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Unionism and Workers' Strategies in Capitalist Transformation: The Polish Case Reconsidered

ABSTRACT ▪ This article reassesses recent debates on labour weakness in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of 'actually existing socialism', examining the relationship between workers' life strategies and the development of trade unionism in Poland. Biographical interviews with workers reveal three distinct patterns of coping with social change, structural conditions and their relationship to workers' activity in unions. It is suggested that recent signs of union renewal can only be sustained by re-linking the union agenda with the workers' diversified and pragmatized life strategies.
KEYWORDS: life strategies ▪ Poland ▪ post-communism ▪ trade unions ▪ workers

Introduction

Union weakness in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a key theme in industrial relations research. Two explanations have been particularly influential. The 'structural thesis' emphasizes economic, institutional and socio-structural constraints for union development, reflecting the labour-hostile variant of neo-capitalism adopted in CEE countries (Bohle and Greskovits, 2006). The 'strategic approach' stresses the path-dependent evolution of CEE trade unions, in which their choices, anchored in their communist and anti-communist pasts (Crowley and Ost, 2001; Ost, 2005), and/or their modernization ideology (Gardawski, 2000; Meardi, 2000) impeded their institutionalization as strong social actors, capable and willing to represent workers' interests.

While structural conditions and union strategies have been relatively well-researched, we do not know much about the consequences of workers' action patterns for labour institutions. To fill this gap, we supplement the 'top-down' focus of structural and strategic approaches, with a bottom-up perspective, based on an analysis of workers' biographical experiences. The assumption, derived from the agency-structure

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debate in sociology (Archer, 2003), is that not only institutions shape actors, but also the latter's ways of acting leave their imprint on institutions. The theoretical challenge, then, is to reconstruct the mutual dependency between the position of unions and the action patterns of their potential and actual members. The article poses the question of the specificity of working-class life strategies, their conditioning, and their possible impact on the situation and prospects of unionism in post-communist reality.

The critical case analysed is Poland, where the discrepancy between the strength of organized labour at the end of communism and its successive marginalization after system change proved the most striking within CEE (Ost, 2002). We will demonstrate that the disintegration of collectivist life strategies and the pragmatization of social consciousness (Drozdowski and Ziółkowski, 1999), involving the growing importance of economic and utilitarian interests, are crucial for understanding the problems unions face and need to be considered in union renewal strategies. This argument is developed as follows. At the outset, we discuss the development of Polish unionism after 1989 against the background of the structural and strategic explanations of labour weakness in CEE. Next, the importance of workers' agency for unionism is justified theoretically and, further, empirically grounded in the typology of working-class life strategies that emerged in the course of biographical research. Finally, our findings are put in the context of ongoing debate on reasons for labour weakness and the possibilities of union renewal in CEE.

Structural and Institutional Context: 'Neocapitalism' versus Trade Unions

Although trade union density, collective bargaining coverage and strike rates may not be perfect indicators of labour strength, the cleavages between continental Western Europe and CEE are striking. Union density fell in many European countries after 1990, but the decline in CEE countries was much sharper. In Poland, density decreased by 70 percent between 1993 and 2003, with around 14 percent of the labour force now unionized – one of the lowest rates in the EU (Carley, 2004). As in other CEE countries, collective bargaining in Poland is company-centred, while the sectoral and national levels of interest representation are underdeveloped (Mailand and Due, 2004). The level of industrial conflict in CEE did not exceed and, in many cases, was lower than in the West (Bohle and Greskovits, 2006); and while Poland was an ambiguous exception at the beginning of the 1990s, there was then a decisive decrease in strike rates (Welz and Kauppinen, 2005).

The 'structural' argument attributes these features to the emergent economic system and the particular characteristics of work organizations

which evolved during capitalist transition. 'Capitalism by design', promoted by new elites, followed a neoliberal agenda imported from the Anglo-American world (Meardi, 2002) and resulted in the macro-structural disempowerment of unions. They suffered from the rapid expansion of economic sectors and work organizations specifically hostile to organized labour. In Poland, as in other CEE countries, unions maintained their bargaining power in the public sector as well as in large privatized firms, which are the typical arena for collective agreements and industrial conflict (Mailand and Due, 2004; Welz and Kauppinen, 2005); while the new companies founded by Polish or foreign private capital proved least 'union-friendly' (Gardawski et al., 1999).

'Disorganized' capitalism was additionally buttressed by statutory support for flexible labour, very high unemployment and the growing importance of the grey economy in which workers' rights were especially vulnerable. A labour-intensive economy in CEE (Bohle and Greskovits, 2006) supported a hierarchical, authoritarian and anti-union management style, reported in small and medium enterprises and larger foreign-owned firms in Poland (Gardawski et al., 1999). In such firms, managers tended to support individualized paternalist relations with the best skilled, full-time, core employees, while simultaneously using low wages, overtime and violations of work contracts to minimize employment costs in the segment of lower-skilled, often female, young and contractual workers. At least in the first decade of transformation, neither unions nor workers were able to resist, as they were atomized by new managerial techniques and blocked by the emerging structural constraints.

Union Strategies: Between Inherited Weakness and Strategic Renewal

Despite the straightforward logic of the structural thesis, recent literature points to its explanatory limitations: it neglects the impact of trade union identities and strategies (Meardi, 2000; Ost, 2005). In general terms, unionism in post-communist countries shares some identity dilemmas of its western counterparts, which follow from the decomposition of a 'working-class subject': the skilled, male blue-collar worker, the core of traditional union movements (including anti-communist unions, such as *Solidarność* in Poland). Organizational changes contributed to a crisis of 'mechanical solidarity' (Hyman, 1999: 98) and to a need to reformulate unions' action patterns. Instead of addressing this challenge, many trade unions in CEE remained locked in the past and unable to develop offensive strategies under new, more difficult and unfriendly conditions (Crowley and Ost, 2001).

The strategic approach to explaining union weakness in CEE refers to the legacies of state socialist unionism, the heritage of the anti-communist unionism (Ost, 2005) and the specific transformation experience, promoting not only a positive value of change, but also the powerless, 'proletarian' identities of unionists (Meardi, 2000). First, it is argued that the model of unions as welfare agencies, established as allies of management, politically dependent on the Communist Party and underpinned by a weak definition of class interests left a negative imprint on union strategies after system change (Ost, 2005). Second, the unions that emerged from the anti-communist movement had difficulties in reconciling their engagement to promoting market reforms with their mission of protecting workers against the negative effects of the same economic transformation.

The strategic approach suggests that these factors contributed to the specific configuration of union strategies in Poland throughout the 1990s, combining inaction, cooperative support for workplace restructuring and, very occasionally, discontent and contestation (Gardawski, 2001). The former 'official' confederation OPZZ (All Poland Alliance of Trade Unions) underwent stronger erosion processes and, as it is confirmed by quantitative research (Gardawski et al., 1999), was much less visible at workplace level than *Solidarność*. The strategies of the latter were in turn marked by stronger engagement in organizational restructuring, considered a necessary step in the 'transition to the market' and included support for privatization and the dismantling of the works councils established in the 1980s. In both cases, the strong 'politization of industrial relations' (Pollert, 1999a: 158) led not only to communication problems between two main confederations (which were historical opponents), but also to 'rotational opposition' according to the colour of the government in office.

However, union strategies began to change, coinciding with more stable membership and the revival of activism in some sectors (such as health care, supermarkets and greenfield industrial enterprises). In the late 1990s, *Solidarność* established a Union Development Unit (DRZ), and OPZZ founded the Confederation of Labour (*Konfederacja Pracy*), both aiming to organize employees in previously neglected sectors. The strategies of DRZ, targeted mainly at new private enterprises, combine an 'organizing model' with some elements of 'economic unionism', including acceptance of the market economy and an emphasis on the work-related interests of workers (Gardawski, 2001: 203). *Konfederacja Pracy* is more critical of capitalist relations. Functioning as 'the last resort' for employees endangered by redundancies, this union extends its activity into the broader communities of pensioners and unemployed (Gardawski, 2001). Although both OPZZ and *Solidarność* claim to have weakened their ties with political parties, these promises seem to be only

partially fulfilled; for instance, *Solidarność* supported a right-wing candidate during the 2005 presidential elections. The tactics of the smaller organizations which combined to form the Forum of Trade Unions (FZZ) in 2002, are difficult to evaluate, since FZZ is hardly visible on the industrial scene. Radical unions, such as *Sierpień' 80*, which recently became engaged in coalition-building with leftist groupings, still function on the margins of industrial relations.

Workers' Subjectivity and Unionism: A Different Perspective?

Even though recent strategies of unions indicate new possibilities for their revitalization, it remains unclear how far workers will support them. Union renewal in Poland seems to follow a path typical of the liberal market economies, such as the UK and the USA, where the acquisition of membership is 'a far more prominent component of union action' than in the more centralized industrial relations systems of Western Europe (Frege and Kelly, 2003: 16). Importantly, however, such an 'organizing approach' requires a renewed commitment of employees. In particular, the emergence of new subjectivities in the work sphere is needed, encompassing a 'positive willingness to have an impact on status quo' (Meardi, 2000: 243). Several studies document that such a turn might be problematic in the CEE context because of a deep sense of powerlessness among workers, and also the development of individual and family-centred strategies (Ashwin, 1999). But conversely, in Poland a cultural heritage favourable to union renewal was found by Stenning (2003) in the traditions of community-centred unionism that developed during state socialism. Meardi (2000) argued that an awakening of radical union consciousness might result from the shock of organizational changes. The potential of a new subjectivity was also found in the experience of harsh working conditions in the 'actually-existing capitalism' by the new generation of Polish employees (Ost, 2005: 196).

While the majority of the studies focus on workplace reality, this article assumes that both powerlessness and renewed commitment to unions need to be explained in the context of workers' broader life strategies. Contrary to the dominant view, which sees workers as mere recipients of structural conditioning, we argue that micro-transformations of these life projects have an important, reflexive impact on involvement in union organizations. This argument echoes a broader debate in general sociological theory on the role of agency in shaping institutional order (Archer, 2003). In industrial relations research, a similar perspective has been proposed by Frege and Kelly (2003: 12), suggesting that 'actors both influence and are influenced by institutions' and that we need to

'trace out the reciprocal interconnections between the two'. However, while a standard industrial relations approach tends to equate social actors with *unions* (along with employers' organizations and state institutions), this article re-examines the agency of *workers*. The analytical decoupling of workers as acting agents and unions as institutions might contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between them, highlighting possible divergences between workers' strategies and trade unions' tactics.

The agency-approach allows us to grasp workers' engagement in unions as the effect of the interplay between the objective circumstances of their actions and their reflexive life strategies, involving 'an end that is desired … and also some notion, however imprecise, of the course of action through which to accomplish it' (Archer, 2003: 6). Assuming that the consequences of new structural constraints, the legacies of the past and 'agential creativeness' codetermine life strategies, we adopt a theoretical perspective founded on the interlinked concepts of resources, dispositions and reflexivity. Dispositions are defined as collectively shared 'schemes of perception, thought and action' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54), accumulated through the experience of structural opportunities and constraints throughout an individual biography. We assume that dispositions operate as a 'practical way of valuing the world' (Charlesworth, 2000: 125), the integration of which depends on the durability of the contexts of actions, actors' resources and reflexivity. Resources are these means for action, their value determined structurally, which facilitate the diverse life projects of individuals. Simplifying Bourdieu's (1986) classification, we distinguish economic resources (material assets and incomes), social resources (potentially useful social networks) and cultural resources (formal education and practical skills). Besides resources strictly related to the class situation of workers, we take account of assets linked to gender and the generational differentiation of working-class milieux.

The impact of dispositions and resources makes certain life strategies less probable, but nonetheless it does not preclude innovation. Especially in periods of deep structural changes, the role of individual reflexivity comes into the foreground. As suggested by Archer (2003: 9), reflexivity can be described as an 'internal conversation', through which social agents define their place in society, their interests and their schemes of future action. In the context of social change, 'the interaction between agents' predisposition and changing social logics might generate historically novel life strategies and choices as people try to stay "on course" and maintain their social trajectory' (Eyal et al., 2000: 43). As reflexive agents, workers try to make sense of new institutional arrangements, to adapt to them or, if their resources allow for it, to adjust them to their life projects. The consequences of such micro-adaptations and everyday struggles

for workers' involvement in unions are discussed in the following part of the article, presenting the results of our empirical research in Poland.

Biographical Research in Poland

In order better to understand the dual nature of workers' action patterns, a biographical approach was chosen. For biographies reveal both individual efforts to cope with immediate structural constraints, and also the processes through which social structures are reproduced, modified and contested (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). In particular, biographical narratives allow us to reconstruct the interwoven effects of rapidly changing institutional contexts and the evolving life strategies of the people involved on their commitments to union organizations. A biographical approach is therefore an interesting, but rarely used source of insights for studying unionization in its historical, processual and agency-centred dimensions.

The research was undertaken in the years 2001–04 in the south-western regions of Poland (Lower Silesia, Opole Silesia and Upper Silesia). The area contains both old industrial districts and territories with the highest rates of new investment in Poland, providing action patterns both in traditional work settings and in the new ones that emerged after system change. Some 140 interviews were conducted according to the technique of biographical narrative interview by Schütze (1983). The informants were women and men of different ages, employed in the lowest levels of organizational hierarchies and performing manual tasks in small, medium and large companies, in manufacturing, construction and retail services. Each interview covered the individual's life story, with additional questions for clarification, including workers' experiences with trade unionism. Around 30 percent of the interviewees were union members, both leaders and rank-and-file.

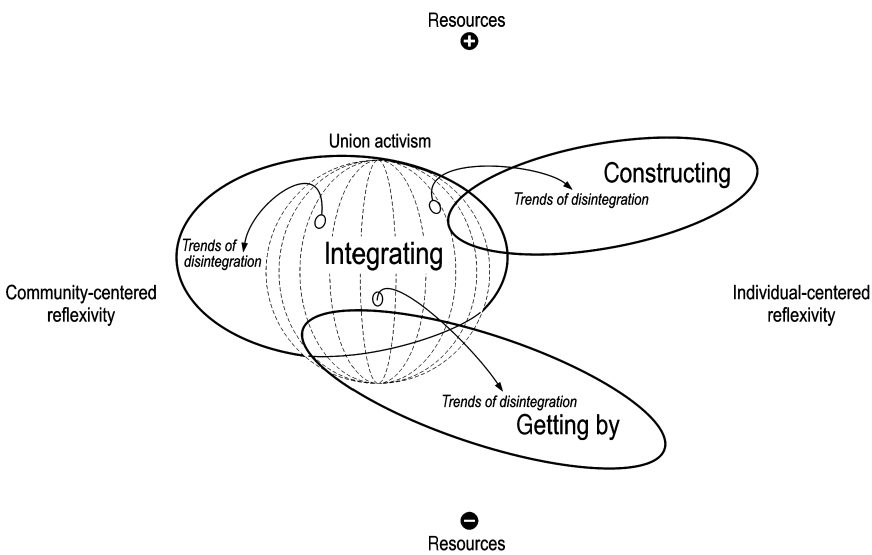
Data sampling and analysis were determined by grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The data collection was carried out in three stages, each followed by analysis of the interviews undertaken. The process of joint data collection and data analysis underlay the theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The sampling was driven by the principle of the maximization and minimization of differences between comparison groups, constructed as the configurations of categories describing life strategies. The analytical strategy consisted of open coding, aimed at breaking down data into categories through line-by-line reading of interviews' transcripts. Next we carried out selective coding, in order to relate emergent categories to the core concepts of the study, 'accounting for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved' (Glaser, 1978: 93).

Constructing the Typology of Workers' Life Strategies

In the course of data analysis, the problem of coping with social change emerged as the central concern underlying workers' life strategies. We identified three modes of responding to this problem: 'integrating', 'getting by' and 'constructing'. The different logics of biographical stories were placed in a matrix defined by two continua (see Figure 1). The first continuum represents the dominant type of reflexivity pervading a life story. The community-centred type, prevailing in the 'integrating' pattern, situates life strategies in a well-structured framework of collective experiences: workers' ethos, collective history and class situation. In the individual-centred type, by contrast, private frames of experience tend to predominate, leading either to a 'fragmented' life perspective (the 'getting by' pattern) or to 'bricolage' life designs (the 'constructing' pattern). The second continuum describes the resources available for individual action. Low-value or devalued resources increase the probability of loss of biographical autonomy in the face of structural changes (the situation typical of the 'getting by' pattern). On the other hand, a diversity of assets enhances capacity for exercising control over individual life (typical of the 'constructing' pattern). Given our research methodology, any estimation of the proportions of workers adhering to different patterns would be misleading. However, the 'getting by' and 'integrating' patterns tended to be more typical, each represented by around 40 percent of the interviewees.

In constructing this typology we focused on the dominant logics of action represented in the life stories collected. Although sequential and

FIGURE 1. Typology of Life Strategies



simultaneous engagement in different life strategies is possible, not all sequences and configurations are equally probable. The structural distance between the 'getting by' and 'constructing' patterns tends to be rigid, whereas the boundaries between the 'integrating' pattern and two other types of life strategies are more flexible. The dominant dynamic is determined by moves from 'integrating' to 'getting by' or 'constructing', with the possibility of combining the features of two types. These 'trends of disintegration' are of crucial importance for the union movement, since its traditional core in Poland (and, probably, elsewhere) was founded on life strategies denoted by the 'integrating' type. We elaborate on this hypothetical tendency in more detail with illustrations from the interviews. All individuals' names have been changed.

Preserving a Collective Ethos: The Integrating Pattern

The 'integrating' pattern involves attempts to maintain the identities and resources embedded in work communities affected by structural changes in the work sphere after the end of state socialism. Within this pattern, community-reflexivity is developed, which rests on establishing a meaningful relationship between an individual biography and workers' collective history. In the context of increasingly individualized employment relationships (Pollert, 1999a: 136–7), the 'integrating' pattern reveals the efforts to retain meaningful social networks both in the workplace and within local communities. A crucial asset for coping with new economic uncertainty is social capital, in the form of useful social connections and recognition at the workplace, accumulated through seniority or through union activity – 'delegated' social capital (Bourdieu, 1986: 251). The pattern appeared to be rather untypical of young and female workers, but was common in the biographies of middle-aged employees, sharing the experiences of long-term employment in large industrial companies, founded in state socialism and restructured (with significant union participation) after system change. Continuity of occupational careers and limited experience of forced job mobility were other typical background factors.

As demonstrated by other studies (Meardi, 2000; Stenning, 2003), the historical link between working-class ethos, typical of the 'integrating' pattern, and the union movement derives first and foremost from the traditions of *Solidarność*, whose strongholds were build around the 'key' industries of state socialist economy. This heritage is most present in the life stories of long-standing union representatives in large public-sector and privatized firms, revealing a strong feeling of continuity between their past union engagement and their present activism:

> *Krystian* (M, 45, steelworker, large public-sector company): Today, as you see, I am a unionist . . . My earliest memories include exactly this

> firm . . . My father already worked here . . . When I came to [the steel mill] . . . I tried to be active in a youth organization – called The Union of Socialist Youth – to do something, but in a sense of doing something for people . . . In practice, not earlier than in 1980, when it was possible to create unions which were independent of the employer, the state, the government, and so forth, we began to change something. For sure, today it's not what was [planned] . . . But what we managed to do is that finally it's normal . . . Today there is economy, everything must be calculated . . . Lower wages allowed us to survive, but because of that we need to do something extra for people.

Like many other long-standing *Solidarność* activists, Krystian constructs his biography as a history of 'becoming a unionist' and emphasizes an ethos of 'working for people'. Although he describes disillusion with the system change, he also re-interprets it as 'normalization' in economic terms. A logic linking broader life strategies with union engagement supports the self-limitation of collective claims in line with a dominant economic discourse. Utilitarian, 'money-oriented' strategies (Meardi, 2000: 275) are related to a defensive mode of pragmatization, based on protecting the integrity of the firm, surviving transition and mitigating its negative effects. Only in a limited number of cases, including unionists from *Sierpień ' 80* (a radical breakaway from *Solidarność*), was the 'integrating' pattern accompanied by offensive strategies, challenging the market logic by establishing a relationship between collective engagement during communist times and collective mobilization after system change.

While the strong relationship between community-reflexivity and union engagement is not untypical of long-standing activists, a situation observed among the majority of rank-and-file members is much more problematic. What matters for them much more than a historically shaped ethos is the pragmatic dimension of collective engagement: the ability to communicate problems at work and the economic effectiveness of their unions. This hypothesis is supported by the negative cases of former and current union members who criticize unions for their passivity and inaction at workplace. Such workers complain that the unions do not take account of the opinions of 'the people like them' in discussions with management, and care more about their 'own business' than the members, decoupling community-reflexivity from commitment to unionism. In this context, two main logics of disintegration emerge. First, participation in unions is maintained as an additional resource, while at the same time very active individual strategies are developed. Second, the 'integrating' logic is combined with loss of autonomy and estranged collectivism:

> *Romuald* (M, 36, process worker in chemicals, restructured medium-size public-sector company): When I was in vocational school . . . the whole

> class enrolled, let's say 'voluntarily' [laughing] in ZSMP [the Union of Socialist Polish Youth], everybody was there . . . [At work] I joined *Solidarność*, because . . . all of us [joined] *Solidarność* I am [a member] up till now, I pay fees, but we're thinking now and then: 'we're paying those fees and what for?'. There are neither meetings nor anything else . . . So, all of us joined these unions in our brigade, we pay these fees, but, honestly, we only get that 50 złotys for Christmas as a reward, let's say. And . . . that's all. So, we're constantly thinking of withdrawing.

Romuald is both strongly embedded in a work milieu and disappointed with unions. The persistence of community-centred reflexivity leads him to juxtapose the collective interests of the people in his 'brigade' and estranged union strategies. Importantly, however, in this and similar cases, low commitment to unionism seems to follow not only from unions' passivity, but also from the scarcity of cultural patterns that help define collective participation in active terms. The inertia of unions, marked by the lack of communication and low economic advantages of membership, is accompanied by workers' 'alienated collectivism' (Ashwin, 1999: 175), expressed by their persistent attachment to work communities combined with limited attempts to influence their collective situation. Except for long-standing union activists, the relationship between a communitarian ethos, produced by working-class communities under state socialism, and active engagement in unions seems weak. In this context, transitions towards the two other types of life strategies become very probable. They are even more likely in the case of young labourers, whose life projects were developed in the context of much more fragmented work settings and the significant absence of a coherent union ethos (represented, in the past, by *Solidarność*).

Living from Day to Day: The Getting by Pattern

The next type of life strategies, 'getting by', involves the fragmentation of life projects and reflexivity. It is characterized by the experience of overwhelming structural constraints, feelings of dependency and lack of control over one's life. In some cases, this is a permanent life strategy, marked by lasting experience of economic deprivation regardless of political circumstances. Other biographies document collective trajectories into the 'getting by' pattern after system change, accompanied by the 'loss of one's planning capacities and a severe deterioration of social relationships for many members of a social "we-community"' (Schütze, 1992: 192). In both cases, economic uncertainty appears inescapable because of limits set up by insufficient economic resources, lack of reliable social bonds at work, and low-valued educational resources. In our sample, the 'getting by' pattern was typical of workers employed in 'peripheral' positions in new private firms, whose occupational experiences involved lay-offs,

demotions, involuntary job mobility and dead-end careers. The significant share of women, as well as very young and old workers indicates the importance of discriminatory factors linked to generation and gender, well described in the literature on labour markets in CEE (Mach, 2005; Pollert, 2003).

Disbelief in individual and collective means to change the situation of disempowerment, typical of the 'getting by' pattern, is doubly determined: by personal experiences of structural limitations in pursuing intentional strategies as well as by a deep-seeded distrust of institutions that are dedicated to the representation of collective interests. Workers' experiences of a profound life destabilization by the restructuring of the work sphere, from which unions were not able to protect them, lead to a sense of powerlessness at the collective level. At the level of individual strategies, the re-orientation to family life and forced pragmatism emerge. The latter can be understood as individualized efforts to protect life stability against the threat of economic degradation:

> *Aleksandra* (F, 34, checkout assistant, large private supermarket chain): For the last two years I've been a cashier [at T-Supermarket]. Work is hard, I must agree, they're constantly scheming and conniving with job terms, but I've got no chance of another job, so I hang on to this one . . . [*Interviewer: Do you think you can change your situation?*] I wish [I could] but that's impossible. Today nobody cares about poor people . . . I used to believe in *Solidarność*, but it's not relevant anymore, because I've made a mistake. People have also changed, everybody thinks only about oneself, to line one's pockets as much as possible, even at other people's expense. I think that one ought to enjoy small things. That one has a home, that one has a place to go back to after work, and that somebody waits for them there.

Aleksandra's story reveals forced pragmatism in the work sphere that follows from the lack of other possibilities on the labour market and the necessity to support her family. Forced pragmatization, indicated in part by strong feeling of economic deprivation and overburdening by intensified work, narrows the horizon of interactions to primary social groups. In this sense, withdrawal to family documents the tendency to disintegration not only of workers' milieux, but also of a collective ethos. Like other informants who feel that 'nobody cares about poor people', Aleksandra considers her previous support for *Solidarność* a mistake, and she develops a strong conviction that 'today you can believe only in yourself'. Although the 'getting by' pattern might produce class identities (e.g. poor/rich) they do not lead to collective mobilization. Solidarity is questioned by forced pragmatism, which underlies the definition of social reality as a domain of a Hobbesian struggle for egoistic interests. Not surprisingly, a tendency to withdraw to domestic life appears partiularly strong in the case of women, because of the persistence or even

increase in their underprivileged position and in conservative gender attitudes after system change (Pollert, 2003).

The deep gap between a highly valued private domain and a disrespected sphere of institutions (trade unions included) strikingly recalls a situation described by research conducted in Poland in the 1970s (Nowak, 1979). Workers' distrust of the unions reflects a continuity of dispositions among those who felt equally 'cheated' by the old and new political *and* union elites. What workers expect are 'caring unions', tutelary, paternalist institutions that are dedicated to protect them against economic uncertainty. What they encounter instead is a lack of unions or else only weak unions – if they exist at all – which are perceived as uncaring. Subordination to structurally imposed conditions negatively influences the union mobilization potential and impedes their organization in non-unionized sectors. A union representative in a small privatized plant expresses this process clearly:

> *Leokadia* (F, 38, store worker in food industry, small privatized firm): You know, I am active in the trade union, but honestly, this union can't do anything at the moment . . . [*Interviewer: Is it because of privatization, or . . . ?*] Well, partly because of privatization – or, unions were founded after privatization, but at the beginning it was somehow different . . . We've tried several times, when it turned out to be bad, to go on strike or something . . . [But] people weren't positive, because they're afraid . . . They are afraid of losing their jobs. So, everybody thinks only . . . to live from day to day.

The type of workers' agency represented in the 'getting by' pattern, and union weakness, are mutually reinforcing. The fear of job loss leads to subordination and undermines the effectiveness of collective bargaining, while the lack of union efficiency compounds distrust of unions and leads to further worsening of working conditions. As a result, 'a vicious circle of workers' consciousness of powerlessness and union weakness' emerges (Pollert, 1999b: 223). Workers' complaints about 'uncaring unions' indicate a deep feeling of abandonment by protective institutions among those pushed to peripheral positions, especially in non-unionized private companies. Regaining trust and securing basic economic security will constitute the biggest challenges for union organizing strategies, targeted at these fractions of working-class milieux. Importantly, the transition from the 'getting by' pattern into the 'constructing' pattern, though very difficult, might be related to the recently observed reinvigoration of union strategies in Poland. We will elaborate on this tendency in the description of the last type.

Innovating for Betterment: The Constructing Pattern

The third type, 'constructing', reflects the development of future-oriented individual projects aimed at improving an individual situation, especially

in economic terms, by taking advantage of opportunities encountered, and securing social and occupational positions through active investment in resources. 'Constructing' pervades life stories either as a durable logic of action or as a strategy provoked by new possibilities after system change, including, among others, educational and entrepreneurial incentives. Supportive factors are generally *stronger* capitals (social capital at work, multifaceted occupational skills or relatively high formal education). Workers also tend to emphasize their resourcefulness, defined as an ability to cope with structural constraints by using *whatever* resources are available. In this sense, the 'constructing' logic suggests 'bricolage' rather than a well-planned design (Eyal et al., 2000: 43). Unlike the 'getting by' pattern, it was rarely encountered in female biographies, but was more typical of skilled, young and middle-aged male 'craftsmen', whose occupational careers were marked by pragmatic and, at least subjectively, intentional job mobility between different organizational settings.

The 'constructing' strategy reveals another side of long-lasting distrust of institutions. A strong conviction that personal destiny depends on individual efforts leads to scepticism towards collective representation. Especially for workers who were able to secure their own economic situation *without* participating in unions, a rationale for membership becomes highly questionable. It is well expressed in Arek's story:

> *Arek* (M, 42, sawyer in steel industry, large privatized company): I have never earned my living from a single source, I have always been doing something more. Because, when I still worked in F-factory, when those 90s began . . . everybody started business activities, so I was also running a rotisserie [firm] . . . Nowadays I also have a second job . . . I'm not like those people who sit and cry: 'I've got no job, I haven't got this . . .'. This won't help me. [*Interviewer: Had you any contact with unions*?] With unions? I joined immediately after *Solidarność* was registered, I've been in unions for a long time . . . Later on, those unions got on my goat . . . [After changing job], in steelwork I didn't join them again . . . I see that unions don't do too much here . . . Well, I manage well at work without unions.

Arek's narrative demonstrates a high level of intentional pragmatism, defined as a utilitarian orientation towards economic betterment. If forced pragmatism is interpreted as the result of limited resources, intentional pragmatization goes together with resourcefulness as an important element of biographical identity. In the case of middle-aged craftsmen like Arek, individual strategies at work are emphasized, including the multiplication of work activities (starting-up a small business, working abroad, taking jobs on the side) and individual strengthening of occupational position. In the younger generation of career-oriented workers, investments in education come into the foreground. In both cases, the disintegration of collective ethos takes the form of distance from people and institutions

considered as locked in the past, incapable to cope efficiently with change, and merely 'getting by'. An idea of self-determination is contrasted with expectations of help and protection ('sitting and crying'). In a similar manner, Adam, a 25-year-old car assembler following weekend university studies, sees unions as protecting low-skilled workers ('storehouse of blockheads') and detached from changing reality ('functioning in communism or *Solidarność '80*'). Importantly, passivity and inertia becomes an interpretative pattern through which unionism is defined.

Although 'constructing' usually goes together with distance from union organization, its inner contradictions and the revitalization of union activities create a potential for the re-linking of personal concerns with union projects (Meardi, 2000). First, the idea of self-determination contradicts the reality of structural constraints that emerged after system change in Poland. Unsuccessful 'constructing', marked by a lack of expected rewards for educational investments, personal exhaustion by intensified work, and the negative effects of work burdens for private life, led some of the young workers to rediscover unions as guarantors of stability for their individual strategies. Second, the reinvigoration of union strategies opened up new opportunities for autonomous action within and through union organizations, even for those who merely used to 'get by'. In both cases, strategic innovativeness is shifted from individual to group level, leading to 'associative' constructing. Some properties of this weak, but qualitatively important turn are illustrated by the narratives of new union activists in foreign supermarkets chains, Grzegorz and Katarzyna:

> *Grzegorz* (M, 26, shop assistant, private supermarket chain): When I was admitted to political sciences, to extramural studies, I had to think about work, about providing myself with money . . . After studies, I've not worked in my field, I'm still working in this [supermarket] . . . I am one of the founders of trade unions in the firm. *[Interviewer: question about establishing unions]* We don't look at the ideals one has, because I've never liked *Solidarność* . . . But . . . what we do look at, is that *we* come off best, that this organization is, well, strong enough so that an employer doesn't ignore us . . . Unions have changed a lot . . . Suddenly, they found money for holidays, for benefits, for [Christmas] parcels . . . There are [unions] in the whole civilized world.

> *Katarzyna* (F, 50, checkout assistant, private supermarket chain): We've been exploited. They've been notoriously breaking the labour code, zero respect for the dignity of an employee. And, as I said, out of the employees' needs an idea emerged to join trade unions [*Interviewer: question about resumé of life*] My life's got more interesting, since I've been in this firm and I've joined unions. Before it was only, you know: work-home-kids, work-home-kids . . . Now, since 2001 . . . I feel that something's going on around me, that I have an impact on something.

In Katarzyna's story, the logic of 'getting by', imposed by the routine of domestic life and exhausting work, is surmounted by her engagement in unions, defined as a turning-point in her biography. Union activism, combining a reflexive emancipatory project with the defence of collective 'dignity', helped her not only to overcome several structural constraints, connected with the employment situation, gender and older age, but also to regain control over her life. Grzegorz's biography documents the rediscovery of unionism in a younger generation of workers. Facing structural and organizational constraints, which impeded the remuneration for his educational efforts, he became involved in union organizing in his firm. In these and similar cases of new union activists, such pragmatic attitudes towards unions seem to dominate. Unions become attractive, since they guarantee support in improving employment conditions and broadening personal autonomy, but identification with their collective traditions (e.g. the tradition of *Solidarność*) is weak. The focus of this new unionism is at shop-floor level, goals are utilitarian, and the expectations that are held concern providing employees with efficient daily support at their workplace, in a similar manner as described long ago by Goldthorpe's team (1968). Interestingly, however, definitions of situations change too. The modern ('civilized') world is described not so much by an economic logic as by the existence of trade unions, which cease to be identified merely with the remote 'communist' past.

Conclusions

The model developed in this article provides new insights into unionization as the process involving the interaction of macrostructural conditions, the strategic choices of unions, and the life projects of workers. From a biographical perspective, neither a homogeneous set of working-class dispositions nor new structural constraints can fully account for the problems that unions face. Rather, past dispositions are variously activated in relation to the encountered contexts of action, resources workers possess and their various kinds of reflexivity. State socialist experiences left a 'ruptured ethos', in some respects supportive, in others problematic for workers' engagement in unions (Gardawski, 2000: 324). While its 'communitarian' side, founded on dense relationships between work, community and social activism in the past (Stenning, 2003), tends to erode in the course of structural transformation, its pragmatic-instrumental dimension, marked by the deep-seated split between private life and institutional reality, persists. In this context, three different expectations of unions might develop: orientations towards collective representation ('integrating'), towards basic protection ('getting by') towards support for individualized life projects ('constructing'). Given

the dynamic nature of both life strategies and institutional reality, potentially conflicting orientations are also possible, as people move between patterns and their reflexivity and contexts of action change.

Individuals are neither fully confined to one life strategy by their structural situation (as movement between patterns demonstrates), nor do they follow them at random. The core hypothesis grounded in this research suggests that the distance between 'getting by' and 'constructing' tends to overlap with 'core' and 'periphery' divisions within working-class milieux, based on the interplay of gender, generation and class. On the one hand, a vicious circle of union weakness and workers' powerlessness is more likely to emerge among those pushed to structurally underprivileged positions, including women, the lower-skilled and those socially defined as 'too young' or 'too old' for better posts. On the other hand, skilled, young and middle-aged craftsmen who experience lack of union support for their individual projects narrow down their collective commitments and try to improve their economic and social standing by their own means. The distinction between 'core' and 'periphery' holds if we take into account that life strategy favouring traditionally understood unionism ('integrating') was also connected with relatively stronger resources (including social capital at workplaces). Maintaining old strongholds, without taking care of grass-roots support, can lead, however, to dangerous inertia, marked by 'façade' participation and the decoupling of collective identities from any commitment to unions.

This research gives additional support to a thesis recently proposed by Ost (2002, 2005) on the decline of social movement unionism in post-communist countries. Collective commitments decreased not only because of unions' passivity and their structural disempowerment, but also because of the pragmatization of workers' strategies (Drozdowski and Ziółkowski, 1999). This was not only 'forced' pragmatism, resulting from the 'proletarization' of the working-class situation and consciousness (Meardi, 2000: 157–8), but also the development of resourceful 'bricolage' action patterns, which challenged workers' engagement in union organizations. Since utilitarian orientations are the most common platform that Polish workers share, we suggest – in agreement with Ost (2002: 34) – that union revival in Poland can only be sustained by endorsing the centrality of economic goals. In this sense, economic unionism, promoted by the Union Development Unit of *Solidarność*, is a well-tailored strategy. It should be noted, however, that without workers' commitment such a company-centred approach remains fragile and probably insufficient to sustain union revival in the long run.

What is needed is reinvented solidarity (Hyman, 1999), which would transcend purely economic rationality, support the communication of workers' concerns within companies and beyond, and reconnect

pragmatized life strategies with the collective project of unionism. In Poland and many CEE countries likewise, there is a rich tradition of unionism going beyond workplaces to meet workers' needs, including participation in local communities, the organization of leisure time and the development of mutual assistance funds (Stenning, 2003). Recent union renewal indicates, however, a qualitative turn, which can be neither reduced to the effects of institutional intervention nor fully explained by the legacies of past 'community unionism'. Compared with old patterns, grass-roots activism, identified within the 'constructing' strategy, seems to be not only less historically embedded and narrower in scope, but also more offensive in challenging the structural constraints that emerged after system change. If it reshapes the collective ethos, this occurs through its broader unintended effects. First, it enhances 'the opportunity structure for individual plans' (Hyman, 1999: 100), encompassing life projects related not only to work, but also to gender and the generational situation of workers. Second, though overtly 'apolitical', it yields clear political consequences, establishing a still weak, but qualitatively important discourse of 'civilizing capitalism' in Poland.

Having said all this, it might be asked to what extent these results are country-specific, even within the CEE context? Additional comparative research is required to answer this question. More powerful accounts are needed for the development of working-class strategies after the end of state socialism, within the context of differentiated communist experiences and the path-dependent development of new capitalist regimes (Eyal et al., 2000). It might be asked how solidarism and collectivism are reshaped in different national and local spaces in CEE, and under which conditions they are replaced by more pragmatized action patterns, producing new challenges for unionism. In countries where the collective contestation of communist rule was bonded with very high economic expectations towards the new social reality, the pragmatization of life strategies might play a particularly important role. Such micro-changes require greater economic and ideological work by unions at grassroots level. The first signs of union revival, noted in this study, might indicate that Polish unions have started to take this challenge more seriously into account.

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