground:

> *Diversity, lack of general co-operation, and the absence of adequate*
> *supranational structures appear as the main drawbacks of the*
> *European trade union movement; and unless there are drastic*
> *changes these features will determine the outlook for future*
> *European labour relations.*
> Blanpain, 1972, p 301

Visser and Ebbinghaus (1992) claimed that there is little doubt that since the account of

Blanpain (1972), profound changes in the political, economic, social and cultural

environments have taken place, in both European society and within trade unions.

Nevertheless, they argued that the cross-national diversity described by Sturmthal (1953),

Blanpain (1972) and Kendall (1975) still existed. Although many individual unions had

merged or simply disappeared, the structure of trade unions and their nationally-diverse

management structures had hardly changed (Visser and Ebbinghaus, 1992).

The diversity of the varied national systems of labour organisation is reflected in the

ETUC. This institution was originally founded in 1973 in western Europe, and has evolved

into an international body representing almost all EU labour organisations (and certain

others), including those of Communist and Christian Democratic persuasions. Only the French CGT remains outside the ETUC, largely because of its continued opposition to the entire Maastricht project. The central aims of the ETUC have been to concentrate on social dialogue and to further the influence of European Works Councils, through a focus on the institutions of the EU and through dialogue with the major European employer organisations. It has traditionally steered away from the diverse ideological struggles within European labour, nor has it become involved in European-wide collective bargaining (Moody, 1997).

Several key policy aims perhaps sit uneasily within the framework of the ETUC. One of the aims of the ETUC is to introduce market regulation across national boundaries on the one hand, while maintaining a 'social partnership' between capital and labour on the other (Moody, 1997). The ETUC is funded by the European Commission, the very structure that is attempting to introduce regimes of deregulation, privatisation and decentralisation. Rath (1994) argued that these often contradictory positions have led to the secretariat of the ETUC spending the bulk of its time attempting to get its national colleagues to agree to common positions and viewpoints, largely due to its consensual organisation. Hence whilst the European Commission has been at great pains to distance itself from a federal, all-encompassing body through the promotion of subsidiarity, the ETUC has faced a struggle of providing a centralised framework to a diverse set of national (and indeed local) trade union structures.

A second problem that the ETUC faces is the high 'national content' (Visser and Ebbinghaus, 1992) of the European labour market. Reasons for this are simple: there are high levels of linguistic and cultural diversity, and there are close ties between labour

markets and national social security arrangements (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kolberg and

Esping-Andersen, 1992). As trade unions developed from local to national organisations,

they nurtured links with national political parties in order to integrate the working classes

(Visser, 1996). Developments towards the formation of a European union – state alliance

have not been witnessed, largely due to the reluctance of nation-states within the

European Union to press for a European 'state' with a democratic process of its own.

Whilst there has been agreement that the influence of the ETUC and other pan-European

labour movements has (to date) been relatively weak, many commentators have stressed

the desirability of the furthering of pan-European collective bargaining. Moody (1997)

argued that:

> *Without dismissing the entire official structure of international*
> *organised labour, it is clear that another level of international activity*
> *is needed that involves the ranks and the workplace activists from*
> *the start.*
>
> Moody, 1997, p 248

Similarly, Buda (1988) espoused the virtues of trade unions as intermediary organisations

at the European scale, but conceded that this vision would remain pure figment of

imagination for the foreseeable future. Turner (1996) has argued that the status quo of

European trade union activity is unlikely to change unless whole new structures of

representation are proposed, built on networks of contacts rather than popular mass

support. Nevertheless, these normative statements seem optimistic if one considers the

organisational and cultural aspects of European union movements:

> *The impression of diversity is reinforced when we consider two*
> *further aspects: whether union movements are united or divided in*
> *ideological and political terms, and whether they are internally*
> *concentrated or fragmented in industrial, occupational or political*
> *terms. The German union movement is united and concentrated;*

British unions combine in one peak federation, but within and between unions, members' interests are fragmented according to occupational and industrial labour markets; Italian, French and Spanish unions are ideologically divided, but in Italy members in the private sector are concentrated in a few comprehensive sectoral unions.

Visser and Ebbinghaus, 1992, p 210

In conclusion to this section, I argue that the accounts outlined here that have actively called for the promotion of a Europeanisation of industrial relations have failed to take seriously both the national or sub-national scales. Certainly, structures have been developed with the purpose of fostering international trade union solidarity, although their effectiveness remains unproven. These accounts have tended to promote, support and assume the Europeanisation of industrial relations. I argue that the accounts summarised here (at the very least) represent cases where prescription has run ahead of analysis. Whilst there can be no doubt that the international scale poses challenges to trade unions, to immediately assume that mechanisms already exist for successful trans-national integration of national and local institutions is premature.

Localising labour

Taking the region as a theoretical departure point for trade union analysis has many benefits. Recent accounts have frequently followed the conceptual thread that it is at the regional level that trust between management and employees can most readily be established, with both parties striving for local economic and social success. For example Locke (1990) provided a detailed case study of the industrial district of Biella, in Piedmont, Italy, where unions and local business leaders united together in a 'pact for development',

co-operating in the renewal of the region's industrial capacity. Locke based his argument on the significance of horizontal trade union structures, able to respond to specific local and regional characteristics. Kern and Sabel (1992), in their study of sub-contracting and out-sourcing arrangements in the West German automobile industry, argued that labour might benefit from a realignment with local level organisation. This reorganisation should involve co-operation with local firms and employers organisations, through which unions should encourage the growth of companies 'crucial to the integrity of the regional economy ... [in] a kind of forward defence against the decentralisation of production and development to suppliers outside the region' (p 239). Sadler (2000) summarised these accounts by suggesting that they saw trade union futures 'as partners in a regional growth coalition; not so much a form of company unionism, as a kind of regionalised supply chain / production complex unionism' (p 142).

Herod (1998a) claimed that the majority of research done by geographers on trade unions had been conducted at the local scale. These academic endeavours began some twenty years ago, approximately the same time that the revitalisation of regional geography took place. Interest in social relations and social change came to the fore within geography, although the question of how locality actually is significant in social, cultural, economic and political terms remains to be fully answered.

This thesis recognises that there is a spatiality to organised labour, and argues that labour has a strong capacity to act in and of its own initiative. Production has always displayed many and varied spatial forms, as have trade unions. As the previous chapter demonstrated, there is now a view within geography that understanding regional performance involves – at least in part – acknowledgement of region's *social atmosphere*,

built around a series of inherited traditions and practices which have created both tangible and intangible institutional characteristics. Part of this understanding – and again only part – comes from gaining an understanding of the localised linkages between culture and labour.

Labour and culture

The examination of organised labour at a local level is a vital component in understanding the cultural, political, economic and social landscape. As Gertler (1997) argued, the role of culture in locality debates has rarely been adequately specified. The self-styled 'new economic geography' – one that understands culture in terms of meanings and practices (Gregson, Simonsen and Vaiou, 1999) – is not incompatible with the Marxist class-based analysis that this thesis proposes. As Fraser argued:

> *... even the most material economic institutions have a constitutive, irreducible cultural dimension,* [and] *even the most discursive cultural practices have a constitutive, irreducible political-economic dimension.*
>
> Fraser, 1995, p 72

Crucially, I argue, there are links between culture and labour. This section seeks not to prioritise the overarching importance of culture, economy or labour, but to demonstrate that analysis into regional industrial culture requires deep insight into how labour strategies are historically bound in place and have given rise to particular scales of action. The prioritising of a regional approach may further understanding on what it is that constitutes or creates distinctive regional industrial cultures (Sadler and Thompson, 2001).

The cultural attributes of a region are contrived from a wide variety of sources. As chapter two demonstrated, firms, civic groups or other institutions all interact together over time and space and contribute to the uneven geography of capitalism. The point that I wish to reinforce here is that trade unions (in addition to other institutions), their members, the particular characteristics of both the national and local labour market, the makeup of the workforce, labour laws and working conditions all contribute strongly to the geographical formation of regional cultures:

> *Social life is fundamentally spatial. Social actors, whether individuals, governments, corporations, environmental groups, or indeed, labour unions, must operate within economic, political and cultural landscapes that may either constrain or enable their actions.*
> Herod, 1997, p 1

Whilst the ability of unions to affect change within national and regional boundaries is shaped by the uneven geography of capitalism, capital itself is constantly shaped by the needs, expectations and traditions of organised labour. Put another way, as Herod (1997) has claimed, being a trade unionist in either Santiago or Soweto – or in this case Teesside or Port Talbot – makes a difference to how they constitute themselves as social, political and geographical actors. Similarly, understanding the regional culture of places may also require an analysis of their historical and geographical links to other locations. Therefore, an examination of place and locality in order to comprehend how workers have shaped and been shaped by regional culture requires a class-based, spatially-informed analysis (see for example Hudson and Sadler, 1983, 1986; Castells, 1983; Herod, 1991; Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1994). Whilst the accounts introduced in the previous chapter generally failed to incorporate labour, I argue that a historico-cultural appreciation of the geographical realities that workers face in varied localities will go some way to addressing the tangible and intangible links that exist between culture and labour. Herod (1997) has

argued that such analyses help to explain (rather than explain away) how local class relations are spatially constituted and worked out.

Martin, Sunley and Wills (1994) argued that there are three (interconnected) reasons why the study of industrial relations should incorporate a regional perspective. First, trade unions, employers associations and the like are themselves geographically constituted. A variety of different scales operate, for example the micro level (the branch), the macro level (nationally-based negotiations), but also the middle-level (regional and sub-regional level). Second, labour relations are spatially embedded in terms of their reproduction within locally varying economic, social and cultural contexts. Geography matters to capital – labour relations in terms of economic structures, and inherited and constantly modified cultural settings (also see Massey, 1984). Local embeddedness, path dependence, adaptation and adaptability and institutional blockage are all major factors in accounting for varied forms of industrial relations and union traditions. The basic point to note, as Martin, Sunley and Wills (1994) argue, is that 'local context matters and that this context has a geography' (p 459). Third, and finally, such local contexts fashion the constant modification of 'strategic spaces' for action by workers, in terms of the cultural, social, institutional and economic resources on which unions and employers draw in shaping their specific strategies. These undeniable links between different phenomena aid an understanding of localised capital – labour relations, and how capital and labour make use of their local resources and contexts. It is precisely for these reasons that the international accounts outlined above fall short. Local dynamics were often written off as passive forces, instead of being considered in terms of active economic, social, cultural and political resources that constantly reproduce and transform local institutional contexts. Martin, Sunley and Wills (1994) have additionally argued that the study of cultural

difference over space and time is of paramount importance when considering British industrial relations because of the decentralised fashion through which trade unions have evolved, when compared to their European counterparts (see also Crouch, 1993). Decentralised bargaining and strong local traditions have characterised the British trade union movement since its birth and, in the opinion of Martin, Sunley and Wills (1994) have 'consistently frustrated the development of strong vertical articulation within union structures' (p 462). Whilst they do not normatively assume that 'going local' is a pertinent route for trade unions to follow, they do argue that a localised approach to trade union research is required to unearth the importance of place and local context.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to review relevant literatures on three levels of geographical scaling, and to provide a framework for the adoption of a regional approach to the empirical chapters that follow. I have criticised certain schools of thought for considering scale in a normative manner. However, the dividing of scale into three categories may also be open to criticism. The regional scale may also be split into the local – and indeed the micro. The subsequent empirical chapters will demonstrate that even within individual steel plants, varied micro-level scales of activity exist that question the validity of making statements about the regional characteristics of the north east of England or south Wales. Similarly, the ISTC has recently begun to forge closer working links with trade unions in the Netherlands, following the merger between British Steel and Hoogovens. Contacts also exist between the national headquarters of the ISTC with the International

Metalworkers Federation in Geneva, even though at a local level, these networks of mutual aid have little significance.

These practical examples demonstrate that whilst this thesis proposes an examination of the local, other scales can not be discounted. The very process of geographical scaling in turn highlights a complex web of new challenges. Yet, there have been very few concrete signs of national trade unions within Europe committing themselves to European-scale issues. The national scale is important, and it is understandable why industrial relations accounts developed in the manner they have. Yet, the national scale is no more important than the local. Instead, I maintain that the key towards providing some rational insight to both academic and practical policy debate is to examine how class relations are structurally constituted with respect to place at the local, community or workplace scale. Industrial relations theorists have recently warned against ignoring sub-national differences, whilst others have argued that moves towards international forms of trade union activity remain very much in their formative years. Labour evidently plays an important role in the ongoing creation and constant modification of regional industrial culture and an examination of this interaction must form part of contemporary geographical enquiry.

Chapter Four: A Geographical History of the British Trade Union Movement

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to add substance to the argument that trade unions are fundamentally spatial institutions. This will be achieved by illustrating their marked regional variation within the national boundaries of the UK, in terms of their contribution to producing and transforming workplace cultures and labourist traditions over time and space. The chapter does not seek however to provide a comprehensive history of British trade unionism – that has been covered elsewhere (see for example Pelling, 1992, and Coates and Topham, 1980).

The first section of this chapter is devoted to offering a brief *geographical* history of the British trade union movement. Key events of trade union history that have geographical implications are documented, emphasising that the structure and actions of British trade unions have been (and continue to be) inherently local, despite the frequent claim that there is a national nature to these institutions. The second section of the chapter backs up these claims using quantitative evidence in the form of regional union density measurements and absolute regional union membership statistics, arguing that a locally-based system of analysis is fitting to assess the changing pattern of localised trade union activity. Much of the material for this section has been sourced from Laybourn (1991) and Fraser (1999). Part three of the chapter offers two contrasting case studies of the uneven

nature of British trade unionism – coal mining and financial services. This section aims to demonstrate that varied forms of localised trade union activity are indeed prevalent and that a detailed investigation of these provides a useful component part of regional analytical endeavour.

The chapter will conclude by linking together both culture and labour. This will not be achieved by demonstrating the overriding importance of economy *or* culture *or* labour within a given region, but instead by arguing that important links exist *between* culture, labour, capital and other institutions that combine together to form the complex mosaic of uneven regional development. A pluralistic understanding of these linkages will add to the debate introduced in chapter two, arguing that trade unions are a constituent part of a regional institutional fabric, and this institutional fabric shapes – and takes shape from – elements of regional culture, including regional industrial culture.

A geographical history of British trade unionism

The early days of British trade unions – foundation until 1914

According to Saville (1988, p 7), Britain had a unique social formation in the nineteenth century that was highly suited to trade union organisation. The near eradication of the peasantry from rural areas during the eighteenth century created an overwhelming majority of labourers based in towns. This social structure was quite different from other European industrialising countries. The early development of manufacturing production, mostly in the form of household industry, encouraged initial collectivist attitudes and action

amongst manual workers. Whilst these early groups were not classified as trade unions at this time, their structures exhibited common characteristics. Early forms of organised labour originated from journeymen craftsmen, who combined to provide mutual aid to one another, in terms of sickness benefits or financial aid to widows. These so-called journeymen craftsmen generally comprised of artisans (for example engineers, iron founders and carpenters) who organised either on a temporary or permanent basis. As the earliest forms of trade unions originated before the industrial revolution and prior to the advent of large scale factories, their organisation was often highly localised. Artisans operated from small workshops and houses, and would occasionally take on extra labourers, depending upon need. These actions constituted early systems of formalised employer / employee relationships.

During the late eighteenth century, British law tended to be hostile to the activities of organised labour (Laybourn, 1991). Nevertheless, these organisations and guilds prevailed and they formed localised pressure groups to encourage employers to offer improved working conditions, and to develop arbitration procedures to protect and increase earnings. As British trade unions have always operated *within* the capitalist mode of production, they had to develop mechanisms of co-operation with employers in order to gain certain (albeit limited) recognition agreements. As Saville (1988) argued, the organisation of workers was not necessarily permanent, but as industrialisation continued, the potential for collective action also developed. Certain groups of organised labour sought to control who could enter their particular craft specialisms, often to the point where the trade union would decide upon who could be employed. Time served craftsmen set about protecting the quality of their work (and therefore their reputations) by excluding others from their organisations. Put more simply, it was these guilds of workers that

defended their own customs, cultures and practices in order to protect their own interests (Fraser, 1999), in similar fashion to many contemporary trade unions. Leaders of guilds tended to be highly protectionist towards their own groups. Guild leaders were often highly exclusive, wishing to have very formalised and limited communication with similar organisations. The only time that organisations would group together would be during times of industrial conflict, when localised demonstrations would be staged (Fraser, 1999).

Until 1850, trade union membership was generally confined to the few and the skilled (Laybourn, 1991). The geography of this movement has rarely been examined, although sporadic accounts exist. Early accounts of trade unionism, according to Southall (1988), have been problematic. They have either provided generalised descriptions of the trade union movement or of specific unions (and more accurately the Executive Committees of these), and have rarely considered the geography or the organisational strategies of these institutions. Southall (1988) attempted to examine these organisational strategies, and argued that early trade unions faced considerable difficulties in terms of creating regional and national organisational structures, largely because of poor standards of resources, communications technology and internal union infrastructure. Because of these hindrances, trade unions (in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century) depended on regional organisation. In turn, these structures hinged upon local and individual consciousness, which often led to and grew out of micro style industrial disagreements. In the opinion of Southall (1988), localism of both trade unions and political action played a large role in the formation of the national organisational structures of British trade unions that took place in the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century.

Whilst early forms of trade unions tended to be somewhat exclusive clubs, they had by 1850 (in the main) entered a significant stage of development. For example, the Ironmakers, the Amalgamated Engineers and the Boilermakers were all national organisations with a fixed national headquarters, employed several full-time officials, and had developed comprehensive regional and local structures within their new national frameworks. Many of the national unions had evolved by means of amalgamation, seeing this development path as a necessary element to secure growth. Nevertheless, localism within these newly formed national trade unions remained strong, largely due to a lack of a centralising ethos. The Executive Council of unions usually comprised men living locally to the national headquarters, who displayed little interest in other affairs. In effect, unions continued to grow around their centres of activity, reinforcing regional difference within their national organisational structures. Their branch and regional structures were the de facto mechanisms through which worker protection was afforded in an increasingly unregulated market. Throughout Britain, class consciousness was expressed in different ways, through the development of varied working class cultures. Saville (1988) argued that an elementary thread ran through these cultures – an attitude of 'them' (employers) and 'us' (workers) that was often strongly apparent throughout the distinctly varying cultural characteristics of different regions.

The latter decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the further development of the national trade union, largely due to the improvement in Britain's infrastructure. Trains (which aided the transportation of goods and people) and telegraphy made these national organisations easier to sustain. The perceived need for national organisations was also stronger, due to national markets creating national problems (Fraser, 1999). Membership of amalgamated national trade unions grew at a steady pace. For example, by 1880, the

Amalgamated Society of Engineers consisted of approximately 44,000 members, the Amalgamated Carpenters organised 18,000 members, and the Operative Stonemasons oversaw representation of 13,000 associates. These trade unions tended to be organised on a national, trade orientated basis. National trade unions were also encouraged by the newly formed Trades Union Congress (TUC). This organisation was founded in 1868, the first of its kind in the world. According to Coates and Topham (1980), the primary aim of the TUC during its initial years was to ensure that trade union affairs were favourably dealt with in terms of parliamentary legislation. MPs were lobbied throughout 1871 through the TUC parliamentary committee. Following on from these events, trade unions were granted official legal status in 1871, but due to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, strikes and pickets remained difficult. The TUC, during its early years, remained a cautious organisation. The TUC has never supported a radical philosophy, and during its early years its leadership was committed to a cautious, craft-orientated approach that espoused the virtues of securing the benefits of trade unionism within a liberal capitalist society, the fundamental values of which were rarely challenged (Maksymiw et. al. 1990).

The trade union movement continued to grow during the latter stages of the nineteenth century, largely through the organisation of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, representing a break from the past. Representation in the service sector expanded rapidly too. Influential trade unionists such as Tom Mann advocated that trade unions must shrug off their elitist image and appeal to all workers, regardless of class or status. The new upsurge in trade union affiliations both enlarged the TUC and brought with them more uncompromising working class values based on overtly socialist beliefs (Coates and Topham, 1980, p 94). These extensive changes, according to Cronin (1984, p 23) had two major effects on the trade union landscape. First, the development of socially-segregated

space in towns and cities created physical spaces for the development of distinctive working class cultures. Second, and more importantly, these working class cultures both took shape from and shaped themselves in a broad array of social and political institutions, which positively encouraged the diverse nature of regional cultures.

Membership of the TUC grew to 100,000 in 1874, and in 1888 had mushroomed to 750,000. Alongside these large increases in membership, the ethos of the rank-and-file began to change. The newly affiliated TUC unions brought with them a change in attitude, pressing for the adoption of more aggressive socialist policies that embraced a wider sphere of workers. By the turn of the century, according to Laybourn (1991), most trade unions were open-minded to the introduction of new members, arguing that they were necessary to resist employer power. This widening of the TUC sphere proved a success in terms of membership growth, but the count of unofficial strikes increased dramatically. According to Laybourn (1991), the 'tide of "new unionism" could not be turned back' (p 80) due to the overwhelming support institutions of organised labour enjoyed throughout Britain.

In-keeping with the traditions of industrial relations theory, the TUC and its affiliated unions have historically been largely scrutinised and depicted as national institutions. Nevertheless, Laybourn (1991) commented that the Royal Commission on Labour (during the last decade of the 1800s) viewed trade unions as predominately regional institutions. Localised conciliation structures were nurtured and developed as the bargaining strength of trade unions increased (Laybourn 1991). This point illustrates that the national map of organised labour may be depicted by its decentralised and disorganised nature. As trade unions have developed unevenly over time and space, trade unionism and associated

regional industrial cultures also may have developed within a similarly complex mosaic of contrasting labour market structures. As Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996, xi) argued, as trade unions and industrial relations practices have evolved in an inherently uneven fashion, they have affected (and been affected by) different labourist traditions and workplace cultures.

A further key date that led to an upsurge in British trade unionism was 1911, when the National Insurance scheme was introduced, allowing workers increased rights as well as paving the way towards a more purely industrial unionism (Southall, 1988). Unionism was also encouraged by the government of this time. The Department of the Board of Trade was openly critical of employers that did not recognise or negotiate with trade unions. The early twentieth century began to see the increased incidence of regional cultures of trade unionism. This was significant for three reasons, according to Southall (1988). First, the industrial revolution had separated the home and the workplace, allowing workers to mix together as contemporaries rather than neighbours. Second, the long hours of work demanded by the industrial society and third, pre-mechanical forms of work combined together and created a greater propensity towards collective action. The increased bargaining strength of trade unions appeared to produce a hardening of class divisions throughout Britain (Fraser, 1999). This collective organisation, however, remained particularly uneven in nature. Localised unofficial strikes prevailed as an increasing proportion of unskilled workers joined trade unions. The national organisation appeared to be by-passed, in favour of localised agreements, often to the chagrin of national trade union officials. Churchill, from Middlemas (1979), stated that early twentieth century British trade unionism:

*'was not highly enough developed to make its branch secretaries (let
alone its rank and file) fall into line with the head office.'*
Churchill, 1919, from Middlemas, 1979, p 143-4

However, by 1914, the foundations had been laid for the British trade union movement that would survive until the early 1980s. Government sponsored trade boards were labour friendly, and basic minimum wage legislation existed. Trade unions were permitted to organise their own structures, strike and be affiliated to the political party of their choice. Unionism was common in a diverse range of employment, with groups of dockers, engineers, plasterers, miners and ironworkers organising the most successfully. Miners had a propensity to develop their own particular brand of unionism. They tended to live in villages, away from mainstream working class life. Saville (1988, p 16) argued that these characteristics led them to develop varied and diverse forms of work, family and community cultures. Mining solidarity often failed to develop in an automatic or linear fashion, demonstrating varied cultures of union activity. As a result of this, miners often found it difficult to establish viable unions of strength, because their decentralised and disorganised bargaining structures often hindered even county-wide collective spirit.

Industrial unrest and union alliances – 1914 to 1939

The First World War brought with it dramatic industrial unrest previously unseen in Britain. The upturn in production during the war led British trade unions to press for improvements to both working conditions and wages. Because of the chronic shortage of workers, trade union leaders applied pressure on employers to introduce the eight hour day. Negotiations between employers, trade unions and government officials reached an understanding to

suspend trade union agreements so long as they were re-installed immediately after the war. Part of this agreement involved a nation-wide no-strike clause. However, the uneven nature of the British trade union map was highlighted again by pockets of militancy in Clydeside and Sheffield rejecting this ruling. These groups of workers fought for plant-based rights outside of this agreement, largely due to resilient networks of shop stewards that promoted parochial union activity.

During the 1914 – 1918 period, a loose alliance of the three strongest British trade unions was formed. The Miners Federation of Great Britain, the National Union of Railwaymen and the Transport Workers Federation formed the Triple Industrial Alliance. Each of these unions (which resulted through increased amalgamations) worked closely together within the alliance and often threatened to call a general strike, but the coalition was often dogged by the jealous guarding of autonomy by each individual institution (Laybourn, 1991), often based around regional power-bases and differences of opinion. Fraser (1999) similarly argued that the bringing together of English and Scottish unions as a result of mergers and alliances reinforced differences in labour market cultures throughout Britain. For example, organised labour in Scotland tended to demonstrate hostility towards employers because of vibrant socialist ideals, but failed to metamorphose these traditions into deep-seated trade union activity. The formation of the Triple Industrial Alliance exposed Scottish and English workers to varied working practices and trade union ideals, but also highlighted the uneven terrain of the British trade union landscape, suggesting that organised labour does play an important role in the formation and modification of localised regional industrial cultures.

Immediately following 1918, trade unions continued to gain recognition in areas where they had never represented members before. Membership of TUC affiliated unions in 1918 had reached 6.5 million (approximately 36% density based on potential membership). By 1920, membership had grown to 8 million and it had broken for the first time the 50% potential male membership barrier (Fraser, 1999). The bargaining position of trade unions had been greatly strengthened as membership grew. Trade unions and government (whether Labour or Conservative) enjoyed a healthy relationship, with negotiation, conciliation and arbitration accepted by employers, trade unions and government. Wage settlements had reached all-time high levels, with certain trade unions deeming themselves to be at the forefront of the labour movement. For example, in 1921 the Miners Federation of Great Britain had secured miners' wages at approximately three times those of 1918, whilst (unsuccessfully) pressuring the government of the time to nationalise the British mining industry. This sectional self-interest often undermined the status of the Triple Alliance, and demonstrates how the British trade union movement has often allowed inter-union competition and exclusive attitudes to hinder long-term interests of members. The TUC reacted to inter-union conflict by reforming its internal structures during the early 1920s. The parliamentary committee was replaced by the General Council elected from affiliated unions which were divided up into seventeen trade groups (Maksymiw et. al. 1990). The General Council was considered as an overseeing body and a co-ordinating centre to pursue general trade union objectives, as well as a committee that could increase the power of the TUC and reduce inter-union conflict. This system of General Council representation survived until 1981 when its increasingly antiquated structure and practices were deemed unsuitable.

The key defining moment of the inter-war years was the 1926 general strike. Yet again, the de facto decentralised nature of British industrial relations was demonstrated by the miners' leaders, who sought to avoid wage reductions and encouraged a revival of localised wage negotiations. Whilst most trade union officials supported the stance of the miners, the TUC saw the strike as a means to reduce the reduction of wages that had been ongoing since the early 1920s. The strike ended with gains being claimed by both capital and labour, but Laybourn (1991) summarised the event as a key turning point in terms of British society, industrial production and industrial relations.

The economic upturn after 1933 gave most unions the opportunity for renewed growth, although high levels of unemployment left them in a weak position in terms of bargaining power. Even during the Jarrow March of 1936, most trade unions remained apathetic, not wishing to be seen to support what was portrayed as such a contentious issue. In contrast, trade unions appeared more interested in representing workers in growth sectors of the British economy. The TUC began to encourage affiliated unions to turn their attentions to the car industry as a new field to gain union representation. New forms of representation sprang up throughout the country, again reinforcing the complex network of voluntary negotiating bodies that employers and individual trade unions appeared to encourage.

This adoption of new sectors prompted increased inter-union competition. Problems soon came to the fore as unions saw non-represented workplaces as recruitment targets. It quickly became apparent that trade unions were spending much of their time competing with each other rather than providing quality representation, for both existing and new members. The TUC recognised the crisis and urged affiliated unions to sign the 1939

Bridlington Agreement. This accord banned inter-union disputes concerning the recruitment of members. Both local and national officials of trade unions were to refrain from speaking or acting adversely to the interests of any other trade union (TUC, 1939). Second, the TUC gained the necessary power to intervene in the case of inter-union disputes. Laybourn (1991) suggested that this agreement has traditionally been viewed as one of the major symbols of TUC authority and has occasionally been employed to expel offending unions from the confederation.

Post-1945 Britain and industrial relations

During the latter years of the Second World War, the government and the TUC began to plan for a post-1945 Britain. The TUC argued that publicly-owned enterprises and the abolition of unemployment must be governmental priorities. Immediately following 1945, the TUC (backed by the majority of affiliated trade unions) refused to allow wage cuts in order to achieve full employment.

1945 also witnessed the birth of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). This organisation was formed out of the Miners Federation of Great Britain and other localised bodies. The NUM officially followed a highly centralised structure, but noteworthy regional peculiarities remained and the central committee of the union suffered the intransigence of various regions. For example, the Nottinghamshire region of the NUM was significant because of its continuing stand against the nationalisation of the British coal industry. Fraser (1999) attributed this to the NUM's regional divisions being drawn along existing county boundaries, rather than after consultation with the workforce and union leadership.

The Fordist or Taylorist paradigm of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s was based on the principle of intensifying work. British trade unions appeared somewhat uninterested in altering the status quo. Whilst unions acted as a shield against managerial power, they also attempted to promote internal labour markets *within* firms, further the employment security of their members, and modify areas of management influence (Edwards, 1979, Littler, 1982 and Friedman, 1977). During these early post-1945 decades, British trade unions tended to grow further apart from their European counterparts. Saville (1988) argued that these decades reinforced the occupational sectionalism that pervaded British unions. British unions continued to be characterised by forms of voluntarist collectivism. The continued segmentation of private sector bargaining to company and workplace levels only reinforced the differences between UK unions and their more centralised opposite numbers in Scandinavia and Germany. Yet, the 1960s and the 1970s saw both the growth and concentration of unions. The 1964 Amalgamation Act removed obstacles to union mergers. During the 1970 to 1978 period, UK union membership grew by 21 per cent overall. By 1978, TUC affiliated unions represented 54.5% of the workforce. A result of this growth, according to Marsh (1992), was a strengthening of the bargaining position of the larger unions, particularly those in the public sector.

Perhaps as a result of their increasing strength, unions were beginning to take an increasing proportion of the blame for Britain's economic problems. British industry was failing to compete with other countries, and the incidence of strikes increased dramatically (Laybourn 1991). The government sponsored Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Organisations sat between 1965 and 1968 and concluded that a two-tier system of industrial relations existed in Britain. The Commission, or the Donovan Report,

as it is more commonly known, argued that the informal system of wage bargaining, one that operated at plant- or micro-scale, was undermining more formalised systems of arrangements between national unions and employers. Whilst the report argued that 'unions represent sectional interests and can not be expected to assume national responsibilities' (Ministry of Labour, 1965, p 2), it stated that organised labour could be put to better use if 'individual unions and workers are willing to give up practices which they have struggled to establish ... in the past' (Ministry of Labour, 1965, p 3). Decisions made at a national level by union executive councils could not automatically rely upon whole-hearted membership support from the grassroots, indicating that variations in intra-union cultures existed. Whilst certain industrial relations theorists argued that the increasing industrialisation of the western world would result in increasingly formalised employer – employee relations and national bargaining systems (see for example Kerr, 1962), others (such as Brannen, 1976) argued that many trade unions had failed in exercising direct control over their membership bodies, indicating that processes of decentralisation and increased union activity at company- or regionally-based levels were increasing. Again, the important point here to note is that variances within national systems of industrial relations systems persisted, and these variations require further analysis to increase understanding of their effects.

The relationship between trade unions and the Labour administration soured during the late 1960s when the government announced that it might have to impose direct controls on unofficial localised strike activity. The Conservative opposition threatened even tighter controls. Whichever party gained power, Laybourn (1991) argued, stricter controls would be imposed on trade unions and their members to ensure that unauthorised local action was limited in success.

1969 to 2000 – tighter controls and the decline of British trade unionism

During the last three decades, both Labour and Conservative administrations recognised that industrial unrest was detrimental to the position of British industry in a world market. Under Labour administrations, British trade unions have commonly operated under a system of voluntarist collectivism. Conservative governments, on the other hand, have sought to strengthen what they have portrayed as the rights of the individual within the union. Conservatives have also sought to place trade unions within tight legal boundaries, a policy that has dramatically reduced union membership and led to some spectacular periods of industrial unrest (the miners strike of 1984/5 is perhaps the best known example). During the Conservative administrations of 1979 to 1997, trade unions were forced to adopt radically altered procedures. They were also slow to react to their new-found vulnerability and the sheer scale of the predicament in which they found themselves (Howell, 1999, p 40). For example, the closed shop was abolished, postal ballots became mandatory and unions were forced to accept the economic consequences of their actions. The 1993 Trade Union reform and Employment Rights Act placed further impediments before trade unions. Seven days notice was required before a strike could be called. Control over ballots for industrial action was tightened up, and individuals were granted the right to join the trade union of their choice. In 1990, only 54 per cent of employees were covered by collective bargaining, compared with 71 per cent in 1984. In 1992, the Conservative employment minister claimed that the 'traditional pattern of industrial relations, based on collective bargaining and collective agreements, seems increasingly inappropriate and is in decline' (Fraser, 1999, p 248). Managements of companies have been afforded an increased right fundamentally to influence the attitudes of the labour force. Unions have found it increasingly difficult to adjust to a labour market which

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involves increasing part-time work, teamwork, and short, fixed term contracts. They have also had to realise that their traditional activities – recruitment, collective bargaining, industrial action – all required much stronger legal support (Howell, 1999, p 41). The pace of union amalgamations has quickened, as a reaction to falling membership and the need of small unions to cover their administrative costs (a TUC report of 1943 originally called for large-scale merger and the 1964 Trade Union Act positively encouraged this, but change has been slow). Between 1967 and 1989, 244 transfers and 87 mergers created 36 new unions (Fraser, 1999). The modern General, Municipal and Boilermakers Union (GMB) can be traced back to over one hundred earlier unions. In 1990 there were still 323 unions but 23 of these covered over 81 per cent of trade unionists (Fraser, 1999). The current count of TUC affiliated unions is 78, representing 6.8 million workers (TUC, 2000).

Whilst the Labour administration elected in 1997 was keen to retain a considerable distance from traditional forms of trade union activity, the official government stance has changed to the benefit of organised labour. The rate of derecognition of unions in the workplace has almost halted and new TUC campaigns to raise the profile of trade unionism have almost halted the rate of membership loss. The TUC (1997) has called for new unionism campaigns and programmes of 'social partnership'. The work-place is seen as where employers and trade unions work together to achieve common goals such as fairness and competitiveness, through employers, employees and unions 'making common cause wherever possible' (TUC, 1997). Perhaps the most important statement on behalf of the TUC has been a recognition that the future of unionism must be based on inclusion of all kinds of workers, and less on the 'protective sectionalism' which was for many decades its defining feature (Fraser, 1999). Under the current economic and social

climate of Britain, it would appear that both of these goals appear rather optimistic, in the short term at least.

Summary

The extended time-span considered in this brief history of British trade unionism has witnessed some fundamental changes in both the structure and character of trade union organisation, coupled with similarly comprehensive changes in the economic, social and political environment in which they operate. The account has highlighted the regional nature of trade unions, arguing that their structures have an inherently spatial constitution, reinforcing the question of how labour might challenge the scale at which relations between capital and labour are constituted.

The sources referred to in the above account have all implied that regional variation exists, but have rarely analysed these differences, preferring to take the national scale as their departure point. Nevertheless, Visser (1991) and Poole (1986) have asserted that notable variations in national unionisation rates and systems of industrial relations have a distinct regional base. Geographers have more recently begun to analyse the large regional differences and cultures that exist within the British trade union movement (notably Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993 and 1996); Massey and Painter (1989); Massey (1994a); Painter (1994) and Southall, 1988)), and it is to this literature that the chapter now turns.

The uneven nature of the British trade union landscape

This second section to the chapter seeks to summarise recent changes in the composition of the British trade union map. It will do this by drawing upon two sources. These have agreed that British trade union activity has been uneven over time and space, but disagreed strongly over which methodologies could be employed to examine and analyse these trends. Areas of growth and decline have been identified by these accounts, although the results of statistical analysis have yielded differing interpretations.

Massey and Painter (1989) commented upon the geographical pattern of the British trade union movement that was identifiable during the immediate post-1945 period. They argued that this pattern clearly reflected a particular industrial structure. This pattern was based upon a capitalism that was 'overwhelmingly urban', where different parts of the country had retained their historical industrial specialisms. This broad spatial distribution was prevalent until the end of the 1950s. But since then, according to Massey and Painter (1989), this geography had changed quite rapidly. They claimed that some unions had succeeded in adding to their membership base in certain regions in Britain, whilst others had experienced massive declines, most frequently in areas of former strength (in terms of regional membership statistics). By the late 1980s, British trade unionism had decentralised into new areas, trade union activity had dispersed and the count of non-unionised industries and regions had grown. As a result of these trends, Massey and Painter (1989) argued that the British trade union map was both decentralising and diffusing, leading to an overall 'flattening' of union activity. However, other work has disputed these claims, and sparked a heated academic debate as to the evolution of the contemporary map of British trade unionism.

Problems in quantifying the geography of British trade unions

Massey and Painter (1989) and Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993) agree that a more locally-based system of analysis would prove to be helpful if an understanding of place and local culture is to be gained. Their difference of opinion concerns the methodology.

Painter (1994), in defence of his earlier work carried out with Doreen Massey (Massey and Painter 1989), argued that a knowledge gap existed in quantifying how regional growth and decline of unions could be assessed. Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993 and 1996) have been quite ardent in their belief that the 'heartlands' of British union activity should be assessed in terms of their relative membership (membership density) rather than absolute membership (the Massey and Painter 1989 approach). Martin, Sunley and Wills have argued that the south east of England is a pertinent example in this situation. Whilst the region is small in terms of land mass, it contains a high proportion of total British employment, and relying on absolute membership counts (rather than membership density calculations) provides a misleading picture of relative union strength. Painter acknowledged this criticism of his and Massey's earlier work, stating that:

> Density is important, as Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993) rightly argue, since it provides one surrogate measure of institutional power.
>
> Painter, 1994, p 100

However, Painter (1994) maintained that the overall size of a regional membership base of a given trade union is still of vital importance, despite the drawbacks to this approach. He stated that employers and employer organisations would take note of where the largest number of members live and work. He still asserted that the labelling of certain regions as union 'heartlands' using the Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993) method of densities would be

potentially both beneficial and hazardous. On the one hand, defining a region as a 'heartland' based upon density would compare regions on a statistical level but would have little meaning to trade unionists (both shop-floor 'grassroots' members and members with more seniority). On the other hand, and in a more positive light, the use of density measurements would perhaps offer more impetus for researchers to understand the cultural and political logic of trade union organisation alongside the importance of place and regional traditions of labour organisation (Painter, 1994).

The question of the use of membership density also raises further questions concerning the delineation of regions. For example, Scotland is often referred to as a union 'heartland' because of its relatively high union density. Painter (1994) proposed that the use of Scotland as a region presents certain problems. Glasgow, a city within a nation, distorts the assumption that Scotland is a trade union heartland. Glasgow demonstrates without doubt a high density of trade union membership, but in doing so disguises the lower densities of almost the entire remainder of Scotland. In Painter's words (1994), this could 'easily lead to a misidentification of the heartland region'. Similarly, this chapter earlier proposed that whilst Scotland demonstrated high levels of unionism, its organisational strategies were often weak (Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1996). Therefore, I argue that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are required to gain an understanding of the contribution that a trade union may play in a local labour market.

Identifying and comparing the membership of given trade unions within a particular region is often complicated, given the varied provincial demarcations used by differing unions. However, the identification of the potential union membership (required for union density calculations) is even more fraught with difficulties. Painter (1994) claimed that an

increasing number of large trade unions in Britain have become (and continue to become) more generic in their fields of representation. Due to union mergers, smaller, more specialised unions are more often than not being amalgamated with larger, more general organisations. In effect, these trade unions no longer restrict themselves to particular occupations or industrial sectors. For example, the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) now considers almost the whole of the British manufacturing workforce as its potential membership base, save for a few minor exceptions. In the past, it was a relatively simple task to define the membership base of a trade union, due to its well-defined sphere of representation. In this era of the general union, overlapping between target membership bases or the double-counting of potential members will inevitably take place, or similarly, non-members of a particular union might simply be members of another 'rival' union.

As a result, it appears that the use of union membership density in regions may be somewhat problematic, due to potential calculation errors. Additionally, unions have often neglected to keep detailed regional membership statistics, making the construction of individual union geographies particularly difficult. Nevertheless, taking the workforce of a given region as the total potential union membership of that region and comparing it with the total union membership of the same region would legitimately offer an insight to the degree of unionisation and associated power (accepting the limitations of using the mean to determine percentage union coverage throughout a region) of that particular union, especially if data could be provided over a period of several decades.

The decline of the British union 'heartlands'?

Painter (1994) offered four processes that he identified as promoting the spatial dispersal of trade union activity in Britain since the 1950s. First, existing trade union heartlands have experienced significant industrial decline. Second, changes in work organisation and production techniques have contributed to the flattening of the British trade union map. Third, the re-location of industrial activity to so-called greenfield sites has again modified the heartland areas of trade union activity. Fourth, the increase in trade union membership from the public sector has re-distributed the map of union representation. Few would doubt these phenomena, although the extent of their effects remains open to debate. Painter (1994) maintained that the key benefit of using absolute membership levels to define union heartlands was to allow a 'crude' appraisal of the cultural and political presence of a given union in a specific region. Density measurements, in his opinion, often paint an unrealistic picture. For example, if the potential membership in a given region is only a few hundred jobs in a particular sector, it is relatively simple for a trade union to boast a high membership density. As a result, the impression is given that a particular union has more strength than in reality.

Massey and Painter (1989) suggested that a dispersal of trade union activity took place from the late 1950s onwards (using their technique of raw membership statistics). The regions that experienced the most dramatic manufacturing decline (the North West, central Scotland, Yorkshire, Humberside, the west midlands and the north east) were also the areas with the most deeply rooted tradition of trade unionism and collective labourism. These regions also experienced the slowest growth of employment during the 1950s, 60s and 70s when compared with the national average. In direct contrast to this, the less

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industrialised and urbanised areas of Britain (including East Anglia, the South West, the East Midlands and the outer South East) grew at a more rapid pace. In effect, major cities lost manufacturing jobs (16 per cent were lost in the conurbations of Britain between 1959 and 1975) whilst in rural areas large gains were witnessed (as much as 77 per cent over the same time period). As Lane (1972) has argued, such phenomena seriously affected the urban based networks of unionism that had developed. The structure of union activists and campaigners that had been so successful in organising large workforces in these localities were no longer in such a strong position to sustain such high levels of concentrated membership.

By the late 1970s, Massey and Painter (1989) pronounced that a new geography of trade unionism had emerged; one that was more widely distributed, both overall in national terms and within individual trade unions. Traditional heartlands of the union movement had declined relatively and absolutely. New areas of union activity had sprung up and such changes in the union map had seen the rise of non-unionism in particular areas, industries and sections of the workforce.

According to Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993), however, Massey and Painter (1989) relied on small data sets from only three unions which supported the overall 'flattening' hypothesis. Similarly, Fothergill et. al. (1986) argued that industrial decentralisation may not have affected the British union map as Massey and Painter (1989) maintained. He argued that many plant re-locations during the 1960s and 1970s simply moved industry from one highly unionised area of the country to another (for example from the South East and Midlands to the traditional union heartlands of the North and Merseyside). There is little evidence, according to Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) that unionisation rates in such

newer industrial areas were any different from those in nearby older urban-based workplaces.

Massey (1993), Painter (1993) and Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) all agreed that a definite flattening of trade union activity took place during the 1960s and 1970s. Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) claimed that there was a clear-cut in-filling (or flattening) of the British trade union landscape, in terms of membership numbers and density. However, they maintained that such an in-filling should not be equated with a demise of traditional union 'heartlands', nor with a blurring of the traditional North / South union divide.

It is possible to offer some quantitative evidence to substantiate these claims. Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) used regional union recognition rates relative to the national rate (as a percentage). They used the Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys (WIRS) of 1980, 1984 and 1990. Although the data does not extend further back than 1980, it is sufficiently detailed to provide a breakdown of types of worker and the sector of employment. Trade union densities (members as a percentage of those in employment) from 1975 to 1994 in terms of rank order have not changed significantly. First, the two regions with the highest densities (the North of England and Wales) remained so, although the percentage density has fallen from 55 per cent to between 42 and 47 per cent. Second, the southern regions (the South West, London, the South East and East Anglia) have remained as the regions with the lowest density, although densities have fallen from 45 per cent in 1975 to less than 29 per cent in 1994. The only regions that have altered their standings significantly are the West Midlands and Scotland, both witnessing a loss in density over the given time period. The north west of England, the East Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside have all remained in the same middle category for union density. Whilst Martin, Sunley and Wills

(1996) admitted that union density has indeed fallen, the heartlands identified in 1975 remain as such in 1994[3].

If the occupational breakdown of the data sets is examined, some interesting points can be observed. For example, a consideration of manual workers in the private sector highlights that it is possible to argue that the heartland areas of British trade union activity in 1980 had become even more dominant heartland regions in 1990. For example, London, the outer South East and East Anglia all witnessed a fall in regional recognition rates relative to the normal rate. The West Midlands remained largely constant, but the North West, the North, Wales and Scotland all witnessed substantial rises in regional rates relative to the national average.

Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) summarised these trends by claiming that whilst union recognition had fallen throughout Britain, the 'relative differential between the southern and northern regions had actually widened substantially'. In effect, whilst union recognition has fallen rapidly throughout Britain, it has been conspicuously more resilient in the older, more traditionally unionised northern regions of the country than in the less unionised south.

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[3] It should be noted that the 1994 map was constructed from the 1994 Labour Force Survey (LFS). Such data are not directly comparable with the WIRS data, simply because LFS data are household-based, in contrast to the industry-based WIRS data. The LFS data tends to depict a slightly lower density of unionism than their WIRS counterparts, although according to Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996), the level of union density as a percentage of employment between 1975 to 1994 has still fallen.

Summary

In aggregate terms, it appears as if there is little evidence to support the Massey and Painter (1989) claims concerning the flattening of trade union activity in Britain. Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) did not seek wholly to dismiss the thesis, instead they concluded that the flattening that did take place during the 1950s and 1960s had little effect on the polarised landscape of British union representation of today. However, it appears clear that a great deal of resilience can be noted in terms of trade union density throughout the heartland areas of Britain.

An examination of trade unions in Britain as solely national entities would thus miss out on the large diversities that exist within the map of British trade unionism. The south eastern region of Britain contains some thirty-five per cent of total employment, giving some idea of the dominance of this area. Similarly, a large number of British trade union members are also located in this region. However, it must be remembered that trade union activity in the south east of Britain tends to be concentrated in a comparatively small number of workforces where trade unions have been recognised and spread relatively thinly throughout the region. As the second section of this chapter has demonstrated, aggregate trade union density is lower throughout the south of Britain (especially the South East) than it is in Wales and the North. Whilst the early post-1945 decades demonstrated some convergence, there are no current signs of any further flattening. In addition, overall levels of worker militancy and strike activity (measured by the amount of working days lost per year through strike action) have tended to be significantly lower in the South East than elsewhere in Britain. Therefore, it does not appear that a region that comprises a substantial number of organised workers (with a low overall density of representation)

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automatically translates into a region with a large degree of union strength or propensity to take collective action.

There can be no question that the overall power of British trade unions has declined during the last two decades. Indeed, their overall membership has fallen back to the level it was during the 1940s. Few – if any – of the regions of Britain have not been subject to this retreat. Nevertheless, the shrinking union movement (in terms of union recognition and density) still displays evidence of a North / South divide. Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) termed this phenomenon as 'comparative resilience and retrenchment within the majority of the historic heartlands' (the exception being the west Midlands). In the more unionised regions, institutions of organised labour still appear to be significant local actors, both influencing and being influenced by regional industrial culture. In some cases, unions in non-heartland regions may be approaching levels of membership so low in density that effective workplace representation is no longer possible (even though the total number of members may still be significant).

A wider issue that this chapter has addressed so far is the inherent spatiality of the British trade union movement. It is clear that there are inherent regional aspects to the landscape of organised labour. The examples cited in part two of this chapter have examined the entire British trade union movement and they have therefore made generalisations, but the picture they have painted has been one of regional difference. The in-depth regional analysis of the ISTC in two different regions (using qualitative and quantitative methodologies outlined above and in chapter one) may provide further insight into how institutions of organised labour affect – and are affected by – regional industrial culture.

The chapter now turns to some examples of how trade unions demonstrate distinct regional characteristics.

British trade union activity in the mining and banking industries

Using the following case studies to demonstrate linkages, I seek to demonstrate that it is possible to go beyond simply tracing out the connections between locally dominant firms, industries and unions and broader aspects of regional industrial culture. Instead, I argue that it is necessary to analyse these tangible and intangible institutional characteristics, in a non-determinate fashion. The case studies are drawn from two sources, mining and banking. Literature concerning workers traditions and trade unionism throughout the British coal industry is numerous, partly due to the high levels of social drama and media interest that has often beset the industry. Research into trade unionism throughout the banking and financial services industry is however less common, perhaps due to traditionally low levels of unionisation. Nevertheless, the two areas of study complement each other, as both industries display pertinent examples of varied cultures within their respective trade unions. It is also important to demonstrate that there are inherent spatialities in both so-called 'old' and 'new' forms of trade union activity. The chapter will conclude by examining the links between labour and culture, and how these interactions have affected regional economic performance.

The British coal-mining industry

During the early decades of the twentieth century, localised forms of trade union activity were prevalent in Britain, especially in both the coal and iron and steel industries. Beynon and Austrin (1994) argued that the Durham coalfield demonstrated deep linkages between the economic and social manifestations of power. The explanation of such differences required analyses of both the political power of the coal owners (capital), and the geographical significance of trade union activity (labour).

Throughout the Durham coalfield during the latter stages of the 1860s organised labour began in the form of unskilled labourers' federations, using political action to produce solidarity (Beynon and Austrin, 1994). Successful trade unionism flourished throughout the Durham coalfield due to the hostile nature of employers. Poor working and living conditions sowed the seeds of strong blue-collar solidarity, through the development of the village as a community. These separate and distinct communities became vital forms of identity, through the deliberate construction of solidarity. Beynon and Austrin (1994) argued that whilst the community was created largely from mistrust, the resulting togetherness was often highly localised in nature. These research findings agreed with those of Krieger (1983). His work examined the evolution of five different collieries in County Durham, namely Boldon, Sacriston, Eden, Rainton and Horden. These five contrasting pits displayed distinctive micro-level characteristics, yet these appeared to combine together to form a distinct regional culture. Krieger (1983) argued that whilst at first glance, factors such as varying geological conditions, production methods, management procedures and labour relations may demonstrate high levels of difference between pits, the habits and traditions of labouring of the Durham coalfield as a whole

tended to form a culture that 'overshadows the diversity of individual colliery outcomes' (Krieger, 1983, p 170). Krieger (1983) explained this regional culture by stating that labouring relations tended to be fluid over time, and that their examination would be better served by recognising that miners (as well as management) are active subjects and are not simply passive objects of their working environment. The participation of the Durham miners in their own particular form of capitalist production has, in the opinion of Krieger (1983), produced a specific regional industrial culture by means of the self-transmission of traditions and expectations.

This deep-rooted sense of occupational and community identity of the Durham miners went some way to influence Anderson in his critique of the British working class:

> ... the very intensity of its corporate class consciousness, realised in
> and through a distinct hermetic culture, has blocked the emergence
> of a universal ideology in the English working class.
> Anderson, 1964, p 33

Even when the miners' unions demanded the nationalisation of the British coal industry (and with this the formation of a national union), the creation of national solidarity proved a stumbling block, due to enduring political, social and cultural legacies in individual regions or communities. Rather than explaining away the importance of these legacies, or ignoring the input of organised labour, I argue that localised class practices have led to significant regional and sub-regional differences in union recognition, union membership density, bargaining arrangements and other industrial relations practices. Additionally, rather than attributing these differences purely to the actions of capital, as many accounts have sought to do in the past, I argue that there are quintessential links between localised labour forces and regional industrial cultures.

In contrast to the Durham coalfield, Cooke (1985) argued that the miners of south Wales displayed quite different characteristics to their north-eastern counterparts. In south Wales, the collier prided himself on his ability to perform all the varied tasks that existed underground. He generally did not possess a particular skill, his skill was that he could turn his hand to any task that was required. In the north east, by contrast, there existed strict definitions between the varied tasks. For example, faceworkers concentrated upon coal-cutting, clearers cleared, fillers filled, and hauliers hauled. According to Cooke (1985), these varied practices were translated into status both whilst at work and in the mining community as a whole. Wage differentials were therefore more distinct in the north east, based upon the clear distinctions between different classes of worker. In practice, the coal-cutter assumed the privileged status within the wider community and often received a rent-free house from the colliery management. Such practices were completely unheard of in south Wales. Daunton (1981) argued that the resulting hierarchical social structure in the north east of England contributed largely to the lack of a militant attitude from coal-cutters. Historically, miners in the north east of England operated their own internal system of arbitration on behalf of management from as early as 1870. In contrast, the south Wales coalfield developed a reputation for industrial militancy, perhaps due to the more egalitarian labour process (Cooke, 1985, p 226).

The prolonged and often bitter national strike of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) of 1984-85 has proved to be a much-researched topic in terms of gaining an understanding of the continual reproduction and transformation of society. Analysis of the national strike of the NUM in 1984-85 requires not only an appreciation of regional differentiation, but as Sunley (1986) argued, an understanding of the 'cultures of the coalfields', the 'new regional geography' and an appreciation of 'place as [a] historically

contingent process'. The reason behind the strike stemmed from the British government's plan drastically to reduce the size of the coal industry and the subsequent loss of thousands of jobs throughout mining communities. The strike captured the imagination of millions of people as it threatened to turn into more than an industrial dispute. Competing principles and morals were at stake, both in and outside the coal producing regions. As Samuel et. al. (1986) argued, the strike placed many aspects of British society at the forefront of debate – the future of paid employment, regional difference, representation and accountability of workers to name but a few. Even today, it remains a useful tool to analyse and reflect upon the varied cultures of trade unionism that exist within Britain.

The case of the Dukeries coalfield in Nottinghamshire makes for an interesting study into regional industrial culture. Much of this area was owned by landed aristocracy, who in the early 1920s became aware of the potential wealth their land contained, largely due to technological improvements in mining techniques. The mines and their associated settlements had, in general, experienced somewhat different development trajectories than their more established counterparts in Yorkshire, the north east and south Wales. For example, the housing provided by colliery management in the Dukeries was generally of a higher standard than in other coal producing areas of Britain. Within these pit villages, however, management sought to provide living spaces for their employees which enabled them to extend the social control exercised at the workplace. Miners and their families shopped in colliery company shops, drank in company pubs, played sport in company leisure centres and so on. Certain forms of trade unionism were encouraged, the development of activism in the local Labour party was (implicitly) discouraged, but perhaps most importantly, colliery management oversaw the maintenance of social relations in both the pit and the home. Management in the Dukeries did not appear to be interested in

constructing integrated, balanced communities, whilst in other coal producing areas of Britain, workers and their families were more exposed to the local community, trade unions and political parties (Griffiths and Johnston, 1991). The social relations and workplace cultures that developed in the Dukeries were ones where collective attitudes were perceptible and local-level solidarity stronger, as rates of pay throughout the pit were more standardised. Due to a combination of these factors, Waller argued that:

> *In the mining villages of the Dukeries ... can be found both deference and powerless resistance.*
>
> Waller, 1983, p 105

This brief synopsis of the evolution of the Nottingham coalfield demonstrated that a distinctive coalfield (or regional) culture existed in the villages of the Dukeries coalfield, created and sustained by economic, social and political processes, a culture that differentiated the Dukeries from its counterparts in south Yorkshire, south Wales and the north east (the most militant regions during the 1984-85 strike). Research carried out by Duncan and Goodwin (1988) demonstrated that the distribution of support for the NUM strike in September 1984 was dominated by the three regions named above, whilst north and south Nottinghamshire and the south midlands could be characterised by their lack of support for industrial action. In north and south Nottinghamshire, some 90 per cent of workers were opposed to the strike whilst in south Wales, Yorkshire and the north east, less than 5 per cent of workers were opposed to industrial action. Such statistics point to the institutional structure of the Dukeries being somewhat different to other coalmining regions in Britain, and support the claim that traditions of worker organisation are better understood as tendencies that are constantly being modified, rather than unitary wholes. Similarly, this example has demonstrated that a study of organised labour exposes much more than a simple reflection of working practices. On the contrary, an analysis of the

trade unions involved in the national miners strike most definitely provide a mechanism with which to view their members in an active, and not passive manner.

Along similar lines to the earlier case study of County Durham, Griffiths and Johnston (1991) also commented that the Dukeries itself is not one homogeneous place. There are, without a doubt, places within place – in this case differing coal producing companies within the region. Both an appreciation and an analysis of these contrasting (and indeed complex) regional cultural mosaics will further understanding of contemporary regional geography.

Whilst the British coal industry has formed the backbone of demonstrating the localised forms of unionism apparent within British regions, it is by no means the only case study that can be employed. In this next section of the chapter, I draw upon examples of the geography of banking trade unionism. Whilst localised trade unionism within financial services has not traditionally attracted a glut of academic endeavour, it nevertheless remains a pertinent example of spatial variations in union membership and workplace union cultures, reflecting varied local histories of union activity which translate to variations in trade union activity, past and present.

The importance of the local in banking trade unionism

Traditions of organised labour throughout British banking and financial institutions are relatively strong. UNIFI (the primary trade union in the UK to represent bank, insurance and finance workers) can be traced back to 1918, when the National Bank Officers Guild was established in Sheffield. Despite its title, the organisation did not become a wholly national organisation until 1946, when it was renamed NUBE (National Union for Bank Employees). As well as being a national organisation in name, NUBE tended to stress to its members the importance of national pay settlements, appointing regional officials to ensure that national NUBE directives were implemented at regional level. In 1968, the union signed a national negotiating settlement, which aimed to standardise conditions, wages and negotiating procedures throughout Britain.

In 1979, NUBE was renamed as the Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU), reflecting both the increasing importance of a more diverse membership base but also the significant merger activity of the union. In 1999, following successive mergers with the Barclays and National Westminster staff associations, BIFU was again renamed UNIFI, largely because these mergers were conditional on the union designation being discontinued.

This brief introduction has demonstrated that – on paper at least – UNIFI appears to be a highly centralized organisation. Nevertheless, the uneven nature of employment in the sectors that UNIFI represents has most certainly produced spatially differentiated geographies of labour organisation, even under the auspices of a centralised concern. As Wills (1995) argued, UNIFI largely represents white-collar workers throughout the financial

services industry – a group that by tradition does not tend to conjure images of zealous trade union activity. Yet, despite general similarities throughout labour processes, management practices and employment conditions in Britain, large differences in union traditions and routines may be witnessed and analysed.

Wills' (1995 and 1996) research with regard to traditions of trade unionism in the British banking sector uncovered discernible regional traditions. Two case study areas were considered – the diverse towns of Welwyn Garden City, in the south of England, and Warrington, in the north west. Both of these areas demonstrated variations in union membership, union activity and union customs. Despite being members of the same trade union and being bound by the same nationally negotiated terms and conditions, Wills (1996) argued that the trade union in question was far more 'implanted' in the regional culture of the north west than in the southern location. For example, in Welwyn Garden City, both union membership and interest in trade unionism was low, due to perceived ineffectiveness and political hostility to the union movement. Such statements were in direct contrast to those found in Warrington. The lack of interest in unionism translated into low levels of union organisation in Welwyn Garden City, once again in contrast to Warrington. Wills (1996) claimed that reasons for these differences were attributable to the workplace level. Workplace organisation, she claimed, is conducted by workplace representatives, who (in the case study in question) were distributed unevenly over space. A region with strong union tradition is likely to have strong union representation, facilitating easier expansion (for example Warrington). Conversely, activists attempting to recruit in Welwyn Garden City faced a much more laborious task.

Wills (1996) summarised the cultural differences in the two localities as a combination of local union traditions and everyday political practices in the banks. Warrington had a trade union history which facilitated a high level of trade union organisation. In traditionally poorly organised locations (such as Welwyn Garden City), trade unions found it increasingly difficult to integrate trade union organisation into the daily working life of bank branches. She argued also that white collar trade unionism – in general – had been more successful in terms of membership density and the propensity to take action in traditionally well unionised areas of the country. The geo-histories of workers' experiences are thus still reflected in trade union organisation (Wills, 1996), despite ongoing changes in the nature of employment. Despite the changes in working cultures and determined central government strategies that have attempted to make the organisation of workers into trade unions more difficult, spatial patterns of union organisation have persisted over time (see Martin, Sunley and Wills, 1993, 1994, 1996). Wills (1996) thus demonstrates how trade union traditions and cultures are involved in constantly re-shaping capital – labour relations, through the inescapable links between culture and labour.

Conclusion

In 1965, Edward Thompson argued that a class-based analysis of the British working class was required, one that took into account the traditions and enduring legacies of trade unions:

> *The real work of analysis remains: the sociological analysis of changing groups within the wage earning and salaried strata: the points of potential antagonism and alliance: the economic analysis,*

*the cultural analysis, the political analysis, not only of forms of state
power, but also of the bureaucracies of the labour movement.*
                                                        Thompson, 1965, p 345

Since their formation, it is evident that trade unions have played a large role in constituting localised capital – labour relations, and hence, as Thompson (1965) suggested, aided the formation of local industrial cultures.

However, as I have demonstrated, too many recent accounts of industrial relations or trade union strategies have tended to conclude with assumptive statements that simply concern themselves with calling for future strategies for organised labour, whether they be based upon regional, national or international enquiry. They also tend to presume that their task of analysis is to construct prescriptions. Given the predicament of British trade unions over the last fifteen years, it is hardly startling that such accounts have proliferated, although I believe that they often fall short of appreciating the importance of varied cultures, traditions and expectations of working people. Instead, I propose that the goal of social scientists should be to comprehend and question what is presently taking place in an increasingly turbulent world, which may in turn offer implications for future policy direction.

Inquiry into organised labour should therefore be much more focused on the explicit ways in which labour strategies are bound in place. I argue that instead of examining the international scale, both the regional and the local are more productive arenas for enquiry. The accounts introduced in the second half of this chapter have indicated that the prioritisation of the regional scale may begin to provide a clearer sense of how regional industrial culture may relate to past, present and future labour strategies.

> *To understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate its basic*
> *structure to the human bond on which it is built; this undoubtedly*
> *depends on legal relations, but also upon forms of labour, ways of*
> *loving, living and dying.*
> M. Merleau Ponty, from Beynon and Austrin, 1994, p 363

As this chapter has progressed, it has called for an inclusion of the historical traditions and

expectations of organised labour in the continual and ongoing creation and re-constitution

of *regional* industrial culture. As the above citation suggests, trade unions form a definite

part – but only part – of the regional industrial culture of a given region.

Chapter Five: The ISTC, Teesside and South Wales

Introduction

This chapter has three sections, and aims to familiarise the reader with the history and characteristics of the trade union in question and the two regions that feature in the empirical section of the thesis. The first section therefore introduces the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC), and offers an historical narrative of the development trajectory of the union, alongside comment and analysis of its major characteristics. The second and third sections briefly acquaint the reader with the regions of Teesside and south Wales, offering historical accounts but also introducing the social, economic and cultural characteristics of the two places. The chapter concludes by teasing out both tacit and specific characteristics of the two regions, thus ensuring the reader comprehends how the theoretical concerns developed in chapters one to four relate to the empirical material presented in subsequent chapters.

ISTC history – from foundation to present

Early days – 1860 to 1917

Labour organisations within the iron and steel industry in Britain began during the 1860s. Ironworkers' unions appeared throughout the country, most notably on Tyneside and in the west midlands. The objective of these unions was to raise the piece-rate. Employees confronted their employers with increasing frequency, with two major effects. First, a

sharp increase in the number of strikes was witnessed, and second, the organisation of labour within the iron industry flourished. However, infighting between differing groups in the industry was common. For example, in the north of England, traditions of disunity had historically existed between rollers and millmen. Key union leaders of the time attempted to suppress such differences and introduce simple forms of arbitration, in order to encourage unity.

In 1886, the British Steel Smelters Association (BSSA) was formed, as a consequence of new technical developments that were driving steel to the fore as an alternative to malleable iron. The BSSA grew rapidly, and by the turn of the century, it was the largest union in the British iron and steel industry. The influence of the BSSA and other ironworkers unions extended during the early years of the 20th century. Many steel smelters moved from the north of England towards the south, where the Ironworkers were more dominant. The strength of BSSA was therefore extended, but it is important to note that many smaller unions continued to thrive on a local basis.

By 1909, the Ironworkers Union wished to form one large umbrella organisation, to allow single representation for all iron and steel workers (Pugh 1951). The accomplishment of such a task was to prove complicated, because of the disunity that was prevalent between varying unions. For example, in 1909, the Steel Smelters Union argued for an abolition of a contract scheme which increased the polarisation of wage scales, whilst the Ironworkers Union fought to maintain it. Additionally, duplication of membership inhibited the organisation of workers within the iron and steel industry. For example, many tinplate workers had joined the Steel Smelters Union, whilst others preferred to set up their own unions on a local basis. Pugh (1951, p 255) argued that if it were not for the 'exclusive

attitude' of the Steel Smelters, a federation of unions within the iron and steel industry would have been possible before the turn of the century. This example reflects early incidences of craft- or occupation-specific differences *within* labour.

Amalgamation and growth – 1917 to 1950

An almost all-encompassing amalgamation of all iron and steel based unions was agreed during the course of World War One, with final amalgamation taking place on the 1st January 1917. Merger was deemed a prudent move by the majority of the union leaderships at the time and was encouraged by the government. In his analysis of the situation, Pugh (1951, p 255) argued that the Steel Smelters and the Ironworkers Union were the two instrumental agents in driving forward the merger discussions. A unified organisation was also seen as being beneficial to the war effort, with an overall aim of providing higher levels of representation with less infighting between associated groups.

The resulting amalgamation of the independent unions in 1917 produced two differing bodies, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) and the British Iron, Steel and Kindred Trades Association (BISAKTA). In practice, all constituent unions under the ISTC sphere of influence transferred their membership to BISAKTA, and devolved all responsibility regarding future membership recruitment to BISAKTA. The formerly independent unions were allowed to die on the vine, leaving BISAKTA and the ISTC as the sole union for iron and steel workers. In 1917, BISAKTA organised some 80,000 workers. The 1917 amalgamation was comprehensive, and only the National Union of

Blastfurnacemen (NUB) elected to remain outside the BISAKTA / ISTC sphere of influence.

Although the original composition of the ISTC and BISAKTA appeared to be complicated, it was in reality relatively simple. BISAKTA was the central association for all the newly merged trade unions, and in turn was affiliated to the ISTC. The bodies associated to the ISTC (in effect, BISAKTA) were obliged to pay their affiliation fees on a *per capita* basis in order to cover the costs of the central ISTC body. Whilst BISAKTA assumed the duties of membership recruitment, the Executive Council (EC) of the ISTC was made up of the representatives from BISAKTA. Put more simply, the two organisations were working as one in all but name from 1917.

Whilst two organisations resulted from the formation of the ISTC and BISAKTA in 1917, they worked very closely together and were – in practice – one organisation. Both the ISTC and BISAKTA had their own Executive Councils, but BISAKTA was represented upon the EC of the ISTC[4]. The inter-war years provided the ISTC with many opportunities for growth, despite difficult economic conditions. Financially, the confederation was making progress, although further membership growth was proving problematic. Membership stagnated, and stood at 76,000 in 1924. By 1927, conditions for iron and steel workers had improved slightly, with most plants having outstanding orders. However, an ISTC EC meeting during 1927 noted two problems. First, and external to the ISTC, there was recognition that without a revival of world trade, the renewal in demand for iron

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[4] Since the ISTC and BISAKTA were in effect one union, this chapter will now refer simply to the ISTC.

and steel would be short-lived. Second, the situation of the ISTC was not improved by the 'poaching proclivities' of rival unions (Pugh, 1951, p 409). According to divisional reports, the Scottish and Northern divisions of the ISTC witnessed high levels of competition, especially from the General and Municipal Workers Union (GMW). The ISTC argued that the GMW should organise only in the non-skilled sector, but an agreement was never reached. Pugh (1951) argued that the GMW wanted 'an open field to plough in' (p 410), reflecting historical examples of inter-union competition.

Sustaining growth in membership during 1929 proved to be difficult for the ISTC, considering the difficulties which then prevailed in every sector of the British economy. Unemployment and poverty throughout Britain was rife, especially amongst the working classes. Nevertheless, the ISTC continued to remain a financially viable organisation, although nation-wide membership had fallen sharply to 53,000. Pugh (1951, p 444) stated that these losses were not seen by the ISTC as a significant problem, in that the confederation could afford to impart substantial assistance to its members in the form of contribution relief. Membership fell further to 42,000 in 1931.

By 1935, a report of the Central Office to the meeting of the EC in February, 1935, opened with the following statement:

> After a succession of years of trade depression and steadily worsening conditions, it is pleasing to report on a twelve months' period of gradual expansion in our industry, particularly in the heavy section. Although there is a lot of leeway to make up, the prospects for the present year are more promising.
> Cited from Pugh (1951, p 503)

Membership at this time had increased marginally to 55,000, and iron and steel production (and associated employment) was expanding. By 1936, membership had expanded to approximately 70,000 and over thirty new branches had opened in the previous twelve months. Divisional reports indicated how day-to-day activity from lay-members and general interest from workers in the broader trade union movement was increasing. By 1940, membership had increased to 97,000 and steel production had reached unprecedented levels within the war economy. Forecasts at this time claimed that ISTC assets (then at £497,000) would continue to rise. Indeed they did. By 1945, the Confederation boasted capital resources of over £1m.

Lincoln Evans, a figure rising to prominence within the ISTC, was appointed General Secretary of the newly-established Iron and Steel Board. This organisation was set up by the incoming Labour government to further the post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation of the British iron and steel industry. Lincoln Evans was subsequently promoted to General Secretary of the ISTC in 1946 and also continued his role on the Iron and Steel Board.

New challenges – 1950 to 1980

The early 1950s were successful times for the steel industry in Britain; 1951 witnessed an all time record output of 16 million tons of steel ingots and castings. The nationalisation of the industry was also completed, under the Labour government (McEachern, 1980). The ISTC continued to grow in strength, and in 1950, organised almost 113,000 members in 634 branches. Lincoln Evans noted that he was General Secretary at a convenient time

for the ISTC and himself, in that the steel industry was in the hands of a new generation of employers that accepted and even encouraged trade unions, as did the government of the time (Upham, 1997, p 4-5).

The British iron and steel industry was privatised in 1953. At the time, government restrictions upon the distribution of iron and steel products were terminated, because of the impact of steady economic growth. The iron and steel industry became less centralised, and negotiations once more became more locally-based, as opposed to the more centralised nature of negotiations during times of public ownership (Pugh 1951).

Sir Lincoln Evans retired as General Secretary in 1953, to be succeeded by Harry Douglass. Douglass, a Teessider, advocated efficiency, and promoted unions to take the initiative in partnership with employers in productivity bargaining. He preferred to negotiate with profitable firms, as he argued that further advances could be gained from these rather than from loss-making firms. His goal was for a better standard of working and living for ISTC members, rather than to advocate a more radical agenda. His ardent opposition to unofficial stoppages aimed to increase the effectiveness of sanctioned strike action (Upham, 1997, p 26).

The ensuing newer generation of union leadership appointed under Douglass recognised the need to recruit all workers connected with the iron and steel industry, including all administrative, technical and clerical workers. Such workers made up some 19 per cent of metal manufacturing employees in 1958 (104,000 people in total). A conscious decision was made by the leadership of the ISTC to recruit where the real growth was perceived to be, seemingly opening the way forward to membership expansion. The first staff members

were incorporated into the confederation in 1960, opening the door to a wider sphere of influence.

Arguably the largest change that the ISTC has witnessed took place in 1967. This event had far-reaching impacts upon the union's structure and its negotiating patterns. In 1965, the Labour government had planned to re-nationalise most of the iron and steel industry in Britain. The ISTC remained silent upon its position on the government's blueprint to nationalise the industry, maintaining its traditional indifferent stance towards this issue. The government set up an Organising Committee to plan for nationalisation, from which the ISTC was originally excluded. Harry Douglass protested vigorously, given the strong representation that the ISTC enjoyed. Eventually, the confederation was granted a shop floor member on this committee. The plans for nationalisation culminated in 1967 with the formation of the British Steel Corporation (BSC).

A 'Ten Year Strategy for Steel' was published by the British government in 1973 (HMSO, 1973). This controversial report called for 50,000 job losses within the British iron and steel industry. The EC of the ISTC called an immediate emergency conference, although the traditional non-confrontational style of the union was apparent throughout these deliberations. The ISTC had become well known in the field of British industrial relations for having a moderate stance, and did not break from these customs. Throughout its evolution, the confederation had always endorsed modernisation of the steel industry, even with consequent job losses. In this instance, the union agreed with the threatened large-scale job losses, but simultaneously proposed safeguards on training for redundant steel workers. Later in the decade, the ISTC agreed a 'high wage, high productivity' future for BSC, and it was agreed that all 'inbuilt overmanning' should be abolished by 1978.

Bill Sirs was appointed as General Secretary of the ISTC in 1974, taking up his post in early 1975. Sirs' stewardship of the ISTC witnessed the failure of the proposed ISTC / SIMA[5] merger. Rumours concerning a merger of the two organisations had been prevalent since 1968, and were seen by the ISTC as a means to reinforce their dominant position as primary trade union in the steel industry. The two organisations came very close to an amalgamation in 1976, when a draft document was drawn up, covering details of the proposed coalition. However, a wrecking amendment was passed at the annual SIMA conference, and the merger talks collapsed.

Major challenges through stagnation and decline – 1980 to 1992

1980 witnessed the first significant piece of industrial action involving the ISTC since 1926. For approximately three months, workers employed throughout both the British Steel Corporation and the private sector took part in a bitter strike, following the announcement of radical changes to the British steel industry planned by the newly elected Conservative government. The strike was contested over pay – rather than job losses – despite the ongoing works closure programme. ISTC members returned to work in April, largely defeated in their quest.

The National Union of Blastfurnacemen (NUB) finally joined the ISTC in 1985. The merger was deemed necessary for two interconnected reasons. The membership base of the NUB had downsized so rapidly that effective representation of the remaining members

was proving problematic. Second, the finances of the union were low, additionally threatening the effectiveness of the organisation. 1985 also signalled the end of the Bill Sirs era. He retired as the NUB and the ISTC merged, having guided the confederation through ten tumultuous years. The then Assistant General Secretary, Roy Evans, took Sirs' position.

The Conservative government was re-elected in 1987, and almost immediately announced that it was to privatise the British Steel Corporation. This was carried out in 1988, alongside further plant closures, most notably Ravenscraig in Scotland. Once again, large-scale changes to the ISTC's negotiating structures were forced upon the confederation, which seemingly was powerless to resist. Nevertheless, the ISTC had always unwaveringly stated that it would never oppose the privatisation of the steel industry in Britain and would always work with the employers to represent its membership 'irrespective of ownership' (Maksymiw, Eaton and Gill, 1990, p 169).

New beginnings – 1992 to present

Changes in union legislation required the General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary to be elected by the lay-membership of the union, rather than by the EC. Keith Brookman, the former AGS assumed the post of General Secretary, following the retirement of Evans in 1992. He was assisted by Mick Leahy. Their first move was to launch the 'Fresh Start' programme, which set in motion momentous changes to the framework of the ISTC. The confederation had previously only represented workers within

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[5] SIMA stands for the Steel Industry Management Association

the iron and steel industry; they now sought to organise members in steel producing areas (past and present), but by actively recruiting in their self-determined style of a 'community union'. Increasingly diverse groups of workers were targeted in an attempt to reverse precipitous falls in ISTC membership.

Following the historical tradition of internal promotion within the ISTC, Mick Leahy took over as General Secretary in April 1999, following the retirement of Keith (now Lord) Brookman. He is currently assisted by Eddie Lynch.

The ISTC remains the dominant union within the British iron and steel industry and currently organises some 30,000 workers. Whilst the organisation has traditionally been viewed as being on the right of the trade union movement and has habitually avoided large-scale industrial conflict, it can be characterised as a small but proud union which is undergoing far-reaching changes to its raison d'être.

The chapter now turns to providing a brief historical narrative of Teesside and south Wales, paying particular attention to key historical events that contributed to the formation of the cultural, social, economic and political characteristics of the regions.

Teesside and the steel industry – an historical synopsis

Iron and steel production began in Middlesbrough in 1841. Middlesbrough had begun its growth in 1830 after its foundation as a coal port. Its population grew rapidly from 154 in 1831 to 5,463 in 1841. During this decade, the Stockton and Darlington railway had been

extended to Middlesbrough, at the same time that six acres of land were sold to Henry Bolckow and John Vaughan for the construction of a new iron works. The situation of Middlesbrough was seen as ideal for such a works, largely due to its coastal location, the close proximity to the Durham coal reserves, Cleveland iron ore, Weardale limestone and Scottish pig iron.

Middlesbrough continued to expand rapidly during the remainder of the nineteenth century. Blast furnaces were installed in Middlesbrough in 1851, Eston in 1853 and at the Cleveland works in 1854. New plants were also constructed at Port Clarence. The West Hartlepool Railway Company provided the transport for this plant, which was opened in 1853. Technological developments continued at a rapid rate, especially within the field of steel-making technology (Hudson and Sadler, 1985). By 1900, some 75 blast furnaces existed in the environs of Teesside, and by the turn of the century, steel production reached approximately 1,350,000 tons per annum (Hudson and Sadler, 1985).

Due to various amalgamations, three major steel producers had emerged on Teesside by 1914 – Bolckow Vaughan, Dorman Long and the South Durham Iron and Steel Company. Additionally, the social, political and economic fabric of Middlesbrough had been largely constructed around the iron and steel industry. During the early years of the twentieth century, iron and steel workers had begun to organise themselves in attempts to exercise some control over their working conditions. As documented above, highly localised forms of unionism had developed as far back as 1862 in the form of the Amalgamated Malleable Ironworkers Association. From these early days, characteristics of organised labour had been set in place that went on to play significant roles in the long-term development of capital – labour relations. For example, much recruitment of labour was sub-contracted to

spin-off companies during the early days of steel making on Teesside to lower wages and reduce the number of permanent contracts, and such practices still continue today under certain guises. In addition, the Consett Iron Company – elsewhere in north east England – initiated the principle of determining wages using sliding scales, where wages were cut during times of slack demand. Beynon and Austrin (1994, p 13) argued that whilst labour on Teesside was not passive, it was in a 'very weak position in relation to capital'. They claimed that as the organisation of labour progressed, the balance altered a little, but the overall supremacy of capitalist interest was never seriously threatened.

The Teesside economy was therefore dominated by the needs of capital, rather than labour. There was very little organised labour for women, due to the limited amount of factory employment. As Bell stated:

> The women [on Teesside] *have no independent existence of their*
> *own. They mostly marry very young; the conditions of the town point*
> *to their doing so. It is one of the few* [towns] *in the kingdom in which*
> *the constant influx of men in search of work, and not of women, the*
> *males outnumber the females.*
> Bell, 1985 edition, p 178

As the steel-making capacity of Teesside grew, so did the workforce. At the turn of the century, the population of Middlesbrough had reached approximately 91,000, due to high levels of in-migration. Consequently, Middlesbrough developed its own community around a particular set of social relations. However, the employment was often of an insecure nature and often was a matter of 'day to day survival' (Hudson and Sadler, 1985, p 11), with workers enduring constant threats of illness and loss of family members due to premature deaths.

The First World War presented the three dominant iron and steel producers on Teesside with an opportunity to assert their dominance due to increased wartime demand, and left them in a position of strength upon which to build. By 1929, Dorman Long and Bolckow Vaughan merged, to form a company that employed 33,000 men. This merger confirmed Dorman Long as the dominant producer on Teesside. The company also had major interests in the major coal producers in the region, and had diversified its iron and steel interests into structural engineering firms and collieries (including two pits in Kent). The South Durham Steel and Iron Company followed a similar path. Developments such as these indicate the high levels of control that capital asserted over the regional economy.

In the early post-1945 period, the regional economy of Teesside was relatively prosperous and near-full employment was not exceptional (Sadler, 1992). Significant investment into iron- and steel-making did not take off once again until the mid 1950s. Most of the new investment was directed towards steel-making. New blast furnaces and mills began to spring up all over Teesside, as older and more obsolete plants were closed. Whilst expansion and investment was commonplace, the profits of Dorman Long and the South Durham Iron and Steel Company were below the national average (Hudson and Sadler, 1985). Conditions dictated that a merger would prove beneficial, and this was agreed in 1966, along with Scunthorpe-based Stewarts and Lloyds. A major pipe and tubes group was about to be formed, the legacy of which is still apparent today in the north of England, before nationalisation intervened.

The nationalisation of the fourteen largest steel producers in Britain took place in 1967. The newly-formed British Steel Corporation had optimistic plans for the Teesside area, designating the region as one of its five 'heritage sites'. The White Paper British Steel

Corporation: Ten Year Development Strategy (HMSO, 1973) detailed the future of British steel-making, and called for the construction of a new steel-making complex on south Teesside and an expansion of the existing Lackenby works. The annual capacity was envisaged to be an optimistic 12 million tonnes by the 1980s. However, the forecast increase in demand for steel largely failed to materialise and by 1978, another White Paper (British Steel Corporation: the road to viability, HMSO, 1978) argued that whilst stage two of the Redcar programme should be completed, the plans for stage three should be shelved. By 1978, annual capacity of the Teesside complex had reached only 4.65 million tonnes.

The closure of the Consett works and the national steel strike of 1980 diluted the influence of the once strong ISTC in the north east of England. The year 1980 was also a watershed in that the British Steel Corporation began to concentrate upon a number of joint ventures with the private sector involving only the more profitable aspects of its operations. These gestures appeared to be no more than token to thousands of workers on Teesside. By 1982, the future of all UK integrated plants was in doubt, and local concern grew with regard to the future viability of the Teesside complex. Between 1971 and 1978, employment in steel in Teesside had fallen from 29,000 to 23,000 as the new Redcar development replaced some of the older iron and steel plants. By 1981, employment had fallen to 18,000 and by June 1984 to just 7,400.

The reliance of the Teesside economy on iron and steel was highlighted by Hudson and Sadler (1985). They argued that in May 1982, over 10 per cent of the unemployment in the county of Cleveland was immediately attributable to the contraction of the local steel industry. Unemployment was also uneven and highly localised – in some areas the

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proportions were even higher; 22 per cent in Eston, 23 per cent in Redcar and 12 per cent in Middlesbrough (Hudson and Sadler, 1985, p 30). During this period, Cleveland also recorded the highest rates of unemployment in mainland Britain.

Significant changes to working practices on Teesside took place during the 1980s. British Steel proposed systems of contract work where all workers were employed on a short-term basis, and only in the instance of the order books be filled. This system of employment was utilised at the Hartlepool works in the first instance. Such practices had far-reaching effects for local industrial relations. First, the relationship between British Steel and the trade unions changed considerably in that the employer could reorganise production processes to its own advantage. As Hudson and Sadler (1985) argued, a redefinition of class relations on Teesside followed due to the exploitative nature of the sub-contracting of labour. Examples of this included workers being re-hired by British Steel and undertaking the same tasks, but being paid a fraction of their former wages.

The privatisation of the British Steel Corporation in 1988 served further to heighten the insecurities of steel employment on Teesside. Out-migration became common, although male members of a household would often move out to seek temporary employment elsewhere, leaving their families behind. Employment within the steel industry on Teesside fell further, and currently stands at approximately 3,500. Thus, the story of employment since the 1970s has been one of almost unremitting contraction, despite – indeed even partly because of – massive investment in new facilities.

Thus Teesside – whilst not a classic one-industry region – is nevertheless a place that has been heavily shaped by the interactions of capital and labour connected to the iron and

steel industry, in terms of its labourist politics and the more general evolution of the representation of working class interests (for more detailed accounts, see Beynon and Austrin, 1994; Briggs, 1963 and Gladstone, 1976). Between the iron- and steel-making companies of Teesside and the trade unions, long-lasting forms of political representation based upon paternalism and patronage have evolved. Teesside today has a population of around 500,000 (including Middlesbrough, Hartlepool, Stockton-on-Tees and the settlements around Redcar and Lackenby). Yet, the historical influence of steel runs deeper than the 3,500 remaining workers, as its legacies remain deeply embedded in local politics and civil society.

The evolution of the steel industry in south Wales

South Wales was introduced by Minchinton (1964) as follows:

> In the popular mind south Wales was regarded until recently as an area of industrial blight, of massive coal-tips, of smoking chimneys, of dark satanic mills, of crowded working-class housing in narrow valleys which were green once but are green no longer. Just as this picture is ceasing to be true of south Wales today it was not true of south Wales two hundred years ago.
>
> Minchinton, 1964, p 1

The first beginnings of small-scale industrial development in south Wales were witnessed during the latter stages of the sixteenth century. Coal was found near the surface and on the coast near Swansea, and small-scale exports began to Cornwall and Ireland. The first plants to manufacture tinplate were founded in Pontypool around 1720 (see Atkinson and Baber, 1987). Iron companies began to look into the feasibility of setting up furnaces following the discovery of iron ore in the Brecon and Monmouth localities. Yet these

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developments did not affect the social fabric or the environment of the region to any great extent due to their small-scale and widely scattered nature. Of more importance, however, was what these discoveries meant for the future of south Wales (Minchinton, 1964).

The plentiful supply of raw materials throughout south Wales has played a large role in the evolution of the region. Whilst coal – used as both a source of power and as a necessary ingredient of metallurgical processes – was a major raw material responsible for the rapid industrial expansion of south Wales, other important raw materials were also present. Clay ironstones and iron oxide ores were also discovered, and the carboniferous limestone found in south Wales also produced the dolomitic limestone and silica used in iron and steel production. The relatively high rainfall of south Wales (often over 2000 millimetres in some parts) also provided an early source of power to drive water wheels.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, the south Wales iron industry was established, largely using English capital. The early development of this industry was slow, largely due to the isolated nature of Wales in comparison with the remainder of the British economy (Collins and Patten 1971), although canals completed at the beginning of the nineteenth century gave Welsh ironworks (often located in the southern Welsh valleys) direct access to the sea, and they soon expanded to meet the ever-increasing demand. As technological advances improved production methods, open-hearth steel production assumed increased importance. Between 1868 and 1875, open-hearth steel making was developed in Wales. This development radically changed the structure of the Welsh ferrous industry. Iron forges were viewed as obsolete and were either closed or converted into tinplate manufacturing plants. These plants (some of which survive today) evolved into a more specialised industry, and steadily grew apart from the steel industry.

Between 1860 and 1920, some 21 separate steel manufacturing plants were built in south Wales. Technological changes around this time in steel production required the importation of non-phosphoric iron ores, as indigenous supplies contained too much phosphorus for either the Bessemer or Siemens steel making processes. By 1900, 1.3 million tonnes of iron ore were imported annually into south Wales through ports at Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. These richer ores helped steel production to soar and began to herald large-scale changes to the social fabric of the region. At this time, the labour community of south Wales remained highly isolated from the rest of Britain in terms of ideas, habits and traditions (Minchinton, 1964).

The First World War characterised the first period of stagnation of the south Wales economy. Some 150 years of solid growth turned into thirty years of stagnation. For the first time, coal production fell and steel production fell under the control of the British government. New plants were built to produce steel for the war effort. Additionally, Baldwins, Richard Thomas and the Cwmfelin Steel Company amalgamated. After the brief post-war boom, depression and high unemployment characterised south Wales. During the early 1930s, only rearmament and migration seemed to reduce unemployment.

In 1937, Richard Thomas and Co. submitted plans to commission a tinplate plant in Lincolnshire. The workforce in south Wales protested bitterly about this decision and appealed to the management of the Welsh company, who eventually agreed to site the plant in Ebbw Vale instead. Firth, the company chairman, believed it more socially acceptable to build a plant where unemployment was rife, instead of in a comparatively affluent region. Put more simply, historical and sociological factors combined with

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government pressure largely contributed to the judgment to locate the plant in a questionable location (see Baber and Mainwaring, 1988). The site at Ebbw Vale was an inland location, meaning increased transport costs. The unemployed at Ebbw Vale were largely coal miners, and required retraining before they could be usefully employed in the steel industry. Ebbw Vale also had to overcome problems relating to the lack of physical space in which to expand. Minchinton (1964) argued, that had Richard Thomas selected a more suitable site during the 1930s, there would have been no need to build an entirely new works in Llanwern during the 1950s. As Warren (1964) documented, other companies began to move their plants towards the sea, recognising the limitations of inland locations. The Guest Keen Company moved from Dowlais to East Moors in Cardiff in 1930, and Baldwins decided to expand their Port Talbot works during the late 1930s. This project was delayed by the war, but eventually this site became the Abbey Works of the Steel Company of Wales.

The immediate post-1945 period offered a period of hope for south Wales. For example, old mines and outmoded tinplate works were closed and surplus labour tended to seek work elsewhere. Local supplies of iron ore were almost exhausted and imports increased. The valleys in which the industrial history of the region had begun were no longer growth regions. Instead, the coastal strip and especially the areas near major deep water harbours had assumed a new importance (Warren, 1964).

Harris (1971) proposed that Welsh social life has tended to centre on small communities, largely due to the relatively late development of large cities throughout the Principality. The movement of population to the valleys of south Wales during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involved the creation of small, local and often independent

communities. Strong Calvinistic tendencies quickly developed in these new settlements and a great deal of emphasis was placed on education, which was largely overseen by the church. The Welsh also placed a great deal of prominence on family and kin relationships, which has further encouraged the development of local communities and a strong associational life. Trade unions also played an important role in the lives of miners and steel workers, indicating that whilst capital – labour relations played a large part in the formation of Welsh culture, recognition must also be given to other institutions.

As Warren (1964) suggested, south Wales became the leading British steel making district during the 1950s. By the mid-1960s (the period immediately preceding renationalisation), four major integrated works existed in south Wales. Port Talbot, Llanwern and Ebbw Vale produced slabs for rolling into strip, whilst East Moors at Cardiff made billets. Smaller plants existed at Brymbo, Briton Ferry, Llanelli and Gowerton. During this time, some eighty per cent of Welsh steel was exported outside the principality (Warren, 1964), leaving the regional economy highly dependent on external sources. The boom in demand during the 1950s and 1960s was fuelled primarily by increased Welsh demand, as the percentage of exports did not increase.

The Benson Report (British Iron and Steel Federation, 1966) – the precursor to nationalisation – called for the development of three bulk steel making plants to be located in Wales following renationalisation; Port Talbot, East Moors and Llanwern. After the 1967 renationalisation, the British Steel Corporation planned to modernise and increase the capacity of Port Talbot and Llanwern, as well as plants on Teesside, in Scunthorpe and Ravenscraig. Both the Corporate Plan of 1969 and the Ten Year Development Plan of 1973 were hopelessly optimistic. The slump in demand for steel between 1973 and 1975

and the further catastrophic slump in 1980 affected every plant in south Wales. After 1975, severe financial losses suffered by BSC forced the corporation to realise that retrenchment policies would have to be implemented. By 1979, BSC had formulated plans to reduce unwanted capacity and increase plant productivity to the levels of its major world rivals. In short, Welsh manned steel making capacity was to be halved (Baber and Mainwaring, 1988).

Despite these difficulties, the 1960s and early 1970s were viewed with optimism in south Wales:

> *Of all the old depressed areas Wales has been by far the most*
> *successful since the war in attracting new industries and in creating*
> *for itself a new economic base capable of sustained growth in the*
> *future ... the long-term outlook is more hopeful than it has been for*
> *half a century.*
>
> The Guardian, 2nd March 1963

As the quotation testifies, viewed from the perspective of the early 1960s, south Wales appeared to have made major strides towards economic diversification, and reliance on traditional industries such as coal and steel was believed to have been reduced. However, the steel slump of the mid-1970s had major effects on the regional economy. According to George and Mainwaring (1988), job losses in the coal and steel industries in Wales amounted to more than 70,000 between 1976 and 1984, or more than fifty per cent of the growth of unemployment since then. Many other jobs were lost in sectors closely linked to the coal and steel industries. More worryingly, new jobs did not replace those lost. Whilst job creation in south Wales was relatively successful, the survival rates of new enterprises was poor. George and Mainwaring (1988) claimed that set against the 70,000 jobs lost between 1976 and 1984, only 30,000 were created in other sectors. Whereas females

accounted for some six per cent of employment in coal and steel, new employment comprised an even split between males and females, although highly skilled, well-paid male jobs were being replaced by de-skilled, low-paid, non-unionised mainly female jobs. This phenomenon has changed the nature of localised industrial relations. Morgan and Sayer (1985) argued that male dominated unions used their relative positions of strength and traditional pay structures to extract favourable terms and conditions from management. In newer industries, workforces have been forced to comply with flexible employment practices, fluid pay structures and often no-strike agreements.

Following the turbulent times of 1973 to 1980, the 1980s and early 1990s were more settled. Labour productivity within British Steel doubled between 1977 and 1984, almost reaching the European average. Nevertheless, overcapacity remained a problem throughout British Steel. In 1985, it became clear that either Llanwern or Ravenscraig would have to close due to overcapacity of wide strip products. Llanwern survived after more employment reductions, and Ravenscraig finally closed in 1992, despite prolonged and bitter protests. During the 1990s, new working practices and further redundancies lowered steel employment further in south Wales. Steel production in Ebbw Vale has all but ended, the plant due to close in 2001. Whilst steel making plants still exist in Port Talbot and Llanwern, large questions remain over their continued viability, as the further loss of some 2,500 jobs throughout in 2001 and 2002 demonstrates (Sadler, 2001).

Conclusion

The regions of Teesside and south Wales – at first glance – may be viewed as similar entities. Until the latter stages of the eighteenth century, both regions were predominantly

agricultural and associated towns and villages were small in size and population. Since then, both regions have witnessed the rise and decline of coal mining, steel making and chemical industries. Membership levels of trade unions have also fluctuated. More recently, both areas have struggled to come to terms with new flexible working practices and huge increases in unemployment. As their traditional industrial bases have declined, policies to facilitate economic renewal have rarely succeeded in replacing the jobs lost, leaving serious social and economic problems. It is also clear – despite the devastating job losses and subsequent promises and endeavours of regional revitalisation – that the steel industry remains an important contributor to both the regional economy and culture of Teesside and south Wales. In subsequent paragraphs, I briefly explore the socio-cultural implications of this economic history.

Sadler and Thompson (2001) argued that the influence of the steel industry runs deeply through local politics and society of Teesside. Local steel production was largely dominated by a small number of firms, which developed pervasive and long-lasting forms of political representation built on paternalism and patronage (see also Sadler, 1990). Teesside was fashioned as a series of discrete settlements – contiguous company towns – characterised by a particular kind of capital – labour consensus that was intrinsically both accomodational and localist. The founders of these company towns played a leading role in a range of civic affairs and arguably laid the foundations for the culture of the region. During these early years, iron producers such as Henry Bolckow and John Vaughan dominated the town council, meaning that effective power on Teesside resided in a small group of men who controlled the local economy. Throughout its history, the powers of patronage over many of the local social and political institutions of Teesside should not be underestimated. Even today, this uneven history remains deeply inscribed on the

industrial culture of Teesside (Sadler, 1990). The disproportionate ways in which these actions of capital affected the institutional composition of the Teesside economy are mirrored in a whole variety of different ways and have had direct implications for the constantly-evolving industrial culture of the region.

The socio-cultural aspects of life in south Wales are somewhat different to those on Teesside. Traditions of trade unionism, family life, religion and regional solidarity appear to be more engrained in the regional culture of south Wales than on Teesside. Adamson (1997) argued that trade unionism was a central feature of Welsh political tradition, with early forms of organisation emerging before those on Teesside. These collective traditions, according to Francis and Smith (1980, p 1), were characterised of 'compromise as well as of defiance' towards management. Whilst the centres of population in south Wales are spatially fragmented, the working population as a unit tended to embrace institutional continuity whilst constantly questioning its own creations (Francis and Smith, 1980). These factors combined together to create a southern Welsh tradition of radical working class politics that have largely survived the dramatic job losses of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Adamson, 1998). Indeed, he argued that:

> [the distinctive social culture of south Wales] *remains a key component of the self-identity of the region and that it contributes significantly to new strategies of collectivism and mutuality which are emerging in community-based organisations. Whilst trades unions are not organisationally important in the emerging strategies of the working class, the culture, traditions and values of traditional unionism are an important influence.*
>
> Adamson, 1998, p 3

Thus, there is at least a tacit base with which to argue that Teesside and south Wales display varied socio-cultural characteristics. In social terms, Teesside appears to be

somewhat fragmented, whilst south Wales – at least in terms of ideologies within trade union organisation – demonstrates a certain degree of homogeneity. Both regions have been classified by Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996) as 'heartlands' of British trade union activity, yet their diverse characteristics provide a pertinent backdrop through which to analyse the relationship between the socio-cultural practices of trade unions and the construction of the uneven geographies of capitalism.

In the empirical account that follows in the next four chapters, I focus on how the historical capacities, traditions and actions of the ISTC have developed across these potentially contrasting steel-producing regions of the UK. These chapters incorporate analysis of interviews with a wide variety of union officials from both the ISTC and other trade unions operating within Teesside and south Wales, exploring the ways in which workplace-based social processes have evolved, and how they have impacted on (and been fashioned by) the broader community.

Chapter Six: Capital – Labour Relations in Steel

Introduction

This chapter analyses the varied ways in which different structures of ISTC action have both shaped – and been affected – by the actions of capital. Whilst the three key moments analysed throughout this chapter took their initial structure from the actions of capital, I make the case that the significant ensuing implications were affected by the actions of the ISTC in the two case study regions in a variety of different ways.

This chapter has three parts. First, it concentrates on the 1967 nationalisation of the majority of the British iron and steel industry, charting and analysing how the ISTC reacted and changed following the more centralised nature of the steel industry that ensued. Second, the effects of the 1980 national steel strike will be analysed in the two case study regions. This event was the first large-scale industrial action that the ISTC had sponsored and was a significant departure from historical policy. Third, the 1988 re-privatisation of the British Steel Corporation will be considered within the light of the decentralisation of nationally-based negotiations that the 1967 nationalisation had appeared to encourage. The chapter concludes by arguing that whilst the three key events analysed in the chapter have patently influenced ISTC behaviour, the courses of action pursued by the union – both as national and local entities – have taken shape from, and actively gone on to shape the regional industrial cultures of both Teesside and south Wales in complimenting and – more perceptibly – contrasting ways.

The 1967 nationalisation of the British steel industry

The 1967 nationalisation of the British iron and steel sector only covered fourteen companies. The firms brought under the control of the newly established British Steel Corporation (BSC) were the larger companies (those with a capacity of an annual liquid steel output in excess of 475,000 tonnes (for more detail, see Upham, 1997). 1967 to 1970 was also an important time for the ISTC as many new faces were welcomed into the higher echelons of the union structure as older members retired. A new General Secretary – Dai Davies – was appointed, alongside wholesale personnel changes in Divisional Offices in south Wales, Scotland, south Yorkshire, the north west and the midlands. The late 1960s was therefore a challenging time for the ISTC, as a new era of representation had begun, in terms of events both internal and external to the union.

Nationalisation and the national ISTC

The 1967 birth of BSC was a key event concerning the overall evolution of the ISTC. The power-base of the ISTC saw the nationalisation of the majority of the British iron and steel industry as an opportunity to increase its own standing in terms of worker representation, especially at national-level bargaining:

> *Nationalisation gave the organisation new opportunities. Before, there was various agreements from varying bodies. You had the Midlands Wages Board, the Sheet Trade Board, the Heavy Steel Board, all these bodies. They tried to rationalise the whole of that for the first time. It was a great opportunity to move the industry forward in terms of better terms of employment and all the rest of it. ... It reinforced our centralised structure to a very large extent, as negotiations took place with the British Steel Corporation on a national basis.*
>
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

The ISTC seized the opportunity presented to it with both hands. The leadership saw nationalisation (and the associated increase of national-level bargaining) as a means to standardise employment practices and conditions nation-wide. In terms of the internal union structure, national committees suddenly came to the fore:

> Nationalisation affected the structure in the sense that we suddenly had a number of national committees. For example, the Central Negotiating Committee, prior to nationalisation, used to meet with groups, like the north eastern steelworkers, and in south Wales they had a similar organisation. Just to give you one example of the effect of this, in south Wales you could have a situation where a pipe-fitter would be classified as a skilled person, whereas in the north east they were classified as being semi-skilled. Therefore they were controlled by the ISTC, rather than the engineering union. So the rates of pay for a pipe-fitter in south Wales were different to those in the north east. The unification came about after nationalisation because British Steel set about a campaign of centralising everything. The union went along with such changes. The General Secretary at the time, Dai Davies, felt it was a better way to control the various aspects of the members interests and the interests of the union.
>
> Ken Clarke, former national officer

The *modus operandi* of the ISTC was significantly altered following nationalisation, from pluralistic and fragmented patterns of bargaining towards a more integrated and homogeneous system:

> Nationalisation changed the emphasis of negotiation. The direct importance of specific negotiations lessened, as negotiations moved towards some sort of more centralised structure.
>
> Brian Connolly, former divisional officer, south Wales

The late 1960s and early 1970s could therefore be characterised as a period of fundamental change for the ISTC. The union appeared keen to exert control over its membership on a uniform basis, and the new style of negotiations introduced by BSC suited the ISTC and its centralising aims. Both the ISTC and BSC viewed the legacy of

the fragmented craft- and regionally-based system of decentralised pay negotiations as an obstacle to achieving a level playing field for all steel workers, and for the ISTC leadership to exert higher levels of control over its divisions.

The majority of interviewees saw the publicly-owned industry as a benefit to the union, and indeed viewed the immediate post-1967 era with a great deal of optimism, believing that a more centralised union (in terms of negotiating power) would afford the union a higher profile with both the government and BSC:

> *Nationalisation improved our situation. We looked forward to better negotiations, a better industry. It was the first time that our union got high level negotiations*
>
> Bill Sirs, former General Secretary

> [Following on from nationalisation], *you then had the first real attempt to structure bargaining, in effect a newer way to work with British Steel.*
>
> Brian Connolly, former divisional officer, south Wales

High-ranking officials of the ISTC saw the formation of BSC as an improvement to the fragmented – and often unruly – system of bargaining that existed before:

> *Nationalisation wasn't a problem for the ISTC. The important thing is that we had negotiated with the 14 major companies as a body for years. It was basically the Sheet Trade Board, as it was then, and the Iron and Steel Trades Employers Federation. They just continued on* [after nationalisation], *but the difference was we continued to meet the same people under different guises.*
>
> Peter Lightfoot, former divisional officer, various regions

Ron Wilson argued that the change to the newer set of negotiations did not occur overnight, but was more of a gradual transition:

> *Nationalisation brought in national negotiations, it brought in new agreements for staff, it made working with a lot of people a lot easier, everyone had to follow the same instructions. It was a*

> *gradual process, I suppose it took about three years to bring in the new terms and so on.*
>
> Ron Wilson, former national officer

The days of nationalisation witnessed high levels of ISTC membership, and were arguably the most successful days of the union in terms of strength of member representation. Membership of the ISTC peaked in 1970 at almost 134,000, as belonging to a trade union became a taken-for-granted aspect of working for BSC. Both BSC and the national leadership of the ISTC saw the 1967 nationalisation as an opportunity to develop 'a modern and competitive steel industry' (Dai Davies, ISTC General Secretary, 1967-75, cited from Upham, 1997, p 82).

Whilst the economic boom of the late 1960s brought success to BSC and appeared to increase the bargaining power of the ISTC, the chapter now turns to an examination of how the nationalisation of the steel industry impacted upon the workers in south Wales and Teesside, and how in turn the union sought to use the modified economic and social climate to further its own aims.

Views from the regions of the 1967 nationalisation

In both regions, nationalisation was welcomed by rank-and-file members who were active in the union during the 1960s and 1970s. In south Wales in particular, ISTC members believed that a publicly-owned steel industry would be more socially aware to the needs of its workers, offering increased wages and vastly improved working conditions:

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> *When I look back, the consequences for British Steel were the changes in its charter so that its primary goal was not simply to make money. It was given certain social obligations.*
>
> Ken Williams, branch secretary, Port Talbot

ISTC members in south Wales also recognised the local problems of the steel industry. Working conditions and wages under public ownership had been sufficient, but many employees believed that the long-term lack of investment in the industry by former private owners would be corrected by the new publicly-owned company:

> *I do remember people talking about the times of private ownership. There was always a certain amount of affection or nostalgia for the old days, but there was a lot of the younger element, myself included, who were looking forward to a publicly owned future, seeing it as a panacea to the ills of the steel industry that had taken place up until that point.*
>
> Alwyn Jones, divisional officer, south Wales

On Teesside, opinions were more mixed as to the effects of this key watershed date. Most interviewees claimed that few major effects were noted on a local basis, although the minor changes were generally welcomed:

> *Nationalisation brought about better works consultation with all the unions. We started having works committees, where the unions would meet with the management every month. The job of chairing the committees was carried out alternately by management and unions. There was also more contact with management. Management listened more to what we had to say.*
>
> John Batstone, former lay member, Redcar

Such comments indicate that the strength of the union was increased by the creation of the nationalised industry. Management on Teesside tended to listen to local union officials and branches, and in turn the union increased its own standing because of its outlook towards management. Co-operation between the local branch structure of the ISTC and BSC increased, due to the different nature of the relationship and the increased frequency

of their meetings. Despite the new national composition of BSC, it consequently appeared as if the ISTC and BSC became more heavily involved in local collaborative behaviour as an improvement between management – union relations was witnessed. This new local collaborative behaviour did not stretch to negotiations, as the overall centralisation of negotiations and dilution of the fragmented bargaining system was confirmed by a local ISTC branch secretary:

> When it was a nationalised industry the business literally came together and negotiated the wage claim at one time. I was on that committee. On that committee there was four guys from the north-east plus EC members, who went to London, I think it was in Grosvenor Square. They had a cinema downstairs and 80 or 90 of us [from all steel-producing regions of Britain], we would sit and negotiate the wage claim. There'd be a representative from every plant there.
>
> Ted Markham, branch secretary, Hartlepool

The centralisation of negotiations also affected workers in south Wales. There was little objection to this from rank-and-file members, especially since some of the new national conditions of employment included improved holiday, wage and pension schemes:

> Nationalisation had quite a profound effect on the local activities of the union. We were getting documents from London outlining the way things were going to go in the future. For example, a national agreement on pay and holidays came out very quickly. That was all-embracing, everyone in the nationalised steel industry was incorporated into this and would be governed by it. This set the tone from the beginning.
>
> Ken Wellington, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

Whilst the ethos of the British Steel Corporation became more uniform and nationally-based, local systems of bargaining remained important, and often were not superseded for several years, due to enduring legacies from the former times of independent ownership:

> The nationalisation was a two-pronged thing. The local system was well-established, it had been for a long time dating back to the old days of private ownership. There were local bodies here but there

was also national input too, which became increasingly important in the early 1970s.
                    Dai Ferris, vice-chair, Port Talbot multi-union committee

This increasing national input following nationalisation was used by the ISTC as a tool to structure bargaining in a manner that was seen as being beneficial to the union and its members. The negotiations included representatives from all divisions of activity (both EC members and lay officials) who met frequently to discuss national agreements. However, the full-time Divisional Officer in charge of Division Two (Teesside) during the 1970s stated that there was nevertheless some form of local decision-making that was important to regional union activity:

> *Nationalisation meant that local negotiations were conducted in a different manner. You had the national negotiations, and then x per cent would go to a local level to negotiate to bring in the new terms and conditions agreement. So for a while, the difference in terms and conditions between works and inter-works remained until everyone fell into line. Therefore to some there was no change because they were already on the new system before it came out. The only big difference was the 35 hour week. That was new throughout the then British Steel Corporation. There might have been an odd place, but overall it was a big step. That would be then costed on a local basis against the national calculations and then it was put into effect.*
>   Roy Bishop, former divisional officer, Teesside

It is clear that even after nationalisation, the Divisional Officer, EC members and branch officials still enjoyed some degree of autonomy within their respective division, works or branch.

Throughout the history of the ISTC, the individual branch has provided the backbone of workplace representation to grassroots members. This system of representation was – by definition – highly localised and the constitution of the ISTC placed much decision-making power with individual branches. An examination of how this powerful branch structure

reacted to the challenges of nationalisation is therefore important. On both Teesside and in south Wales, each individual branch retained some localised autonomy, despite moves towards national systems of bargaining. Few changes were witnessed in terms of day-to-day activities, as this example from south Wales demonstrates:

> The structural changes involved the negotiating processes. The branch itself was always autonomous and it ran itself the way it was always run. As officials our job changed in some ways because negotiating committees were set up which took away the power of individual branches to negotiate their own terms and conditions and so on. After BSC came in as far as we were concerned we had national agreements then and within these agreements we went through processes such as job evaluation and working measures, incentive schemes and that type of thing. These things, whilst national, were negotiated locally. Committees were set up in these works to negotiate for this works alone.
>
> Roderick Williams, branch secretary, Llanwern

Structurally, the ISTC branch did not change in any shape or form following nationalisation, although it did retain much of its power. Even under nationalised terms for pay and conditions, certain forms of local malleability remained within the bargaining system, the responsibility for which remained with the local branch. Whilst individual branch autonomy may have been eroded by all-encompassing agreements, each area of the works and their respective committees (comprised of local branch officials) continued to shape and guide the working culture of the plant. On Teesside, the situation was similar, with the effects of the nationalisation taking time to filter through to branches:

> I don't think that 1967 had any major local bearing on us whatsoever. On the plant nothing really changed. National terms and conditions changed, but for the branches on the ground, it didn't affect us at all. I can't remember any significant changes.
>
> Colin Wildon, branch secretary, Lackenby concast

In both south Wales and on Teesside, few changes were therefore witnessed in terms of the structure of the branch within the normal practices of local representation inside the

works. Perhaps the most important overall change to ISTC activity during the late 1960s was the introduction of a social, political and economic climate that was more conducive to trade union activity. It has been illustrated that few structural changes took place in local union activity, but the important point here is that during the 1970s, the ISTC was operating in a favourable climate in which trade unions were both respected and consulted on the well-being of their members. There was increased co-operation between management and workers, and a different nature of capital – labour relations resulted, particularly in south Wales:

> *Nationalisation gave greater legitimacy to the trade union movement. The labour government gave us an awareness and also a right to say have an input into the future of our industry. To some extent, this legacy continues to this day, as some of us still talk of 'our industry', even today. There definitely was, without a shadow of a doubt, the feeling of self-determination.*
> Ken Williams, branch secretary, Port Talbot

The ethos of co-determination within the works and improved capital – labour relations afforded the ISTC an even more influential voice on committees and consultation bodies, whether national or local. Membership of the ISTC grew, and levels of interest in trade unionism in general increased. Some in south Wales recognised that the power of the union was often absolute:

> *During the times of nationalised industry, it was the case where management had to approach the union with a view to change anything. They [management] also had to give good reasons for wanting to change things.*
> Paul Rhys, former ISTC lay member, Port Talbot

During the years of public ownership, the ISTC therefore could be characterised as an institution that seized the opportunity to increase its standing, particularly in south Wales. The union itself did not have to fight for increased representation – that seemed to appear

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automatically in the political and social climate of the time. The methods of negotiating and levels of hegemony that the union enjoyed during the 1970s re-defined the ISTC and, to a large extent, structured the nature of the engagement between the union and the local economy. These changes helped create a distinctive south Welsh identity to the ISTC, where there was a greater belief in the principles of solidaristic local trade union activity than on Teesside. These high levels of cohesive trade union organisation within the works and the ISTC's belief that collective activity would benefit the company, the union and the local economy in turn served to increase the differences between steel workers in south Wales and other parts of the country.

On Teesside, there appeared to be less interest from ISTC members in the wider social and political arena. The largest effect of nationalisation of the industry was an increase in general interest in trade unionism in – somewhat conversely – an individualistic manner. Grassroots members appeared to view nationalisation as a means to get a fairer deal for themselves through a standardisation of employment practices, believing that their wages and conditions were not as advantageous as their contemporaries in other regions. Membership of the union grew and more and more workers within the steel industry began to take an earnest interest in the organisation of labour:

> *Back in 1967, I've got to admit that I was just about kicking off my real interest in unionism. When I was originally in Redcar, there was no activity in the union, all you did was see the union official once a week and you'd give him your subs. There was never branch meetings, anything like that. You didn't even know the officials or anything. So in 1967, I think it was the back end of the '60s when I started to get involved, I noticed that people were actively encouraged to become involved. Things like branch meetings started. So I started to go to branch meetings and get interested. But in terms of structural changes, nationalisation never changed us one little bit.*
> John Moffat, former lay member, Teesside

Nationalisation appeared to have few effects upon local union activity on Teesside, apart from allowing the various branches of the ISTC to have a little more input with management decisions. Nationalisation appeared to fuel interest amongst workers to become increasingly active members of the ISTC, which resulted in a stronger local trade union structure and allowed the union even more scope to be an important actor in the industrial culture of the region, albeit in a slightly less solidaristic and place-based manner than in south Wales.

The 1980 national steel strike – voices from the regions

By the early 1970s, the British steel industry began to feel the effects of a slump in domestic and world-wide demand. Severe job cuts within the industry were threatened and the election of the Conservative government in 1979 appeared to heighten fears of substantial job losses. For the ISTC, 1980 proved to be a key watershed date, witnessing a protracted spell of industrial action, the first official national strike that the ISTC had sanctioned since 1926. Following an EC vote, work throughout BSC ceased completely on January 2nd, 1980, due to the government's and BSC's refusal to review its zero per cent pay increase offer. The ISTC had met with the National Union of Blastfurnacemen and agreed simultaneous strike action within BSC. Other minor unions connected with the iron and steel industry soon followed. According to the current General Secretary, the ISTC had correctly judged the mood of the country (and beyond) in calling the strike:

> *I don't think that the Tories realised that the ISTC, which hadn't called a strike since 1926, could actually galvanise as much support as it did for three months. We closed British Steel, then the private sector came out, so yes, it was a defining moment.*
>
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

The International Metalworkers Federation (based in Geneva) immediately backed the ISTC action, as did the three main British rail unions. The TUC was concerned that the steel strike might grow into a general strike. Private iron and steel companies external to BSC joined the strike on January 16th, 1980. The strike became increasingly bitter, but the EC called for all BSC members to return to work on April 3rd, 1980. The ISTC had been largely defeated due to the stance of BSC and the non-flexible nature of the newly elected government. Consequently, crippling job losses were witnessed. Such job losses were reflected in ISTC membership.

The elongated and bitter strike of 1980 had a large effect on union structures throughout the ISTC. This section explores changes to the branch structure, the increase in works-level bargaining and the inauguration of multi-union bargaining. These changes occurred on an uneven basis over space, and definite differences between south Wales and Teesside can be identified.

In south Wales, there was a general consensus that the strike had been fought on the issue of pay, when the more concerning issue to members was their long-term job security. Immediately prior to the strike, the union and management had been deadlocked:

> *MacGregor* [the chairman of BSC] *was daring us, in effect, to take strike action. Not in so many words, but by his attitude. There was no way that we were going to have a national award, or even a local one, which is what we wanted. There was absolutely nothing forthcoming.*
> Hanbury Williams, former EC member, south Wales

Within the changing political climate of the time, the accepted union policy of stipulating national pay awards appeared to be under threat. Even when local deals for improved wages and long-term guarantees on job security were discussed throughout the plants in south Wales, management did not seem interested. Nevertheless, grassroots members of the ISTC in south Wales understood that their industry was about to go through a period of transition because of past performance, but they felt contempt towards their managers because of the way they were challenged to take industrial action:

> *We'd had enough of management and the government. It was time* [to take action]. *Although the industry was in a mess, make no mistake, we were in the shit, we hadn't been losing money for that long.*
> Cyril Jenkins, committee man, BOS plant, Port Talbot

The bitterness of the aftermath of the strike in south Wales witnessed further recognition from union members that the strike should have been fought on the grounds of future employment guarantees. A small pay increase was awarded to workers, but the union had been comprehensively beaten on issues of job retention and morale was therefore at a low ebb:

> *After the strike, we had the pay increase, in that we won the battle, but I think that we lost the war. That's how I'd put it. Because after the strike, people had been out for thirteen weeks, and they were coming straight back.*
> Gareth Howells, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

Whilst morale was very low, a conciliatory attitude was adopted between the union and management in south Wales. Local ISTC divisional officers ordered that the works be kept in good working order throughout the strike to ensure an efficient return to work. Some of the striking members disliked seeing their contemporaries reporting for safety and maintenance duty, and such actions caused localised splits throughout the union:

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There was a lot of resentment from people on strike towards the workers that were working with union permission as safety workers. We damped the furnaces down, as they still had to be monitored and so on when they were not being used. There was a lot of resentment from the workers in general – all the entrances were picketed, and I had a job to get through the lines without someone calling me a bastard. I thought that was a bit naughty – we had to keep the works in good order for when we went back to work.
Terry Jones, committee man, BOS plant, Port Talbot

There was evidently a consensus that there would be a general return to the steel plants at some point in the future and the union felt it had a duty to protect a safe return to work, even if this policy was unpopular to certain more militant groups within the local ISTC structure. This conciliatory attitude largely resulted from the ineffectual efforts of the south Wales ISTC to resist further job losses:

Some of the leading lights in the local ISTC [in south Wales] at this time were quite prepared to sign anything. Their argument was that they were fearful that the works would shut. They felt that things were moving above their head – there was this fear that if agreements were not signed the works would close. The company were very keen to permeate this fear throughout the union.
Gareth Howells, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

Because of the traditionally high levels of accord between management and unions in south Wales, British Steel had to put little effort into filling the workers with trepidation for their futures. Such sentiments were more obvious in south Wales than on Teesside.

An analysis of the role of the branch structure illustrates additional regional difference between local structures of ISTC action. The aftermath of the strike altered the branch structure of the union in both regions, but in markedly differing ways. On Teesside, the local organisation of the ISTC was altered by a rejuvenation of local activists:

There were no structural changes, apart from having to tighten up on [union] money. We had spent a lot of money, millions in fact [on the

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strike]. *But, the structure carried on, it brought forward quite a lot of new activists. There were lots of local activists that came to the fore, and got popular support. There was a new breed of delegates and branch secretaries. A lot of people came to the fore, most often a lot younger.*
Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

Similar to events that followed nationalisation in 1967, the aftermath of the strike introduced a large change in the personality base of the ISTC on Teesside concerning local branch officials and representatives. Older campaigners were replaced by younger, more energetic branch secretaries who were prepared to accept more responsibility for their branch and tread a more fragmented path concerning local industrial relations:

The strike cleared out the older people. People who had been trade unionists for a long time were generally replaced by younger blood. Also, branches became much more responsible for what they were doing, rather than following the national structures from the national union. Branches tended to ignore these national ideals, and get on with things locally as best as they could.
Mick Mannion, EC member, Teesside

The strike was also perceived by the majority of the interviewees to have achieved little in terms of improving terms and conditions for ISTC members on a local level. Nevertheless, the local structure of the ISTC on Teesside was modified by a significant change to the union officials:

The strike didn't achieve much. The local feelings were strong, but when things were finally settled, there wasn't much that was actually solved. Afterwards, there was a large change in the union personnel. In the past, it was dominated by the old labour traditionalists, but we had to change.
Malcolm Harker, former lay member, Hartlepool mill

These new union officials viewed a localised path of bargaining as a suitable way to conduct union activity. As the previous years of public ownership and older, more experienced branch secretaries were not perceived to have achieved much for the ISTC

and its members on Teesside, the newer crop of branch secretaries notably decided to conduct bargaining in an increasingly fragmented fashion, in contrast to their contemporaries in the principality.

In south Wales, the importance of the branch structure of the ISTC diminished notably after the strike. The return to work, after some three months of industrial action, proved to be a turning point for this region of ISTC activity. Whilst no structural changes within each individual branch took place, the overall standing of the union within the plant appeared to change dramatically:

> *It* [the strike] *weakened the branch structure. The local branch has always been the lynchpin of the ISTC. But then when you don't have branch bargaining and you have collective bargaining done at the centre of the works then individual branch officers become less answerable for their actions than they had been previously.*
> Ken Williams, branch secretary, Port Talbot

Instead of the individual ISTC branch being fundamentally autonomous in its own right, bargaining within the works in south Wales suddenly began to move towards the level of the works, incorporating branches together in one large group. Similar to on Teesside, many well-known local ISTC officials began to leave the industry and the union, although in direct contrast, the loss of these representatives was lamented:

> *The characters within the union all went after the strike. It was a real watershed not just in terms of personnel – there were many great characters who left the industry.*
> Roger Moore, EC member, south Wales

New and inexperienced branch officials on Teesside attempted to tread their own paths of fragmented bargaining, whilst in south Wales, their untested contemporaries viewed this inexperience has a hindrance to the furthering of ISTC aims:

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Because a lot of older workers left following the strike, it meant that there were a lot of trade union officials, like myself, who were thrown from being Vice-Chairman of the branch right into the hot-seat, into the negotiations scene. There was therefore a lot of inexperience in the works in terms of ISTC activity.

Ron Walters, chairman, multi-union committee, Port Talbot

Consequently, differences were apparent during the early 1980s between the ISTC in both regions. On Teesside, the aftermath of the strike produced more fragmented union activity within the works. In south Wales, conversely, the weakening of individual branches due to the inexperience of officials largely strengthened the resolve of the overall structure of the union within the plant to bond together and take stock of a wider framework of activity and strategy. Moves towards plant-based bargaining were also encouraged by British Steel management:

After 1980, management adopted the idea that you could always measure performance by quantifying it on a works level. So they brought in this lump sum bonus and conditional on this was the meeting of certain targets at works level. So there was a direct link between productivity and what you were earning. There was always the feeling after 1980 that you could measure and quantify performance on a plant basis in terms of tonnage and manning and so on. So there was always a threat against the workforce in that management played one works off against another. It had happened before, but after 1980 it got worse.

Gareth Howells, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

In south Wales, management used threats of plant closure to increase productivity, which further enhanced inter-plant competition:

Each plant became more concerned with its own interest rather than looking at the wider picture. We had the threat elbowed at us for years that either Llanwern or Port Talbot was to close. If one didn't perform then it would go. After the privatisation the fear factor increased, no doubt about that at all.

Terry Jones, committee man, BOS plant, Port Talbot

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As a consequence, each *plant* became increasingly introverted in south Wales, whilst each *branch* on Teesside started to look after its own affairs at a smaller scale rather than consider options for the plant as a whole. Because of the customarily higher levels of agreement between management and workers in south Wales than on Teesside, British Steel had to put little effort into impregnating the union members with trepidation for their futures. Territorial chauvinism began to permeate the national and local union structure, leading respectively to both inter-plant and inter-regional uneasiness:

> *When you have a national system you look at everybody. Everyone*
> *was inclusive. So when you got back to the local level you started*
> *looking at your own plant. Therefore you tended to become more*
> *parochial.*
> Peter McKinn, former EC member, south Wales

A further change to traditional union structures of bargaining was introduced by British Steel immediately following the strike that served to increase the plant-based nature of union bargaining in south Wales. The formation of the multi-union slimline committees in each plant served to reinforce the notion of plant specific negotiations:

> *After the strike, there was a more collective feeling. In other words,*
> *the individual branch was not the fully-autonomous unit it once was.*
> *The autonomy bit was weakening, so there was a great awareness*
> *that, whereas prior to the strike each branch would run it's own*
> *course, after the strike there was more pressure put on branches to*
> *conform collectively for the good of the works.*
> Tony McCarthy, EC member, south Wales

The ISTC has always been a rather elitist union, and has felt it should – by default – take the lead in all negotiations. The obligation to work closely with other trade unions was not greeted with enthusiasm in south Wales:

> *Bringing craft and production together on the multi union was an*
> *enormous task. Everyone was very jealous of their own autonomy*
> *for a long time as they'd had it for decades within their own union,*

never mind between their own branches. But, it was achieved, it wasn't easy, and the difficulty was that once all unions were together, elections had to be held. ... The ISTC obviously in Port Talbot was the biggest union. We had quite a lot of say of who should get which position. The ISTC and the NUB worked very closely and insisted that we had the biggest shout anyhow.

John Thomas, lay member, Port Talbot

In the view of the ISTC, as long as other unions within the plant realised and accepted that the ISTC should have the right to take the lead in negotiations, relationships would remain harmonious. Therefore a combination of directives from management and the traditions of localised ISTC activity in the plant led to tensions between a variety of trade unions. The culture of the ISTC that had been socially constructed over generations led to such elitist attitudes. Specialist skills were passed on from generation to generation (and therefore requiring an expert union presence) and were based upon high levels of unionisation. Such legacies drove the ISTC consistently to claim that it could provide the most comprehensive and proficient representation of labour in steel. Until 1980, such features had historically structured the nature of engagement between the ISTC and its competitors in the field of union representation.

Further regional union activity was witnessed immediately after the strike. Following the return to work, suspicion grew throughout ISTC branches in both regions that varied regional wage and productivity agreements were being struck with management. For example, there was a belief on Teesside that certain agreements had been made in south Wales that would prove detrimental to steel making in the north east. Nevertheless, there was a resentful understanding of why such actions took place. John Moffat, a former lay member on Teesside, noted that the plight of ISTC members in south Wales was well understood throughout the union:

> *In south Wales, the workers tend to get shat on from a high height. We* [on Teesside] *were quite surprised at the speed that they* [the ISTC branches and works committees] *could do their negotiations. They would always accept the first offer. I would think that the north east isn't the pushover that the Welsh sometimes seem to be. Perhaps it's because they feel that they've had their souls ripped out because of the loss of the coal industry and they're terrified about losing the steel industry.*
>
> John Moffat, former lay member, Redcar

This fragmentation of bargaining appeared to have been made possible due to the splitting up of BSC, perhaps due to changes in the culture of the management of the company, as a former branch secretary on Teesside explained:

> *The ethos of management changed. We suspected that the people* [both management and local ISTC officials] *in south Wales had an agreement before the strike started. They made an agreement very quickly immediately following the strike. Everything that they agreed to appeared in our agreement. Some of their stuff didn't suit us and we wanted it changed. British Steel quickly became masters at playing one off against another, as in different plants and regions.*
>
> John Batstone, former lay member, Redcar

There is a definite perception amongst workers on Teesside that traditions of conciliation and deference towards management exist within the ISTC in south Wales, suggesting that different cultures of trade union activity exist and react in varied ways to the fluid nature of capitalist activity.

This assessment of the role of the ISTC during and following the 1980 steel strike has demonstrated several tangible cases of regional difference. First, opinions from south Wales clearly indicated that the strike was fought on the wrong grounds. Such sentiments were not nearly so apparent on Teesside. Second, a slight deference during the strike and a distinct conciliatory attitude after the strike towards management was witnessed in south Wales. Attitudes such as these were not found on Teesside. Third – and perhaps most

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importantly – significant changes in the union structure took place during the early 1980s. On Teesside, the new crop of branch leaders that replaced redundant or retired officials appeared to support a devolved or fragmented union structure within each plant, taking full advantage of the age-old ISTC tradition of branch autonomy. In contrast, branches in south Wales tended to operate alongside each other to forge a plant identity. This was especially apparent in Port Talbot following the introduction of multi-union bargaining, which appeared to afford even more impetus to the local ISTC to pursue a plant-level agenda.

The events analysed in latter paragraphs of this section lead directly to the next key date in the history of the ISTC, that of the 1988 privatisation of the British Steel Corporation. This privatisation was seen as a further upheaval to the British steel industry and the beginning of the dismantling of national negotiations, in favour of plant- and regional-level bargaining.

The effects of the 1988 privatisation of British Steel

The British Steel Corporation was privatised in 1988 and was renamed 'British Steel'. The structure and the *modus operandi* of the ISTC was once again affected by this further upheaval to the steel industry. As the previous two sections of this chapter have discussed, the national-level negotiations that were preferred during the 1970s – and to some extent during the early 1980s – were dismantled over time, in favour of plant- and section-level bargaining. Following privatisation, British Steel activity divided into the Long- and Strip Products groups. Scotland, Teesside and south Yorkshire largely comprised the

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Long Products Group, whilst south Wales provided the make-up of the Strip Products Group. Despite the apparent decentralisation of bargaining that took place during the mid-1980s, the ISTC still appeared to view British Steel as a centralised concern, as a former national official argued:

> *We were still very much centrally controlled. [Although] we did have a fair private sector, largely in the West Midlands, basically re-rolling mills and that sort of thing, but overall we still were very British Steel orientated, well, very British Steel Corporation orientated, hence we were still very centralised on a national basis.*
> Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

The ISTC adjusted itself to the changes connected with privatisation in a manner which accepted that it would have to revert to more decentralised forms of bargaining:

> *Privatisation led to changes in the negotiating structures. British Steel did not want national pay and conditions settlements, nor procedures that led local negotiation breakdowns to neutral committees possibly then to national sub-committees. They wanted problems sorted out locally. The political climate ensured that they could use the utmost pressure in pushing their intentions. The industry, following negotiations with the union, in the main, reverted back to a similar kind of representation that had existed prior to nationalisation. For example, we again have boards representing almost all employment conditions relating to the largest groups such as Heavy Steel and the Strip Trade. Others such as engineering have developed.*
> Ron Wilson, former national officer

In addition to the change in bargaining, the ISTC also faced changes in how British Steel viewed other unions that represented other workers in the industry. These changes were not welcomed by the ISTC, as suddenly other unions began to assert their power in local forms of bargaining:

> *The ISTC used to negotiate on its own before privatisation. We were the yardstick for the rest of the industry. We always were. But that ended after privatisation. I think that nowadays things are more decentralised. I've never found that a good thing in negotiation. ... When you've got these other unions involved, they all think that*

they've got to say something, they're always sticking their oar in, and what it means is that you don't have the same sort of negotiations.
Bill Sirs, former General Secretary

The privatised British Steel seemingly preferred more inclusive and localised forms of bargaining to which the ISTC had to adapt.

When the central negotiating committee with British Steel split up into various businesses [after privatisation in 1988], there were different negotiating groups then, so there wasn't the central unity that there used to be.
Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

Encouraged by these changes and seizing their chance, rival unions also grew in strength. Viewing this local empowerment of other unions with suspicion, the ISTC appeared to devolve more power in the form of negotiating rights to divisional officers, who had to increase their knowledge-base.

I don't doubt that the union became more decentralised as a response to the decentralisation of the industry.
John Foley, former divisional officer, south Wales

Part of the decentralisation of bargaining stemmed from the decision of British Steel to divide the industry into product divisions:

There was a great debate in the union concerning devolved bargaining. British Steel wanted to create Long- and Strip Products, as in two divisions. The debate within the union was whether we would accept this, or whether we would not participate in the new structures. We didn't agree with it, as we thought it would lead to anarchy, as in the Scargill model of decentralised negotiations, with all sorts of small disputes hither and dither. Eventually, British Steel decided to go for it. If there's a dispute at local level, you bring in a full-time officer, if that fails, the branch has the right to take things further. The board structure, with the various representatives, the General Secretary and other EC members would oversee the problem and its resolution. So it caused all sorts of difficulties.
Mick Leahy, General Secretary

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Plans for the future of British Steel were not welcomed by the leadership of the ISTC, as it believed that its power would be diluted. However, others argued that single-level negotiations for all steel employees would not have been suitable for the newly-decentralised company, as a former full-time official for south Wales argued:

> It wasn't until the major steel closures that British Steel understandably came to the conclusion that the then situation [concerning national systems of bargaining] was not on. British Steel are a number of different businesses, they could either live or die on their own, and therefore they had to come to their own agreements. Initially it wasn't on plant-base, it was on company-base. Strip products, long products, etc. But then they still came to overall agreements, they would delegate the constitution of that to plant-level, which is more what we have now.
>
> Brian Connolly, former divisional officer, south Wales

Bill Sirs agreed, arguing that the newly-formed company sections of British Steel were quite separate from each other:

> Some negotiations are [now] down to plant-level, for instance the industry split up into different sections, and those different sections handled their own negotiations. Certainly it is more split up than it was, without a doubt.
>
> Bill Sirs, former General Secretary

Even the local branch structure of the confederation was affected by the far-reaching changes that privatisation began, with much of their power being assumed by multi-union works committees. These plant-based negotiations were particularly evident in south Wales:

> In 1988, the branches agreed to erode their autonomy by giving their local negotiating committees, not full-time officials, certain powers. ... The branches had a lot of power, but a lot of power was devolved to these works committees. I kept telling the committees that it was always important to consult the branches. I understood that they'd devolved a lot of autonomy to the committees, but I told the committees that they had to take things along with them.
>
> John Foley, former divisional officer, south Wales

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Although the EC of the ISTC appeared to accept that it was no longer in a position to dictate events upon a national scale, due to new forms of plant- or section-level bargaining, it still assumed an important role. If problems became apparent at a local level, the EC remained on hand to offer local guidance:

> *Considering decentralisation since 1988, it is difficult to say. There is still the central control* [within the union], *although at the works level, it is worth remembering that you've got an enabling agreement when you go in, and sometimes it is done by local officials, sometimes by division. But if you can't get an agreement it refers back to the national structures again.*
> Peter Lightfoot, former divisional officer, various regions

Whilst privatisation had evidently forced enormous changes onto the *modus operandi* of the ISTC, the overall internal structure of the union remained the same as it was during the heyday of nationalisation. However, the divisional officials suddenly had to become experts at locally enabling agreements, and had to deal with multi-union works committees on a local- or plant-level. Local officials also swiftly had to deal with being part of a product division within British Steel, so for instance, the Long Products division in the north east may have found that their closest contemporaries were based in Scunthorpe or Rotherham, due to the new organisational geography of the British steel industry. These local agreements have since assumed large significance in south Wales and on Teesside.

On Teesside, the effects of privatisation posed a number of challenges to all levels of union activity within the division. After 1988, British Steel seemed keen to conduct local negotiations within Teesside with all the trade unions that offered representation within the industry. In practice, the ISTC found itself working alongside the AEEU and the GMB. On Teesside, the ISTC retained its dominant position within the works:

The structure of the negotiations varied between divisions, especially after privatisation. On Teesside, all the negotiations were conducted by the full-time officials and were led by the Divisional Officer. You also had the AEEU, the GMB and so on. We even had the bricklayers. I basically did the lot. Sometimes the other full-time lot would come, sometimes they wouldn't. If the AEEU turned up at all, we thought they were early. That was a standing joke. We felt that we were the union of the steel industry. In No. 3 Division, the full-time officials were never involved. The local officials always did the negotiating. It was the Joint Committees that did the work. I thought the full-time officials were less biased. Therefore, different cultures have grown up, in that sometimes the full-time official was all-powerful, sometimes it was the local lay-officials.

Roy Bishop, former divisional officer, Teesside

The Divisional Officer on Teesside, Roy Bishop, took it upon himself to oversee the negotiations, often representing other trade unions as well as the ISTC. As he stated above, different cultures between steel producing regions have however evolved as a result of the relaxing of the national negotiations. The replacement of the Central Negotiating Committee by the setting up of various product divisions appeared to encourage this fragmentation of bargaining, much to the chagrin of local ISTC officials on Teesside:

One of the things that I would say is that when the Central Negotiating Committee with British Steel split up into various businesses, strip, and general steels and engineering steels and so on, there were different negotiating groups then, so there wasn't that central unity that there used to be, from that point of view.

Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

From our point of view, it broke us up a bit as a national union. British Steel set about breaking down the bargaining procedures into Long Products, Strip Products etc. That was bitterly resented here in the north east, Scotland and parts of Rotherham. We thought it was better to stick together and I think we were proved right, because British Steel has used it to put one group against another.

Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

The strength of the national union was consequently weakened, with many of the local officials viewing the breakdown of national negotiating as a method devised by management of undermining the once strong internal unity of the ISTC:

> *There was a lot of resentment immediately after the privatisation, especially amongst the senior officials of the union. They thought that the general power to negotiate on a national basis was being broken up and we would lose our dominance. There was a lot of unrest about British Steel breaking up into product divisions.*
> Ray Hensby, branch president, Teesside staff

In south Wales, the privatisation did not affect the organisation of the union, although grassroots members believed that the social conscience of the former public company was replaced:

> *Privatisation didn't really change a lot. All it did then was change the role of some of the company personnel. It also meant a lot of job cut-backs and management seemed to use the umbrella of privatisation to achieve that. It just simply changed the tack of the company. We once thought the government was the boss of the company, then it became the shareholders.*
> Dai Ferris, vice-chairman, Port Talbot multi-union committee

Privatisation appeared to accelerate some of the far-reaching changes that were set in motion back in 1980, but the selling-off of the industry was viewed by grassroots members as a necessary evil. According to the recently retired ISTC president and Port Talbot EC member, privatisation was seen as a necessary step to ensure the continued survival of steel-making in south Wales:

> *1988 was a big date for us. It was probably the first time that money was made available to put into our works so that we could start competing again in the steel making world. The industry has really gone from strength to strength since then. The trade union had been very active because, to be honest, without the trade union, I don't think it would have taken place. Management came out with these proposals and we thought about them, took it back to them, we negotiated it and so on, but in the back of our minds going along*

with the privatisation was something we had to do to ensure our communities were safe.

Tommy Fellows, EC member, Port Talbot

Again, the managerial strategy of 'divide and conquer' worked alongside the cultural idiosyncrasies of the ISTC, including regional parochialism. The fragmented union saw its responsibilities as keeping as many works open as possible, but accepting too that some forms of inter-plant competition were going to be the way forward to safeguard certain jobs:

There was both a change of name in 1988, a change in philosophy, a change in stance, a wholesale change. I think overall individual union members in south Wales were becoming more and more worried about their own particular plants because of the break-up of national negotiating structures.

Peter McKinn, former EC member, south Wales

The formation of the Strip Products group was viewed with the same suspicion in Wales as it was on Teesside, with similar effects being apparent:

The negotiations have been taken out of our hands, to a large extent, especially with the formation of the strip trade board. That's something to do with the Joint Business Council (JBC). There's more power in these organisations and it's driven a wedge between the strip plants here in Wales and the long products up north.

Lyn James, EC member, south Wales

Inter-regional tensions within the union began to arise, especially between south Wales and the north east and Yorkshire. The union, once concerned with national wage and other bargaining arrangements, soon found itself at a crossroads of priorities. Whilst British Steel appeared quite willing to allow a regional agenda to permeate the union, its strategy remained national, using regional tensions to extract higher productivity:

Not only did British Steel divide the national negotiations on pay, they quite clearly tried to set area against area as well. For them, it worked very well. It set areas against each other. Each area had

special guidelines in their annual round which they couldn't breach. I knew at that time that people in Yorkshire couldn't get any more than people in south Wales because that's how the rules were set. Although it was called devolved bargaining, it was orchestrated from London to basically split people up. British Steel were very good at it, they did a very good job overall. It was a very well thought deliberate plan, as deliberate as deliberate could be.

Bob Bird, divisional officer, south Wales

Local relationships with management throughout south Wales remained amicable, largely through deference and due to the threat of further job losses and plant closures. It was also clear that management – rather than the ISTC – were in the driving seat when it came to decision-making:

We built up a relationship with the multi-union in Port Talbot, and we tended to keep things within Port Talbot, management included. I think that we had a very good relationship at that time, although we were going through hell with massive redundancies. However, at the end of the day we got there and in my opinion the relationship was very good.

Dai Ferris, vice-chairman, Port Talbot multi-union committee

Nevertheless, there was a conscious recognition – even open acceptance – of difference from workers in the same industry elsewhere in the country, or even within regions:

I think that this plant and its workers tend to look at their own local area first. It's how I think the union should operate. We are its members and they should look after us first. We all want what is best for Port Talbot and our families and the union has a responsibility to that.

Steve Hare, lay member, Port Talbot

On Teesside, regionally-specific policies towards promoting job retention in the local area were also prevalent, as levels of branch autonomy *within* each works increased further:

Privatisation accelerated the autonomy [of the branches of the ISTC]. By this time, people were doing lots of their own deals. Union activity was becoming more work-based, the works multi-union committee became the most important body. Branches are massively more autonomous. Branches can now decide what they

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want to do for themselves, then do it. They won't take any notice of national or local officials, if they want to do something they'll do it.
Mick Mannion, EC member, Teesside

Skinningrove, a small plant based away from the main Teesside industrial area, became increasingly introverted:

As far as union activity is concerned, privatisation has made things more down to looking at what you've got on your own site. We're here to sort Skinningrove out for ourselves. It used to be the Teesside lump sum, but we've broken away from Teesside as a whole in 1991. We're trying to get a little bit extra for ourselves. We're now quite single-minded here at Skinningrove, we try to run our own affairs.
Colin Hart, branch secretary, Skinningrove

ISTC branches have become more and more plant-specific than ever before. The privatisation was therefore a defining moment in terms of how workers seemed to become more parochial in their outlook towards other ISTC members working in other divisions and product bases throughout Britain. Most union members in both regions seemed to regret this change of heart, and still argue that the era of national negotiations in the past served the union in a more successful manner, rather than plant- or branch-based bargaining that now exists on Teesside:

I think the most effective way probably would have been to have to have tried to have kept the plants more together. I think we could have kept it together more in plants. We used to, each plant would come together collectively, say Hartlepool and Teesside and negotiate together, whereas now we're more remote with this split, even the businesses are split down again. You know, so it's really smaller and smaller and smaller groups. It's getting smaller and smaller all of the time. I think if we could have resisted that more and kept together more so each of us know first-hand what the other were doing.
Ted Markham, branch secretary, Hartlepool

The general consensus amongst the interviewees appeared to blame British Steel for the

new, more regional outlook that was set in motion due to the 1988 privatisation of British

Steel:

> *I think a lot of that will be the attitude generated by British Steels*
> *policy of divide and conquer. There were 5 integrated plants* [in
> Britain], *and not one of them was safe. So everybody said that they*
> *will do everything they can to protect our plant, so it's not our one*
> *that closes and another one does.*
>
> Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

The advent of multi-union works committees in the varying regions of ISTC activity has

forced local officials and EC members into becoming experts in a wider sphere of

knowledge in terms of local enabling agreements. In short, the whole *modus operandi* of

local ISTC activity has been changed comprehensively and has often resulted in one

region of union of activity being pitted against another, often relating to the product

divisions formed after the 1988 privatisation:

> *When British Steel came away from national negotiations, which split*
> *it down the middle, that tended to make, well, it did make, the strip*
> *division entirely in Wales and the rest of the company in England.*
> *So that, to a certain extent, emphasised the regional aspect of the*
> *union.*
>
> Bernard Pike, divisional organiser, Teesside

British Steel have recently become adept at playing one region off against another.

Mistrust of other ISTC divisions has become commonplace throughout south Wales, which

in turn appears to have strengthened the hand of management:

> *In the North, agreements come to an end six months ahead of us. A*
> *committee gets together as a national body and discusses what*
> *each region realistically wants and decides what is to be locally*
> *negotiated with the company, based on the feelings of the local*
> *committees. I think that at the time the company could see that this*
> *was to be a very strong committee and fortunately they* [the
> company] *offered the workers up north a slightly larger increase than*
> *here in south Wales. As a result, the people up north signed an*

agreement, knowing that the ISTC and SIMA had decided that under no circumstances negotiations were to go down that road. Once the north east had signed that agreement, even though six months later we had to enter the same negotiations over a similar type of agreement, because they had already agreed that, we were only able to change that in very small ways.

Paul Rhys, former ISTC lay member, Port Talbot

On Teesside, workers in south Wales are viewed with similar suspicion. The decentralisation of capital – labour relations has most certainly affected intra-union relations, in effect setting aside steel workers in south Wales from those engaged in the same industry elsewhere in the country. Cultural differences between regions (encouraged by British Steel) are seen as being at the heart of the issue:

Different cultures have arisen over the different businesses that British Steel have been divided into. In my view, the Welsh culture is softer than the Long Products culture [Teesside]. British Steel, who started the break-up, have exploited these differences. It's harmed the union in some ways, because British Steel now have different areas with different expectations that they can put one area against another. When it was all one, under national negotiations, it was more difficult. Then, we were bound together more and we were stronger. Decisions were made and they applied to us all. We'd all had a part of it before. Now, one group may come to an agreement that in the end is a detriment to other groups because British Steel see that as a green light, and they will hang on through our resistance until they manage to find a way in with it. Under a national system, they'd never have got away with it. British Steel have realised that they can use the Welsh as a lever. The Welsh are always the first in the firing line. As an example, British Steel tried to alter the negotiating dates, because the North east and Wales used to negotiate during April. In 1992, British Steel tried to change our negotiating until October. We wouldn't have it. The next year, British Steel moved the Welsh until October, they made Teesside wait 18 months. So British Steel managed to break up the negotiations and set us against the Welsh. They've done it with the staff, the job evaluation exercises, they've managed to get it in Wales but not yet within Long Products. The Welsh have a history of doing that, they've gone for future employment packages, changes in manual pay – British Steel have always gone to Wales first. We think the Welsh are a bit weaker, so we tend to hold out for more up here and we have managed to do so a little bit. It has caused difficulties within our EC from time to time and British Steel know it.

Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

This lengthy quotation is neatly summarised by another Teesside branch official:

> *Wales, as in the strip division, they negotiate at completely different times of the year, annual review, I mean, it's done quite specifically to split us up.*
>
> Ted Markham, branch secretary, Hartlepool

The above quotations demonstrate the reasons why most of the interviewees stand by the claim that the ISTC was a stronger institution when it was bound together by national agreements. A divisional officer in south Wales argued that whilst the ISTC has been fragmented, British Steel remains a company with a central strategy:

> *Corus* [formerly British Steel] *don't practice what they preach. Even though there are different businesses* [such as Long Products and Strip Products], *and they all come under the Corus heading, they meet centrally and they have a central strategy. But when it suits them, they claim that the business is split up, and they're entitled to put one works against another, dare I say it.*
>
> Alwyn Jones, divisional organiser, south Wales

Whilst British Steel appear to have a single strategy, the ISTC has had to accept that increasingly localised arrangements have become commonplace throughout the industry. Indeed, its constitution of permitting branch autonomy has encouraged localised – or even parochial – forms of bargaining, especially on Teesside.

It is also clear that regional patterns of industrial relations are created and modified by the actions of both capital and labour. Evidence presented so far in this chapter has demonstrated that the formation of product divisions within the steel industry has encouraged ISTC regional offices, EC members and branch officials in south Wales and on Teesside into forming more parochial attitudes and thinking primarily of their own local area before others at a variety of different spatial scales.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how both the actions of capital *and* labour combine together to aid the ongoing creation of regional industrial cultures. Throughout the three key events on which the chapter has concentrated, definite trends of trade unions shaping – and being shaped by – regional industrial culture have been established. From 1967 to 1980 the ISTC appeared to strengthen its hand considerably in terms of its legitimacy within the works and the regions. Trade union activity was accepted and indeed encouraged, especially in south Wales, where organised labour was viewed by workers and management as a necessary component part of the British Steel Corporation. Whilst the ISTC gained membership and legitimacy, it was also evident that localised dealings between management and the union remained important, even though an increasing proportion of negotiations were carried out at national level.

After the strike of 1980, regional differences became increasingly apparent. Although the strike was national in nature, differing attitudes existed in south Wales and on Teesside. Union members in south Wales appeared more concerned with their future employment status, rather than issues of pay. Whilst the national strike was officially fought over the zero per cent pay offer, interviewees in south Wales believed that the strike should have been connected with safeguarding future jobs in the steel industry. Such feelings were noticeably less apparent on Teesside (despite – or perhaps even because of – the threat of closure then hanging over the Consett steel works). The aftermath of the strike also heralded a new era of labour – management relations. Local deals became more and more evident and workers from Teesside believed that their Welsh counterparts often received poorer wage settlements due to a Welsh propensity to defer to management

decisions, largely resulting from a fear of redundancy. In addition, the elitist stance of the ISTC towards other trade unions became more evident, damaging already strained inter-union relationships.

Privatisation of the industry appeared to cement – and indeed encourage – the trends that the early 1980s had begun. The formation of the long- and strip-products groups within the British Steel umbrella served to reinforce and encourage heightened forms of territorial chauvinism throughout the ISTC. Empirical data also pointed to ISTC activity becoming progressively more plant-based in south Wales and even branch-based on Teesside, indicating that (especially on Teesside) micro-level bargaining was taking place within the works. Opinions in south Wales and on Teesside tended to blame British Steel for such developments, even though it appears that there have been clear tendencies that union activity within individual plants has also encouraged these changes.

This chapter has demonstrated that the ISTC does play a significant role within the British steel industry at both national and regional levels, even though the boundaries of these spatial scales are themselves fluid. Especially in more recent years, significant forms of localism have pervaded the ISTC at varying scales, using the branch – the key component local of ISTC representation – as a focal point of expression. The decentralisation of industrial relations outlined in earlier chapters of this thesis is taking place, and is the product of the actions of both capital and labour. Little regional trust exists within the ISTC, and recent trends within the steel-producing regions are diminishing the already tenuous links between national and local levels of activity. The 'divide and conquer' attitude of management that was so condemned by many of the featured interviewees is

providing a fertile and uneven environment for the ISTC to express its own – and highlight existing – varied regional cultures.

The thesis now turns to the question of how the ISTC has interacted over space and time with other trade unions representing workers within the steel industry, through an examination of union activity within the plant.

Chapter Seven: A Review of Inter-Union Relationships within the British Steel Industry

Introduction

The thesis now turns to an analysis of the relationship of the ISTC with other significant trade unions and staff associations that operate – and have operated – within the British steel industry. Workers in the British steel industry have not experienced a large choice of trade unions to choose from, largely due to the historical legacy of the all-encompassing BISAKTA – ISTC structure that was formed in 1917. Yet, an analysis of inter-union relations within the British steel industry still warrants attention, due to the varied geographies and traditions of trade union organisation it highlights within the confines of the ISTC structure.

The chapter begins with an analysis of inter-union relations during the period immediately following the 1967 nationalisation of the industry. This era afforded the ISTC an opportunity significantly to strengthen its sphere of representation, largely due to the formation of a national committee that was charged with improving representation for existing steel workers and opening the door to trade union membership to those that had traditionally been members of a staff association. This section therefore examines and analyses both the national and important local implications of these events, and explains how local events differed markedly from the official national position of the ISTC.

The second section of the chapter concentrates on the merger activity witnessed by the ISTC. This section begins with an analysis of the failed merger between the ISTC and SIMA, and details the past and present relationship between the two organisations at national and local levels. The chapter then moves on to examine successful ISTC merger activity. Only two amalgamations have taken place throughout the history of the union – with the National Union of Blastfurnacemen (NUB) and the Wireworkers. The NUB was the one notable trade union that chose to remain independent after the comprehensive 1917 merger. The NUB remained outside the ISTC sphere of organisation until 1985, when its rapidly declining membership (forced by a crippling financial situation) decided to amalgamate with the ISTC. The merger with the Wireworkers in 1992 was of less significance, due to the amount of members involved. Both national and varied local viewpoints are considered in an analysis of how the ISTC and the NUB – two highly exclusive, independent and proud institutions – merged together.

The third section of the chapter concentrates on more recent inter-union relationships, through an examination of perhaps the most fundamental challenge the ISTC has faced in recent years. As the previous chapter introduced, section- or plant-level bargaining appears to be taking precedence over national-level negotiations, especially since privatisation in 1988. Additionally, over the past decade or so, British Steel has sought to introduce teamworking practices throughout the works, provoking reactions from all levels of the ISTC. Teamworking has resulted in increasing redundancies and a further erosion of union power, in addition to posing fundamental questions as to how the ISTC operates within each plant.

The chapter concludes by highlighting the apparent differences and similarities between south Wales and Teesside, and how these aspects contribute to the different regional industrial cultures that are apparent in the two regions. Whilst the two regions display significant likeness, the concluding paragraphs identify certain contrasts in inter-union relations that are comparable to the trends introduced earlier in the thesis.

The ISTC and the TUCSICC: expansion and conflict, 1967 to 1976

Following the nationalisation of the bulk of the British iron and steel industry in 1967, the Trades Union Congress set up the Steel Industry Consultative Committee (TUCSICC). By mid-1967, the operation of TUCSICC was set in place, and it had frequent meetings with the newly-formed British Steel Corporation. Items commonly discussed included workers' participation in management decisions, future levels of consultation, and trade union recognition. The committee also dealt with non-pay issues on a multi-union basis. Dai Davies, then general secretary of the ISTC, had been elected as chair of the TUCSICC. Davies was chosen to head the committee because of the overall influence of the ISTC within the iron and steel industry, and the ISTC's long standing lack of involvement in domestic politics (Upham, 1997, p 62).

Throughout times of public ownership, the ISTC retained its highly exclusive stance concerning pay negotiations, and pressurised the TUCSICC to allow individual unions to retain individual wage bargaining rights. As Upham stated, the development of all-encompassing TUCSICC pay negotiating committees would have 'cut at the heart of its [the ISTC's] representational system' (Upham, 1997, p 62).

According to ISTC officials, past and present, the TUCSICC has been a success since its formation, for the ISTC, the steel industry, and other trade unions:

> *The TUC initiated the committee to look after the interests of all the unions within the steel industry. It brought us together to get rid of the niggling that was going on between unions, and to make us collectively more effective.*
>
> Ken Clarke, former national officer

It is clear that whilst other unions were involved in the national decision-making of the TUCSICC, the ISTC remained the most influential constituent. The committee followed the centralised nature of BSC, given the national nature of negotiations that accompanied nationalisation. Even following privatisation in 1988 and the associated decentralisation of bargaining discussed in the last chapter, the TUCSICC thrived due to the continued need for certain national negotiating structures, as the current General Secretary noted:

> *From privatisation onwards, we thought we still needed the TUCSICC at the national level to co-ordinate our efforts. Roy Evans and Keith Brookman carried this tradition on from 1988, and myself, as Chairman, will do so too. There are things of mutual interest, internal recognition disputes, pensions, all are national. ... Even though British Steel devolved bargaining, they've been coming back to the steel committee for agreements on working time directives. British Steel still need some central bodies to deal with, for example to co-ordinate activities with the new European Works Councils. At present, the MSF, the GMB, UCATT, AEEU and the T&G are involved. We've even invited SIMA, unofficially.*
>
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

All the major trade unions that have representation in the iron and steel industry have some form of representation on the TUCSICC, although the ISTC remain the authoritative partner, due to its continued – and self engineered – representational dominance within the steel industry.

In summary, the TUCSICC was ISTC dominated. Nevertheless, the TUCSICC has played an important role throughout the years in forging links between differing trade unions, and providing a forum for nationally-based negotiations (even post-privatisation).

Merger activities associated with the ISTC

The ISTC has experienced little merger activity since its formation in 1917, because the confederation brought together almost all of the trade unions connected to the iron and steel industry. The majority of ISTC membership until the 1960s was blue-collar, as white-collar staff were largely represented by the Steel Industry Management Association (SIMA). SIMA – unlike the ISTC – was not affiliated to the TUC and did not consider itself a trade union, preferring to use the term 'staff association'. The ISTC viewed this situation as an opportunity to further its own scope, as the following section demonstrates.

Widening, expansion and conflict – the ISTC and SIMA on a national basis

Following the formation of the TUCSICC and the increased significance of nationally-based negotiations, the ISTC decided that the appeal of the union could be successfully broadened by the inclusion of staff grade members. The union leadership appointed six staff organisers, working under national staff organiser Sandy Feather. By 1970, the ISTC had approximately 30,000 staff or white-collar members, illustrating the success of the recruitment drive. By 1975, the ISTC had also won recognition rights to middle

management grades, thus broadening the scope of the confederation. The inclusion of

staff grades helped bring a more cohesive nature to the structure of the trade union:

> *The staff made a great difference, in the sense that we were looking then at a nationalised industry. Nationalisation meant that we had the chance to organise staff in greater numbers. We already had some staff, but in very limited numbers. These staff organisers were engaged to organise the staff in the works, assisted by the union branches that were already there. It meant that our membership increased, and we became fully knowledgeable in the systems of staff negotiations.*
>
> Bill Sirs, former General Secretary

> *The staff organisers had quite an effect on the numbers of staff being brought in, and more importantly, they took more part as individuals within companies than they had done in the past. I think that it was quite an effective measure.*
>
> Gordon Roberts, former national officer

The ISTC became an increasingly all-encompassing organisation following the recruitment

of staff. Nevertheless, certain blue-collar lay members were originally against the idea of

staff recruitment:

> *When the staff came in, there were a lot of feelings from the shop floor against their inclusion. But, I think that once they came in they put a lot into the union. We've had some very good staff, especially in terms of Executive Committee members, branch officials, they've all had a good understanding of the industry.*
>
> Gordon Roberts, former national officer

Over time, as staff members became increasingly integrated into the confederation,

relations between the relatively new white-collar branches and their established manual-

grade counterparts improved. Flows of knowledge between blue- and white-collar

sections were seemingly enhanced:

> *In general, relations between staff and manual branches are pretty good. One would tend to support the other. I've good grounds for saying that, as for example Long Products, on the new management projects, management wanted to withdraw staff from the annual*

negotiations to implement a new payment structure. The staff were
feeling that that might go against them, so the manual branches
generally supported them in keeping them on the committees.
Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

The success of the vigorous staff recruitment policies outlined above (that characterised the ISTC from 1969 onwards) damaged relations with SIMA, especially if the findings of the 1968 Pearson Report are considered. This report called for SIMA to become the official union to represent middle management within BSC. However, SIMA (in its guise as a staff association) had no formal connection to the TUCSICC due to its non-affiliation with the TUC. The ISTC took full advantage of this situation in its attempts to recruit staff, steadfastly pronouncing that the steel industry was best served under single union representation. On the other hand, when wage bargaining was taking place, SIMA expected to be included in negotiations with other trade unions, whilst the TUCSICC and the ISTC sought to exclude it. The ISTC viewed SIMA as a staff organisation and consequently argued that its negotiations should be conducted separately from TUC-affiliated trade unions.

Within a few years of the formation of SIMA in 1968, many problems had become apparent in their working relationship with the ISTC. Both organisations became frustrated by attempts to 'poach' membership. Relations between the two organisations remained very poor. During the mid-1970s, the General Secretary of the ISTC (Bill Sirs) introduced a further internal structural change that did little to improve the already strained relationship with SIMA. Staff sections within the ISTC had remained largely separate from the blue-collar sections since their formation in 1967. For example, there was little communication between the two types of branch on a local level. Consequently, Bill Sirs altered the job descriptions of the six national staff organisers that had been originally

charged with increasing staff recruitment. Staff organisers were placed upon a level playing field with their other organising colleagues for the following reasons:

> *The manual and staff sections, there was somewhat of a bitter feeling. When Bill Sirs took over as General Secretary he did away with staff organisers, like Roy Bishop. He put them all on the same level, he pulled it together. It was a good move, I think. Having sections doesn't work, you always get one playing off against the other. Adding them together was quite good.*
> Gordon Roberts, former national officer

This merging of two distinct sections was a shrewd move in terms of intra-union – if not inter-union – relations. As a result of the staff organisers merging with their other full-time counterparts, the local branch and divisional structure of the union took on a more unified appearance. In addition to this, a more integrated internal structure would permit the powerful EC to exert more control over the divisional base of the union. However, inter-union relations between the ISTC and SIMA suffered, largely due to the ISTC recruiting and representing in what SIMA viewed as their traditional sphere and both institutions (on a national basis) viewing themselves superior to each other. On the one hand, the ISTC believed itself to be the primary organisation to represent steel workers, whether white- or blue-collar. On the other hand, SIMA perceived itself to be a 'cut above the rest' when the question of middle-management representation arose. Such difficulties seemed to make a merger between the two organisations impossible.

Nevertheless, during the early 1970s, both the ISTC and SIMA realised that ongoing bickering was folly. After prolonged deliberation, a merger agreement was finally reached in 1976. The EC of the ISTC voted in favour of the merger, but SIMA backed out of the deal at the last minute. The merger collapsed, and SIMA finally merged with the EEPTU (now part of the AEEU) instead. A merger between the ISTC and SIMA *could* conceivably

have proved beneficial to both institutions. First, the ISTC goal of one industry – one union would have been closer, had the majority of staff fallen under the ISTC umbrella of representation. Second, on financial grounds, both institutions could have saved substantial sums of money, had they both not spent heavily upon attempts to 'outsell' each other.

The nature of the organisations in question here was of vital importance to the proposed merger. The ISTC saw itself as a trade union, predominantly having represented in the blue-collar sector. It reserved the right to strike when called upon (even though it had not done so since 1926). SIMA, on the other hand, viewed itself as a staff association.

> *The thing with SIMA is that they got the encouragement from management. They were also outside the TUC, so they did actively poach. They grew, were blessed by management, but we never had in the staff area the sort of national leadership that we should well have had.*
> Peter Lightfoot, former divisional officer, various regions

The ISTC viewed SIMA with scepticism during the early days following nationalisation. The difference in the nature of a trade union and a staff association, according to Bill Sirs, was too great a divide to bridge:

> *We talked to SIMA, but you couldn't trust them. They were like employers. ... They thought themselves a little above us. They were just representatives of management. At the end, we had more members than they did, and they had to go elsewhere to get a merger.*
> Bill Sirs, former General Secretary

After the failed merger, relations between the two organisations did not improve:

> *Our relations with SIMA have been and are precarious. I think they saw themselves as elitists, and the managers of the industry. They didn't want to be involved with a group over which they thought they*

*had control. The other point from my learning curve was their role
during the strike. They weren't TUC sponsored and their non-
participation in the strike would have coloured people's judgements
towards them, so a formal closer relationship wouldn't have worked.
On a local level, there will be working relationships, but that is about
as far as it goes.*

Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

The current ISTC general secretary has recently attempted to make conciliatory moves

towards SIMA, but the differences between the two organisations are still apparent:

*I tried to patch up relations with SIMA. It seemed daft to me, to have
two organisations juxtaposed, separately negotiating terms and
conditions of employment with British Steel. On the other hand,
British Steel had argued in other forums that there should be single-
table, multi union bargaining. So on the one hand, we had multi-
union bargaining, but on the other, we had SIMA. They didn't follow
that logic. I argued that that was illogical. If they wanted single-table
negotiating, it should have been for all levels. I tried to develop a
relationship with SIMA to bring that about. With the advent of
teamworking, we had to make an agreement, which we have done
with the AEEU* [the parent union of SIMA]. *So middle management
is now included.*

Mick Leahy, General Secretary

On a local basis, in contrast, relations between the ISTC and SIMA were perhaps not so

incompatible, as a former ISTC staff organiser stated:

There were a lot of clashes [between the ISTC and SIMA] *in my
opinion. However, at full-time officer level in many places, the local
officials seemed to get on quite well together, although they
competed for membership. There was also a feeling with some
middle-management people, you know, a superiority complex, but
generally speaking, I saw the local officials working quite well
together.*

Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

Thus, officers of both the ISTC and SIMA realised that they had to work alongside each

other on a local basis, and they often developed informal networks of inter-union co-

operation. Despite their differences, it appeared that unwritten divisional or highly

localised arrangements have existed that divided prospective union membership into

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groups. If a local agreement was successful in a particular division or workplace, the ISTC would concentrate upon recruiting one specific group, and SIMA would focus on another.

The inherent differences between the ISTC and SIMA proved to be too great for a successful national merger to take place. The subsequent merger agreement between SIMA and the EEPTU incorporated a no-strike clause, reinforcing the long-standing wish of SIMA to remain characterised as a staff association in preference to a trade union. Nevertheless, localised relations between the ISTC and SIMA warrant close attention, and it is to this topic the chapter now turns.

Amicable relationships – Teesside, the ISTC and SIMA

Relations between the ISTC and SIMA on a national basis were often strained, although some local-level relations between the two organisations have been of a more amicable nature. On Teesside, it appears as if this has been the case:

> *I've never had a problem with SIMA. I can only speak for No. 2*
> *Division, I've got on with SIMA, the relationship from the Teesside*
> *Multi Union Committee has always been amicable. It has been their*
> *national activities that have been the cause for concern. Locally it's*
> *still holding up. It's always been on an 'arms length' basis, there has*
> *always been a bit of suspicion there. The local officials have always*
> *managed to keep it together.*
> Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

Most of the current ISTC branch officials did not really see any problems caused by SIMA on a local basis. SIMA are classed as being rather insignificant and have little to do with the affairs of the ISTC:

For the most of us, there aren't any problems. It's only when you go to multi-union meetings that the problems start. You see the differences. Locally, down on the ground, there aren't perceived to be any differences. We don't have anyone on shifts that have anything to do with SIMA. Personally I feel that they're a bit of a non-entity. I'm not too bothered by them at all. They've still got their no-strike clause. We see them as a non-entity, if we sort our stuff out then they can do what they want.

Colin Wildon, branch secretary, Lackenby concast

However, ISTC members on Teesside historically have good reason to feel some suspicion towards SIMA, due to a bitter localised dispute that took place during 1971, when SIMA as an organisation was still in its infancy. The problems began when management of the then British Steel Corporation decreed that ISTC members had to take orders from SIMA representatives. Due to the strong leadership of Roy Bishop, a local industrial dispute took place:

We had a big strike for four or five days over SIMA in the steel plant at Lackenby. That was a local strike, Roy Bishop led it, by the way. The problems flared up in 1971, just after the time of nationalisation. It might have been a sponsored thing, there was some sort of sponsorship where British Steel wanted their managers not to be represented by the main craft and production union. They'd rather have engineers in SIMA than in the AEEU, for example.

Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

Ken Clarke, then a branch secretary at Lackenby works, recounted the events that could have seen an early end to SIMA representation on Teesside:

The EC of the ISTC made a ruling, because BSC were going to issue instructions via SIMA to the ISTC staff people. The ISTC issued a ruling that they were not going to take any notice of this. Eventually it did happen in Lackenby, it wasn't in my area, even in the beam mill, I think it was only in the slabbing mill. The SIMA Rep issued instructions to the ISTC foreman. He refused, and was suspended. All worked stopped fairly quickly. Everyone went home. Hartlepool followed within a few days. Now, to me, this was the opportunity of the ISTC to do away with SIMA and support the people on strike. They weren't going to go back until SIMA stopped issuing the instructions. But Dai Davies decided that we should all return to work, we all did. The opportunity was then lost, we could

have done away with them.

Ken Clarke, former national officer

Roy Bishop, the then Divisional Officer, argued that the ISTC used the mini-dispute as a means to destroy SIMA on a local basis before their representation grew. As the previous chapter introduced, the ISTC was also actively recruiting staff grade members at the time, and saw this opportunity to rid Teesside of SIMA representation:

> *We had an EC instruction that we were not to take instructions from SIMA members. What happened was the foreman in the Concast happened to be the Branch Secretary of the melting shop and the Concast branch, it was one branch. You could see what happened. We were looking for the fight. SIMA gave the instructions, we told our lads not to take any, this was a time long before we had to take ballots, so we said no, we wouldn't take our instructions from SIMA. We walked out and had a strike, 4 or 5 days or something. We all felt let down. We had SIMA on the rack, because we had the whole of Teesside stopped. It was amazing. Lackenby stopped, there wasn't much at Redcar then, Cargo Fleet, Hartlepool stopped. An EC member, who was the secretary of the Joint Committee at Skinningrove, he rang up, from a phone box in Lackenby works and got Skinningrove out. Consett came out as well. Any General Secretary worth his weight in gold would have sorted this one out. Dai Davies backed off. He told us to go back to work, eventually the strike crumbled, we went back to work. That was where the mistake was made. We got them out, we had the chairman of BSC against SIMA, that was the message. Tell SIMA to bugger off because they're just trouble-makers. Dai Davies missed the opportunity. He pulled back.*

Roy Bishop, former divisional officer, Teesside

The local dispute failed, and SIMA continued to expand representation on a local basis, much to the frustration of the ISTC. Both Roy Bishop and Ken Clarke blamed the leader of the ISTC for the breakdown of the local strike, which allowed SIMA to become a much stronger force throughout Teesside and the north east as a whole.

These localised problems between the ISTC and SIMA caused many future problems between the two organisations:

After the local strike, relationships between the ISTC and SIMA were very strained, as you would imagine. SIMA got more of a foothold, and eventually we did then get recognition for our middle managers, which of course SIMA didn't like. That's why we have a strong middle management branch around here. To be honest, the localised relationships we have on Teesside now are quite good. They improved during the late 1980s, because with this multi-union bargaining, SIMA had their own bargaining within the local lump-sum bonus. They'd go and do a deal that made it more difficult for us. So our view was they would be better on the inside than outside. We lured them in to our sphere of influence. In some ways, they were quite proud of that, they thought they were in with the big unions and that. They thought they had a way of controlling us. They saw it as a power trip.

Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

Again, the ISTC took the lead in the years following the strike and adopted a proactive role in order to deal with SIMA. The current EC based in Division Two made a conscious decision back in 1987 along with Divisional Officer Roy Bishop to accept SIMA for what it was and to include it in negotiations, but only for the benefit of the ISTC. Although SIMA had relatively low numbers concerning representation, it still retained sufficient power to cause problems to local ISTC activity:

SIMA have caused us trouble over the years. I guess they've got 500 members on Teesside against our 4,000. I think that out of all the divisions, I guess that the best relationships with SIMA are here in Teesside. We took a conscious decision in 1987 under Roy Bishop, the then divisional officer, to co-operate with them on the multi-union. In the past, they'd caused us all sorts of problems by going off and doing things on their own. Our view was that if we kept them in with us, we'd have more control as we'd know what they're up to. We told them that they'd get a lot further by working alongside us, but letting the ISTC take the lead. In some ways, it tickled their egos a little, so they came on board, and since then we've got on well with them.

Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

It appears as if inter-union relations on Teesside are more cohesive than in other areas of ISTC activity. Both Roy Bishop and Tony Poynter have argued that relationships with other trade unions and SIMA are more amicable and productive on Teesside than in any

other ISTC division. Nevertheless, some dissenting voices were still heard when questions were posed concerning SIMA, as legacies of past skirmishes evidently remain in the thoughts of ISTC members:

> *If I didn't have to speak to them* [SIMA] *ever again I wouldn't be too disappointed. I wouldn't want to associate myself with those people at all. In my view, they're lower than a snake's belly. I don't even know why they call themselves SIMA or why their members pay their contributions! They never question anything or kick up a stink. They're all yes-men. They'd be better off putting their contributions on the horses. In addition, their union rep has been in a couple of meetings, but some of their leadership have signed some deals and done some very dishonourable things. I don't like people like that so I tend to keep them at arms length.*
> Rob Middlemas, EC member, Teesside

Whilst this section has demonstrated that the north east has witnessed perhaps the most difficult inter-union relations concerning the ISTC and SIMA over time, it should be remembered that the overall ethos of Teesside appears to be one of proactive behaviour towards SIMA. Inasmuch as the local legacy of the relationship between the ISTC and SIMA may have once produced bitter relations, the end result appears to be largely one of mutual understanding through which localised co-working relationships have resulted. Past altercations do not appear to feature in day-to-day activity and both sides grudgingly recognise each other's fields of representation.

Mutual mistrust – the ISTC and SIMA in south Wales

The ISTC and SIMA in south Wales have tended to keep a distant relationship, each believing that the other is an inferior organisation. Bitterness between the two organisations stems back to the failed merger of 1976:

The SIMA issue was a very vexed question. In all fairness to the ISTC, it wasn't their fault that the merger talks failed. It was the fault of SIMA. SIMA was an elitist organisation and they never wanted anything to do with another organisation. The ISTC to a certain extent was insular, but SIMA was beyond that. They didn't even regard themselves as a trade union in those days, more of a staff association.

Ken McNeil, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

Mistrust and a professional dislike between the ISTC and SIMA also correlate with the intense acrimony felt by ISTC members towards their SIMA counterparts during the 1980 steel strike. During the strike, SIMA members continued to work despite intense pressure from the ISTC to stage industrial action. SIMA also attempted to persuade ISTC members who were worried about their jobs to join SIMA:

After the strike, relations with SIMA were absolutely terrible. People were even dropping out of our union and joining SIMA. People like that were no bloody good to the ISTC – they just sold their souls.

Cyril Jenkins, committee man, BOS plant, Port Talbot

SIMA? The lads hate the bastards. No doubt about that. A lot of it goes back to the strike. A lot of British Steel management that was in the ISTC jumped ship straight away at the beginning of the strike because SIMA wouldn't go on strike. There was a lot of ill-feeling about that. There still is. Any manager that jumped ship is still disliked. That feeling runs throughout the union.

Colin Griffiths, divisional organiser, south Wales

Whilst SIMA do not numerically pose a threat to ISTC activity, the organisation has thwarted the long-term ISTC goal to represent all workers in the steel industry. After the proposed merger failed in 1976, SIMA continued to expand its membership, much to the chagrin of the ISTC, who were totally powerless to intervene:

SIMA always had a different agenda to the other trade unions. They didn't care at whose expense they prospered. That was their basic philosophy.

Hanbury Williams, former EC member, south Wales

The largest problem that appears to exist between the organisations is the belief that SIMA is a management organisation, and not a trade union. In terms of highly localised relations, opinions remain divided between seeing SIMA as a trade union attempting to provide quality representation to members. On the other hand, it could be viewed as an organisation that deliberately sets out to damage the standing of the ISTC and the quality of representation towards its members:

> *We feel that the leadership of the union is just a puppet of British Steel management.*
> Lyn James, EC member, south Wales

> *To be totally honest I'd rather not waste my Welsh breath on that lot. They're a shower of shit as far as I'm concerned. Their leaders are not much better, they were spawned out of management and they delighted when negotiating by winning their agreements behind people's backs and signing deals so the others got their leftovers.*
> Tommy Fellows, EC member, Port Talbot

The previous section demonstrated that local relations within the plant between the ISTC and SIMA on Teesside are amicable, despite some serious altercations in the past that demonstrated competing local and national strategies of action. The situation in south Wales is evidently somewhat different. SIMA has insisted in carrying out its own deals, even if this led to the upsetting of localised relations with the ISTC. Whilst individual patches are respected, the elitist attitude of the local ISTC has proved incompatible with a similar perspective from SIMA.

These trends reinforce the individual regional characteristics outlined throughout chapter six. On Teesside, relatively amicable relationships between the ISTC and SIMA have assumed local importance within the works, as understandings between the two organisations have evolved on a branch level basis. Conversely, union strategy in south Wales appears to be based around the plant or the region as a whole. SIMA is uniformly

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viewed by union activists as a peripheral organisation to union representation within the works that acts in a detrimental fashion to ISTC interests, so is largely ostracized and disregarded.

ISTC mergers with the NUB and the Wireworkers – 1985 and 1992

The National Union of Blastfurnacemen (NUB) was taken into the ISTC in 1985 and given a separate trade group, known as the Coke and Iron Section (CIS). At the time of merger, the NUB organised blast-furnace workers in England and Wales, as well as coke workers and workers engaged in iron and limestone mines and quarries. The NUB was the last major iron and steel union to retain independent status after the ISTC was formed in 1917. Nevertheless, the merger of the ISTC and the NUB could not be considered a major event. The NUB joined the ISTC with a mere 4,000[6] members nation-wide, and therefore little distinguishable effect was seen in the national membership figures of the ISTC. Most of these members in 1985 were based in south Wales and Teesside. According to the current ISTC General Secretary, the NUB remained independent for longer than had been anticipated, and the merger has been a success:

> *A lot of the stuff with the NUB had to do with personalities. Their last General Secretary, Hector Smith, another Welshman, always wanted to maintain their independence. They'd managed to get through the* [1980] *strike together, but they realised that they didn't have someone with the personality to carry the union on. We've had no problems at all, they've integrated into the* [ISTC] *system well.*
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

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[6] Similar to the ISTC, the NUB had suffered a dramatic loss of membership during the early 1980s, largely due to the high levels of redundancies immediately following the national steel strike

The merger of the two organisations was relatively painless, especially as the two unions

had worked alongside each other in similar fields of representation for decades:

> *The NUB had the attitude of a small but powerful trade union. They*
> *knew they were all in it with us* [the ISTC]. *I found them a different*
> *breed, very proud, they were an older trade union than the ISTC, but*
> *I can't really pick out anyone who was a problem, they knew that*
> *they had the same problems as us, but we were interdependent.*
> John Foley, former divisional officer, south Wales

The two unions were so similar regarding their nature and respective fields of

representation, that few problems were experienced after the merger:

> *The ISTC / NUB merger was relatively simple in practical terms*
> *because of the very close working relationship between the two*
> *organisations on the shop floors. NUB and ISTC members had*
> *worked alongside each other for decades.*
> Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

It did not take long for the former NUB officers to become integrated into the ISTC

structure. The close historical relationship between the two institutions aided the

integration, as NUB officers soon were treated as ISTC members:

> *The merger with the NUB in 1985 didn't substantially change*
> *anything on a permanent basis. We initially said that the officers*
> *would continue, but it didn't take long before they were just filtered*
> *out and the Blastfurnacemen were regarded as one of us. They only*
> *joined with about 4000 members anyway. ... The problems that*
> *traditionally faced the Blastfurnacemen were generally known to us*
> *anyway. Historically, even when we were separate, a number of*
> *incidences took place where joint negotiating structures were used*
> *anyway.*
> Brian Connolly, former divisional officer, south Wales

On a structural basis, no long-term changes were effected within the ISTC. The EC of the

ISTC was temporarily enlarged to accommodate NUB members, but these changes were

short-lived, as Bill Sirs explained:

The NUB took two or three seats on [the ISTC] EC when they merged. Their membership was only 4,000 at the time. They had no money, so it was something that had to be done. It worked well because it means to say that they still have a direct voice in the industry with their own kind, and within their section they have representatives coming to the top level if they wish.

Bill Sirs, former General Secretary

The two extra seats on the EC were offered to the NUB for a six year term, before the EC reverted back to its usual 21 members.

The only other merger was witnessed in 1992, when the Wire Workers union joined forces with the ISTC. The Wireworkers had been part of the original ISTC / BISAKTA, but left the confederation after a minor disagreement during the 1930s. The reasons behind the merger were similar to that concerning the NUB, some seven years before:

The Wireworkers transferred their engagements to the ISTC in 1991. The reason we wanted to merge with the ISTC was the synergy. Clearly, wire, metal are both basic industries and there is great synergy between the two. In addition to that, at the time, our union was 150 years old, and we had a long and honourable tradition. We didn't want to see that get taken into a general union and get swallowed up. We were a very family orientated union, using old-fashioned union principles. We saw similar conditions applying within the ISTC. Such conditions made us natural partners, if you like. We always had a close working relationship with the ISTC. We were always part of integrated structures, if you like, within firms, between the ISTC and the Wireworkers. We were also looking for a little more clout for our members, we were too small at the time, and the ISTC offered us some more strength.

Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

The 'family orientated' and 'old-fashioned' approach of both the ISTC and the Wire Workers aided the successful transfer of engagements, and demonstrated the close working relationship between the two organisations.

Temporary changes to the EC of the ISTC took place, similar to those witnessed during the NUB merger:

> *When the transfer took place, the Wireworkers nominated two people to sit on the ISTC Executive. They were there for 6 years. One of ours is still there now in an ISTC capacity, he was successful in the last set of elections.*
> Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

Eddie Lynch, formerly an officer of the Wire Workers, now holds the post of Assistant General Secretary within the ISTC.

> *The Wireworkers merger also went well – Eddie Lynch is living proof of that.*
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

The two recent mergers that have involved the ISTC have been a success in that the memberships of the NUB and the Wire Workers have been incorporated into the national structure of the ISTC with relatively few difficulties. The amalgamations had become necessary for two reasons. First, the ISTC had historically enjoyed close working relationships with both the NUB and the Wire Workers, both nationally and locally. Second, membership of the these unions had deteriorated to such low levels that effective representation within individual divisions was no longer possible. The respective membership of the two organisations was transferred into the structure of the ISTC without any major difficulty, such were the high levels of co-operation between the organisations before the merger dates. The chapter now turns to an analysis of the intricacies of the merger of the NUB into the ISTC in the two regions, before offering some conclusions.

Localised relationships between the ISTC and the NUB

On Teesside, localised relationships between the ISTC and the NUB prior to the merger were relatively strong:

> *There had always been close working relationships within Division Two between the ISTC and the NUB. Their EC member, who carried on as an ISTC EC member, was very instrumental in making sure that the two organisations worked together, but he made sure that the NUB members realised that they were ISTC members. He worked towards that in the north east. Of course there were the odd NUB branch officials who weren't too keen, but relationships were strong because they always had been. Relationships were cemented during the strike, and maybe set in motion the merger. We realised that the continuance of two different organisations was not sensible.*
>
> Roy Bishop, former divisional officer, Teesside

Another of the key dates of ISTC evolution, that of the 1980 strike, also had a bearing on the relationship between the ISTC and the NUB on Teesside. Both organisations acted as one during the bitter national steel strike and were drawn closer together.

During the 1970s and early 1980s in south Wales, the ISTC and the NUB valued their mutual independence and remained rather distant from one-another, due to the self-determining nature of the ISTC at plant level[7]. Similar sentiments existed throughout the NUB, as well as the ISTC:

> *My own feeling was that I originally didn't want to join the ISTC, it was a typically loyal feeling, that I was an NUB foot soldier. I wanted to stay separate, and not look at the wider issue.*
>
> David Williams, branch secretary, Llanwern

> *The NUB were immediately accepted after the merger because they were part of the ISTC, even though they had their own branches within the overall ISTC organisation. Prior to all the merger discussion, they were kept at arms length.*

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[7] Nevertheless, during the national strike of 1980, the NUB fully supported the ISTC in south Wales and participated in the industrial action

Ken McNeil, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

After the merger, the ISTC believed that fully incorporating the NUB into their structures of representation could only increase their overall standing within the plant as a whole:

> *The NUB merger was a good move in the sense that it increased the numbers of ISTC. That gave us a little bit more strength, but again, we were talking about basically controlling the plant from start to finish, you know, with the craft in the middle.*
>
> Ron Walters, chairman, multi-union committee, Port Talbot

On Teesside, some 15 years after the merger, differences on a local basis remain between members of the ISTC and the former NUB. Previous NUB sections remain somewhat independent of the main ISTC structure, although recent workforce turnover has reduced these differences:

> *The NUB and the ISTC have worked well in these works for a long time. We were in the strike together, so we go back a long way. There still is a legacy, their old branches generally survive as they were.*
>
> Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

Immediately following the merger, the differences between the ISTC and the NUB on Teesside were apparent. Since the ISTC had been historically the strongest union in the steel industry on Teesside, the wages for the members of the former NUB were not as high as their ISTC counterparts. The NUB saw the merger as a change to improve their terms and conditions of employment, even though success appeared to be limited, due to the highly localised cultures of unionism on Teesside:

> *The attitudes, the cultures, even throughout Teesside were different, because they were the NUB and we were the ISTC. The NUB, when they came in with us, they felt that their union was a very active union, their wages and in some ways their terms and conditions were somewhat lower than Lackenby people were enjoying. For some time, they felt that they should have had some period of catching up. But the way things are, the way the order*

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> *book is, it hasn't been opportune to do that. They've always felt*
> *themselves to be one step behind the ISTC members and branches*
> *as far as wages have been concerned.*
> Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

Other differences between ISTC and former NUB members still exist, as current CIS section workers still do not enjoy the same rates of pay as some of the more successful ISTC branches. Despite the disappearance of the NUB name on Teesside, its legacies remain within the branch structure of the ISTC-dominated works. In addition, traditions of seniority have maintained the assertive position of the ISTC within the works, largely to the detriment of former NUB members:

> *There isn't much difference between ISTC branches and former*
> *NUB lodges now. But in multi-union meetings, you still get a division*
> *between the old iron making groups [the former NUB members] and*
> *the steelworkers. Some people still call their branches 'lodges', the*
> *NUB name for them. But, not many of the old hands are left now*
> *from the old NUB days, so we probably know more about the ISTC*
> *than we do about the NUB. I don't think the ISTC take the*
> *differences as seriously as they ought to. It's always the long-time*
> *ISTC members that get the highest rates of pay.*
> Adrian Cook, works rep, Redcar coke ovens

Whilst little now remains of the NUB structure in either south Wales or on Teesside, this section has demonstrated that notable regional differences existed in how the merger was treated within the ISTC. The merger was seen in south Wales as a means of increasing the power of the ISTC within the plant by incorporating the NUB wholly into its structure, whilst the fragmented nature of the ISTC on Teesside largely kept the NUB at arms length.

Summary

This section has demonstrated that the ISTC has not always enjoyed close working relationships with other unions. Because of the exclusive nature of the ISTC, the

development of working relationships with other trade unions has often been difficult. The ISTC has viewed itself as the dominant trade union to represent workers in the iron and steel industry, and has found association with other competing bodies difficult, especially prior to the nationalisation of British Steel in 1967. The current General Secretary even called the historical ISTC an 'elitist' organisation:

> *Because the ISTC has been very elitist, it turned people away. We didn't recruit certain groups of steel workers. We didn't see a role in terms of staff and middle management.*
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

Nevertheless, relationships between the ISTC and other organisations at local levels, between branch and divisional officers have been (in general) agreeable, with many informal agreements being operative over time.

The importance of geographic scale has become clear throughout this chapter. For example, the localised dispute on Teesside between the ISTC and SIMA was not viewed as a success largely due to interference from the national structure of the ISTC. In more recent years, relationships between the two organisations have improved to the point where they appear to tolerate each other, but wish to remain at arms length. In south Wales, the hostile attitude of the ISTC towards SIMA during the strike was supported by the national structure of the union largely because the local branch structure of the ISTC was supporting a national policy. Similarly, in the case of the NUB merger, local legacies remain in the two regions and continue to affect union activity within the plant, whilst the national structure of the NUB has completely disappeared. In south Wales, the NUB was welcomed into the ISTC largely because the ISTC viewed its new partner as a means of increasing strength, whilst on Teesside, certain ISTC branches have used their position of

power to extract favourable deals from management at the expense of former NUB members. In other words, the current composition of the ISTC reflects enduring legacies of past processes and disputes at *both* the national and significantly the *local* scale. In this chapter is has been demonstrated that a lack of analysis at the local level would result in a seriously deficient understanding of the ways in which the ISTC – in conjunction with other trade unions – contributes to the working culture of the British steel industry.

Recent trends in inter-union interaction

General inter-union relationships on Teesside and south Wales

Before turning to the significant topic of teamworking and its influence on inter-union relations, the chapter briefly considers localised relations between the ISTC and other independent trade unions that organise in the steel industry. Local structures of ISTC action on Teesside and in south Wales display both contrasts and similarities when general inter-union relations are considered.

The ISTC across both regions is characterised by a general aversion to close collaboration with other trade unions that operate within the plant, especially in south Wales. Whilst the ISTC represents approximately seventy per cent of the British Steel workforce, the Amalgamated Electrical and Engineering Union (AEEU), the General, Municipal and Boilermakers Union (GMB) and the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) also have significant levels of representation within the works.

On Teesside, the ISTC has close working relationships with other trade unions, largely the AEEU and the GMB. Relations have been to a large extent cordial over time, and in some instances are of a proactive nature. The ISTC has assumed the position of the lead trade union in all negotiations, and as long as other unions recognised this, then local relations would remain congenial:

> *I've never had any problems with them and vice versa. They knew where stood, as long as they knew they came second there wasn't a problem.*
>
> Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

The quality of representation within the works provided by other trade unions is largely viewed with derision by the ISTC, yet certain highly localised relationships on Teesside have been forged between these various trade unions, where local conditions were deemed suitable:

> *The AEEU in general are a pain in the arse, to be honest. Some of their representation is very poor. Where I am, they're great, because they've got a great convenor in Ronny Agar. They're very poorly informed in general. There's no communication.*
>
> Colin Wildon, branch secretary, Lackenby concast

In south Wales, the ISTC has also revelled in its self-proclaimed position of being the primary union for the representation of steel workers, asserting that it is a specialist union, offering higher quality representation over other minority unions:

> *The ISTC has always been very jealous of its own autonomy within each works. I think that the union leadership over time has never really wanted to encourage too much involvement with other organisations. It's a culture, if you like, it's been handed down throughout the ISTC over the years. It's been a 'look after the ISTC family first' sort of attitude and to hell with other organisations.*
>
> Ken McNeil, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

Within the plants of south Wales, there appears to be less co-operation with other trade unions than on Teesside. Certain 'rules of the game' are followed by other unions, with the ISTC dominating proceedings within the plant:

> *Relationships with other unions have always been set* [by the ISTC]
> *over very clearly defined lines. They had to stay on their side, and*
> *we had to stay on ours. It was always a local, unwritten rule.*
> Roderick Williams, branch secretary, Llanwern

There is most certainly more than a degree of elitism in the ISTC's attitude towards other trade unions within the works, especially in south Wales. These sentiments are built resolutely around the belief of the ISTC that it offers the most comprehensive and knowledgeable representation of the workplace in the steel industry. The mention of the ISTC 'family' within the works emphasises the more apparent exclusive attitude of the ISTC towards other trade unions in south Wales, whilst relationships on Teesside have often been less confrontational, albeit in a highly uneven and localised manner.

Over the last decade, ISTC authority within the plant has been questioned by the advent of teamworking. It is to this subject the chapter now turns.

Teamworking – local impacts and inter-union relations

The latest challenge to union organisation – teamworking – was introduced locally during the 1990s. For a union – and industry – founded on principles of seniority and hierarchical authority, the introduction of self-managing teams under a team-leader (and incorporating workers from more than one union) represented a substantial departure. As this section

goes on to demonstrate, teamworking poses quite fundamental problems for traditional

forms of union organisation within the plant.

> *I think that teamworking will have one hell of an effect on local union*
> *representation. I've got no objections with teamworking in principle,*
> *it's what model of teamworking that they want to impose that I have*
> *problems with. But I certainly see, and I've quite openly said to the*
> *ISTC and employers, that I believe that it is a deliberate attempt to*
> *negate the influence of the trade union.*
>   Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

Such views are based on the assumption that the introduction of teamworking represents

an attempt to align workers' interests more closely with those of the company, and less

with those of the union – to impose a new and different level of communication and

dialogue within the plant. They also – in part – reflect the ISTC's already well-documented

traditional attitude to the involvement of other unions in the industry. Effects of

teamworking have been uneven throughout regions of ISTC representation, as the next

two sections of the chapter illustrate.

Teamworking in south Wales – a departure from the homogeneous plant?

In south Wales, positive and negative aspects of teamworking were identified. The

traditional hierarchical branch structure throughout the plants of south Wales was suddenly

faced with many questions regarding its future. Work-based occupational hierarchies,

seniority-dependent career paths and the belief that the ISTC is the 'specialist'

representative of labour in the industry appear to be under threat:

> *The rank-and-file members were horrified by teamworking at first.*
> *They were to lose their seniority and in some cases their jobs.*
> *Ranking within the branch and within the workplace was to go. We*

*are a hierarchical union and teamworking has weakened us, but
certainly not as much as it has done to the AEEU and the GMB.
They were small fish before and they still remain very small players
overall throughout the works.*

Roger Moore, EC member, south Wales

Conversely, some view the moves towards teamworking as a positive step; a means of

reducing forms of inter-union jealousies that have often damaged relationships within the

works. Teamworking is seen as a tool that can encourage higher levels of cohesive inter-

union activity within the plant:

*The good thing about teamworking is that it will bring the different
unions together. The infighting between unions over the years has
been very destructive in my opinion. When I was negotiating I think
some of the biggest headaches was the rivalry and bickering
between unions.*

Ken Wellington, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

Nevertheless, the bringing together of varied trade unions through teamworking practices

is proving a massive culture shock to the ISTC, as well as other trades unions:

*I've got trades people working within my team as a part of the team,
doing some maintenance work as well as production work, which
has never happened before. From the point of view of an inner job,
it is a benefit, these people are active on the site and they can be
used to do maintenance work when they're not doing production
work. It has been a huge culture shock to a lot of workers,
especially the trades people* [mainly AEEU members]. *I think that
from the point of view of the business, not from the trade union, it is
a benefit.*

Roderick Williams, branch secretary, Llanwern

There is a ready acceptance that teamworking was introduced to benefit management,

rather than the trade union. The team leader – usually an ISTC member due to its

dominance within the works – is charged with managing a team that incorporates workers

from more than one union. Such moves represent a substantial departure from the

hierarchical system where each union remained independent from each other.

Teamworking also poses fundamental problems for worker organisation within other trade unions. The ISTC largely represents production workers, whilst the AEEU organises skilled craft-employees:

> *Teamworking is changing things. Some of the boys in the craft unions haven't seen many changes to their jobs, but the electricians and fitters are also doing some of the production work as well as their jobs. The ISTC are dominating the teams, but we are skilled workers and we'd never join them. The ISTC don't want anything to do with us and we don't want anything to do with them. Us craft workers have done four year apprenticeships, for the craft, I think there is about six weeks worth of training. There still is a skill in their job, but they aren't at the same level as the craft boys.*
> Mike Rivers, AEEU lay member, Port Talbot

Due to numbers within a team, usually 70 per cent ISTC, 30 per cent other unions, the ISTC can afford to dominate proceedings. Nevertheless, due to historical legacies and differences in wages and job descriptions, neither the AEEU or the ISTC wish to co-operate with each other to any great extent, despite some members of the ISTC suggesting that more cohesive structures of union organisation within the plant as a whole could result from the advent of teamworking:

> *A lot of the boys are very protective towards the AEEU, especially because of their position as craftsmen. The ISTC members are less skilled, so it comes down to differentials. AEEU members probably feel themselves to be a cut above the standard ISTC man. I don't think there's any animosity or anything, but teamworking is causing differences between the workers.*
> Mark Lewis, AEEU lay member, Port Talbot

It appears as if both the ISTC and AEEU respect and understand the position of their opposite numbers, but significant differences remain. Both unions appear charged with looking after the welfare of their members only, with little regard for overall working relations.

Ronny Walters from the ISTC is looking after his members and I can't blame him for that. But, he hasn't got a clue about electrical or mechanical workers. He's there for production and production only. That's what he does.

Viv Clyant, AEEU lay member, south Wales

Such views, if only in part, reflect the ISTC's traditional attitude to their involvement with other unions in the industry. They demonstrate a lack of will to adapt and change to new working practices, and highlight the ongoing ISTC tradition in south Wales of plant-level bargaining and a conscious belief in solidaristic – albeit introverted – trade union activity:

The ISTC seem to sort themselves out first with management because they've got the numbers. Management seem to think that this is OK because if the ISTC members are happy then the AEEU have such low membership then they're insignificant. There's no doubt that the ISTC have used their position of dominance to get what they want first. The team leaders are pretty much all ISTC members and it seems that ISTC problems get sorted out before craft problems. That's basically winding us up. We're being treated like shit and we're quite bitter about it. You can't blame the ISTC for using their dominance and looking after their members but it still isn't right.

Viv Clyant, AEEU lay member, south Wales

It seems as if teamworking goes against the grain of the traditions of the ISTC in south Wales and has already had radical effects upon the local ISTC and union organisation in general. Teamworking is increasing the fragmentation of the ISTC within the works as consultations are becoming increasingly based around a team consisting of a variety of unions, rather than on the traditional ISTC branch structure where other trade unions have been held at arms length. Such changes are at odds with the interconnected traditions of plant-level activity in south Wales described in earlier sections of the thesis:

I find that the works as a whole is fragmented. The teamworking has divided the works into many different areas, and of course each area is fighting for its own cause. The works was always divided into groups, but nowadays we tend to look at ourselves. Instead of

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having the strength of togetherness like there used to be, I now find
that everyone is trying to get a better deal for themselves.
John Tetsill, lay member, Port Talbot

The new forms of teamworking are challenging the status quo regarding the industrial culture of south Wales that were evident until the early 1990s. For example, the traditional respect for seniority and hierarchy does not appear to sit in a coherent fashion with new forms of work organisation that have fragmented bargaining within the works. A former research director of the ISTC and former branch secretary in Port Talbot criticised the union, claiming that it was largely unhurried in its response to teamworking:

> *One of the things that I understand about teamworking is that the*
> *ISTC have closed the stable door after the horse has bolted. We*
> *reacted too late. The original teamworking started in the mill in*
> *Lackenby in the late 1980s. Some of the teamworking agreements*
> *were implemented in south Wales before the union had reacted.*
> *British Steel were in the driving seat.*
> Gareth Howells, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

Sentiments such as these also point to a certain degree of deference towards management within the ISTC – and indeed other trade unions. Additionally, there has been little sign of teamworking bringing the various trade unions together throughout the plants in south Wales, despite the positive attitudes depicted early in this section, leaving the ISTC a solitary and exclusive organisation within each plant.

Teamworking on Teesside – increasing fragmentation and local empowerment

On Teesside, traditions of highly fragmented bargaining structures within the works have been reinforced by the introduction of teamworking. Whilst traditions of seniority within the

local branch structure are under threat, the ISTC leadership on Teesside has permitted lay officials to negotiate their own deals:

> *Yet another reorganisation is taking place with the industry at the moment. It's called teamworking. British Steel, in its 5 year plan, introduced at the beginning of '97, indicated that it wanted flat management structures. It wanted a system of self-managing teams under a team leader. It probably is the most radical change that we've undertaken in the last 70 or 80 years. The manual grade union branches have been asked, is the longer someone has been in the department determines your seniority. The company are not happy with that, they want to move to a system of inspiring individuals within teams and to develop themselves. In many ways its against the principles of unions. But, we have grasped the nettle in terms of putting it into the industry in order to survive. We've had all sorts of problems on how we should respond to that. It's not the full-time officials that are negotiating this, it's the lay-officials. In that sense, the ISTC is very unique and very distinctive.*
> Ian Crichton, branch secretary, Teesside middle management

Local ISTC officials have therefore maintained their powers to negotiate their own deals within their teams (which incorporate members of other trade unions) without the interference of full-time officials or EC members, illustrating again the fragmented nature of bargaining within the plant on Teesside. Yet, these fragmented branches are facing challenges from management to standardise their practices with other branches in similar areas of the works. This amalgamation of branches is not proving popular on Teesside:

> *If I can be parochial and just speak about production services, I would be against the merging of the branches because I know nothing about iron making or the plate layers and people like that. Initially, there will be problems. The biggest problem as I see it is that there are four branches in this example, and four wage structures. That's going to be the problem. With no disrespect to any of the other three branches, South Teesside 1 branch has the most difficult job of the lot. We work in all weathers, all conditions. We are the highest paid of the four branches. Now the question has to be asked, if we were to amalgamate, we have four different rates of pay. What happens then? People won't accept a new pay deal where everyone gets the same. It's obvious that some won't accept pay cuts. So the amalgamations are going to cause problems.*
> John Moffat, former lay member, Teesside

British Steel have attempted to merge many grades of worker (from both within and external to the ISTC) all onto one – or a less polarised – salary scale. The question of differentials in pay before and after the merger of branches again appears to be an attempt to reduce the local effectiveness of the trade union. Yet, in plants where teamworking has been established for a number of years, uneven bargaining structures still exist:

> *We've already got teamworking here in Hartlepool, we've had it since '97. We've got our own version of it, which has been approved by divisional office, because we got it through without any manning reductions. In fact, we actually made jobs out of it. We did it all ourselves in Hartlepool. What I did was, when we got a draft agreement, I sent a copy to the office, to Mick [Adams]. He looked through it, I said that I couldn't see anything wrong with it, he came back to me and said the same. When we got the final draft, and told him that there were not going to be any job reductions, he was quite pleased. I send Mick [Adams] copies of agreements that we are negotiating now to ensure that they're OK. It's also reassuring that if there is something that you are stuck on, you can go to the office and ask them to come in. I have the power to decline to discuss something with management before consulting Mick [Adams] and other full-time officers. So we made permanent jobs, and we agreed to teamwork or our version of it. At that time we called them area controllers, not team leaders. We now have changed that to team leaders, but its exactly the same thing. We have 11 teams and we found that we could work it and live with it.*
> Ted Markham, branch secretary, Hartlepool

In this case, the power of some of the branches on Teesside has increased since the privatisation of the industry in 1988. The branch officials connected with the 42" mill have been granted sufficient local autonomy to negotiate their own local agreements along with other trade unions within their respective teams within the plant due, largely to their position of strength that has been built up over the years. As a result, less contact is required with full-time officials and divisional office, again highlighting the localised nature of bargaining.

These increasingly localised agreements between various trade unions on Teesside pose new challenges to union organisation within the plant. Similar to the case of south Wales, the ISTC may benefit from a renaissance of organised activity due to its position of being the dominant trade union within the works:

> Management must remember that the culture of British Steel is for a highly unionised industry, and these moves towards teamworking are making our lives more difficult. I think management are hoping that the strength of the trade union will be weakened, but I think it might go the other way. We might lose some members and change some working practices, but I think it might bring some of our members together more than before. British Steel want to change the works culture from one of collectivism to one of individualism.
> Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

There are, therefore, some grounds for optimism in the face of adversity. There is a conscious recognition from British Steel management that the local culture of the north eastern steel industry is one of high union activity. Should these traditional high levels of union activity be combined with the bringing of members of varied trade unions together due to the increasing importance of local bargaining, a renaissance of ISTC-dominated union activity may result. The encouragement of locally-based – and even micro level – agreements by British Steel is suited to the fragmented culture of unionism on Teesside that has evolved over decades of ISTC activity.

<u>Summary</u>

There is a definite fear throughout the ISTC that teamworking has been introduced by management with the sole intention to align the attitudes of the workers more closely with those of the company, and less with those of the union. Over time, such changes have

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fundamentally remodelled the traditional ISTC methods of hierarchical communication and dialogue within the plant. Teamworking also represents a radical break with the past in terms of inter-union relations and reflects the ISTC's established attitude to the involvement of other unions in the industry.

Having evolved from age-old principles of seniority and hierarchical authority, working in teams and directly alongside other trade unions, the introduction of teamworking has posed the ISTC some deep-seated questions. Teamworking has not simply challenged the way in which the ISTC has organised its workers – other trade unions have also been obliged to examine their own methods. The ISTC (both nationally and locally) reacted strongly against the introduction of teamworking, but was largely powerless to prevent it. More recently, the ISTC has viewed teamworking as a tool to further their own aims. This is especially apparent on Teesside, where the increasing fragmentation of union activity can be linked to traditions of uneven ISTC activity within the plant and region. In contrast – in south Wales – teamworking goes against the more cohesive, but ultimately more exclusive nature of the ISTC within the plant.

Conclusion

There are two broad conclusions that can be drawn from this chapter. First, the ISTC has found working relationships with other trade unions difficult throughout its history. Second, the analysis of localised inter-union relations has demonstrated that the ISTC has structured its engagement with other trade unions in a variety of ways over space and time.

Since its formation in 1917, the ISTC has not enjoyed close working relationships with other trade unions. The ISTC's attitude was that it organised the vast majority of workers in the steel sector, and therefore should assume the leading role in any negotiations. As long as other unions recognised and accepted this – especially in south Wales – local relations remained amicable. This stance is also reflected in the belief that the ISTC is able to benefit from its exclusive focus on steel by achieving a more intimate knowledge of the industry and its working practices.

The formation of the TUCSICC provided an organised forum for trade unions to come together and air grievances in a formal environment. It did not, however, improve localised relations between trade unions on Teesside or in south Wales. These two regions display marked differences in attitudes towards other trade unions that represent in the workplace. Traditions of ISTC representation in south Wales are built around a highly exclusive attitude to other non-ISTC members. Whilst teamworking has encouraged bargaining with other trade unions at an increasingly localised scale, the ISTC in south Wales has preferred to retain a plant-based culture for its own sphere of representation. Put more simply, there is a high degree of solidarity within the ISTC inside the plant, but little beyond it in terms of other trade unions or other regions of activity. In contrast, ISTC activity on Teesside has been traditionally more accommodating and less discriminatory towards other trade unions. Combined with its more fragmented structure, teamworking has not been viewed with as much derision on Teesside by ISTC members, as localised deals have been struck in accordance with other trade unions.

The thesis now turns to analyse the internal structure of the ISTC, paying particular attention to how its subnational organisational geographies vary over time and space.

Chapter Eight: the Organisational Structure of the ISTC

Introduction

This chapter explores the ways in which varied scales of ISTC action have contributed to the regional industrial cultures of Teesside and south Wales. This is done through an examination of the internal organisation of the ISTC through an analysis of four of its structures of representation. Each of these structures contribute to the spatially uneven nature of the ISTC, despite being depicted as a centralised organisation (see Maksymiw et. al., 1990).

First, the past and present composition of the Executive Council is examined, along with its uneven representation throughout the steel producing regions of Britain. Second, a brief review of the internal co-working arrangements of the ISTC provides a framework with which to view the uneven nature of the power-base of the union. Internal power struggles and relations of mutual collaboration between regions of ISTC activity characterise this section. Third, the changing nature of the divisional offices of south Wales and Teesside are investigated, through an appraisal of the changing role of ISTC full-time officials and executive committee (EC) members. Fourth – and most importantly – the evolution of the branch structure of the ISTC is analysed. This section begins with an examination of the evolution of the trade group system of branch representation, and charts how these autonomous and highly powerful forms of localised organisational structures have acted at a variety of scales within south Wales and Teesside. The chapter concludes by summarising the issues raised, but also provides a general analysis of

common regional themes and contrasts highlighted in this and the previous two chapters,

before chapter nine turns to the changing role of the ISTC in the wider community.

The composition of the ISTC Executive Committee

The key decision-making body of the ISTC is the Executive Council, to which the General

Secretary is accountable. In 2000, the EC consisted of 21 members. The number of

divisional seats on the EC is determined by the membership base of individual divisions.

The current General Secretary summed up the complicated electoral procedures that have

evolved over time:

> *There was always a great debate in the union about whether the EC should be made-up by occupations or divisions. No-one really understood the system. In the past, each division of the union would have one EC member. Then, you would calculate how many other seats the division would have in relation to the occupational make up of the division, and so on. It was so complicated, and generally unfair. It was basically divisions and occupations. Then it moved to a private, public and staff EC composition. The problem with this was you could get on the EC in a particular division without the people in your own division having voted for you. Back-scratching went on. This wasn't popular, especially after British Steel was privatised, so it moved towards divisional elections on the basis that each division would have a minimum of one seat, and the other seats were made up by using divisional contributing membership statistics, to make up a fair picture of representation. This gave a national divisor, and was used to see how many seats each division would have. The number of sites within a division also had a small bearing on how seats were divided. The larger the workplaces, the more representation was afforded.*
>
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

Many minor changes have taken place over time to the manner in which the EC is elected.

However, divisional membership is still the overriding factor that determines the

composition of the EC. At present, the make-up of the Executive Council is as follows:

Scotland	(Division 1)	1 seat
North East	(Division 2)	3 seats
South Yorkshire	(Division 3)	7 seats
Midlands	(Division 4)	2 seats
South Wales	(Divisions 5 + 6)	7 seats
London and south east	(Division 7)	1 seat

However, new rules are coming into force that limit a particular division to a maximum of six seats, in order to even out the power-base of the union to a certain extent. The EC will also soon comprise of a total of 23 seats, two of which must be held by women. The same electoral procedures apply to these extra seats. It must also be noted that the EC comprises solely of lay-officials. The General Secretary, his assistant, and full-time salaried union officials are not represented on this board.

It is clear from the overall composition of the Executive Committee that the regions of south Yorkshire and south Wales hold much of the decision-making power, by virtue of the number of EC seats that they control. In past years, under differing electoral conditions, this was also the case:

> *South Wales had more EC members. There was no doubt about it, south Wales had 11 out of 21 members. They maybe even had 12. There was only a couple in Scotland, a couple on the north east coast, a few in the Midlands and the North West, but no-one could get the number of EC members that Wales had. South Wales was definitely the power-base.*
> Gordon Roberts, former national officer

Others disagreed with Gordon Roberts, and suggested that the power-base lay elsewhere:

> *The composition of the EC reflected raw membership in the divisions. That's how it was. So Yorkshire, and especially Rotherham, was the real power-base of the union.*
> Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

Ken Clarke agreed with the opinions of both Gordon Roberts and Clive Lewis, stating that the two regions in question had historically formed the heartlands of ISTC activity:

> *South Wales was one of the strongest. They had large works, it was easy for them to be effective. ... I think that Rotherham and Sheffield [South Yorkshire] came to the fore and still is now. We used to call them the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire.*
> Ken Clarke, former national officer

Because of employment (and therefore membership) concentration, the regions of south Yorkshire and south Wales have historically been the core of ISTC decision-making. The uneven distribution of ISTC membership has produced a complex – and often confrontational – mosaic of representation within the union structure over time and space.

Internal co-working arrangements within the ISTC

The only body within the ISTC that regularly meets with counterparts from other regions within the national structure is the executive council. The composition of the EC has historically been determined by the total membership of each division. Consequently, certain divisions have had the ability to influence the overall direction of the union, much to the annoyance of others. The internal politics of the ISTC played a large part in forming relationships between divisions. The relatively meagre representation provided by the three divisional officers of Teesside often led to closer working links with Scotland, or division one in ISTC-terminology:

> *There was a certain affinity between the EC members in No. 2 division and the ones in No. 1. They tended to be classed in the same political group. Politics used to play a large part in who your friends were on the EC. When No. 1 division was a thriving division, with Ravenscraig, it was a highly politicised region and the EC*

> *members used to be very closely bound. I would say that the working relationships now are non-existent. There's only one EC member in Scotland now, a very good one I might add. But, things just aren't the same. The EC isn't as politicised as it used to be, you know, Left and Right just aren't as important now as it used to be.*
>
> Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

Alongside the relative decline in the importance of politics in forming co-working arrangements between divisions came the advent of privatisation and the formation of product divisions within British Steel. Again, 1988 proved to be a large watershed when the internal structure of the ISTC is considered. From 1988 to the present:

> *Numbers 1, 2 and 3 Divisions are working more and more together, and I suppose that a wedge has been driven between here and south Wales. There has never been a close working relationship between here and Wales. I found generally, that the north east coast tends to be rather insular. We prefer to do our own thing here. We're not particularly outward looking, even to the extent between Teesside and Hartlepool. Because they're in the Tubes business and not General Steels, there is no real relationship between Redcar and Hartlepool. Redcar probably feels more affinity towards Scunthorpe than Hartlepool.*
>
> Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

Thus, the formation of product divisions split the ISTC into two 'encampments', although there is still mention of the fragmented nature of union activity within the Teesside works. Scotland, the north east and Yorkshire found themselves all dealing with long products, whilst the other ISTC regions found themselves in the strip products business. The complex internal structure of the ISTC was affected by the formation of these product divisions. Co-working arrangements even found their way to the most local levels of ISTC activity:

> *The only other branch that I've had contact with is in Scunthorpe, the Locos branch. That is because it is an identical branch. They argue for the same things that we do, again, because I got to know some of the officials you get to know some of the men. We share information about wage settlements and so on, us officials communicate quite a lot.*

The three EC members connected to Division Two also began to forge ever-closer links with Division Three:

> We've always been fortunate to have three strong EC members from Teesside. They now work very closely with those from Scunthorpe because of product similarity. We're very close to Scunthorpe and Rotherham. It's basically proximity, and generally because they're in the same sort of business that we are. We know a lot more about them than we did in the past. We know their business.
>
> John Moffat, former lay member, Teesside

Despite the self-evident power that south Wales has enjoyed in terms of its count of EC members, many interviewees from the principality claimed that tacit co-operation agreements between Scotland, the north east and south Yorkshire had shifted the power of the EC to the north:

> There obviously has been regional difference throughout the EC because of its composition. It does hold a lot of power. There are areas where the amount of EC members in that particular area must carry a lot of weight. Yorkshire have always exercised dominance. Them and the north east coast are the real areas of the ISTC now. At one time it did come from south Wales. We did, at one point, have strong people, the job market was better, we had both the main and the satellite plants, a lot of members. We seemed to run the show, but not any more.
>
> Dai Ferris, vice-chairman, Port Talbot multi-union committee

In contrast to Division Two on Teesside, the EC in Divisions Five and Six historically has rarely sought co-working arrangements with other divisions because of their relative strength and their historical legacy of working together as a cohesive unit (there is only one regional office for both divisions). There is a perception within south Wales that other divisions often grouped together in order to negate the influence of Divisions Five and Six.

Nevertheless, personal competition between EC members in differing regions was often commonplace:

> *There was a lot of rivalry. There was a lot of personality rivalry, usually centred between Yorkshire, Scotland, the north east and Wales.*
>
> Peter McKinn, former EC member, south Wales

Traditionally, south Wales – working as one division – has rarely sought co-working relationships with other regions of ISTC activity due to its position of strength and traditions of provincial solidarity. Such traditions reflect the culture of south Wales. Additionally, this may be because south Wales has traditionally produced different products to Yorkshire and the north east, more recently reflecting the division of British Steel in 1988 into the strip- and long products. Whilst Yorkshire and the north east continued to work increasingly closer together because of both belonging to the Long Products Division, south Wales was left to fend for itself. Internal politics therefore determined relationships between other regions, but seemingly not in the two divisions of south Wales because they were perceived to have an identity of their own, in both product base and in terms of a distinct regional culture. Nevertheless, recent years have shown the EC of the ISTC to lose much of its political bias, even though regional differences so noticeably exist:

> *My theory on the EC over the last few years has been that it would appear that we all get on much better than we did in the past. You'd have to relate to the Scottish time when Ravenscraig was still open. They had a larger proportion of people on the EC in those days. In those days, meetings were quite aggressively conducted, because there was a variety of vociferous members on the EC from both south Wales and Scotland. Equally so from Teesside and Scunthorpe.*
>
> Lyn James, EC member, south Wales

> *There has been a lot more smoking of the peace pipe between the divisions in more recent years.*
>
> Ron Moore, former EC member, south Wales

Whilst privatisation in 1988 and the subsequent formation of product divisions greatly affected other regions of ISTC activity, little change was noticed in Divisions Five and Six in terms of inter-EC relationships. Whilst the cultural attributes of the ISTC do include a degree of territorial chauvinism, EC members representing Divisions Five and Six seem to have remained an introverted body, pursuing the aims of their region first, without enlisting the help of others. In contrast, on Teesside – a region of less strength in terms of membership numbers – EC members have actively pursued links with other divisions to increase bargaining power. In more recent years, the managerial strategy of 'divide and conquer' introduced earlier by Mick Adams appears to have increased territorial chauvinism and encouraged a union structure where each division or product group seek to extract particularly favourable deals from management for their own plants or region. In south Wales, strong regional identities amongst steel workers that have evolved through the internal politics of the ISTC are apparent, whilst on Teesside it is the small-scale consensual relations between management and labour where the most interesting intra-union relations exists.

The changing role of the divisional office

Each division of the ISTC comprises a divisional office, where one or more full-time officials plus administrative support staff provide back-up and representation for members. At the time of the fieldwork, the Teesside divisional office employed two full-time officers, whilst the ISTC employed four full-time officers in south Wales. The role of the divisional office had remained rather static until the mid-1990s, when significant structural changes took place, continuing the theme of decentralisation and local empowerment.

In south Wales, the divisional office assumes less of an active role than that of Teesside.

The role of the Cardiff office is difficult to define:

> *Our role here in Divisional Office is whatever the flavour of the day is. Essentially we are custodians of EC policy and the ISTC Rulebook. That also means that we are under the control of the General Secretary and the Assistant General Secretary. We are basically responsible for the day-to-day running of the Division and the well-being of the members.*
> Alwyn Jones, divisional officer, south Wales

Ensuring the 'well being' of the members means that individual branches are permitted to run their own affairs. Each branch enjoys high levels of autonomy, as long as each branch is carrying out ISTC policy:

> *Central office tends to let the branches get on with their own things. Both Cardiff office and central office try to see two views – their views and the opinions of the branch. They do tend to let things go.*
> Dai Ferris, vice-chairman, Port Talbot multi-union committee

Each branch contacts the divisional office only when a problem arises, but experienced negotiators within the plant attempt to solve matters before they even are raised with divisional office:

> *I have a good relationship with the divisional office. The primary point of contact for me if I have a problem would be the Cardiff office, but I would try to get things sorted out here first before calling them. If a branch stepped out of line, then there would be problems. But in my capacity here in Port Talbot, I see myself as a custodian of the branches, I make sure that the members are treated fairly by the employers and also that they know what they're doing when it comes to negotiations.*
> Dai Ferris, vice-chairman, Port Talbot multi-union committee

In south Wales, the ISTC prefers to conduct negotiations on a works basis, using a hierarchical system where seasoned and respected branch officials are on hand to offer

guidance, in preference to making contact with regional full-time officers. During the early

1980s, when localised plant negotiations were beginning to take precedence, the divisional

officers reacted:

> I feel that the full-time people in Cardiff thought that the situation was perhaps getting a little bit out of hand. Perhaps they felt isolated, and not knowing what the local officials were up to, although the local officials were happy. The full-time officers started to bring in the slack. Cardiff [office] then appointed one full-time person to look after Port Talbot. This person was responsible, knew everything that was going on, and generally had to get involved. It was a general person to oversee things, just to make sure that individual branches weren't overstepping the mark.
>
> John Thomas, lay member, Port Talbot

Put another way, the tensions bubbling under the surface between branch officials and full-

time officers illustrate how increasingly localised deals (such as slimline) are altering the

manner in which the ISTC operates within regions. Additionally, the moves to bring the

actions of certain 'rogue' branches back into line by the intervention of full-time officials

may also have served to re-invigorate the tradition of the ISTC in south Wales in relatively

high levels of plant- and regional-based cohesion.

The divisional office on Teesside had not witnessed a significant change in its role until

1992, the date when the ISTC announced a change in direction to become a 'community

union':

> The role of the divisional office ... hadn't changed a lot, but in the last few years it has changed significantly. We have now moved to what we call our Priority One, which is recruitment. We are trying to change the role of what we have become over the years, which is a servicing union, to one of an organising union. We're attempting to give power back to the local officials in the local area. They effectively look after themselves a lot more than they have been doing, they've been dependent on this office a lot of the time, so instead of trying to resolve their own problems they've been tempted to telephone us and get us to sort things out. They found it easier for us to do the work for them. What we're trying to do is empower

> *the local officials to leave us free in this office to go out and recruit*
> *new members.*
>
> Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

The union appears to be becoming more localised in its outlook concerning its composition on Teesside. The 1992 change of ethos from a servicing to an organising union has had effects upon the ways in which the union structures its local affairs and maintains contact with branch officials. Whilst Mr. Adams argued that the local branches were bearing the fruits of this increased localisation of decision-making, a branch secretary commented that it was local executive council members of the union that are also benefiting from increased powers:

> *I think branches got less autonomy after the privatisation. Agreements now tend to be made above your head, even though branch autonomy is set out within the rules of the Confederation. It appears to be the EC that is taking a lot of the power. I don't like it, EC members are supposed to be at work as well. I think their role should perhaps become a full time role. The EC members seem to becoming full-time officers given the amount of time spent in negotiations. I don't speak to the Divisional Officers as much as I used to. It's really only administrative matters that I bother them with now anyway. I think the EC are taking over. There's no reason to get in touch with the full-time officers, because if you want to discuss agreements, it's the EC members who know the whole details.*
>
> Adrian Cook, works rep, Redcar coke ovens

When compared with other British trade unions, the ISTC is somewhat rare in that the decision making body of the union is made up of non-full time officials. EC members of the ISTC are branch officials who are elected onto the EC by means of divisional seats. The three members of the EC from Division Two (Mick Mannion, Tony Poynter and Rob Middlemas) have been handed more and more responsibility to make increasingly localised agreements between the ISTC and British Steel:

> *I think the EC have a lot more responsibility than they used to have, at the expense of the full-time officials. Now a normal member (such as myself, as an EC member) can shout at management and tell*

them to boil their heads and so on. It hasn't made for a better class
of branch officials in my opinion, I think that full-time officers in effect
have been replaced by EC members.
                              Mick Mannion, EC member, Teesside

On Teesside, therefore, EC members appear to hold much of the localised decision-making power, advising branches on an 'ad hoc' basis. In south Wales, conversely, seniority and length of service within the industry appears to be awarded with elevated status within the union. During the time spent in south Wales conducting fieldwork, I noted that Dai Ferris (a branch official at Port Talbot who has never harboured ambition to sit on the EC) was often approached by branch secretaries for advice on localised agreements or disputes ahead of either EC members or full-time officials, largely due to the respect he is afforded from fellow workers and his 'time-served' status. This case demonstrates the more interconnected nature of ISTC activity within the plant in south Wales than on Teesside.

The evolution of the ISTC branch structure – 1967 to present

This section examines traditions and legacies of branch-based ISTC activity in south Wales and on Teesside, before turning to a critique of how certain branches have used historical positions of power to negotiate favourable deals for themselves, and how more recent moves towards teamworking have been used by certain branches – particularly on Teesside – to reinforce the highly fragmented patterns of activity and authority within the plant.

The most powerful unit of ISTC organisation is the local branch. Each member of the ISTC is organised into a particular branch connected with the works in which they are employed. Within small work places, all ISTC members may be organised into one branch, but at large integrated plants, several branches may be formed, each branch covering members employed in a specific subdivision or process. In such cases, the branch structure may reflect trade group organisation. This division of workers dates back to the 1917 formation of the ISTC:

(a) *Blastfurnace (including coke-producing plant)*

(b) *Sheet Smelters (covering all types of steel production)*

(c) *Steel Rolling Mills (covering any class of rolling mill, with forges in addition)*

(d) *Tinplate and Welsh Sheet Trade*

(e) *Malleable Iron and Non-Ferrous Metals (a non-occupation-based section covering all employees in these trades)*

(f) *Steel Sheet Trade (intended for all steel sheet employees not embraced by section (d)*

(g) *Tube Trade*

(h) *Nut, Bolt, Rivet, Nail and Light Iron and Steel*

(i) *Steam, Hydraulic, Electric Service, Engineering and Maintenance (a section which included crane drivers and also those trade, craft or maintenance men who were members of the ISTC / BISAKTA)*

(j) *Clerical, Administrative, Technical and Supervisory (the most recently created section, which embraced all white-collar staff)*

(k) *General Labour (for all unskilled workers other than shift workers)*

Adapted from Upham (1997)

These groups reflect the enduring legacies of the old craft-based systems of production and labour organisation, from which the ISTC and BISAKTA originally evolved (see also Bowen, 1976). The branch composition of the ISTC is generally structured around these

trade groups, in that a particular branch historically is composed of workers from a particular trade area:

> *A lot of the branches cover specific processes. In a works, the Blastfurnacemen will have a branch, there will be a re-rolling branch, there will be a hot sheet finishing branch and so on. They are process-orientated branches. In some major works, for example, there will be a crane-drivers branch. But that's been broken down a little, there's been an amalgamation of some branches, especially if they're small.*
>
> Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

Lay members of the ISTC therefore are locally represented primarily in branches, but these branches are heavily influenced by their respective trade group, if the workplace is sufficiently large or diverse to accommodate multiple branches.

A contradiction appears to exist in ISTC policy, in that local branches officially enjoy some degree of autonomy, yet in practice are under the strict control of the Executive Council and full-time divisional officers. Past and present full-time union officials have indicated that the former notion above holds the most weight, as the following quotations illustrate:

> *The consultation was* [originally] *laid down, the branch was the all-important item of the ISTC. The only body that could overrule a branch was the EC. All the divisional officers, who all had powerful jobs, all they could do was advise.*
>
> John Foley, former divisional officer, south Wales

Ken Clarke argued that local agreements are permissible even without Executive Council or full-time officer interference:

> *One of the big things about the ISTC is that branches have their own autonomy. They can make agreements, like for example the beam mill, the rates for the beam mill and the subsequent mills, were all established without the divisional office being involved at all.*
>
> Ken Clarke, former national officer

Clive Lewis' stated that branch diversity is common, although separate branches will often group together for added strength should the need arise:

> *Branches are accountable to both the region and nationally-speaking. But, the ISTC has always been in favour of local autonomy and local involvement. It's often better from an organising point of view. ... Every branch has its separate negotiating rights. Sometimes they concede that to a works joint negotiating committee, when there is a matter of common interest, as the jargon goes, they'll negotiate together then. If a branch says that it doesn't want anything to do with that than it doesn't have to. Every branch has therefore been autonomous.*
>
> Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

Such declarations indicate that each branch has certain powers of self-determination. Only the Executive Council, the supreme power-base of the ISTC, is permitted to overrule a branch. Divisional officers and other full-time officials are charged with the tasks of guiding and advising branches, although exercising no official control over them.

The competitive character of many of the ISTC branches was highlighted by Jack Gavin, a former full-time official who retired almost twenty years ago. He claimed that the diverse nature of the union bred a competitive element into local internal electoral procedures:

> *The branch system has been quite successful. There was a lot of interests created in the branches in the various departments. There were annual elections for the branch officers. They were stimulated by the competitive nature of the branch.*
>
> Jack Gavin, former national officer

Differing regions of ISTC activity may have differing methods of local representation that are reflected in the local branch structure:

> *Branches in Teesside tended to be more diverse* [than other areas of the country], *so in a large plant like Lackenby, you could have in theory three branches, one covering the steel works and all the ancillaries, one covering the beam-mill, and one covering the slabbing-mill. That's the theory, but in practice you get little sections.*

In Lackenby 5 we had pipe-fitters, their mates, the riggers, their mates, all the production workers, all in one branch. It made it an effective branch, because it was so diverse.

Ken Clarke, former national officer

The map of ISTC activity is far from uniform, despite the supposed power of the centralised – yet inherently uneven – Executive Council. It also suggests that the legacy of trade group-orientated branches is degenerating in terms of their adherence to the strict boundaries highlighted earlier by Upham (1997). Eddie Lynch, the current Assistant General Secretary of the ISTC backs up this point:

The reasons for the reductions in branch numbers are quite clear. First, financial reasons. Auditing branches costs an awful lot of money. Some branches had five, maybe ten or fifteen members, and it was costing us an absolute fortune. We wanted to bring those sort of branches into a structure that was financially manageable. Second, teamworking is having an impact. I think by 2004 it will all be in place, and that will reduce the number of branches [even further] *because people will be in a branch that is based around their team at work.*

Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

Over time, as membership of the ISTC has fallen, and the count of branches has decreased, the supposition that the historical legacy of each local branch is trade-group specific may become invalid. However, differing regions of ISTC activity illustrate varying norms and expectations within the local branch structure (and therefore may be reflected in the broader culture of the local labour market). As the next sections demonstrate, notable differences exist between Teesside and south Wales in terms of ISTC representation within the plant that can be linked to wider cultural differences between the two regions.

Fragmentation and the uneven power-base of the ISTC branch structure

As the constitution of the ISTC allows, branch autonomy within south Wales has been staunchly defended, even during the so-called centralised times of public ownership. Despite negotiations being increasingly of a national nature, branch meetings were well-attended simply because members believed that there was a great legitimacy to the trade union movement:

> Branches were effective in the sense that lots of people went to branch meetings, people were volatile and excited because people in the 1960s and '70s felt that they had a great input into their own future. They had it because they could directly elect (or de-select) the people making agreements on their behalf. Once we had multi-union bargaining, the branch became less and less effective.
> Ken Williams, branch secretary, Port Talbot

The late 1960s and 1970s were therefore used by the ISTC in south Wales as a time to increase their representation and standing throughout the works by establishing a strong local union structure. Certain legacies still hold firm within the works today, even though this resilient structure was strongly challenged from the 1980s onwards. As the chapter dealing with capital – labour relations suggested, inter-works autonomy began to be eroded in favour or a more multi-union, plant-based system of negotiations, with obvious effects on individual branches and overall plant and regional solidarity:

> The ISTC branch lost a lot of power immediately following privatisation because there was a move by the company into the use of works committees rather than the branch. Negotiations became multi-union – all through slimline, that's what started it, they became involved with other unions. I think that it was seen by the ISTC as a way of unifying the workforce on the plants.
> Peter McKinn, former EC member, south Wales

The works system of negotiating has been strengthened by the moves towards teamworking, to the detriment of individual branches. Keeping in regular contact with members is becoming less easy for individual branch leaders:

> *Teamworking is making union activity more difficult. I'm having to keep in touch with my lads by 'phone because we don't see as much of each other any more. It certainly has weakened the union and the way that it was introduced basically had the branches fighting internally and with each other instead of against the management.*
> John Tetsill, lay member, Port Talbot

Once again, 1988 is a key turning point for the branch structure. Some branch officials have argued that after the introduction of slimline, individual branch autonomy was employed to weaken the overall position of the union within the plant. Although management had decided to move towards plant level negotiating, the ISTC branch did not re-mould itself in order to keep up with the pace of events, leading to increased intra-union jealousies and mediocre representation, events which are at odds with past traditions of commonality within the plant:

> *I think that the management have again been clever, in allowing slimline to work as it does. They still employ the usual inter-union and intra-union jealousies to a certain extent, people want their own autonomy and so on, so we haven't got the situation where the slimline officers can speak for the trade union movement on the plant as a whole. There have been a couple of occasions when the slimline committee has passed something, it's gone back to the branches, and they've changed it or not accepted it or whatever. That's weakened our position as a committee as a whole. The ISTC branches remain very powerful and I think that in the future the branches and the unions have to become far closer together and close-knit and we've got to stop thinking of branch autonomy and think about plant autonomy.*
> Paul Rhys, former ISTC lay member, Port Talbot

As negotiations have become more place- or works specific, the importance of the individual branch in south Wales as a negotiating tool has declined, even though levels of individual branch autonomy have not. On Teesside, each individual branch may reflect

differing types of ISTC activity at local level, but in south Wales the complex mosaic of union activity extends more to plant level, rather than to the more localised degree.

Branches within works appear to have little to do with the centralised structure of the ISTC, preferring to involve the divisional office only as the last resort. The local branch officials (such as the Secretary and Chairman[8]) remain in positions of power to administer help to members, as the branch (rather than works-based committees) remains the primary contact with the grassroots member:

> *I'd go to the local rep first of all, then he could deal with it with other people if need be. We all know who the reps are around here but we wouldn't bother divisional office unless there was a major problem.*
> Steve Hare, lay member, Port Talbot

> *The branch has always been the first point of contact if there was a dispute in the works – you'd go and see your local branch official. The branch structure seemed a democratic way of doing things.*
> Terry Jones, committee man, BOS plant, Port Talbot

Complex organisational characteristics exist in the role of and the relationship between branches within the plant. Whilst the ISTC varies between regions, the evolution of the ISTC branch structure in south Wales has tended to be plant-based, rather than the high degree of freedom *within* the plant that characterises activity on Teesside. The tradition of plant-level negotiating that has characterised the steel industry in south Wales sits uneasily with the new working practices introduced in the last chapter. On Teesside, however, teamworking has been more successfully integrated into the works, due to a more decentralised ethos to union organisation.

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[8] the use of this gender-specific term is deliberate

Such comments are not to imply that certain individual branches do not have more potential to both define and achieve their objectives than others. Many attributes – some of which are not necessarily related to the workplace – are required to be an effective branch:

> *A successful branch needs two things. The officials and the lay-membership. You can have extremely good branch officials who work their way around a problem and then get stuck when it goes back to the members. The two have to come together in the best combination. A branch can operate purely as a branch, or it can operate in a broader scale where it has outside political activities, for example. That's in a sense how the good branches operate – health and safety, politics and so on and so on. Ordinary branches don't have that.*
> Bob Bird, divisional officer, south Wales

> *A successful branch needs good officials that are consistent in the way they deal with things. The branch membership has to feel that it is being led in the correct direction. Everything you do you need someone to lead. It doesn't matter whether the branch is large or small – it depends upon the branch strength of the people.*
> Colin Wildon, branch secretary, Lackenby concast

Branch officials also have to have the power over their members to allow for gentle persuasion or manipulation whenever the need arises. Diplomatic skills are seen as a prerequisite, especially during times of deadlock between the lay membership and the employer during protracted negotiations:

> *Without any question, the strength of the branch officials can make a good branch. They virtually dominate the branch. They can, as I used to, manipulate the members to whatever I felt was in their best interest. It's very much a personality based system. Officials had to manipulate different people into compromise situations.*
> John Batstone, former lay member, Redcar

South Wales appears to have an historical tradition of 'strong' branches in both Port Talbot and Llanwern. These branches, through the combined layering of historical legacies, have the strongest and most forceful branch officials and large membership. Such traditions

reflect the hierarchical system within the ISTC, which certain branches use to their advantage:

> *The Abbey mills branch have always been strong, they had a large membership and strong leadership. They were just powerful people. They did a good job, they represented their members well and they were very active people. They held a lot of respect as a result of it. There was some sort of branch hierarchy throughout the works, there were always some branches that would get more respect and perhaps better deals because of their tradition.*
>
> Ken McNeil, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

> *The finishing end has always been the strongest. The Cold Mill used to be a very militant branch. They've always been well paid and they've always negotiated well. Their wages have shown their strength.*
>
> Cyril Jenkins, committee man, BOS plant, Port Talbot

Such differences reflect the position of these branches in the overall production process.

Whilst automation has removed some of the all-important craft-based skills that may have made these branches the most powerful, the legacy of such processes is still apparent in the hierarchical structure of the union:

> *The finishing end have got a lot of power. I think that is the difference between Division Two and south Wales. ... Once you get past the concast in Lackenby and in Scunthorpe[9], there's not a lot to do in terms of manpower. For example, you don't pack big girders, you simply sling them and shove them on a railway line and that's the end of the matter. Once you get past the concast at Port Talbot a whole range of very complex processes operate, the finish, various coilers having to prepare the surface in a particular way, then you go onto things like the cold mill, you have galvanising, you have tin plating processes, all of which are very, very close to the customer.*
>
> Brian Connolly, former divisional officer, south Wales

Therefore both inter-regional – as well as intra-union differences – have played a part in creating the historically-bound legacies of strength and weakness within the branches

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[9] Lackenby is in division two (Teesside), Scunthorpe is in division three (Yorkshire)

throughout the works. In south Wales, the branches at the finishing end have been able to dictate to others because of their perceived extra importance:

> *If you look at the finishing end in Port Talbot, when they negotiate a new local bonus scheme, they have, and they've always been, near the top of the pile. That's how things work locally, and in my opinion, the local bonuses are not as good as they should be. If you look at it plant against plant, Llanwern earns more bonuses than us, and there are probably reasons for that, but we're now virtually concerned only with how we can make our own plant better.*
>
> Tommy Fellows, EC member, Port Talbot

On Teesside, similar traditions are evident, although the differing nature of the production process has allowed differing branches to come to the fore. Steel-making and rolling branches have historically been the most powerful and effective means of representation. These branches all had strong leadership, very rarely contacted the divisional office, maintained high levels of pay for their members, had good relations with management, and fiercely guarded their independence and autonomy:

> *The strongest branch was always the Beam mill at Lackenby. It was always a big branch, and always very strong. The works rep did the negotiating. Arthur Ashley, a bit of a character, he always did the negotiating. It was the grassroots at work. The strong branches, the beam mill, the concast, the melting shop. All of these rarely came to divisional office, but they did come when they had a serious problem. I think these legacies have continued. To be fair, they've all got good rates of pay, which perhaps reflects their success.*
>
> Roy Bishop, former divisional officer, Teesside

> *The strongest branches have always been the BOS Plant, the concast. The beam mill are the same, they've all got a will. Management understand that too. These people don't agree to everything, but their relationship with management is good. They're also the best paid branches. It's all about doing deals. The worst branches are the ones that won't do deals, they always end up at the back of the queue.*
>
> Mick Mannion, EC member, Teesside

A former branch secretary of the Lackenby Concast plant furthered the claim that the concast and BOS plant branches have developed a tradition for being the most active and

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powerful ISTC branches on Teesside. He claimed that a tradition for continuity amongst union officials has been the key to the success of these branches, having been branch secretary for some twenty-three years:

> The concast branch has always been the strongest because of the continuity of the officials. I was branch secretary for 23 years. Colin Wildon, my successor, he'd also been active in the branch for years before he took over from me. The BOS plant is a little different. They have the same people on the committees, but they tend to rotate the personnel every two or three years, every time there is an election. So there's continuity there too, in a slightly different way. But continuity is by far the most important thing, and realising that you have independence and autonomy in your own branch.
> Dave Hunt, former branch official, Redcar

As a result of this continuing historical legacy, the branches in question have somewhat of an elitist attitude, attained through a disciplined membership and strong, energetic and effective leadership:

> I think you tend to find around the steel making lot are especially strong. I'm talking about the BOS and Concast plants. They tend to be well-run, active, and they have more formalised systems of organisation. ... There is the sort of idea that they are a little bit elite, they've got the old sort of artisan ethos about them, they see themselves as the cream of the crop. Because of that, years ago, when people were more active, they have laid down pretty strict branch rules, and made sure that when people came into those branches, they conformed. I think that discipline leads to people when they replace the leadership being educated into their ways and continuing on in the same vane.
> Bernard Pike, divisional organiser, Teesside

> The strongest traditionally in Teesside are the steel plants, the BOS and concast plants. In the end, we're in a steel works and if we don't make steel we've got a problem. Both the union and management are aware of this and over the years the branches concerned have had a lot of success in using this weapon. That's why they are strong branches. The members can rule the roost. The proof is that the concast workers are the highest paid around here.
> Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

Thus, differing branch capacities are clearly reflected in varying financial returns on union membership within particular parts of the plant.

<u>Summary</u>

This section has demonstrated that the ISTC branch structure displays complex organisational geographies that are highly uneven throughout the plant and region as a whole. The mechanics of the ISTC branch structure has not altered to any large degree over the decades in terms of its role within the confederation, as it remains the primary point of communication for the lay-membership of the ISTC. The actions of the local branch structure of the union offer a key towards understanding regional traditions and local industrial legacies, as the evident differences between south Wales and Teesside have demonstrated.

Whilst the significance of ISTC branches at the local scale can not be underestimated, each individual branch possesses relatively little power when relations with management are considered. New practices such as teamworking have recently placed further question marks over the traditional ISTC branch structure as a pertinent means to organise members throughout the plant. Similarly, the fragmented nature of union activity on Teesside has also resulted in a disorganised structure of representation with which to conduct negotiations with management.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that there is a highly uneven power-base within the ISTC, and the high levels of autonomy afforded to individual branches has resulted in a complex mosaic of union activity at a variety of scales, from the national to the micro. Whilst this

chapter has examined the internal working practices of the ISTC within two regions, it has demonstrated that the ISTC does not operate in a uniform fashion *within* each of the places in question, hinting that a regional approach to union enquiry is not wholly sufficient. The examination of the local branch structure has shown how the potential exists for small-scale variations in procedure, agreement and conditions *within* the region or plant. Within the works, there are differences in the capacity of particular branches in defining and achieving their objectives. Even with the advent of large-scale automation, the branches central to the steel-making process still assume an advantageous position to others. Whilst the ISTC may appear – on paper at least – to be of a centralised nature, its constitution concerning branch autonomy ensures that a high degree of freedom of action has evolved at the micro-scale, that of the individual branches. These levels of local autonomy were increasingly sought and realised in practice after the 1980 strike, and given further impetus by privatisation, due to the increasingly decentralised pattern of industrial relations bargaining.

Micro-level bargaining has flourished in the last decade, and branches at the core of steel-making activities (in particular BOS and concast on Teesside and the finishing end in south Wales) have used their positions of relative strength to extricate relatively advantageous deals from management for themselves. In more recent years, the introduction of teamworking – a huge departure from the past in terms of the organisation of work – challenges the very nature of the ISTC brand of trade unionism that has evolved over the years. The respect for seniority and hierarchy that still pervades the ISTC sits most uncomfortably with new forms of workplace organisation, even though these new working practices have been used by certain members of the ISTC to further their own aims.

Chapters six, seven and eight have highlighted distinct contrasts between the regional industrial cultures of the two regions in question. The regional industrial culture of south Wales can be characterised by one of large-scale trade union activity, where trade unionism is viewed as an important constituent part of working for British Steel. Much emphasis has been placed upon plant and regional autonomy, but other trade unions operating in the same spheres of representation have largely been viewed with disdain. Highly localised working practices have also been eschewed, which has often placed the ISTC at odds with management. Conversely, on Teesside, increasingly localised deals have assumed greater importance over time, as have micro-scale working relationships with other trade unions. These highlighted differences between Teesside and south Wales can not be attributable to the actions of capital or labour acting in isolation from one another. Instead, they should be viewed as by-products of the complex – and multi-scaled – interactions of capital and labour that have contributed to the formation of these varied regional industrial cultures.

These chapters have thus argued that the ISTC is an institution that operates at a variety of spatial scales. Through an examination of localised practices within a national framework, I have demonstrated that a multi-scaled and fluid analysis of regional activity is required – one that takes into account the complex web of inter-and intra-union interactions at a variety of local scales, but also one that recognises the national frameworks within which the union operates. I have also argued that the ISTC remains a significant actor within the steel industry, due to its continued strength (in terms of members) within the works. The question of how the ISTC operates within the wider

community – especially since its change of direction in 1992 – remains unexplored. It is to

this topic the thesis now turns.

Chapter Nine: The ISTC in the Wider Community

Introduction

The first section of this chapter is used to link an examination of the ISTC within the works to a investigation of the ISTC in the wider community. In these preliminary paragraphs, theoretical debates concerning the alleged flattening of the British trade union map are explored in the case of the ISTC, examining how membership density has varied over the last thirty years on Teesside and in south Wales.

The chapter then concentrates on the so-called 'Fresh Start' initiative that the ISTC embarked upon in 1992, as a somewhat overdue response to dwindling membership numbers across all regions of representation. The background to this radical departure is analysed by charting structural change within the union and examining how the union re-aligned itself within the TUC. The chapter then turns to the region of Teesside, and concentrates upon how the local ISTC organisation has embraced its sudden change in direction over the last decade. This section also incorporates evidence from officials of other trade unions, both in terms of their recent relationship with the ISTC and how their union is coping with new forms of union representation. The next section of the chapter concentrates on similar issues affecting the ISTC in south Wales. Similarities and contrasts to the Teesside example are analysed, as is input from officials of competing trade unions. The chapter concludes by arguing that the ISTC's conversion to community unionism has not altogether been a success, due to historical legacies and a basic unwillingness to change. As south Wales and Teesside are heartlands of British trade

union activity, the chapter also argues that the ISTC may have left its change in direction too late, due to the recruitment activities of other competing trade unions.

ISTC membership – dramatic decline or stubborn resilience?

The examination of statistics of union density by Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993, 1996) took issue with Massey and Painter (1989) regarding whether trade unionism in general had declined relatively or absolutely throughout Britain. Using the case of the ISTC, I wish to side with Martin, Sunley and Wills (1993, 1996), and argue that whilst the strength of the ISTC has declined absolutely, its relative influence within the works (in terms of membership) has remained largely constant. A discussion of such issues is pertinent here, as the chapter goes on to review the radical change in direction the ISTC embarked upon in 1992. In order to do this, the ISTC required a strong foothold in the institutional composition of the regions in question, and I argue that – quantitatively at least – the union has remained a significant local actor in the regions of Teesside and south Wales.

The three graphs displayed in Figure 1 show membership statistics for the ISTC from 1960 to 1999 on a national basis, and on Teesside and south Wales. Total employment in iron and steel – from 1971 to 1981, 1981 to 1991, and 1991 to 1996 – was garnered from the census of employment. ISTC membership density was calculated from dividing iron and steel employment by ISTC membership.

Fig 1: ISTC membership, iron and steel employment and associated union density

National

North East (Division Two)

South Wales (Divisions Five and Six)

Census of Employment 1971 - 1981   Census of Employment 1981 - 1991   Census of Employment 1991 - 1996
ISTC Membership 1960 - 1999   Union density 1971 - 1981   Union Density 1981 - 1991
Union Density - 1991 - 1996

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Whilst some trends are apparent, it is important to mention the methodological difficulties and inaccuracies within the graphs. It is evident that the census data (1971 – 1981, 1981 – 1991, 1991 – 1996) do not exactly match, especially in 1991. The definition of what constitutes iron and steel employment changed with each data set, so care must be taken in the interpretation of these statistics. Calculations of union density have been affected, despite the accurate membership statistics held by the ISTC. The other potential inaccuracy within the original data set concerns matching up census data with regional ISTC membership. Regional ISTC membership data (unlike most other British trade unions) has been accurately recorded since 1917, although there is little quantification of where boundary lines exist between divisions. Therefore, the boundary between Teesside (Division Two) and Yorkshire (Division Four) has been estimated. Similar problems were experienced in delineating south Wales.

It is particularly evident that iron and steel employment has fallen dramatically, and in similar fashion on Teesside and in south Wales. Exceptionally precipitous falls were experienced from 1980 until 1988, especially on Teesside, largely due to the rationalisation of the industry following the 1980 national strike. ISTC membership also fell during the 1980s, but stabilised during the 1990s.

It is the union density measurements that are of the most relevance. The pictures displayed at national and regional level look remarkably similar. In 1971, the ISTC represented some thirty per cent of all iron and steel workers in Britain, yet by 1996 represented some fifty per cent. On Teesside and in south Wales, ISTC density was approximately fifty and sixty per cent respectively in 1971, and had increased to

approximately fifty-five and sixty-five per cent respectively in 1996. Union density in the two regions has demonstrated much resilience in the face of large-scale changes within the steel industry.

Whilst the significant methodological problems of presenting accurate data have been demonstrated, I argue here that it is still possible to draw some important conclusions from the trends shown on the graphs. First, whilst the ISTC has lost thousands of members on Teesside and in south Wales, it has shown a high degree of resilience in the face of adversity. Second, I argue that whilst union power in the two regions has declined absolutely, the ISTC still wields significant power within the works, as a high percentage of workers still view union membership as a prerequisite of working in the steel industry. Relatively speaking, the ISTC therefore remains a significant actor in the working culture of the steel industry in both regions. To use the phrase of Martin, Sunley and Wills (1996, p 81), the ISTC has shown 'resilience amidst retreat'. The current regional pattern of ISTC membership shows similarities to that of thirty years ago in terms of union density, even though thousands of members have left the industry *and* the union. Teesside and south Wales continue to be heartlands for the ISTC and other trade unions, and in the case of the ISTC have displayed significant buoyancy. More crucially, I argue, the ISTC remains an obvious, important, and often overlooked contributor to the regional industrial cultures of the places in question.

A new direction? The ISTC and community unionism

Privatisation of the British Steel Corporation in 1988 did not stem the tide of plant closures, rationalisation schemes and associated large-scale job losses that had begun in earnest in

1980. During the early 1990s, member contributions to the ISTC accounted for only half of the union's expenditure (Upham 1997). Rather belatedly, the ISTC realised that drastic action was required. Retention of existing members and the recruitment of new blood became the new priority. The new leadership team of Keith (now Lord) Brookman and Mick Leahy promised change, and launched the 'Fresh Start' initiative. This project was to break with a near century-old tradition of the ISTC concentrating exclusively on the steel industry, and aimed to broaden out the membership base. Anticipating a backlash from the membership, the leadership argued that it would focus exclusively on existing steel communities, even if most (or in some cases all) of the jobs provided directly by the steel industry had gone. In this way, the ISTC sought to transform itself into what it calls a community union, as described by the current General Secretary Mick Leahy:

> *The hard thing for us to realise has been the contraction of the steel industry. Employment will decline further within it. The ISTC aren't strapped for cash, when compared with the rest of the union movement. What were we to do? Manage decline? Or alternatively, keep the best traditions of the union alive by recruiting in the communities? Most of our former members and their families that live in steel areas work in industries that have replaced traditional steel jobs. Most of those workers are low paid, non-unionised and employ a great deal of women. Because of our commitment to the steel industry and the associated communities, we thought we could put something back whilst regenerating the union. We're being quite successful in the transition towards a community based organisation.*
>
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

The decline of the British steel industry nationally had seen the membership of the ISTC plummet to a level of 34,000. The ISTC has always had close links to the communities in which its members lived, and steel workers tend to stay in their community even after they have left the steel industry. Therefore the notion of a family orientated, community union has direct relevance to the restructuring of the confederation.

Because of these historical connections between the ISTC and steel communities, and a reluctance simply to 'manage decline', the ISTC saw a way forward in extending its role from being firmly based in the steel industry towards developing a more community-based focus that addressed the needs of all of the inhabitants of a traditional steel area.

> *Since privatisation in 1988, there have been thousands of people in steel communities left to fend for themselves. We found that steel communities had developed the history of the ISTC so far, so we couldn't neglect them. The first thing we did was to introduce the 50 pence subscription for an earning member. With that, they got the full entitlement of representation from the union. Second, we wanted to see a position where we could get involved in retraining. We then found out that it was rather pointless to retrain people for jobs that aren't in their localities. So we tried to train people in how to look for jobs, and then introduce training courses that would meet those needs. Of course, they would then continue with their membership and then they would remain an ISTC member for life. Additionally, we've tapped into one million pounds of European money to set up nineteen training projects.*
>
> Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

Therefore, the key aim of the ISTC became to retain members of the union *after* they had left the steel industry by developing alliances with its members based upon training, development and long-term career information, as well as representation whilst they were in employment.

> *The last and most important date in the union, after we had to manage all this change, is now. We're changing our focus. At one time, it was melters, rollermen who were the base of the union. We found if you look back, the union was always community-based, just like the coal industry. With the closures, some of the communities lost some identity within the union. We're turning back to recruiting in the communities. We're looking at focussing ourselves on the once steel community. The hard fact is that, as a union, if we don't start to change, then we'll disappear.*
>
> Peter Lightfoot, former divisional officer, various regions

The ISTC is seeking to extend its influence beyond the (declining) steel industry, and is advertising itself as an all-encompassing trade union offering expert collective

representation within steel communities. Some resources have been devoted to training programmes for members presently employed in steel, for instance through a collaborative venture known as Steel Partnership Training. This is on the grounds that if they are laid off or take voluntary redundancy and subsequently find new employment, they would be prime targets for the recruitment drive:

> *We want to retrain our people, be part of inward investment, give our people transferable skills, so that if they leave the industry they can get a job elsewhere. British Steel seem to consider this a waste of money. We have the money to do it, and we spend more money per capita on education and training than any other UK union.*
> Mick Leahy, General Secretary

In structural terms, the union has changed little since the 'Fresh Start'. The familiar composition of branches, divisional officers and the Executive Council remains the same. However, the roles of certain union officials has subtly altered:

> *'Centralisation was introduced in certain respects. We saw much more of the national officers than we had done. After the splitting up of the negotiating bodies, they became very much more involved, they involved the divisional officers being more in touch with central office. ... People in the regions, the branch secretaries, for example, in some ways, are allowed to get on with their own thing'*
> Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

Divisional officers have had to diversify their knowledge base, in order to provide expertise to aid branch secretaries with more widely-focussed recruitment drives. Divisional officers are expected to co-ordinate training and development courses for members. In short, the full-time employees of the union have become more centralised in their outlook, working alongside their contemporaries from other divisions more frequently and intensively than before. On the other hand, locally-based officials have been allowed more autonomy to put their training received from divisional officers to good use in their particular region.

The ISTC has so far resisted the temptation to develop into a general union. The confederation has no plans to recruit outside former areas of steel employment. Nevertheless, inter-union relations have deteriorated to a certain extent. Some other, more generally-based unions have taken issue with the ISTC's decision to represent outside of the steel industry:

> 'Some other TUC affiliated unions don't really like us parking outside non-unionised workforces and trying to recruit, as we're outside what they see as their traditional base. They'll go round and leaflet the day after and that tends to undermine us. But, we are staying in the steel communities, we never see ourselves as a general union. We see a responsibility to those people and we'll continue working with them.'
> Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

The ISTC has no current plans to merge with any other trade union. After having faced large-scale membership losses, the confederation remains financially stable. The current Assistant General Secretary dismissed any future merger plans, whilst claiming that other larger, more general trade unions have for a long time been attempting to merge with the ISTC, for largely financial reasons:

> 'We have no plans to merge with anyone. We're particularly financially sound. For example, if you take the AEEU, to have the ratio per capita that we have on membership at present they would have to have assets of £1.6 billion. They've been trying it on with us for years, on the one hand they're always trying to put their arm round us and help us, but next they're trying to undermine our recruitment. The new century holds no fears for the ISTC. We've got highly trained officers, we're highly professional, we'll soon be offering on-line membership, we intend to deliver what we promise.'
> Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

Brian Connolly, a recently retired full-time officer, shared this view:

> 'Our wish to be a single-industry union goes back one hundred years. More or less, over time, we've been talking about a metals union of which iron and steel would form the predominant part. There are clear benefits to that, the problems are known and

understood by all concerned, it must be very difficult to be a general union and indeed the bigger unions are fudged together on the cheap because what they do is set up specific groups within the general union. All that's done is brought together a number of specialist unions and pretend that it's a general union. We would prefer to be honest, we've always said that. No manager could ever point his finger at me and say that I didn't know what I was talking about.'

Brian Connolly, former divisional officer, south Wales

Several different motives – and potential conflicts – therefore arise from the Fresh Start campaign. There is a definite wish to recruit more members and to stay independent (although these two facets of the drive go hand-in-hand). These substantial departures from long-established forms of ISTC activity are legitimised by expressions of continued support for present and former steel communities. The ISTC now tellingly refers to itself not as a trade union for iron and steel workers, but as "ISTC – the community union". Additionally, the ISTC is by no means alone amongst competing trade unions in seeking to expand (or at the very least maintain) its membership base. Its position is justified by arguing that it is not seeking to compete with other unions, just recruit from non-unionised workplaces and only in steel communities. Officially, the ISTC has confined itself to the manufacturing sector in its attempt to recruit new (non-steel) members, although evidence from Teesside and south Wales suggests that recruitment targets have placed increasing pressure to cast a wider net. This process raises important questions about precisely how such new members are represented within the ISTC, and how the ISTC can accept the re-definition of the nature of its relationship with other unions and other non-steel workplaces.

The ISTC and the Teesside community, 1992 – 2000

Internal change to the ISTC on Teesside

When questioned about the radical change in ISTC policy, full-time officials and high-ranking branch secretaries within the Teesside structure chose to reiterate official union strategy. The recruitment and retention of members became a priority, resulting in a radical change in union policy:

> *A significant change to our organisation has been that whilst for 100 years we have only organised in steel and metal industries, we now organise outside of these and like to now refer to ourselves as a Community Union rather than just a Steel Union.*
> Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

> *One of the things that Keith Brookman did, and his successor has carried on, Mick Leahy, was to launch what's called Priority One. That was to recruit, recognise there was a limit as far as the limits of membership as far as the conventional metals union is concerned. The fact is we had a meeting last night with the divisional officer, and he was able to report a significant amount of interest is being developed in other non-metal industries. We're spreading our net within the TUC range. We're not poaching, but we're looking into workplaces that don't normally have trade union representation. That's a big initiative, and only relatively recently developed. That gives you a flavour of how we've seen it necessary to develop the union here on Teesside.*
> Ian Crichton, branch secretary, Teesside middle management

Significant change is being witnessed in local ISTC activity. The current divisional officer clearly believes that regional membership must increase, although recent gains in membership have been offset by losses from the steel industry:

> *There are people out there living in ex-steel communities, and chances are they live with or are related to steelworkers. Our line is that if they aren't in a union they aren't being represented properly and getting the benefits that they deserve. In the first 12 – 18 months of the new campaign, we weren't even managing to check the losses that we were sustaining. We're now at the stage where we are still making losses at British Steel as they downsize, but as*

> *recruitment continues we're managing to stand still. We're hoping to build on this, in fact we're slightly in front at the moment. That would help us to remain an independent trade union rather than become a section of the AEEU or the T&G.*
>
> Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

The seriousness of the situation is identified by the need to attract more and more members into the ISTC to ensure the survival of the confederation as an independent trade union:

> *It's a means to keep our union as an independent union. If we say that we're going to stay just as a simple steel union, I can't see us being able to keep our independence for very much longer, so therefore recruitment has to be the number one objective.*
>
> Ted Markham, branch secretary, Hartlepool

The ISTC clearly believes that it still has a role to play within what it sees as the steel community of Teesside. It remains adamant that it can reach out to local people who were once employed in the steel industry and offer them similar benefits.

> *People who have been made redundant will go on and work somewhere else or if we've had steel plant closures, they'll go on and work somewhere else. We're finding that even members who have left the steel works of their own volition had gone and found full employment. We often find that a lot of people have been members and are now working in the new industries that we're targeting.*
>
> Bernard Pike, divisional organiser, Teesside

The ISTC continues to resist the temptation to develop into a general union, despite the further possibilities this would offer in terms of recruitment. On Teesside, workforces targeted have only to date included manufacturing industries, as the ISTC official line states that many of the problems experienced by many workers within the manufacturing industry on Teesside are similar problems to those who remain employed within the steel industry:

I think that the issues in manufacturing are very much the same. In terms of what people ask us about, it's not a million miles away from what we get from the steel industry.

Bernard Pike, divisional organiser, Teesside

Many interviewees based in existing steel branches seemed wary of the new community ethos, even though to date it has remained within the manufacturing sector. Such feelings were summed up by Roy Bishop:

I would have been uncomfortable if I'd had to deal with this new Community Unionism. The original divisional conferences in my day were a little strange in that some of the staff grades were not really included in the full events. They felt excluded. I've seen it in the annual conference. The non-ferrous industries felt out of things a bit. We couldn't appreciate each other's problems. Now, with the community union, we might all live in the same area, but we've all got different problems. The industries are different.

Roy Bishop, former divisional officer, Teesside

The current divisional officer outlined some of the difficulties that the new community unionism is experiencing. He argued that the much-vaunted methods currently being employed by the American steel unions are simply not applicable to Teesside and the north east, simply because of the entrenched views concerning organised labour:

The American steelworkers are going out knocking on doors and trying the double-glazing technique. They try to get a foot in the door. They also seem quite proud of themselves. We've seen some of their videos. But, I'm sceptical about knocking on doors. It won't work here. The culture is such that it is a lot harder to find people who will join like that. Officers don't really want to recruit like that either. People won't be cajoled into joining. I can give you an example. We had members at a works in Weardale. Part of the recruitment pack that we were handing out was an enquiry form. Questions were simple, along the lines of expressing a preference for more information on joining the ISTC. On the back of the receipt of one of those, I rang the individual up and frightened him to death. He wasn't expecting anything like that. He thought that the stuff would come through the post. He didn't want me ringing. I got the impression that I had frightened him more than encourage him to join.

Mick Adams, divisional officer, Teesside

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Nevertheless, all interviewees argued that the local ISTC had to take drastic steps to increase its membership, even though some were not enthusiastic about recruiting outside the steel industry. Most offered a grudging acceptance that trade unions were in existence to offer help and advice to all working people:

> *I don't think that this community unionism is a must, but as far as membership goes it is a must. The numbers within British Steel are going down and down, but it's going to take an awful lot to get new representation. It wouldn't really bother me. We're all in a union together for the same purpose. Some people have their own idealistic world of British Steel. As far as we're a trade union, we're there to represent the people.*
>
> Colin Hart, branch secretary, Skinningrove

A current EC member voiced concerns about the ISTC adopting any method it saw fit to attract membership, which would in effect form a two tier union with the steelworkers continuing to form the dominant part, whilst the supplementary membership would be encouraged to join simply to bolster union funds, and would not manage to attain the same levels of interest in unionism that the more traditional membership could offer:

> *I can possibly see a two tier union forming, because you will always have the strong people together bound by the workplace, because of the obvious common interests. Whereas a community union will have lots of little areas of representation that won't have the same bond.*
>
> Tony Poynter, EC member, Teesside

Clive Lewis, a former Teesside divisional officer who was later given the national responsibility for the Fresh Start, voiced his apprehension concerning the effects of the wider representation:

> *I've got concerns about it. It'll go wider than I wanted it to. I wanted to stick to manufacturing, rather than sandwich-making and call centres. It's OK in Division Two, they're staying in plastics and chemicals. In Scotland it's electronics. That's where we should have concentrated. I can't see the ISTC becoming the new T&G or anything like that. I wouldn't like to see us as a general union.*

We're a manufacturing union. I was in a supermarket in Redcar yesterday. I wouldn't want their workers in the ISTC – they should go and join USDAW [Union of Shop, Distribution and Allied Workers]. They'd be better off in their union. Fundamentally, if the ISTC stick to manufacturing, you'll find that people tend to have the same sorts of problems. They can relate to one-another. There's no way we can relate to bloody Morrisons supermarkets. There's no chance there.

Clive Lewis, former divisional officer, Teesside

A useful summary to the current state of affairs was offered by a branch official. He argued that the union could develop into being a successful community union by continuing with what it has a wealth of experience in, that of local branch representation:

We've got to form workplace branches. That's the only way it could work. We couldn't become an AEEU system where we would have area branches. That would be disastrous. We've got to stick to what we know best. Mick and Bernard are going to have to become more expert in other areas. It's a tremendous change for the full-time officials. But, we're a trade union for everyone, so if it remained branch-based, it wouldn't be a problem.

Colin Wildon, branch secretary, Lackenby concast

In this view, the coupling of the traditional ISTC local branch or workplace structure with the expertise of the full-time officials would provide new members from the manufacturing sectors with a good chance to develop a successful and regionally-specific ISTC. Each branch would remain structured around the workplace, the full-time officials would continue their work concerning recruitment, whilst the EC members would continue to look after the traditional steel sectors. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the ISTC has failed to consider alternative forms of worker representation other than the branch – a structure that may not be compatible with flexible or part-time forms of working.

<u>*Community unions on Teesside – voices from other trade unions*</u>

For the ISTC, the term 'community unionism' is relatively new. Other trade unions with significant representation on Teesside also seem to have embraced this new terminology, albeit on their own terms:

> *The GMB themselves have recently become involved a lot more with the community. We do a lot of things that are community-based. We see it also as a way of recruitment and getting out there, amongst the community and getting a higher profile for the GMB. Nowadays, there's more emphasis on the families* [of GMB members]. *We see that as a positive step.*
> Jimmy Skivington, regional organiser, GMB Teesside

The GMB also differs slightly to the ISTC in terms of how it relates to the 'Community Union' tag:

> *We* [the GMB] *play a significant role in a vast number of people's lives who live and work in Teesside. Not just people who are employed, it's a case of the members that we have that are unemployed still get a service from the GMB in terms of benefits. There are therefore a number of different aspects to us apart from providing workplace representation. We like to think of the terminology that you join the GMB for life, not just for the length of your employment.*
> Jimmy Skivington, regional organiser, GMB Teesside

Whilst the ISTC has defined community unionism as opening up its realm of representation within old industrial areas to include non-steel workers, it appears as if the GMB has taken a slightly more all-encompassing approach. The GMB place great emphasis upon non-workplace representation and being a GMB member for life. Under the often difficult economic climate of Teesside, employment is often of a short-term and precarious nature, and the GMB has decided that membership retention is often best served by offering cut-price membership. Membership for the unemployed costs as little

as five pence and has been offered for some time as an incentive to remain within the organisation.

The Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) offered similar opinions concerning the definition of Community Unionism. Neville Taylorson, the Teesside organiser for the AEEU, argued that Community Unionism must incorporate other organisations and institutions. Unionism, he argued, was about partnership:

> [Community unionism] *is about trade unions assisting wherever they can in the local community. This encompasses politics, in the way we as a union can influence the selection of MPs, councillors, leaders of local authorities and so on. Education too is important. With the Lincoln Project, and the Accelerate Project, we're making inroads into local education as far as training, or being able to train, disadvantaged young people. Disadvantaged means a number of things. It means perhaps within the family unit, where younger members have never seen their parents go to work. Perhaps youngsters, when they come off the tracks a little bit. We hope to pick these things up and point them in the direction of a productive future. That's how I like to see the AEEU in the local environment.*
> Neville Taylorson, full-time official, AEEU Teesside

Both the GMB and the AEEU appear to play more far-reaching roles within the social and political economy of Teesside, through a wider range of activities and services that they offer to their respective membership bases. The notion of 'Community Unionism' was not simply a new buzz-word for either union, with both regional organisers stating that their brief for widening their influence throughout communities had not changed in years.

Ron Brown, the Regional Organiser for USDAW, claimed that the term 'Community Unionism' was new to him, but in practice, it appeared as if USDAW were as community-based as the other unions:

> *To be honest, the term Community Unionism is not something that I've ever come across, so as a term it means very little to me. Nevertheless, USDAW can be viewed as an integral part to the community. We encourage members to get involved in local authorities, school governors and councils. We've set up an advisory service within the union that provide packs to explain what being a school governor is all about and so on. Our members in the co-op are also very much involved through the member service scheme. So there is a community involvement. So community unionism is something that we've always done, rather than just putting a recent title to it as the ISTC appear to have done.*
>
> Ron Brown, regional officer, USDAW, Newcastle

Representatives from the GMB, USDAW and the AEEU were surprised to hear that the ISTC were experimenting with widening their sphere of influence, although there was a clear understanding of why the ISTC felt it had to broaden their membership:

> *I think that if you look at where the ISTC came from, as in the steel industry, they've been ever-decreasing [in terms of membership]. Unionism is also a business, whether you like it or not. Without money coming in, you can't run a business and you'd soon go bankrupt. So they've had to look at other areas to recruit.*
>
> Neville Taylorson, full-time official, AEEU Teesside

Both the AEEU and the GMB were also engaged in comprehensive recruitment drives and have been for quite some time. Such recruitment drives were not simply a reaction to the ISTC; instead other unions are under increasing pressure to recruit because of internal directives:

> *We don't necessarily need a kick up the backside from the ISTC because our backsides have been kicked for the last four years from our own direction in head office. We're constantly being reminded of the need to recruit. We have a very active recruitment campaign all the time. For instance, the role of a full-time union official has changed dramatically in the last few years, where much more emphasis has been placed upon recruitment and organisation as opposed to representation all the time.*
>
> Jimmy Skivington, regional organiser, GMB Teesside

On the other hand, USDAW appeared to need little added incentive to recruit, considering the under-unionisation of their sector:

> *USDAW is one of the few unions that is growing in a national sense, unlike the T&G and the GMB. There are about 2.5 million people employed in retailing, but we've only got 300,000 members. So we're not very large, but there's a lot of potential. I spend a lot of time just recruiting new members.*
> Ron Brown, regional officer, USDAW, Newcastle

Thus, the change in the role of the full-time officers of the ISTC appears to have been largely mirrored by the other main unions on Teesside. Whilst Mick Adams and his staff at the ISTC office in Middlesbrough have had their role changed by new directives from Head Office, other trade unions are no different, as branch officials assume more power for themselves, whilst the full-time union officials spend more and more of their time in an organising and recruiting role.

The relationship between the ISTC and the GMB and AEEU has not changed significantly from the 1992 beginning of the Fresh Start. Other unions appear to accept the wishes of the ISTC to change direction, but to date have not come into conflict with each other in locality:

> [If, for example, the ISTC targeted a non-unionised plant in Teesside], *all I could say to that would be 'good luck to the ISTC'. If they got into a company first then they could recruit in it. That's their business. We couldn't shout foul under the Hull and Bridlington Agreement*[10] *because it's an open season.*
> Neville Taylorson, full-time official, AEEU Teesside

USDAW have so far had nothing to do with the ISTC in terms of representation on Teesside. There has been no mistrust or hostility demonstrated towards the ISTC in the

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[10] A 'non-poaching' agreement signed by all TUC-affiliated unions

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slightest, as the ISTC has remained within the fields of manufacturing, and has therefore

avoided encroaching upon USDAW territory:

> *I've never had anything to do with the ISTC. We're both aiming for different fields. If we got anyone from their field, we'd even point them in the direction of the ISTC. We're not a predatory union, unlike some of the others. But the ISTC aren't doing anything to us. I've got no problem with them.*
> George Cain, regional officer, USDAW Newcastle

One representative from USDAW praised the ISTC for keeping within their boundaries of

representation, but criticised the GMB instead for stepping over the border into established

USDAW fields:

> *We've had no problem with the ISTC. That's not to say everything is OK with all the unions - the GMB are the worst. The ISTC have never impinged as yet on our areas, but the GMB have. They're now calling themselves the union for retail workers. That's cheeky, in my book. But, I guess that the ISTC have annoyed the GMB, so it's all swings and roundabouts.*
> Ron Brown, regional officer, USDAW, Newcastle

Whilst no serious animosity was reported between the two parties, the ISTC was criticised

by every union questioned for not being able to offer quality representation outside of the

steel industry:

> *Truthfully, I don't think they* [the ISTC] *could do a good job. They've been such a one-industry union. I don't mean this to sound derogatory towards their officers, but certain industries bring a certain amount of knowledge and so on that you need to have. The ISTC are a much more fixed type of union than we are. We are a more general union, we probably have members from all walks of life and different jobs. The ISTC are pretty much steel-making and that's it.*
> Jimmy Skivington, regional organiser, GMB Teesside

> *I don't think they* [the ISTC] *could provide the same quality of service outside their single sector. I would suggest that the AEEU are better simply because of our experience within our industrial sector over many years.*
> Neville Taylorson, full-time official, AEEU Teesside

The ISTC hasn't got the expertise to represent in the retail sector. It's a different ball game. Obviously when it comes to representing people at a tribunal, it's pretty standard, but they would find it difficult to understand the complexity of it. We've got staff on zero hour contracts, temporary contracts, casual contracts and so on. We also have staff who are not natural union members. That will make it difficult for them. A modern hypermarket can have 150 different shift patterns. It's not half as static or steady as it is in the steel industry.
Ron Brown, regional officer, USDAW Newcastle

Consequently, major other unions organising workers on Teesside argued that they still have the ability to provide superior levels of representation in the manufacturing sectors than the ISTC.

Summary

The ISTC on Teesside has experienced significant problems throughout its recent transition to a community union. Its insistence on recruiting exclusively within the manufacturing sector – based around a claim that representation within manufacturing is similar to that of steel – has proved problematic, largely due to other unions already providing high levels of representation in this sector. These other trade unions have essentially remained passive to the recent activities of the ISTC, due to the lack of a perceived threat to their dominance. Similarly, ISTC members view the on-going recruitment campaign as a means to ensure the survival of their union as an independent entity, which is resulting in a two-tier and disjointed union structure.

The ISTC in south Wales, 1992 – 2000

Recent structural changes to the ISTC following the Fresh Start

In south Wales, the divisional officers appear to have taken different steps in their definition of community unionism. Rather than targeting manufacturing, as Mick Adams and Bernard Pike have done on Teesside, Alwyn Jones and his team based in Cardiff have opened the sphere of representation to anyone who works or resides in past or present areas of steel production, no matter what their occupation:

> *Moving towards a community based union is exactly what it says. We're not being elitist and stopping people from joining from outside the industry – we'll gladly take them on. No matter what line of business they're in, or whether they're out of work, between jobs or retired, we see it that we have something to offer. Put somewhat crudely, we offer cradle to grave representation. We're not just there for people who are working in the steel industry, we want to be involved in the community and we want to be seen to have a heart. That's the sort of message that we want to put across to some less-than-understanding employers as well.*
> Alwyn Jones, divisional officer, south Wales

This type of union is fundamentally different to the traditional ISTC and significantly dissimilar to the approach adopted on Teesside, largely due to recent recruitment drives outside the realm of manufacturing. The ISTC in south Wales clearly was haemorrhaging membership at unsustainable rates, and consequently has used community unionism as a means of increasing its reputation and capability:

> *It was clear, from the direction that the union was going in, that it was going to collapse. We were going to be insignificant and we would have to merge with another union or just fold altogether – who knows? Clearly, Keith Brookman and Mick Leahy's intention at that time was to change the emphasis from being wholly a steel union to being a general union, although even now we don't talk about us being a general union. It's still seen by people in this area as being a steel community union, only serving people in steel areas. If we went into Port Talbot and called the ISTC a general union you'd*

probably get your arse kicked and be told that I didn't appreciate the history of the union or something. They still seem themselves as a steel union and not a general union. Quite obviously Mick and Keith saw the need to change us from a steel union into an all-embracing union. In Yorkshire, that mantle has been take up, but since I've been working back in Wales I've noticed a marked difference in attitudes in calling the ISTC a general union.

Bob Bird, divisional officer, south Wales

The grassroots of the traditional ISTC in south Wales found it difficult to make the transition to a community union. First, the union has not readily embraced change and has traditionally been concerned with single-sector hierarchical representation. Second, south Wales is a relatively highly unionised area of Britain, which does not make the task of ISTC organisers any easier:

I suppose if to be practical about it all, the ISTC doesn't spring to mind when you talk about trade unions on the TUC. You first think of the T&G, the AEEU and the GMB and that sort of thing. So we do have difficulties, ours is actually selling our union. It's very difficult in this area for the ISTC to recruit more members. It's a highly organised area in general for unions, so we're losing members from the steel industry, but it's very difficult for us to recruit more from elsewhere because they're generally in another union already.

Lyn James, EC member, south Wales

The ISTC in south Wales appears to be at a crossroads. Existing members are not wholly in favour of the transition to community unionism, and this transition is proving more difficult than first envisaged. Therefore, a two-tier trade union may be the *de facto* result of the transformation:

You've got to talk about whether we're going to be a servicing or an organising union. Are we going to organise new workplaces or are we going to simply service the membership in the workplaces that we've already got? We give them a good service, but in my opinion neither of these options are right. There is somewhere in-between that is the right thing for this union to do. You've got to recruit, you've got to go out there and organise, but once you've got them you can't expect them to just sit there and do nothing. You've got to

> *service them. If they've got a problem then someone has to go and*
> *see them. I think it would be wrong to go either way.*
>
> Bob Bird, divisional officer, south Wales

The organisers in south Wales, under intense pressure from central office, have recruited new members from other sectors besides manufacturing. These moves have proved to be troublesome. For example, other trade unions have also suffered large-scale membership losses and are seeking to shore up their respective membership bases, and employers often play one union off against another in order to secure the best recognition deal that benefits the employer, rather than the employee:

> *The type of employer that we're looking at now – the packaging*
> *industry, meat packing, glass – the employers want a beauty parade*
> *of unions before they'll let us have recognition. They want to check*
> *out all the options before choosing a union that suits them better.*
> *Some companies are now realising that they will have to have a*
> *union so they want the best deal from a variety of packages from*
> *varying unions. We try not to enter into that sort of scenario, but I*
> *think that the T&G, GMB, and the AEEU will come out with no strike*
> *clauses and so on in their agreements. Things are not as simple as*
> *they seem.*
>
> Bob Bird, divisional officer, south Wales

Additionally, workers in traditionally non-represented industries are often apathetic to the trade union movement. Therefore the ISTC has two problems. First, it is difficult for any trade union to increase its standing in these non-traditional unionised areas:

> *The thing that makes it more confusing and is common, is that when*
> *we talk to people on the gate, is that they're being treated like shite,*
> *they're on dirty money, the bosses are bastards, but they don't seem*
> *interested in unionism. Even when we say that we can help them,*
> *we still get no great response. It's very rare we find a factory where*
> *the boss is OK and the pay is acceptable.*
>
> Colin Griffiths, divisional organiser, south Wales

The other problem relates to the ISTC name and its historical tradition. The union is well known in steel producing areas, but only as a steel union:

The ISTC had previously been presumed to be steel centred. So if you went into a place in the valleys for example, the question that you'd be asked is 'what's the steel union doing here?'. So there was a need to carve out a separate, distinct niche, present the union in a different image away from the steel ethos.

Gareth Howells, former branch secretary, Port Talbot

So far, the ISTC has faced an uphill struggle to enlarge its membership base for the variety of reasons introduced above. Whilst the national direction of the confederation has attempted to resist the temptation to develop into a general, rather than a manufacturing union, few fruits of success have been witnessed in either manufacturing or other sectors of the south Wales economy. Since the launch of the Fresh Start in 1992, insignificant amounts of new workplace branches have been formed in new areas of representation:

I think three branches have actually been formed outside the traditional area. It's early days you see, of integrating with the larger body, because obviously, it's only been going the last year. When we get into the conference scenario, that's when the interchange starts taking place, in actually building up relationships.

Tony McCarthy, EC member, south Wales

ISTC community activity in terms of increasing membership was not witnessed in south Wales until 1998. Full-time officials claim that seventy per cent of their time is taken up with the servicing of existing members, rendering the remaining thirty per cent insufficient for recruitment. Because of these pitfalls, it is difficult to comment on how the traditional and new branch structures will relate together because they have not yet met at the biannual divisional conference, the only formally-organised forum provided by the ISTC for branches to interact outside the workplace. The responsibility for integrating the established and new branches together is that of the divisional officers:

Handling both the community unionism and the traditional membership seems to be a balancing act. We have a limited resource – from both a financial and actual point, of how many man

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> *hours we can put into negotiations. It's always a balancing act and it*
> *isn't easy.*
>
> Alwyn Jones, divisional officer, south Wales

It therefore appears that during the infancy of the community unionism campaign, serious structural and communication problems exist within the new ISTC organisation. Members of traditional steel branches in the main do not support the moves towards community unionism, because they perhaps view non-steel members as a threat to their traditional sovereignty and overwhelming dominance within the union:

> *I think that the ISTC should concentrate on what it knows best. I feel*
> *that the union often doesn't know what is going on here in this plant*
> *so I don't know how it could do a good job in the steel communities.*
> *I do agree that other workplaces need union representation.*
>
> Steve Hare, lay member, Port Talbot

Others grudgingly accept the change in union direction to maintain the independence of the ISTC, whilst arguing that the two-tier structure that would result would not be desirable:

> *I don't think that they'd understand our problems and I don't think*
> *that we'd understand theirs. But looking at the wider picture we've*
> *got to get more membership if we're to survive.*
>
> David Williams, branch secretary, Llanwern

The legacies upon which the ISTC has been constructed appear to be too strong to have permitted a fundamental reappraisal of the role of the union in regard to the wider union movement, and indeed the local union community. Many still hanker after providing quality representation in heavy manufacturing:

> *The union can be successful in attracting new members, but it can*
> *only do this by looking at factories, you know, in the manufacturing*
> *side of things. I don't think that workers in Tesco's would be served*
> *too well by the ISTC – they would be better elsewhere.*
>
> Roger Moore, EC member, south Wales

Similar to Teesside, moves towards community unionism have not been universally approved. Whilst divisional officers have worked hard to secure increased representation, little success has been achieved. In south Wales, community unionism was not attempted in earnest until 1998, somewhat later than on Teesside, so perhaps direct comparison is unjust. Still, it is obvious attempts to break with a near century-old tradition of focusing exclusively on the steel industry are proving a fundamental challenge to the ISTC in south Wales.

Community unionism throughout south Wales?

Other trade unions in the region seemed ignorant of the ISTC's recent activities, and largely hypothesised about the role of community unionism. Nevertheless, representatives from other major trade unions in south Wales argued that the ISTC was not suitably equipped to organise workers external to the steel industry, citing difficulties common to general unions:

> The ISTC would claim that they would have the expertise to represent the types of worker that USDAW traditionally recruits. But, it is the case that there are certain nuances in the line of business that USDAW are in that I believe that other trade unions would find difficult to deal with. The GMB are finding it increasingly difficult to operate in their diverse fields – ASDA supermarkets are a good example of that. The T&G also are having problems operating in the retailing sector too. Other unions would struggle too in my opinion.
> Nigel Davies, USDAW regional officer, south Wales

A T&G divisional organiser based in Cardiff offered comparable views:

> I don't think that the ISTC does have the necessary expertise to move into other areas of representation, because the T&G have been doing these things for years. I think that the ISTC will find that workers in newer non-steel industry have different needs to their

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> *traditional members. We find that in being a general union we can deal with a wide range of employers and we have a large network of lay-representatives that are trained in their respective specialisms. Obviously the ISTC can't do that.*
>
> Randall England, regional officer, T&G south Wales

Such opinions bolster the view that the ISTC is out of its depth in attempting to represent workers from outside the steel industry, simply because the mechanics of re-defining inherited union traditions and practices is a major challenge to the structure and the leadership of the union as well as its traditional members. The outgoing ISTC President appeared to follow the official union line, in arguing that the ISTC should avoid becoming a two tier union at all costs. Having just returned from a fact-finding mission to Canada, he offered his up-beat assessment of how the ISTC could successfully make the transition into a community union:

> *It's so very important that we mustn't be a two-tier union. We're diversifying, we're heading out into the communities. Yes, we've got a one hundred-year tradition to be a steel union. But, I don't really think that a name means anything. If you take the Canadian concept, their steel workers union represent taxi drivers, they've got hospital workers, they've now got the University of Toronto - cooks, bottle washers, cleaners and even teachers. The steel-workers' union even represents them. We've also got to do it in order to survive. We've got to make sure that our union, which definitely has its roots in the community, we've got to ensure that we live to be independent.*
>
> Tommy Fellows, EC member, Port Talbot

The aspects of 'community unionism' discussed by Tufts (1998) for the case of Canada seem a world away from the goals of the ISTC, even in south Wales. He describes the new role of unions in forging close co-operative links with other community- and non labour groups in order to achieve common goals. The ISTC is simply not in the same game. Instead, it remains within its traditional remit of providing workplace representation, utilising the same branch structure that has remained unaltered in decades. The present

recruitment drive and moves towards community unionism appear to be little but a belated attempt to increase membership.

If the ISTC had attempted with great vigour to recruit new members in all sectors of the south Wales economy, then inter-union relations would have most likely broken down over representational wrangles. Instead, other trade unions appear to be relatively ignorant of the ISTC's activities, especially concerning their moves towards their much publicised 'community unionism':

> *The ISTC do appear to have a policy of recruiting in steel areas, even if the steel employment all ended thirty years ago. They see themselves as a steel union. That's their excuse and that opens the door for them to say that they have a rightful area to recruit as they know what they are doing in that given region. They've been trying that all over the country and to the best of my knowledge, they've not been doing that well in Wales. I don't understand a lot by the term of 'Community Unionism'. I know that the ISTC have a number of community initiatives but I'm not familiar with them.*
> Paul Collier, AEEU organiser, south Wales

Indeed, the ISTC are only too quick to point out that they are not attempting to poach members from other trade unions:

> *We're not targeting other trade unions' areas, I want to be quite clear about that. We're pretty much only looking at manufacturing industries – that is pretty much union policy.*
> Alwyn Jones, divisional officer, south Wales

Yet, Alwyn Jones' deputy argued that the ISTC is seeking to gain a representation deal with a meat packing company in one of the southern Welsh valleys, a deal somewhat removed from the claim of seeking representation only in manufacturing areas within steel communities:

*There's a letter downstairs from the T&G moaning about us
recruiting in a meat packing factory. We started a campaign last
week and within a few days we had a letter claiming that the T&G
were there first and telling us bluntly to keep our nose out. We have
problems like that. It's nothing unusual – we write to them too if we
are in an area and some other union come sniffing around we'll tell
them to keep their noses out.*

Bob Bird, divisional officer, south Wales

Minor skirmishes such as these are commonplace in south Wales, a region with many

varied trade unions, all of which are competing for increased membership. Nevertheless,

professional relationships between full-time officials appears to be good, as each union on

the whole tends to respect its own area of representation:

*Inter-union relations here in south Wales are pretty good. We're all
in TULAP, the Labour trade union group. There's a good rapport
and you're dealing with other people who have a common aim and
also people who would like to see their own organisation expand and
grow. That's only natural. Whilst we do have good relations, if
poaching was going on then I would have no difficulty in talking to
my counterpart and telling them what I thought. We all know each
other and we all have to trust each other to a certain extent.*

Nigel Davies, USDAW regional officer, south Wales

A former EC member claimed that the reason that the ISTC is struggling to come to terms

with its new role is simply because full-time officials have not adapted to the need to

change their recruitment methods:

*The ISTC does have the expertise [to expand its representation]. It
should do too as recruitment is the bloody job of the full-time
officials! He's supposed to recruit, and over the years they haven't
done it and in my opinion it's about time they got of their backsides
and did recruit! Basically that's their job. And if there aren't any
potential members in steel to recruit then they should look
elsewhere. They're finding it difficult because they've not been used
to it.*

Peter McKinn, former EC member, south Wales

Such sentiments were echoed by the local AEEU organiser, claiming that the ISTC simply did not adapt quickly enough before other unions had moved in and secured recognition deals with companies:

> The ISTC have not been particularly successful in Wales because they're too far behind the game. In the case of inward investment in Wales, the AEEU have more single union agreements than the rest of the trade union movement put together. Most companies have wanted the AEEU in. In Wales, the ISTC are so far behind the game that any new company wouldn't know who they are and what they stood for.
>
> Paul Collier, AEEU organiser, south Wales

It does appear that the ISTC has acted too late in south Wales to secure increased representation, although it does remain a respected organisation in Port Talbot, making the furtherance of representation a possibility if these alternative strategies are explored:

> Our reputation, I believe, in Port Talbot, is a good one, largely due to the town having been dominated by steel. It still is today. The ISTC has got things to offer the community but the union can not afford to stand still. I think that if people have been unlucky enough to be made redundant, the ISTC does have to be in the correct position to be able to pick up people who are in trouble.
>
> Alwyn Jones, divisional officer, south Wales

Whilst potential still exists in steel towns for the ISTC to expand, the notion of a steel community in other areas of south Wales does not mean much to many contemporary residents and workers:

> I think that steel communities are a dying breed. Port Talbot is a bit different I guess. But many towns in south Wales, twenty, even ten years ago were steel communities, without a shadow of a doubt. Today people go to work and that's that. Ten years ago within five minutes of getting in the pub you'd be discussing every single problem of the steel works and the solutions. Now that ethos has gone. People don't want to talk about their work. But Port Talbot is different. Newport and Cardiff are thriving business communities without the steel industry. There is plenty of work about, if you're

prepared to look for it. Port Talbot is a real steel town. It is the be-
all-and-end-all in Port Talbot, but not in the Newport or Cardiff area.
Ron Moore, former EC member, south Wales

<u>Summary</u>

Attempts throughout south Wales to re-invent the ISTC as a community union have a greater chance of success than on Teesside, although tribulations are obvious due to internal and external factors. This thesis has demonstrated that there is a greater awareness of community within the ISTC in south Wales, although this can be interpreted as an exclusive sense of solidarity. There is a definite recognition that any worker living in an ISTC-defined steel community – past or present – is worthy of recruitment into the union. However, newly recruited members are expected to fit into the age-old system of ISTC branch-based representation, which has not been modified in any shape or form to accommodate the varied and flexible working practices that typify other sectors of employment.

Conclusion

Inherently localised aspects of ISTC activity have once again been highlighted through an analysis of how specific traditions of union strategy spill over to other firms, industries and communities. The varied traditions of ISTC activity outlined in earlier stages of the thesis have combined together to formulate distinctive regional cultures have once again been evident throughout this chapter. The cohesive nature of the ISTC within south Wales and its definite feelings of regional solidarity have once again been demonstrated, as has its

traditional arms-length relationship with other trade unions. On Teesside, the picture is more fragmented, with less collective spirit in evidence throughout the steel-producing localities.

The transition into a community union was a result of the desire of the ISTC to remain independent. Almost one decade after this change, few benefits have been noted in either region in question. Granted, the ISTC remains independent, but only limited membership gains have been witnessed on Teesside and in south Wales. Further redundancies within the steel industry will pose further questions as to the future viability of the ISTC as an self-sufficient entity. Perhaps the largest hurdle the ISTC has had to overcome is that it can no longer be a union at the forefront of expert bargaining for all of its members. If classed as a community union, the ISTC is now a small fish in a large pond. The area within this pond reserved for exclusive ISTC use (the steel industry) is getting smaller, whilst the pond as a whole has an increasing number of hungry fish (competing trade unions that are more practiced in organising a diverse and fluid membership base). Additionally, the ISTC is relying very heavily on its self-advertised image as a community union and overworked full-time officials to survive.

Several other tensions exist within the new structure of the ISTC. On Teesside and particularly in south Wales it has been a profoundly exclusive organisation, reflecting even to the present day its origins as an institution closely akin to a craft guild. Its entire history has been built on occupational segregation both internally – and especially more recently – externally. The aspects of community unionism embraced by the ISTC do not involve a fundamental reappraisal of the role of the union with regards to local communities. It appears more concerned with securing what many term outmoded branch-style systems of

representation for its new members. The question of providing representation and quality retraining for the unemployed within steel communities has received little attention in either region. In other words, the ISTC has displayed very limited capacities for adaptability. Whilst the ISTC has recognised the need critically to question its own constituency and embrace social change, it has not substantially departed from the route on which it embarked in 1917.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

Introduction

In conclusion, I return to the ideas within which the framework of the thesis was grounded. This chapter has three sections. First, the four empirical threads that characterised chapters six to ten are reviewed and analysed, drawing upon the main issues raised. I argue that in many cases, these are often interrelated. Whilst I have demonstrated – within the confines of four separate chapters – that organised labour is implicated in the continual and ongoing creation of regional industrial culture, it remains for this concluding chapter to draw these threads together. Second, I return to the three conceptual threads that provided the backbone to the first four chapters, and relate how these theories may – and may not – be applicable to future analysis of trade union organisation. Third, I bring these two sections together in a critical appraisal of both the role of the ISTC in the two case study regions and the contribution of the thesis as a whole to the field of labour geography. In doing so, I argue that theory and method should remain at the forefront of a constantly changing discipline that should seek to take account of a wide range of actors and institutions in its search for greater comprehension of regional change.

The role of the ISTC on Teesside and in south Wales

Chapters six to nine concentrated upon the ways in which the ISTC has been implicated – and has implicated itself – in the two regional economies. First, they examined capital –

labour relations in steel, through a lens of the social construction of work within the steel industry. Second, relations with other trade unions were analysed. Third, the fragmentation of collective bargaining through an analysis of the internal structure of the ISTC was considered. Finally, the ISTC's recent conversion to community unionism was charted, and the success of this evaluated.

The analysis of these issues confirms the argument that the ISTC – and other trade unions – are territorially constituted and are implicated in the evolution and constant modification of regional industrial culture. The ISTC was depicted as a processual institution, taking shape from national and local practices, whilst shaping social and industrial processes at a variety of spatial scales itself.

Over the time-span in question, the ISTC has enjoyed a varied relationship with the management of the British steel industry. The nationalisation of the industry in 1967 appeared to afford the ISTC a new legitimacy to assert itself. Throughout the regions, nationalisation appeared to change little in terms of the structure of the union, but local cultures of union activity were apparent. On Teesside, nationalisation galvanised steel workers to become more active in trade unionism, without raising their interests in the social and political arena of trade union activity. Workers on Teesside appeared to view trade unionism as a means to increase their individual standing within the works. In south Wales, on the other hand, nationalisation afforded the ISTC a greater social legitimacy throughout the community as well as the workplace. Similar sentiments were noted during and after the 1980 steel strike. In south Wales, the strike was seen as a mistake because it focused on future pay deals, rather than guarantees of employment. Similarly, the Welsh ISTC ensured that the works were kept in good order so that the return to work

would be as painless as possible, by the ongoing maintenance of furnaces and other equipment. On Teesside, the works were left throughout the strike and the return to work was much more embittered.

The post-1980 period was characterised by the increasing fragmentation of bargaining structures which largely reversed the centralised era of public ownership. Increased territorial chauvinism became commonplace throughout the ISTC as management sought to play one region of union activity off against another. Following the 1988 privatisation of the industry, local ISTC structures were prepared for the increasing fragmentation of bargaining. The formation of product divisions was part of a centralised strategy by British Steel, yet had serious ramifications on overall ISTC activity. As a result of these changes, Teesside fragmented to a greater degree than south Wales. Teesside fell wholly into the Long Product division of British Steel, yet union activity appeared to become increasingly branch-based. Conversely, the ISTC in south Wales was a more cohesive regional unit, arguing that the survival of the Welsh steel plants was more important than the individual branch. This chain of events therefore saw the emergence the ISTC as a predominantly uneven organisation over a variety of spatial scales, viewed through an overall window of decreasing trust and levels of regional co-operation.

Chapters seven and eight also portrayed the ISTC as an uneven institution. The composition of the Executive Committee afforded south Wales much bargaining power throughout the union, perhaps to the detriment of others. The more cohesive nature of the ISTC within south Wales can be attributed to this, whilst the power-base of the union on Teesside could not influence the whole ISTC structure as their Welsh colleagues could. Put another way, the ISTC has defined itself in territorial terms. Whilst the union has been

quick to blame the strategies of management, this uneven power-base has also been encouraged by the internal politics of the union. Workers in south Wales and (in particular) Teesside have become obsessed with perceived differences and conflicting priorities in wage and other bargaining procedures. Thus, this conscious and even willing acceptance of difference of workers in the same industry from different parts of the country has produced increasing forms of territorial chauvinism over recent years.

The role of the Executive Committee has varied between the regions. For example, lay members and branch secretaries on Teesside tended to seek advice regarding bargaining from their EC members. In south Wales, respect for seniority within the plant characterised bargaining and other decision-making. Branch officials in Port Talbot discussed procedure with Ron Walters and Dai Ferris, neither of whom were EC members, but were chair and vice-chair respectively of the works multi-union committee. EC members were not viewed with the same respect that time-served union officials were afforded.

As well as discussing the Executive Committee, chapters seven and eight discussed the role of the ISTC within the plant. Far from suggesting that union activity within the plant was uniform, a far more complicated picture was painted. There is a legacy of ongoing tensions between Teesside and south Wales in terms of their regional- and plant-based structures of representation. Since 1980, there has been increasing potential for small-scale variations in procedure, agreement and conditions *within* the case-study regions. The ISTC is particularly predisposed to these localised practices, as its constitution guarantees a high degree of freedom of action at the level of individual branches over such issues. There has been a strengthening of local collaborative behaviour in the plant

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between management and the union, often built upon age-old traditions of a branch hierarchy. In both regions, branches connected to the core of the steel-making process have traditionally extracted the most favourable deals for their members. Whilst large-scale automation has removed some of the skills required in these areas of the plant, craft-based legacies remain.

Throughout its history, the ISTC has also endured uneasy relationships with other – indeed rival – trade unions. Whether at the national scale (the TUC steel industry committee), or the local, the ISTC has found meaningful dialogue with other trade unions difficult. When TUCSICC was formed, the ISTC immediately self-engineered that it would assume the lead role. Similarly, the difficulties with SIMA in both regions stemmed from the ISTC and SIMA competing over staff representation. On Teesside, relationships were more amicable, largely due to the personalities of the officers involved, whilst in south Wales, bitterness between the two organisations during the national strike of 1980 continues even today. The merger with the NUB succeeded largely because the amalgamation was on the terms of the ISTC, even though the cultural legacies of the NUB remain to this day, some fifteen years after the pooling of resources.

Teamworking presented the ISTC with its greatest challenge over the time-period of the study. Whilst it goes against the grain of the principles of trade unionism, the ISTC (especially in south Wales) has seized upon it as a tool to further its own aims within the works, to the detriment of other trade unions. For an industry and a trade union built on traditions of seniority and hierarchical authority, the introduction of self-managing teams organised under a team leader and incorporating workers from more than one trade union represents a substantial departure. These forms of worker organisation sit awkwardly with

ISTC tradition. In effect, increasingly localised patterns of bargaining within each plant have been witnessed, along with a tacit acknowledgement of difference between the various trade unions and plants.

Despite these far-reaching changes and challenges to traditional ISTC activity, the union remains a strong institutional presence within the plant, as the quantitative analysis in chapter nine demonstrated. Between 1971 and 1996, the proportion of steel workers in south Wales and on Teesside who were members of the ISTC fluctuated significantly and uniformly across the regions, but was comparable between the start and the end of the period. As total employment in the steel industry has fallen, however, the ISTC recognised (somewhat belatedly) that it could not remain an independent union with dwindling membership. Whilst in some respects, this conversion to community unionism might be regarded as a radical departure, it is in other ways (as yet) far less of a transformation than it might appear at first sight.

Chapter nine argued that this change in direction was largely an attempt by the ISTC to retain its independence, rather than a fundamental reappraisal of the role of the union with regard to local communities. In south Wales, any non-unionised workforce is being targeted, whilst on Teesside recruitment has largely concentrated on the manufacturing sector. This is largely due to the ISTC's belief in south Wales that inhabitants of and employees working in steel communities could benefit from union membership, irrespective of their occupation. Membership losses have been stemmed in both regions, although large increases in representation have not yet been noted. Other trade unions seem rather indifferent to the activities of the ISTC, largely due to their belief that the ISTC can not offer any more to workers in (ex-)steel producing areas than their own

representation. There is a definite apathy towards community unionism in both regions –

even in south Wales where feelings of attachment to the steel community were found to be

stronger due to the cultural characteristics of the region – suggesting that should the

initiative be a success, a two-tier union might be an outcome.

The ISTC as a regional actor – a summary

This thesis has demonstrated that an examination of the historical strategies of the ISTC

illustrates notable differences in the regional industrial cultures of south Wales and

Teesside. Most importantly, a deeper attachment to union activity can be witnessed in

south Wales than on Teesside. Welsh political culture has contributed significantly to this

tradition (see for example Adamson, 1997; 1998), with many workers viewing the union as

a central point in their daily lives. The ISTC in south Wales has been based around a

distinct local economy where structures of representation have been traditionally based

around a single place of employment within which social attributes were relatively

homogeneous (Adamson, 1998). On Teesside, the benefits of union membership (even

during the times of public ownership) were weighed up as a type of cost-benefit analysis,

as members calculated how the union could help them purely in terms of an amelioration

of wages and working conditions. Their southern Welsh contemporaries tended to view

the steel-producing areas of south Wales as their community, and based their

organisational strategies around this spatial area, whilst workers on Teesside tended –

especially more recently – to view their plant and even their own branch as their sphere of

activity.

More general characteristics of the regions in question can be identified from an examination of the localised practices of the ISTC. South Wales has a more coherent *regional* identity, and its (declining) industrial landscape is underlined by a political and social cohesion which is not nearly so apparent on Teesside. The reputation of south Wales as a solidaristic, collectivist working class community is, however, reflected somewhat conversely in the highly exclusive structures of ISTC action. Teesside, on the other hand, demonstrates traditions of decentralised and highly localised action that has occasionally been more accomodational to other local trade unions, but without drawing upon a regional (north-eastern) identity.

I have sought to explore the role of organised labour in the continual and ongoing creation and reconstitution of regional industrial culture. Three distinctive aspects of the union's role in shaping regional industrial culture can be identified. First, many of the varied cultural qualities created in and through the engagement between the union and the place are related to the construction of the nature of work in the industry. The ISTC has developed its own social ideologies of steelmaking as a set of diverse occupational activities. These principles have been largely founded upon traditions of hierarchy and seniority and have characterised the ISTC's efforts to remain the 'specialist' representative of labour in steel. This attitude has largely led to an elitist and separatist attitude towards other trade unions on Teesside and particularly in south Wales, even during recent years with the move towards community unionism. Second, a strong regional identity pervades the ISTC, which has stemmed – and derived from – a conscious articulation of differences and palpable suspicion of workers in the same industry throughout the country. Thus, notions of a centralised union or a centrally constituted class of steel workers must take into account the varied traditions of the regions featured in this thesis. Third, recent

tendencies towards fragmentation within the works have permitted certain union branches to exert influence over management and other union branches. This process has built on – and indeed been encouraged by – small-scale consensual relations between management and labour.

The recent move to reposition the ISTC within certain regions in Britain as a community union exemplifies many of the union's characteristics that have evolved over decades of a particular style of representation as outlined above. Recent research into the north east of England and south Wales has suggested (see Strangleman et. al., 1999 for example), that industrial legacies can have positive aspects in terms of new challenges. South Wales and Teesside can be characterised by a work ethic based around formal waged employment, not only in terms of steel workers but their families and indeed the broader community. New forms of work in these communities largely demand flexibility, variability of shift patterns, teamworking and general adaptability. These are aspects of employment that the ISTC has only recently begun to embrace.

Unlike the majority of TUC-affiliated unions, the ISTC should be commended for having the endeavour to recognise that a fundamental review of its representational practices was required. Nevertheless, some eight years after this change in direction, the ISTC remains an old-fashioned union, dependent on the steel industry and its occupational legacies. It is only interested in recruitment in order to survive as an independent organisation, and has not embraced much in the way of innovation or flexible forms of worker representation. As Munck (2000) argued, as capitalists have taken advantage of changes to the global economy, workers seem 'sticky', placebound and slow to react. Despite the optimism of the General Secretary and the London-based recruitment team, the ISTC's parochial

nature and an unwillingness of a large proportion of members (including EC members and full-time officials) to change does not bode well for its future in either region. As Munro (1998) proposed, the ISTC displays a culture that is largely unsuited to change. Whilst the ISTC has provided high quality specialist representation in steel for approximately eighty years, its current culture within the regions is inflexible and largely unsuited to the new forms of labour market activity that characterise south Wales and Teesside.

Future directions for trade union enquiry – lessons from this thesis

At the beginning of this thesis, I proposed that three threads would provide its theoretical spine. First, I argued that organised labour should be conceptualised as an actor in its own right. Second, I proposed that there is an inherent spatiality to organised labour, reflected in regional differences in membership, density, and tendency to take collective action. Third, I made a case that these variations are a product of specific historico-geographical traditions, constructed over time to create distinctive regional industrial cultures.

If regional industrial culture is fundamental to understanding uneven regional development, it is important to unpack the notion of culture. I return to McDowell's definition:

> *Culture is a set of ideas, customs and beliefs that shape people's actions and their production of material artefacts, including the landscape and the built environment. Culture is socially defined and socially determined. Cultural ideas are expressed in the lives of social groups who articulate, express and challenge these sets of ideas and values, which are themselves temporally and spatially specific.*
>
> McDowell, 1994, p 148

Chapter one argued that cultural traditions and ideals are linked to power relations, through certain societal groups producing and reproducing culture through social practices that occur over a variety of spatial scales. This thesis has demonstrated that the ISTC has indeed shaped the social and cultural identity of Teesside and south Wales in a variety of different – and ongoing – ways.

The critical realist departure point of this thesis has largely proved to be pertinent. I argue that non-reductionist Marxist theories are a particularly effective lens with which to view – and analyse – the social relations of production. It is these social relations of production within a society that afford society its fundamental character and make it, for example, a capitalist society rather than some other kind of society (Chitty, 1998, p 57). As capitalism becomes increasingly engrained within western society, class struggle between capital and labour becomes ever more worthy of academic endeavour. This thesis has demonstrated – both theoretically and practically – that social systems of production are indeed 'complex and messy' (Sayer, 2000) and that the boundaries of the places where production occurs are 'torn and ragged' (Painter, 1998), and that regional analysis provides a window through which to view wider economic, social, political and cultural processes.

One of the major questions that lies over Marxist enquiry is its reductionist tendencies. In chapter two, a metaphor of interconnected rock pools (Foster-Carter, 1978) was introduced. This figure of speech retains significance for the thesis, especially if viewed in a labour-orientated manner. It is possible to view capitalism as a cyclical phenomenon, rather like the tide of the sea. South Wales and Teesside can be viewed as rock pools, situated directly on the high water mark of a beach. These two regions have historically

been subjected to the ebb and flow of global capital, similar to rock pools being cyclically disconnected from one another, apart from at specific – and unevenly spread – times. For example, the 1967 nationalisation could be characterised as an ongoing period of spring high tides, when the two regions were more closely linked than before, even though regional parochialism still could be witnessed. The 1980 strike could also be viewed as a storm surge, when Teesside and south Wales were flooded, and chose to act together (albeit in varied ways) to improve their situation. The 1988 privatisation again flooded the rock pools to such an extent that their composition was changed, but since this date there has been relatively little stormy activity (with the exception of recent events that took place after the fieldwork was completed), leaving the two pools largely unconnected and actively pursuing their own varied agendas. More recently, activity within each pool has become more fragmented, with the diverse groups within pursuing varied agendas to suit their own needs. It is precisely *these* agendas that warrant ongoing critical analysis.

This metaphor – whilst perhaps being slightly tenuous – does illustrate some important points. First, it should not be interpreted in the light that the two case study regions have reacted passively to the changing nature of capitalism. Instead, I argue that whilst capital has dictated certain rules to local ISTC structures, they themselves have responded in a variety of ways that have had impacts on the regional industrial culture of Teesside and south Wales at a variety of fluid and processual scales. Similarly, these regions are not disconnected from one another, although more recently they appear to have chosen to follow their own developmental trajectories. I therefore argue that it is unwise to look at the science of the singular (Sève, 1975) or the science of the specific (Layder, 1981). It would also miss the point to view capital in isolation, as it would labour, as the thesis has demonstrated that the actions of labour influence those of capital, and vice-versa.

The issue of scale was also at the forefront of the theoretical framework of the thesis. Chapter three was based around a discussion of three scales of trade union enquiry – the national, the international and the local. I have argued throughout this thesis that these scales should not be viewed as pre-determined, and that their boundaries are instead fluid. Whilst I argued that trade union strategy could assume a variety of spatial scales, I proposed that a localised approach to trade union research is required to reveal the importance of place and context. Chapter four highlighted the importance of the local to the British trade union movement, although most British trade unions have been viewed as national organisations with little regional variance within their structures. Instead, the picture that emerges here is one of unevenness, with industrial structures within regions linked to historical industrial specialisms. Whilst problems of quantifying regional change in British trade union activity remain, there have been definite signs of membership resilience amidst retreat throughout industrial regions, where significant traditions of trade union action exist. Both the 'old' industry of coal-mining and the 'new' industry of financial services displayed significant and varied regional cultures of union activity, indicating once again that institutions of organised labour contribute to the formulation of regional industrial culture.

Concluding comments

Theory and practice – transferability and further study

Even though I have depicted the ISTC to be a significant actor in the regional economies of Teesside and south Wales, it is important to recognise that there is a strong institutional

presence of other actors within these regions, such as firms, local authorities, development agencies, chambers of commerce, and business development organisations – the list is almost endless. These institutions interact in a way which create a particular 'social atmosphere' of a place.

I recognise that I have only examined small component parts of one trade union in two regions of Britain. I do not propose that all trade unions operating in old industrial areas be viewed in the same light as the ISTC, even though certain key issues may be evident in other areas. Nevertheless, I do believe that certain key policy implications result from this thesis. British trade unions – in particular the ISTC – have a hard reality to face. I have demonstrated that the ISTC is not (yet) a successful advocate of a modern and dynamic trade union. Its recruitment strategies within the wider community are not (yet) proving particularly successful. It has few young members outside the steel industry. Its structures of representation and bargaining within the steel plants of Teesside and south Wales – whilst being varied – often quickly resort to confrontation and opposition to other unions as well as to management.

During the first part of this thesis, I argued that the time was right for a revival of labour studies. Whilst these concluding paragraphs have been pessimistic as to the impending fortunes of the ISTC, I wish to conclude on a more optimistic note. The retrenchment and decline over recent decades of the British steel industry and the placebound nature of its past and present workers have presented the ISTC with significant challenges. If the ISTC – along with other TUC-affiliated unions – wanted to radically re-define itself, there are other reformist strategies to employ. Capitalism – as Beatrice and Sydney Webb argued

over one hundred years ago – will continue to provide the scenario within which unions operate. Hutton recently argued:

> *If the unions were really clever they would argue for a distinctive British economic and social model. It would be capitalist – of course – but it would enlist the creativity of the workforce. Every speaker at the podium would hammer away at Britain's continuing poor productivity record and the desperate need to reframe the national argument. ... the new debate would concentrate on generating more creative and innovative organisations.*
> Will Hutton, *The Observer*, 9th September, 2001

Such changes are not to be taken lightly. Both capital and labour would have to adopt a different working culture – one that stresses the quality of working life, and the role that trade unions have to play in its creation. Additionally, future trade union strategy should be sympathetic to the variety of spatial scales at which organised labour operates. The differences that exist between the localised practices of the ISTC on Teesside and in south Wales supports the case that future trade union policy would be more effective if multi-scaled and regionally specific strategies are implemented. These should take into account – and be sensitive to – the varied norms, traditions and expectations that characterise the varied place-bound cultures in which trade unions operate. At present, the ISTC seems some distance from these ideas, yet ongoing reappraisal of its role could still yield numerous benefits for its present and potential members within the steel communities of Britain.

Appendix – list of contributors

Interviewee	Union	Region	Description
Adams, Mick	ISTC	Teesside	Divisional officer
Atkin, Chris	ISTC	Teesside	Former branch secretary, Redcar
Barnett, Mick	ISTC	National	Director, Office of the General Secretary
Batstone, John	ISTC	Teesside	Former lay member, Redcar
Bird, Bob	ISTC	South Wales	Divisional officer
Bishop, Roy	ISTC	Teesside	Former divisional officer
Brown, Ron	USDAW	North East	Regional officer
Cain, George	USDAW	North East	Regional officer
Clarke, Ken	ISTC	Various	Former national officer
Clyant, Viv	AEEU	South Wales	AEEU lay member, Port Talbot
Collier, Paul	AEEU / SIMA	South Wales	Regional officer, AEEU / SIMA
Connolly, Brian	ISTC	Various	Former national and divisional officer
Cook, Adrian	ISTC	Teesside	Works rep, Redcar coke ovens
Crichton, Ian	ISTC	Teesside	Branch secretary, Teesside middle management
Davies, Nigel	USDAW	South Wales	Regional officer
England, Randall	T&G	South Wales	Regional officer
Fellows, Tommy	ISTC	South Wales	Executive Committee member, former ISTC President
Ferris, Dai	ISTC	South Wales	Vice-Chairman of multi-union committee, Port Talbot
Firmager, Steve	ISTC	Teesside	Former branch secretary – Cleveland locos
Foley, John	ISTC	South Wales	Former divisional officer
Gavin, Jack	ISTC	Various	Former national officer (deceased)
Griffiths, Colin	ISTC	South Wales	Divisional organiser
Hare, Steve	ISTC	South Wales	Branch committee man, Port Talbot
Harker, Malcolm	ISTC	Teesside	Former lay member, Hartlepool mill
Hart, Colin	ISTC	Teesside	Branch secretary, Skinningrove FD2
Hensby, Ray	ISTC	Teesside	Branch president, Teesside staff
Hopkins, Adrian	AEEU	South Wales	AEEU Convenor, Llanwern
Howells, Gareth	ISTC	South Wales	Former ISTC research director, former branch secretary, south Wales
Hunt, Dave	ISTC	Teesside	Former branch official, Redcar
James, Lyn	ISTC	South Wales	Executive Committee member
Jenkins, Cyril	ISTC	South Wales	Committee man, BOS Plant, Port Talbot
Jones, Alwyn	ISTC	South Wales	Divisional officer
Jones, Terry	ISTC	South Wales	Committee man, BOS Plant, Port Talbot
Leahy, Mick	ISTC	National	General Secretary
Lewis, Clive	ISTC	Teesside	Former divisional and national officer (deceased)
Lewis, Mark	AEEU	South Wales	Lay member, Port Talbot
Lightfoot, Peter	ISTC	Various	Divisional officer member
Lynch, Eddie	ISTC	National	Assistant General Secretary
Mannion, Mick	ISTC	Teesside	Executive Committee member

Markham, Ted	ISTC	Teesside	Branch secretary, Hartlepool mill
McCarthy, Tony	ISTC	South Wales	Executive Committee member
McKinn, Peter	ISTC	South Wales	Former Executive Committee member
McNeil, Ken	ISTC	South Wales	Former branch secretary, Port Talbot
Middlemas, Rob	ISTC	Teesside	Executive Committee member
Moffat, John	ISTC	Teesside	Retired lay member Redcar works
Moore, Roger	ISTC	South Wales	Executive Committee member
Moore, Ron	ISTC	South Wales	Former Executive Committee member
Pearson, Steve	ISTC	Teesside	President Teesside No1 branch
Pike, Bernard	ISTC	Teesside	Senior organiser
Powell, Ken	ISTC	South Wales	Branch secretary, Port Talbot
Poynter, Tony	ISTC	Teesside	Executive Committee member, branch secretary Teesside staff
Pugh, John	ISTC	South Wales	Committee man, Cold Mill branch, Port Talbot
Redmond, John	ISTC	Teesside	Works representative, Cleveland contractors
Rhys, Paul	ISTC / SIMA	South Wales	Branch secretary, SIMA (former ISTC lay member)
Rivers, Mike	ISTC	South Wales	Lay member, Port Talbot
Roberts, Gordon	ISTC	National	Former national officer
Saunders, John	ISTC	Teesside	Works representative, Greatham 5 branch
Sirs, Bill	ISTC	Teesside	Former General Secretary and divisional officer
Skivington, Jimmy	GMB	Teesside	Full-time official
Smith, Alan	ISTC	Teesside	Branch secretary, Cumbria 1
Taylorson, Neville	AEEU	Teesside	Full-time official
Tetsill, John	ISTC	South Wales	Lay member, Port Talbot
Thomas, John	ISTC	South Wales	Lay member, Port Talbot
Walters, Ron	ISTC	South Wales	Chairman, multi-union committee, Port Talbot
Wellington, Ken	ISTC	South Wales	Former branch secretary, Port Talbot
Wildon, Colin	ISTC	Teesside	Branch secretary, Lackenby concast
Williams, David	ISTC	South Wales	Branch secretary, Llanwern
Williams, Hanbury	ISTC	South Wales	Former Executive Committee member, former ISTC President
Williams, Ken	ISTC	South Wales	Branch secretary, Port Talbot
Williams, Roderick	ISTC	South Wales	Branch secretary, Llanwern
Wilson, Ron	ISTC	National	Former national officer

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