

## Chapter 3

---

# Comment on della Porta

Wolfgang Streeck

---

This is a useful chapter. It summarises the state of the art on an often-overlooked subject, listing the relevant literature in case readers want to explore the matter further. And it supplements this with concise case accounts of recent developments in the relationship between social movements and trade unions in a number of countries. I have nothing to hold against or add to Donatella's piece. So I will limit myself to one specific aspect of what now tends to be called the "framing" of an issue before I proceed to several, more or less related general remarks on social movement and trade union politics in, and in relation to, the European Union (EU). The intention here is to sketch out a baseline for research and theory on this subject, in the sense of a list of fundamental conditions underneath whatever conjunctural, sectoral, topical, etc., modulations may be observable on top of them. I am doing this because I suspect that much of the work on and discussion of "European integration" is far too occupied with minor fluctuations in current events, to the neglect of deeply rooted priors that remain importantly in force regardless of what happens on the surface.

First on "framing". When it comes to the EU in particular, most consumers and too many producers of "Europe"-related social science sooner or later categorise arguments and conclusions in terms of whether they are "optimistic" or "pessimistic". I note in passing that such distinction is meaningless unless one specifies what side one is on. For example, concerning the time-honoured idea of a "social dimension" of the EU "optimism" may mean that one expects it to come about, in which case one is very likely a trade union sympathiser, or alternatively that one expects it *not* to come about, which would be the optimism of a neoliberal economist or, which is by and large the same, of a friend of capital – a *Kapitalversteher*. Symmetrically, of course, on "pessimism", which for a trade unionist means the "social dimension" won't come while for an employer it means it will. More important, optimism and pessimism are psychological categories that characterise persons or their general outlook on life; in social science, one should think, it is realism that counts, not whether its producer is or is not a happy-go-lucky type. I am not saying this for nothing. I have for more than two

decades pointed out that the idea of a “Social Europa” had basically turned into an illusion propagated by national governments and a Brussels bureaucracy that had very different things on their agenda. I claim that most of my occasional, always carefully calibrated predictions on where the EU was about to go next were right, at least pointed in the right direction. (So austerity and “structural reforms” under EMU did not come as a surprise to me, nor should they have to my readers.) All too often, however, I had to observe that colleagues and users of my work got around the facts and logical arguments that I had so painstakingly put together by declaring Streeck to be a “pessimist”. In their eyes this rendered my assembled evidence irrelevant, entitling them, upon having declared themselves “optimists”, not to weigh my evidence against theirs with the only justification that they were, unlike me, nice and pleasant people. Let me assure you that this is not what Gramsci had in mind when he spoke of the “optimism of the will”: will includes action not just wish; political struggle not just article-writing and certainly more than a personal determination to produce good news.

On to a few baseline facts on social movements, trade unions and the EU. First, social movements cannot govern; they depend on an addressee willing, for whatever reason, to listen to them and act on their demands. This is unlike trade unions, which, where there (still) is collective bargaining, do co-govern the wage relationship together with employers, ideally on equal terms. (Without collective bargaining trade unions turn into social movements pure and simple.) For social movements to be effective their addressee must be receptive to them, meaning in simple English weak enough to be vulnerable to their pressure. This condition is far from always present. Moreover, trade unions tend to be relatively well resourced while most social movements are not. This may make them liable to accepting material support from addresses, substituting for such support from their constituents. The result may be more or less pervasive collusion resulting in co-optation of the movement into the institutions that it tries to influence (“yellow movements”, in parallel to “yellow unions”).

Second, “Brussels” is not a good addressee for social movements. It is, essentially, a fake polity, one that lacks sovereignty – which does not prevent it from pretending the opposite. Again as a “baseline”, Brussels is run by national governments which are the only players in town to command that most precious political resource, state sovereignty; never was this more obvious than during the years of crisis management after 2008. Only an addressee with some sort of sovereignty, however, can be responsive to social movement demands. Moreover, the Brussels institutional setup is such that the power of its component elements varies inversely with their accessibility to movement-type mobilisation. The Parliament is the most accessible Brussels institution, but it is largely powerless: it cannot appoint or de-elect a government, nor can it initiate legislation. The Commission, for its part, pretends to be a government, but it is no more than a bureaucracy; it would

AU: Please define acronyms on first use for consistency.

like to change this and will therefore try to be receptive to “European” political mobilisation, but it cannot make concessions that the Council won’t condone. As to the Council, it is an intergovernmental body *par excellence*, and what happens there are international power games and diplomatic negotiations impenetrable to outsiders. Next, the ECJ is a court, powerful as such, but as courts are these days it has little taste for collective rights and collective action, especially in the labour market (also because its charter is essentially competition law and the enforcement of the “four freedoms” of the internal market). As to, finally, the European Central Bank (ECB), it is safely shielded from public scrutiny and public pressure; in fact its entire structure is designed from the beginning to immunise monetary policy against electoral, let alone social movement politics.<sup>1</sup>

Third, as indicated, not only the Commission but also other EU institutions like to pretend that they are more than they are, and they spend a great deal of effort on creating and sustaining a myth – or as one puts it today, a “narrative” – of their power and importance. On this, enormous resources are being spent. The matter is complicated by the fact that national governments do not object to the Union’s symbolic self-aggrandisement; in fact, since their neoliberal turn in the 1990s, they are happy to help Brussels make people believe that it is Brussels, not the national governments, that is calling the shots in Europe. Blame is shifted upwards, allowing national governments to defend neoliberal policies at home by pointing to Brussels and referring opponents to “Europe”. (One result is right-wing populist movements and parties turning “anti-European” where in fact the problems their clients want addressed are problems that national capitals have created and refuse to deal with.)<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, as in particular the Commission works to keep the European myth alive and make itself appear as a big political player, it is only too willing to help European-level trade unions and, to a lesser extent, social movement organisations to build a presence in Brussels, by funding offices, officials, research institutes, conferences, interpreters, etc. The idea here is to cultivate a “corporatist” infrastructure for the Commission of intermediary organisations obliged to the Commission and the Parliament for the access and material support provided to them. Such organisations are effectively subject to what Schmitter and I have once called a “logic of influence” – governing the give-and-take between interest groups and their institutional interlocutors – while they are much less controlled by their “logic of membership”, i.e., their relationship to their social base (Schmitter/Streeck 1999 [1982]). This is so because in Europe, social movements and trade unions are, for cultural, political and practical reasons, nationally based and organised, nested in inherited, nationally specific structures linking them to their members on the one hand and their national political systems on the other. While they can and do meet at European level, indeed increasingly so and typically funded by the EU in its effort to build legitimacy through

a supranational constituency of intermediary organisations of its own, substantive interests and procedural routines and preferences are too different from country to country to make for more than very general common policies that are from the beginning understood to have little operational meaning if at all.

Fifth, one can illustrate this with reference to the demands of trade unions and social movements for European-international “solidarity” in relation to austerity, low growth, low investment, indebtedness, unemployment, regional and national economic disparities and the like. Organisation matters – meaning that the way politics are constituted and political actors organised affects the substance of their interests and the demands they are willing and able to make in the political arena. We have learned this in the past when comparing the labour market interests of workers in craft unions to those of workers in industrial unions (Streeck 2005). In Europe it is the specifically European configuration of nation-states and supranational institutions that shapes what workers and citizens on the ground perceive to be their interests and where they can and cannot unite in supranational collective action.

Very fundamentally, again, workers in European industrial relations, including social and labour market policy, are not just workers but also taxpayers. While as workers they may perhaps feel to be in the same boat as their fellow-workers in other countries, as taxpayers they find themselves in conflict with them when it comes to fiscal redistribution among nation-states in the name of Europe-wide “solidarity”. Transfers from North to South mean higher taxes or lower benefits and fewer services to workers in the North, or entail that risk – which is why debt forgiveness, a centralised European investment budget, EMU-wide unemployment insurance and higher European “structural funds” are hard to sell to Northern European voters. Europe-wide social movements find it easy to clamour for “solidarity” at demonstrations in Brussels as they will never have to get their constituents to pay for it; the same holds for European trade unions as long as it is understood that what they say at European social movement occasions is not binding on their national constituents. It remains cheap talk covering up the fact that the very institutional structures in Europe that national governments have used to engineer the move from state-administered to neoliberal capitalism stand in the way of the production of collective-European oppositional interests and their being acted upon in more-than-just symbolic European politics. What we are seeing here is another permutation of an old theme well known from the 1980s and 1990s, when Northern European unions advised their Southern European brothers (and increasingly also sisters) to make stronger efforts to narrow the wage gap between North and South. Of course both sides were aware that this would make employment more secure in the North while likely increasing unemployment in the South. The same was true when in the 1980s the German

metalworkers' union, IG Metall, tried to convince trade unions in Italy and elsewhere to fight for a reduction of working time to 35 hours a week, as IG Metall had successfully done, in order to reduce unemployment. Nobody took such advice seriously, not on the giving and not the receiving end, since everybody knew that such "solidarity" would only protect German jobs at the expense of, for example, Italian ones.

## Notes

- 1 One should also remember that social movements are thoroughly local in character in that they much depend for their mobilisation on the physical closeness, the personal contact and the shared experience of the warm bodies of their supporters (as do, to a lesser extent, trade unions, at least those still availing themselves of the strike weapon). This means that they are likely to do better within smaller jurisdictions and vis-à-vis addressees with a more limited territorial reach closer to what may be called the particularism of social life. The Blockupy attack on the ECB, impressive as it was, remained a one-time event that Sr. Draghi has very likely long forgotten.
- 2 Alternatively the blame is put by national governments on a lack of European institutions and European "integration", as reflected in the survey data that della Porta cites. Such lack, of course, is entirely of the making of member states and their governments. By complaining about it they activate the "European" illusion, moving address of collective grievances as articulated by social movements and trade unions to a very distant future. This amounts to a "Europeanisation" of hopes and the use of "optimism" as a political tool.

## Literature

- Schmitter, Philippe C.; Streeck, Wolfgang (1999/1982): *The Organization of Business Interests: Studying the Associative Action of Business in Advanced Industrial Societies*. MPIfG Discussion Paper 99/1.
- Streeck, Wolfgang (2005): The Sociology of Labor Markets and Trade Unions. In: Smelser, Neil; Swedberg, Richard (eds.): *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, Second Edition. New York: Russell Sage, 254–283.