Dimensions of Collectivism:
Occupation, community, and the increasing role of memory and personal dynamics in the debate

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 Abstract
This essay argues that the notion of there being a decline in collectivism does not adequately engage with a whole new set of initiatives within labour process theory on collectivism in its various forms. These debates demonstrate how diverse social influences and experiences, and the memory of previous experiences and collective endeavours, are essential features that must be acknowledged in terms of their implications. There are series of interventions on occupational identity, the everyday lives of workers, gender and ethnic relations and the experience of work that nourish our understanding of collectivism as a more complex and broader concept. Furthermore, how features and relations are mobilized, linked and developed is becoming a vital feature of how collectivism should be understood. It is argued that the nature of these relations needs to be a greater focus of the debate if we are to develop a more dynamic view of collectivism, and a more relevant one.

Introduction

At the heart of this essay is the attempt to illustrate that collectivism is a flexible and rich concept, which continues to be valid for the study of work and workers in a context of change regardless of the extensive literature on the decline of collectivism. It is not the purpose of this article to define collectivism through some experimental process along the lines of Benjamin Franklin, for to define it in a one dimensional manner would be to de-politicise it, essentialise it and de-contextualise it. Rather, it questions the way the issue of collectivism and its current dilemmas have been caricatured within accounts of decline. The paper makes a point of reviewing a selection of recent debates on collectivism in the particular area of labour process analysis. Interventions regarding employment relations, the occupational identity of workers, the social and community aspects of workers, the collective dimensions of ethnicity, and modes of solidarity in everyday life are referenced: they are used to outline how debates have become subtle, nuanced and multi-dimensional in their approach adding a curious characteristic to the study of work. Collectivism is established with regards to distinct points of reference: the nature of the employment relationship and the manner in which management intensify production. In addition, the role of occupational structure in terms of labour market relations, as well as in terms of occupational memories, has re-emerged in the light of a discussion of labour market strategies of employers and the state. Then there is the constituting of collectivism in relation to local spatial communities and relationships. Other reference

points view collectivism as evolving in relation to gender and ethnicity: in this respect, experiences of exclusion and segregation inform, and influence, the manner in which activism emerges on collective issues.

The conclusion argues that there are different levels and dimensions of collectivism being discussed that provide us with a potential basis for a framework for the understanding of collectivism within work and employment. It is argued that the nature of these links, connections and levels need to be a greater focus of the debate if we are to develop a more dynamic view of collectivism, and a more relevant one. It is demonstrated how difference, diverse social influences and experiences, and the memory of previous experiences and collective endeavours are an essential feature of these new debates – the problem is that these are not acknowledged explicitly in many studies in terms of their implications. What is more, how these are mobilised, linked and developed politically is also rarely a preserve of the debates. In fact, there is a paucity of politics in the broader sense in various studies of the collective aspect of employment relations.

The Strange Death of Collectivism

Within labour process analysis and industrial relations a significant body of literature has emerged alerting us to the claim that Britain's workplaces are witnessing a decline in collectivism. However, there are a number of issues that require some contemplation when considering such pessimistic accounts, as arguably the question of declining workplace collectivism is not adequately explained in the accounts provided. This could be due to the fact that many of these accounts are overly quantitative and behavioural theory testing is seldom investigated. It is also argued (Martinez Lucio 2006) that they fail to confront the political dynamics of collectivism and its social characteristics.

Martinez Lucio (2006, 2007) argues that union decline or change is multidimensional. It is argued that it has social, political, regulatory, corporate, cultural and global dimensions, which are not being addressed by the advocates of decline. Hence, their view of decline fails to see ironies and counter-developments across these dimensions. There is also, of course, the question of the historical dimension. Much of the material relating to trade union decline tends to focus on one key period, in particular from 1979. However, as Kelly (1998) demonstrates, by drawing on long wave theory, there is an extensive historical account of upswings and downswings in trade union membership and density, strikes and strike waves and collective bargaining and statutory pay coverage in Britain since the late 19thC (see also Carruth and Disney 1988). D'Art and Turner (2002:8) also argue that, historically, worker collectivities have experienced varying levels of accommodation or opposition from dominant groups. The challenge to the 'decline of labour' thesis would therefore appear to be an important feature of current debates. Yet questions of collectivism have been framed within the context of particular streams of labour process studies in relation to employment and work related issues and not just institutional fluctuations. Hence, we need to map different approaches to the varying debates to show how even radical views of collectivism are nuanced by a greater acknowledgement of individualism,

social relations, and personal memory in terms of the workplace and management/worker relations, sectoral features of work and identity, spatial aspects of labour markets and ethnicity and gender relations. The *implications* of which are not clearly acknowledged as we conclude on.

Re-encountering collectivism

Management strategies and the collective aspects of individualisation

Whilst not a central feature of this essay, the irony is that mainstream management theorists have not held back in using the term collectivism (a space one would not necessarily have associated with continuing recollection of collectivism). Collectivism is not solely the preserve of Marxian political economy or industrial relations paradigms. There is, in fact, the increasing use of the term collectivism to explain the new strategies of employers within the workplace in their attempt to create corporate and team based loyalty. The argument is based on the assumption that an employer led notion of 'collectivism' is at times developed to displace independent forms of representation and loyalty such as trade unionism and workplace based independent worker identities (Bacon and Storey, 1996). Developments such as quality circles, teamworking, management led 'mass' meetings, and the general referencing of a collective identity through the prism of corporate identity as in the views of 1960s Japan, have become referenced in human resource management. The *attempt* by managers to create direct forms of communication with workers and to bypass embedded and institutionalised systems of worker representation has been the subject of exhaustive debate. The extent to which such developments have emerged coherently is questionable, but as a feature of management strategy and discourse, the collective referent is an important feature of management action – indicating that debates in relation to management control of the employment relationship are shaped, not just in terms of its individualisation, but of competing meanings of collective interest.

Moreover, individual and collective struggles are usually interlinked: individual tensions are a source of collective organisation and intervention (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 1997). This may appear to be an obvious point but it is a silent feature of many discussions due to the potential anomalies that it raises for reductionist views of collectivism. Those with a more explicit acknowledgement of this link argue: '…Why is individual isolation so often referred to in terms that can also be interpreted as reward factors - flexitime and individual contracts? Is it really true that these create insecurity in a personalised and individualised way? …. [Yet] it is also significant that most union struggles today are provoked by management strategies that focus on temporalising and fragmenting labour.' (Stewart, 2006: 188-9). The acknowledgment of these links suggest that there is an ongoing role for collectivism, whether as an ideology, or in its influence on shaping workplace identity and the way it interacts with individual experiences and projects of individualisation (see also views of modern work as being increasingly 'Taylorised' and 'alienated', Sennett, 2000). Yet what has emerged from this strand of debate in the labour process sphere, and through the International Labour Process Conference, is a concern with method, context, and the interaction between collectivism and individualism. Such continuity in terms of

the influence of collectivism – albeit modified and relatively more open - is not just apparent in the workplace but also in the labour market.

Collectivism, labour market and sectoral identity

The recent debate on collectivism has begun to cross-reference with questions related to occupational identity. Workers connect through different understandings of their position in the labour market, in the perceived class structure and the changes they face. Building on the work of a range of debates on occupational identity such as Strangleman *et al.* (1999), Savage *et al.* (2001) and Turnbull (1992), MacKenzie *et al.* (2006) have located questions of collectivism in terms of the dynamics of change and occupational reference points. Through a study of redundant steel workers in Wales, they have argued that the occupational and shared experience of change forges a collective occupational identity which is not solely one of decline and individualisation (as per Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) but one which has a more proactive dynamic. They suggest that employment must be salvaged as a reference point in the debate in identity, '…the collectivism that was intrinsic to the steelworker identity, although heavily premised on the occupational community, extended to a sense of class identity and solidarity. The group identity of the steelworker was based on a sense of distinction, but rather than leading to excessive particularism based on the occupational community, it served as a mechanism through which class-based thinking and class identity were articulated, and allowed for the recognition of a shared structural location and problems in common with workers elsewhere.' (MacKenzie et al, 2006: 848)

Closely related to this point, it is also suggested that the role of memory, in particular, the occupational and social memory, is important in shaping a different experiences and different narratives of change. However, there is always the risk, in such cases, of local occupational identity being commercialised and established as a passive historical reference point. Note also the role of time-frames, generational change and cultural dementia that may affect such communities. However, the mediating point for coping, understanding and acting upon change is the legacy of occupational solidarity and support. This issue of memory is an emergent feature of many debates in organisational and workplace culture, as the following sections will demonstrate.

Space, community and collectivism of the everyday

Stephenson and Stewart (2001) argue that one of the major problems in the definitions of workplace collectivism within the current debates is that they do not adequately engage with the problem of the concept in its various forms (see also McBride 2006). Their study on the typologies of workplace collectivism demonstrates how the notion of 'collectivism' can contain visible and non-visible categories. Their study identifies three different categories of collectivism. Firstly, 'trade union collectivism' whereby active trade unionists 'lead' employees in trade union organised collective activity. Secondly, they mention 'work place collectivism' referring to the willingness on the part of employees to provide support to one another in the workplace, whether the

issues are work or non-work. Finally, they refer to the 'collectivism of everyday life' that denotes the routine friendship and support that employees extend outside of the workplace through workmates, families and communities.

McBride (2005) also argues that collective behaviour and workplace representation should be studied, not only in terms of the workplace and its internal systems of collective representation, but also in terms of the relations between workers and their communities in the form of broader approaches to social solidarity. In a study of several companies in the maritime construction industry on Tyneside it was discovered that a variety of forms of collectivism could be identified, both internally and externally to the workplace. These were: an 'internal workplace collectivism' that was demonstrated in an ongoing form of proactive collectivism and well organised workplace unionism with no evidence of a decline in the collective identity (see also McBride 2004); a 'regional industry workforce collectivism' and how this collectivism also extended to a 'regional workforce community' through the recalling of previous struggles and activities within the local area. This was apparent in the willingness of the workforces to provide financial support for each other and their community as was common in the past, regardless of whether the issues are work or non-work related. This is also a key element identified in the Community Unionism literature.

Increasingly, community unionism is a term that is of growing academic and trade union interest in the UK (see McBride and Greenwood 2009). It is perceived as significant to trade unions, in terms of extending their role in the community, and also in relation to their revitalisation and the importance of organising and recruiting members. It is argued by some commentators that the future of the labour movement rests in the community and local labour markets. Various studies focus, not on an external trade union attempting to help in the regeneration of a community, but rather a communally based and grass roots activism regenerating a trade union (Stephenson and Wray 2009), although there is no single model of community unionism *per se* but rather a variety of possible 'community initiatives' (Author B and Perrett, 2009). Other studies have also focused on regional community initiatives (Wills, 2004; Holgate and Wills, 2007) in the combination of a variety of community groups with varying identities, such as ethnicity, gender, faith, age and past experience, who developed strategies to give support to groups of workers in the local community. The issues of gender, race and 'other' communities are also central in the understanding of collectivism and the different elements that have emerged in the concept.

Collectivism, gender and race issues: the collective in 'other' communities

The framework of employment change, occupation and local space is essential for the understanding of collectivism: and they call on us to establish a multi-dimensional approach to the subject. One factor in many debates on this subject has been the role of ethnicity and gender. These are normally established as identities or deep structures that run parallel, secondary, or even ahead of class and collectivism but the links between them are rarely explored. The reasons for this are usually due to the negative impacts of collectivism on race and gender (Authors, 2003). The work of Healy *et al.* (2004a and 2004b) provides an alternative narrative for linking the two

through detailed ethnographic study. In their work on activism and the role of black women in the labour movement, they have begun to reframe the concept of collectivism. The experience of activists and workers as women or ethnic minorities may play an active part in contributing to the experience of employment relations and general issues of exclusion.

Gender and ethnic 'differentiation' can contribute to new sources of collective identity and activism. Memories and familiarities of union experiences and radical politics play a part in framing the views and perspectives of women from black and minority ethnic communities. The struggle around equality is important in shaping and framing the understanding of issues such as justice and solidarity: '… prior solidaristic values … do not always arise from 'traditional' class and occupational affiliations. Nor should we assume fixity of values. Collectivism may emerge from the workplace experience or a prior collectivist orientation affected by this experience' (Healy *et al.*, 2004b:459). Once more, we note the salient role of memory as a factor in the debate on collectivism. There are alternative sources of collectivism through informal networks and self-organising, which may indeed come from reacting to the nature of a trade union's gendered or ethnic identity and limitations. This provides a complicating factor, but for Healy *et al.* it is actually a point of potential enrichment. The approach of these authors broadens the source of collectivism. The communal and the experiential therefore become important reference points in the way collectivism is shaped.

Discussion: collectivism, the social, the personal and the curious absence of the political

The reality is that, whilst there is much talk of decline and crisis in relation to collectivism, the term has not disappeared within debates on the sociology of work. There is a more flexible and variable approach to using the term – although this flexibility is not always acknowledged in terms of its implications. This means that defining the term in a clear and emphatic manner is no longer acceptable within the debate: we cannot speak of collectivism as a simple term or narrative. Moreover, it should be noted that there was probably never a golden age of collectivism (Hyman, 1995). What is important here is that the role of the personal, the informal, and the role of memory are seen as being linked to the occupational and social dimensions of collectivism.

What is also noticeable is that the current studies - of which the above are a minor yet representative selection from the area of labour process research which has been closest to the study of work and employment change – draw particularly on questions of *memory*. The importance of recalling past occupational experiences, local community pasts, the legacy of workplace exploitation and the history of racial exclusion, amongst others, has become an important feature in the development of a collective character or collective sentiment workers and unions can draw from. In addition, recalling mutual support and reciprocity even at the level of the 'mundane' (Stephenson and Stewart, 2001) plays a part in configuring a shared set of values or positions. Notions of reciprocity – which appear to be the common feature running through some of these approaches to collectivism as discussed - give rise to the structure of worker relations and the ability to acquire a series of quid pro quos and

mutually supporting behaviour – this is premised on memory and recollection of previous actions and relations. It therefore becomes clear that within the broader social relations and dynamics of collective relations, ongoing support and personal relations appear to be an important configuring feature. It also means that collectivism cannot be viewed as being solely concerned with the question of difference with employers through antagonistic relations, but also concerned with how supportive mechanisms within the workforce emerge to cope with change and exploitation. In this respect, the term is more concerned with relations within groups of workers than between them and 'the other'. In one regard, it appears to be more passive and more accommodating in terms of broader antagonisms.

What we see is the possibility of an approach to collectivism emerging that draws from the diverse experiences within work and the external social and spatial dimensions of work. The question becomes how the links between these different experiences and relations are developed, as we show in Figure 1. This can be through a range of formal institutional and informal processes (e.g. unions or social networks respectively) which in turn may modify the character of the relations and developments established in the workplace, occupational, labour market, social and spatial arenas. In effect, collectivism is made in the workplace, the community, the labour market and – ironically – the social and personal relations and differences within the workforce. The collective may be configured in part by economic and employment relations but its development as an active feature of work finds nutrition from the social and the personal as well. This is a significant development which is implicit, but rarely explicit, in much of the literature we have discussed. What is more, each of the areas of debate we have explored – the role of occupational experiences, local community relations, the impact of workplace exploitation and racism, for example – can in turn be related to each other and are part of different yet potentially complementary features of the employment relation.

Insert Figure 1 here

For example, local community experience of ethnic groups in relation to the state may contribute to the way personal relations are bonded in a workplace around particular concerns and common agendas. On the other hand, personal relations and personal support may be configured by shared memories of the community. The memories of labour market and social experiences may in turn be mobilised. What we see is that these different sources of collectivism are dependent on each other for the development of a more explicit approach. In many respects, they are open to being articulated with each other in a variety of forms – yet the outcomes of these may be more open and ambiguous and cannot be anticipated or understood in terms of the nature of their outcomes. Such links may not give rise to a more explicit, antagonistic or conscious view of collectivism.

What appears to be missing is the *organising* element[1]. Our argument is that the studies above suggest the need for a multi-dimensional approach to the subject. If we therefore decide to elaborate an approach that is aimed at developing an awareness of these different levels, and how they are tied together, then we can begin to see how

collectivism *works* in action if it is not to decline into merely being viewed as concerning passive social-coping mechanisms as one could argue is the case in some of the new wave literature. There is no guarantee that individual tensions at work, occupational memories of organised and once 'proud' industrial communities, informal and community based initiatives that support workers, and the development of links and experiences across ethnic, racial and gender boundaries will *in themselves* create mobilising narratives – explicit collective narratives whatever their qualities or forms. Hence, the question for researchers and critical academics is how these link and fuse into alternative narratives and visions of work, or how they at least create supportive networks and linkages which allow for humane forms of support and coping strategies in a face of economic restructuring. The challenge will also be understanding durability, sustainability and effectiveness in terms of these forms of collectivism: that is to say comprehending the challenge of their normally transient nature. Either way, the focus may be on the links between these levels and the purpose and logic of those links.

These approaches therefore lead us to a discussion of how these levels are tied or linked together and by whom. Is there any mileage in the fact that how these link together or not may allow us to understand the way different collective approaches emerge in specific contexts? The particular relation in terms of occupational memory or personal support for example is contingent for its meaning and role on how it is combined, developed and crystallised (Martinez Lucio, 2006). In this case, the weaving of employment, workplace, occupational, gender, ethnic, and spatial factors together in particular narratives and patterns. This allows for the diversity of the collective character to be discussed, raising organisational and political challenges.

Moreover, when one talks of how these factors link together, one assumes that there is some organization or informal network, for example, linking them. The connections between the levels of experience may be formalized at specific moments. The notion here is of a relation of experiences around specific narratives and strategies, which may have emerged from the individuals or from external bodies. So one could argue that questions of occupational identity and restructuring may take a more market and supply side perspective of worker support, through state or employer funded union learning centres for redundant workers, or through ad hoc acts of individual support (Martínez Lucio and Stuart, 2009). It may also mean that personal support in and around the workplace can be usurped and supported by management led learning initiatives, social support and individual schemes such as 'mentoring' and 'buddying'. What we find is that how these new social and personal dynamics are linked together and supported is open to contestation, competing approaches and political tension. What is more, much may depend on whether the political narratives for such developments see a more active or passive vision of participation as being important (Hyman, 1975). In this respect, the role of the political requires a more concerted role in current debates on collectivism even if we know that the political is more complex and itself open to undermining the social dynamics of collectivism. This absence of a discussion of the political in some of the new wave literature may be a reflection of the paucity or lack of presence within the field of alternative, radical narratives linking the above levels together – it may be also be a concern with academic convention and the dominance of sociological disciplines over political science based ones. Furthermore, it may be a reflection of the desire to seek a collective dimension to work which is not externally derived or politically constructed, i.e. one that

emerges from experiences and internal relations, and not external ones and is therefore more engaging. Yet the question of linkages provides challenges the debate may need to further concern itself with, if the links between collective experiences and initiatives are to become more robust, sustained and significant.

One way forward would be to link the new personal and social features of collectivism and its debates into a more systematic and institutional view of mobilization. It has been suggested that mobilization theory, for example, is useful in measuring collectivism as it helps to construct conceptual frameworks to help us think rigorously and analytically about the conditions under which individual workers come to define their interests and identities in collective terms, based around the notion of 'injustice' (Kelly, 1998). This would allow us to then see how there are different stages within the process of mobilization; and how different relations and experiences are referenced as resources and the basis for legitimating action in the struggle against an employer or the state. One could argue that mobilization without the presence of such social sensitivities and individually grounded experiences of collectivism can in fact be as much concerned with particular groups of workers as the employer or management in terms of an enemy (Healy et al., 2004b). If this is the case, then the future requires us to consider that how different threads of collectivism are tied together, and how they are invoked, can configure the very meaning of collectivism, collective mobilization and collectivism's purpose. What we need to realize is that collectivism is personal and reflective on the one hand, yet also conscious and explicit on the other. In trying to cope with the decline in the latter – or its perceived decline – many have partly re-camped to the personal. Arguing about collectivism and whether it 'exists', 'continues', or 'changes' is not really the point – that would be a static approach unlike the contributions we have outlined in this essay which are fluid and dynamic. Now that we know more about this area it may be worth considering how the personal is in turn subject to development and articulation in terms of the broader tapestry of politics. Otherwise what we are talking about is not collectivism but *coping* in a time of savage late capitalism.

[1] – Which is not quite the same as the union 'Organising' agenda with its technocractic, apolitical tendencies (Authors, 2009).

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Figure 1: Dimensions of Collectivism

Sectoral, occupational factors

Spatial and community contexts

Coordination Linkages

Workplace relations

Social, gender, ethnicity relations