Self-organization and trade union democracy

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Abstract

This article is an offshoot of a three year study into the self-organized groups for women, black members, disabled members and lesbians and gay men which have been enshrined in the constitution of the UK's public sector union UNISON. The argument is that self-organization has become a significant axis around which trade union democracy is being reconstituted in the late twentieth century. However, our understanding of this phenomenon has been obscured by the ascendancy of mainstream union perspectives over self-organized perspectives, which has unfortunately been compounded by academic researchers. A re-conceptualization of self-organization proceeds in three stages. First, it is contextualized politically and theoretically in terms of trade union histories, new social movements and models of a diversified democratic polity. Second, it is re-signified by attending to its actual unfolding over the past two decades and the self-understandings of its activists. Third, is problematized with reference to exogenous pressures towards bureaucracy and oligarchy, and endogenous pressures towards essentialisms and exclusions.

Introduction

This article considers the political philosophy and practical unfolding of self-organization within the British trade union movement with specific reference to the four self-organized groups (SOGs) for women, black members, disabled members and lesbians and gay men which emerged in the local government officers' union NALGO in the 1980s, and which were enshrined in the constitution of the public sector union UNISON in the 1990s. The material upon which this article is based derives from a three year research project conducted by the author between 1995 and 1998 (Humphrey, 1998a), but the inspiration behind the article is twofold. On the one hand, an evaluation of self-organization in the trade union movement is long overdue – the TUC has increasingly endorsed self-organized forums in its own structures and in those of its affiliates in respect of women (TUC, 1990), black members (TUC, 1991), disabled members (TUC, 1993) and lesbians and gay men (TUC, 1995). On the other hand, a re-conceptualization of self-organization is the necessary prerequisite for such an endeavour – if we rely upon existing conceptual

schema, we are likely to miss the significance of self-organization for its subjects and its embeddedness in wider histories of social movements.

During the 1980s, the main researchers to study all four NALGO SOGs were Cunnison and Stageman (1995). Their cardinal error was to mobilize an 'analytic standpoint' to overturn the 'subjective standpoint' of the self-organized activists. According to the analytic standpoint, only groups which harbour the characteristics of numerical majority status and cultural cohesiveness (defined in terms of a commonality of identity, history and culture) are in need of an SOG, and only women and black people are deemed to meet the relevant criteria. This reasoning is intrinsically flawed on various counts. For one thing, we should note that self-organization offers itself as a solution to the marginality of minority groups – even the women's group in NALGO began as a minority group, and its acquisition of majority status under UNISON has not been propitious for its self-organized struggles. And of course the black members' group is a minority group, deemed to be a majority by the researchers only by dint of considering black people as a global constituency, which is of dubious relevance. Moreover, we should remember that the cohesiveness imputed to larger collectivities is extremely suspect – witness the fracturing of feminist politics (eg, Griffin, 1995) and the hybridities in anti-racist politics (eg, Werbner and Modood, 1997). And of course it is the smaller collectivities which have been successful in constituting themselves as distinct 'ethnic' groups, appropriating shared identities, histories and cultures – hence the lesbian and gay community (eg, Epstein, 1987) and the disabled peoples' community (eg, Shakespeare, 1993).

During the 1990s, the main research expedition into the UNISON SOGs has been led by Colgan and Ledwith, and their initial publications on women's self-organization suggest that the failure to adopt a self-organized standpoint is resulting in the erasure of the history of SOGs and the concept of self-organization itself. First, they define self-organization as a rulebook requirement and as a vehicle through which the other rulebook requirements for proportional and fair representation can be attained (Mann *et al.*, 1996). Such a conceptualization is inaccurate on the level of historical facticity, insofar as self-organization pre-dated the UNISON constitution by over a decade, and inadequate on the level of union politics, insofar as SOGs have been the vehicles for cultural as much as structural changes in terms of inserting new identities and issues into the union. Second, they analyze self-organization in terms of separatism, leaving them with the question of whether the groups are engaged in a fully-fledged or an interim form of separatism – which leads to an impasse since they acknowledge that even if self-organization is only an interim separatism, it may still be oriented towards either integration into the union or new separatist unions which are women-only etc. (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996). This way of framing the existence of SOGs is unfortunate since it conflates the enforced separatism of a few women-only organizations in the late nineteenth century with the creation of SOGs within a particular union in the late

twentieth century, when SOGs exist in symbiotic unity with the host organization, their autonomy granted on the condition of accepting accountability to the union.

My own research project was predicated upon a self-organized standpoint. Its premises were that equal value and validity should be accorded to all groups; that the groups could only be comprehended in terms of local and wider histories; that the political philosophy of self-organization can only be broached by a careful attention to the narratives of its advocates and activists. This standpoint was facilitated by my own status as a self-organized activist in the NALGO then UNISON lesbian and gay group, and by my participation in various 'equal opportunities' forums which brought together members from all four SOGs. However, the cluster of insider knowledges brought to bear upon the project was conducive not only to a broader and deeper appreciation of self-organization, but also to a broader and deeper critique of it. Whilst traditional researchers may have inadvertently played into the hands of the opponents of self-organization – those who would prefer to regard the SOGs as transitional phenomena or as subversively separatist, or to find reasons to disband some of them – my own research invites both mainstream and self-organized activists to reflect critically upon SOGs and the union in which they are embedded in order to promote an even more robust and diverse union democracy. Of course, my own research was non-representative – participant observation was confined to self-organized forums; the forty interviewees were self-organized activists who had pioneered self-organization in NALGO and who remained among its contemporary leaders in UNISON; and mainstream union views were accessed only indirectly via union documents. Therefore my account is partial and perspectival, intended as a necessary antidote to previous analyses, and a fruitful starting-point for future research.

The rest of the article undertakes the dual task of re-thinking and re-evaluating self-organization. Re-thinking self-organization entails an analysis of the concept in historical contexts, locating the praxis within models of democratic diversity and analyzing the narratives of its protagonists and opponents. Re-evaluating self-organization involves a sympathetic but critical appraisal of the actual unfolding of SOGs in UNISON, which is re-inserted into the debates about democratic diversity. Future prospects for self-organization are considered in the conclusion.

Contextualizing self-organization

Whilst there may well be points of intersection between self-organization and separatism, they are conceptually and politically distinct phenomena. As a generic term, self-organization literally denotes the processes whereby a group of people organize themselves in pursuit of a common cause, and some kind of identity and interest politics inheres in these processes insofar as they must demarcate the criteria of belongingness and the parameters of activities and

agendas. In practice the term has, however, been associated with and appropriated by, subordinated groups whose trajectories were forged under conditions of adversity which heightens the awareness of the double jeopardy – the perils of self-organizing against the *status quo* and the perils of *not* self-organizing thus succumbing to the *status quo*. On the level of the national polity, the trade union and civil rights movements are prime examples of self-organization. However, self-organizing propensities can also operate within subnational or supranational polities, in corporations, trade unions, charities, federations and the like, and my own study is about the story of self-organizing groups within a broader self-organized movement.

The important point is that self-organization is born from a position of exclusion from or subordination within a wider polity, and that it is geared towards inclusion into that polity, or integration on more equitable terms. An ongoing moment of 'separatism' is a necessary component of self-organization insofar as disprivileged groups will require separate spaces to debate their predicaments prior to negotiations with dominant groups. But self-organization is successful only to the extent that it results in these negotiations, in reserved places in the polity etc, which are emblematic of integration. The self-determination sought by a self-organizing group should be decoded in terms of the desires to control its own group boundaries, to preserve its separate spaces, and to ensure that its sapiential authority on its own issues is respected by other groups in that polity. By contrast, separatism is ultimately about the quest for self-governance in a separate polity – the dream of a women-only union, a gay-only workplace, a black-only nation-state etc. It is not that self-organized movements have never dreamed the dream – revolutionary socialist, Black Power and radical lesbian feminist movements hearken precisely to such separatist visions – but the dream has little to do with the contemporary trade union movement or its SOGs.

Historiographies illustrate that the 'separatism' imputed to subordinated groups arises from a prior 'segregation' instituted by dominant groups. In the bourgeois public sphere, it was white male elites who construed themselves as universal citizens (Young, 1989), leaving a host of dispossessed people to create alternative institutional spaces, such as trade unions, women's charities, black churches and gay bars (Fraser, 1995). In the British trade union movement, it was white male leaders and members who construed themselves as universal proletarian subjects, leaving many workers out in the wilderness. Worse, the combination of a labour aristocracy and a reformist agenda resulted in the displacement of the 'enemy without' (ie, capital) by various 'enemies within' (eg, working women and immigrant labour), and the substitution of ultimate goals (ie, a socialist economy) by various intermediary goals (eg, a family wage and a white British labour force). Boston's (1980) history of women workers illustrates that their enforced exclusion from trade unions impelled them to create separate unions from the late nineteenth century, but that women aspired to integration into the malestream labour movement and voted to disband their women-only organizations as soon as inclusion was offered.

Ramdin's (1987) history of black workers shows that whilst they subscribed to whitestream unions, they also had to create their own workers' associations alongside this, without which they could not have survived strike actions which were taken in protest at racial inequalities in pay and prospects, but without any support from their unions.[1]

Disabled and lesbian and gay workers had to await the emergence of their own civil rights movements in the late twentieth century before their self-organization as trade unionists became possible, demonstrating the umbilical cord that has existed between SOGs in trade unions and wider social communities and political movements. Indeed, self-organization is precisely what Stewart (1995) names as an active citizenship, whereby those who suffer a form of subordinate citizenship mobilize their collective resources in pursuit of a genuine integration into a more egalitarian polity, and in the process unravel hitherto hidden dimensions of citizenship.[2] Of course, the dichotomy between 'old' and 'new' social movements must be deconstructed if we are to comprehend the birth of new civil-rights or status-based groups within the womb of the old labour or class-based movement – a task already countenanced by Scott (1990). But this must also be articulated with the birth of new agendas and new agents.

In Fraser's (1995) typology, it will be necessary to think through the convergences and divergences between the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition. The politics of redistribution stems from the inequalities generated by economic and political structures, which signify exploitation and deprivation for working classes and underclasses, leading to an advocacy of redistribution in respect of material resources like income, property and welfare. The politics of recognition stems from the cultural symbolic processes of representation and communication which signify marginalization and stigmatization for those deemed to be 'different' qua 'deviant', resulting in demands for disrupting 'normalizing' discourses and revaluing alternative ways of being, doing and relating. Whilst in practice many citizens may labour simultaneously under both regimes, and to ameliorate one set of injustices may have positive repercussions upon the other, they are analytically and politically distinct, and those who subscribe to one agenda may repudiate the other. In Bauman's (1995) schema, the demise of the Old Left and the withering away of the working class as the agent of historical change renders it imperative that the New Left reassembles itself from diverse citizenries and re-orients itself to a new ethico-political project of democracy, autonomy and diversity, beyond equality *simpliciter*.[3]

To explain the advent of the four SOGs in NALGO in the late 1970s and the early 1980s we must appreciate that they arose at a unique conjuncture in which exogenous and endogenous influences operated in a mutually reinforcing manner. The exogenous influences were those emanating from the New Urban Left which took root in Labour-controlled London boroughs and city councils at this time. Cooper (1998) illustrates how municipal socialism from the grassroots upwards in opposition to the Conservative government was

conjoined with an identity politics which reversed the hierarchical exclusions of the polity by re-imagining a host of subordinated peoples at the core of the community. This movement reached its zenith in the Greater London Council and its attempts to institute a diverse democracy by enticing elderly, unemployed, disabled, black, ethnic minority, lesbian and gay subjects into active citizenship.[4]

The endogenous influences were those already inscribed within NALGO and pertain to its two-dimensional autonomy which probably facilitated some kind of 'capture' by New Left ideologies. On the one hand, NALGO was not affiliated to the Labour Party which provided its activists and officers with more leeway to reflect upon non-class-based dimensions of inequality and to enter into alliances with civil rights movements (Lawrence, 1994). On the other hand, NALGO branches enjoyed autonomy from the National Executive Committee (NEC), and several 'radical' branches were known to breach mainstream union policies in the service of 'minority' causes and other local convictions (Terry, 1996). The net result is that branch-level groups for black, ethnic minority, lesbian and gay members existed in the absence of any constitutional remit or national-level recognition, and even flourished in spite of the hostility from the majority of members and officers towards SOGs (see NALGO, 1987, 1988). Virdee and Grint (1994) testify to the birth of new collectivities, naming the SOGs as 'class-and-status groups'. Perhaps we can also speak of the birth of new subjectivities, as self-organized activists are not only hybrid creatures who straddle the divide between class and status, but often more complex creatures with overlapping memberships of different SOGs.

When UNISON enshrined rights to self-organization for women, black members, disabled members and lesbians and gays in its constitution, alongside other rules on proportional and fair representation, it embarked upon a radical implementation of Iris Marion Young's model of a group-differentiated democracy.[5] It is therefore worth reconstructing the steps outlined by Young (1990) in more detail. First, she regards such a group-differentiated democracy as the necessary corollary of a heterogeneous public, and as the emblem of the irreducibility of differences which cannot simply be collapsed into a general interest or indeed re-presented by others who do not inhabit that collective subject-position. Since the groups entitled to recognition, resources and representation are those which experience oppression in one or more spheres of social life, their entitlements also counteract histories of discrimination. Second, resources are released for self-organization which enables oppressed peoples to debate their predicaments in safe and separate spaces, and which acts as the vehicle for their collective education and empowerment. Third, group representation in policy-making forums is mandatory so that each group can explain how any given policy proposal is likely to affect its members and advance alternative policy proposals, and this is essential to inclusion. Fourth, this kind of democratic polity is said to maximize practical wisdom and equitable outcomes in decision-making insofar as a variety of group

perspectives are shared and insofar as each group must take into account the equal value and validity of all other groups. The resultant laws and policies are likely to harbour a duality between universal rights for all and group-specific rights to respect the bodily or cultural integrity of some citizens, such as disabled people, pregnant women or minority language-users. It is of course not the case that either elites or majorities are eclipsed by this democratic diversity – rather, they are re-positioned as groups among other groups, re-signified in the particularity of their identities, interests and narratives. Moreover, it is claimed that such an articulation of a democratic polity is applicable to modern nation-states as well as the various institutions under their auspices. The rest of this article offers an explanation of the emergence of a group-differentiated democracy in NALGO and an evaluation of this model in relation to UNISON SOGs.

Re-signifying self-organization

Although the NALGO SOGs shared a similarity of narratives – about discriminations suffered in workplaces, unions and wider society – they exhibited diverse origins and orientations. The women's group was nurtured under the auspices of the National Equal Opportunities Committee, created after the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and in the light of the massive under-representation of women at all levels of the union. This committee came to be regarded by the other SOGs as an 'other-organized group' insofar as it had been established by NEC fiat and insofar as it reserved places for men (who did not in practice take their seats). The disabled members' group can be construed as a hybrid group – the Disability Consultative Committee was created by the NEC in 1985, and non-disabled officers were crucial in releasing the resources to make the union accessible in terms of its environmental infrastructure and communications media, but as soon as progress was made disabled members insisted on making the committee a disabled-only group. The black and lesbian and gay groups were fully self-organized from the outset – they were setting up groups in branches from the late 1970s and convening national conferences and committees from the early 1980s, mobilizing around the problems of immigration and racism on the one hand and homophobic dismissals and harassment on the other. They were deprived of recognition and resources from the leadership, and stood accused of importing 'alien agendas' and 'perverse identities' respectively into the union. However, by the late 1980s their vision of self-organization became the template for the other groups, and by the early 1990s this template was written into the UNISON constitution. In the words of a disabled activist:

> DM: Those of us involved in self-organized politics have hung onto the existing self-organized structures because they have delivered what we want *against* the wishes, to some extent, of the oppressing majority.

Perhaps the ultimate significance of this history of self-organization will reside in its implicit critique of other-imposed models of organization on the one hand and rational-discursive and majority-voting conceptions of democracy on the other.[6]

Although the three partner unions which came together to form UNISON in 1993 adhered to very different conceptions of union democracy, the resulting constitution proved to be the most radical in the history of British trade unionism.[7] It is undergirded by a conception of democracy which weaves together autonomy, diversity and equality, attempting to devolve maximum rights and responsibilities to a differentiated membership, in ways which should in principle be congruent with the praxis of self-organization. In terms of diverse locations of members, there are three main dimensions of democracy. First, the geographical dimension guarantees autonomy and authority to each region in respect of its priorities and practices, which becomes particularly poignant *à propos* Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which each harbour their own socio-legal systems, national-ethnic identities and now elected assemblies. Second, the occupational dimension allows each service group to convene separate conferences to generate specific bargaining agendas, thus respecting that the predicaments of health service workers, local government officers and employees of privatized utilities could be very different. Third, the status dimension pertains to the differences of 'race', gender, disability and sexuality, which cut across the geographical and occupational axes of identification, but which are equally salient in structuring the labour market positions of the membership, even if this salience only becomes visible from the perspective of the disadvantaged (see COHSE-NALGO-NUPE, 1992).

In terms of the diverse identities of members, there are three main rules codified into UNISON's internal governance. First, there is the rule of proportionality, which states that women and men will be represented in all committees and conferences in proportion to their numerical strength, such that the 70% majority of women should be reflected throughout the union, although it is only fully enforced at national level. Second, there is the rule of fair representation, which expresses a general intention that all union forums should mirror the diversity of the membership as regards occupations, skills, qualifications, racial origins, sexual orientations and disabilities, although this rule entrains neither monitoring nor enforcing mechanisms in its wake. Third, there is the rule of self-organization, which specifies that the four SOGs for women, black members, disabled members and lesbians and gay men will be entitled to hold meetings, committees and conferences at branch, regional and national levels of the union, and to dispatch delegates and motions to the various mainstream union conferences (see UNISON, 1994). It is important to note that the first two rules pertain to the surface structures of representation, whilst the rule on self-organization transports us into deeper cultural waters, as it provides the vehicle for the education and empowerment of disadvantaged groups, without which they may not be equipped to take their seats in the

union structures, or to bring distinct issues and insights to mainstream union agendas. It is in this sense that self-organization acquires priority over the rules on proportional and fair representation.

Nevertheless, a certain marginalization continues to haunt self-organization. Unlike the *bona fide* geographical and occupational constituencies, SOGs continue to be treated as quasi-illegitimate constituencies, and branch and regional autonomy in terms of rule-interpretations and resource-deployments means that many local SOGs are still subjected to ridicule, resentment, resource-starvation and bureaucratic obfuscation. Even at national level, SOGs did not enjoy the immunities of other rule-commitments, which were ring-fenced during the 1994 financial crisis and unchallenged during national debates, such as that occasioned by the 1995 General Secretary election – one of the candidates to this election secured a quarter of the votes on a platform which revolved exclusively around a diatribe against SOGs and a determination to eradicate them from the rulebook. Indeed, self-organization is regarded as dispensable by some more moderate members and officers, as part of a reductive manoeuvre which enthrones proportional representation for women as the golden rule of union democracy and paper policies on other issues as the touchstone for union equality (see Humphrey, 1998a).

It is of course under these conditions that self-organized activists have had to articulate their *raison d'être*, and it is my contention that a re-conceptualization of self-organization in the union needs to commence from these localized self-understandings. The terms of this debate have been structured by the question as to whether SOGs exist as a 'means-to-an-end' or as 'ends-in-themselves', a question which has been inherited from the NALGO era, but infused with new meanings under the UNISON constitution. An analysis of interview transcripts elucidates the double-binds which have littered the trail of self-organization as follows. In public, advocates of self-organization have embraced a sales mythology version of the 'means-to-an-end' clause, whereby SOGs exist to further the ends of the mainstream union. In other words, SOGs are configured as the conduits through which people who would otherwise be estranged from the union can be recruited into membership and then active participation, not only in self-organized settings but also in mainstream ones. This makes economic and political sense on all sides of the ideological spectrum and becomes the glue to bind together self-organized activists with mainstream officers. However, the SOGs must necessarily venture beyond the ends of traditional unionism, becoming the channel through which other identities and issues are inserted into the mainstream, in ways which interrupt both the traditional consciousness and the traditional constituencies of trade unions. This is where their opponents rail against them for damaging unity, diverting resources and dissipating energies. And this is where the rationale for self-organization undergoes a metamorphosis – they exist as a means to an end, but the end is to combat the

prejudices of the majority and to thus to change the mainstream union, as testified by the following lesbian:

> L: There is a significant proportion of the union's members who think that lesbians and gay men at best should be neither seen nor heard, and at worst should be lined up against a wall and shot. And that's what we're here for, isn't it? Because that's the prevailing social attitude. I see that as our bread-and-butter work – to organize, to educate, but also to prevent – when we can't educate, 'cos of bigotry – to prevent them from getting their way.

There is another sense in which SOGs exist as a means-to-an-end, inasmuch as they are supposed to bring about equality for their members in workplaces and unions alike. However, this leaves them vulnerable to a process of gradual elimination, since they may be deemed transitional arrangements, to be jettisoned as soon as the end is nigh. This argument has ironically been strengthened under UNISON, on account of the aforementioned reductionist decodings of democracy (ie, that proportionality is just around the corner) and equality (ie, that there is an abundance of equality policies). The inadequacies of this argument were captured by a man from the black members' group:

> BM: The reason I don't agree with people who say it is a means-to-an-end is that you've got to have an end and you've got to be able to conceptualize that end. *I can't* ... The end is, we have total equality. But for two thousand years – or longer than that, whatever the time is that people have been on this earth – we've had discrimination. I can't see us eradicating that in fifty years or a hundred years-Self-organization is *not even a baby* – it's still *a seed*.

It is scarcely surprising that some self-organized activists retreat into the sanctuary of the 'ends-in-themselves' clause. There is a genuine sense in which 'being there' is an end-in-itself for marginalized subjects whose existence has historically been disregarded or disparaged in the labour movement, and under the threat of extinction in the wider polity.[8] However, to be recognized, represented and resourced as black, disabled, female, lesbian or gay subjects is anathema to mainstream officers, who allocate scarce resources on the basis of what members are planning to *do*, not on the basis of who they *are*. Indeed, SOGs have accepted the priority of doing over being. The following interviewee explained how the conversion to a fully-fledged self-organization among women in the late 1980s had ushered in a legitimacy crisis:

> W: There were people who seemed to think that self-organization was an end-in-itself – once you got that, you could do marvellous things, and you didn't necessarily have to define them – the object was to become self-organized and to be recognized as self-organized ... The idea of

> being a woman trade unionist became a thing-in-itself, without something that you're going to be a trade unionist about ... Once self-organization was validated as policy ... we became a kind of feminist without going through the *rite de passage*. And at the end of that we were left with a personality and we'd lost the agenda.

Finally, the notion of 'ends-in-themselves' evokes the spectre of separatism. Advocates of self-organization simultaneously repudiate and reframe separatism. On the one hand, they point out that it is often mainstream officers who propel SOGs into a separatist corner and then lambaste them for sectionalism – some officers seem content to sign cheques for SOGs to convene a few meetings 'out there' on the proviso that they do not return to take up their representational rights, which could disturb the *modus operandi* of the union. On the other hand, they indicate that the dream of separate unions for various disadvantaged groups is unfeasible and/or undesirable, and that it is precisely self-organization within pre-existing union polities which ensures that even the dream of separatism is no longer on the agenda. In the words of a black activist:

> BM: These [separatists] are the same people, to me, who argue that Black people one day will have to return to Africa ... the same people who tell me that all white people are racist ... But we are *not* in a majority – we're not in a position to *survive* here by ourselves – we don't have that luxury and we *have* to work with the majority community.

To summarize, the dwelling place of self-organization to date has been marked by a double-bind. The injunction from the mainstream union is 'You can exist, but on our terms, within our traditions, and as a transitional phenomenon'; and the rejoinder from the SOGs is 'For our existence to serve any purpose, we must breach your terms, interrogate your traditions, and as a permanent presence'. As the offspring of miscegenation processes, self-organized subjects occupy a quasi-bastardized position in the union. But SOGs are neither a problem-free nor a prejudice-free zone, as will be explained in the next section.

Problematizing self-organization

An immanent critique of the UNISON SOGs requires the disentanglement of at least two types of problems, which may be depicted as exogenous and endogenous. The first cluster of problems revolves around the bureaucratization of structures, processes and outcomes. Since these are problems endemic to the wider union polity, which become reflected in the SOGs insofar as they become institutionalized as part of the union apparatus, critics may do better to suspend judgement on self-organization as such, and to interrogate

the wider polity in which it is embedded, whilst contemplating how it might be possible for SOGs to challenge and change that wider polity.

I would contend that this bureaucratization has been detrimental to self-organization in a double sense. First, it has been inimical to the development of intra-group democracy. Self-organized subjects began from a position of marginality, experiencing the *modus operandi* of the mainstream union as mystifying and disempowering, as jargon and rulebooks were wielded by existing leaderships often in the service of maintaining the *status quo* (cf. Michels, 1959; Cockburn, 1991). However, a mimetic relationship between the SOGs and the mainstream union seems to be a vital ingredient of the successful integration of SOGs. In other words, SOGs have had to evolve hierarchies which parallel the mainstream structures in order to liaise effectively with each layer of the union; their leaders have had to assimilate terminology and procedures in order to play by the rules of the game; the dialogues can rapidly become adversarial which fosters a combative style of negotiating for survival; and so we turn full circle, as novice self-organized activists can become estranged from and perplexed by various aspects of their own SOGs. This was borne out by a detailed case-study of the lesbian and gay group, although the leadership had begun to recognize and redress some of these dynamics in terms of induction and training courses for newcomers (see Humphrey, 1998a). However, it even resonates in the smallest group, the disabled members' SOG, where a chasm has opened up between the national leaders (dubbed 'icons' or 'élites') and the grassroots members (see Humphrey, 1998b).

Second, bureaucratization has been inimical to the promotion of substantive equality. Self-organized leaders have been offended by the disparity between the union's equality policies and the discriminations routinely suffered by their memberships, but the mimetic irony resurfaces here too, since the national self-organized conferences tend to issue a stream of their own paper policies, which may prove just as impotent in redressing members' grievances. It is not so much that the civil rights agendas emerging from these fora are not valid as testimonies to discriminations or valuable in disclosing *desiderata*. It is rather that similar agendas are repeated year-on-year without many tangible improvements at the grassroots and that education and empowerment of the membership has increasingly been tied up with writing and speaking to conference motions, in an inward-gazing fashion (see Humphrey, 1998a). This may of course gesture towards problems intrinsic to civil rights agendas, insofar as their surface acceptability may conceal a deeper inability to dislocate the oppressive cultures which circulate around the lives of marginalized peoples (cf. Cooper, 1994; Gamson, 1995).

The second cluster of problems pertains to the essentialism which is endemic to self-organization as a species of identity politics. Insofar as this seems to be an endogenous growth, it can be construed negatively as a problem which may recur independently of the wider polity, or positively as a problem which is potentially within the control or cure of SOGs themselves. My concern here is to sketch out the three kinds of exclusions which flow from this essentialist

conception and enactment of self-organization, which militate against both equity and efficacy. First, there is the essentialism which is written into the boundaries of each group in such a manner that some potential members of those groups may become ineligible for membership. Whilst it is impossible to know whether and when all relevant voices have been included (see Phillips, 1996), it is easy to detect deliberate exclusion. For example, the black members' group purports to rally around blackness as a political category rather than as a colour-coding, but it does not in fact admit 'white' ethnic minorities like Irish and Jewish people, leaving some Irish groups to self-organize 'illicitly' in London, and indeed an 'unofficial' colour-hierarchy within the group itself. Likewise, the lesbian and gay group has been vigilant in patrolling its own boundaries and, in particular, expelling any bisexuals in its midst (Humphrey, 1999c).

Second, there is the essentialism which clings to each collective identity category, enclosing each group in a quasi-mystical circle, and segregating it off from the other groups. The institution of self-organization in theory offers an ideal platform for what Reagon (1983) refers to as 'coalition politics', whereby marginalized groups journey from the safety of 'home' to the politics of 'the streets', banding together for survival in a hostile world. Later writers like Phelan (1995) suggest that in the process, identities will not only be transfigured, but also supplanted by issues, as many people from diverse social groupings discover that whatever divides them is counterbalanced by what unites them, so that they can embark upon shared campaigns. However, my research demonstrated that there are many barriers to coalitions, which can be exacerbated by size and power differentials between the SOGs (ie, the larger ones can dictate the rules of engagement as regards inter-group liaisons), and by game-playing tactics from hostile mainstream officers (ie, they can propel SOGs into competitions over a single restricted budget). As a general rule, coalitions seem to have become instrumentalized as tactics on the floor of mainstream union conferences, designed to ward off the possibility of conference failing to ratify the motion of any given SOG. Elsewhere, there is a possessiveness about issues which hinders a multifaceted approach to grasping and tackling them, as evidenced in the lesbian and gay group's lengthy and unilateral campaign around the HIV/AIDS crucible (Humphrey, 1999a).

It might be apposite to digress here and revisit Iris Marion Young's formulation. My own reading is that she is deeply ambivalent on these matters. She recognizes that pressures towards homogenization of identities and inward-looking interest group politics are probably inevitable (Young, 1990a; 1995). She believes that intra-group diversity can be preserved by instituting caucuses for minority members and that solipsism can be staved off by inter-group liaisons or 'rainbow politics' (Young, 1989, 1990a). But she also offers a philosophical critique of community which suggests that its metaphysics of co-presence between similar-and-symmetrical subjects is intrinsically oppressive insofar as it annihilates alterity by absorption or expulsion, and she is adamant that respect for otherness is the linchpin of democracy (Young, 1990b, 1996). The UNISON

experiment is indicative rather than conclusive here, and arguably complicates rather than simplifies these matters. The SOGs exhibit a far more sophisticated conception of community and democracy than is typically appreciated, insofar as they provide for caucuses within each group (eg, the lesbian and gay group has caucuses for lesbians, gay men, black lesbians and gays, disabled lesbians and gays) and cross-representation between groups (ie, each SOG has reserved seats on every other SOG at national level), as well as allowing for some inter-group liaison and training. Yet more than a decade later, it seems that this has failed to bring about a sustainable rainbow politics, or a loosening of the boundaries of community, or indeed a deep appreciation of hybrid identities (Humphrey, 1999a,c).

Finally, there is the essentialism which results in the exclusion of mainstream members from self-organized debates. This may appear a strange concern, given that the entire ethos of self-organization is predicated upon the exclusion of those who do not identify as women, disabled, black, lesbian or gay, and it is not my intention to undermine this principle. Rather, my concern resides in the dilemmatic juxtaposition of inclusivity and exclusivity at the heart of self-organized praxis, the resultant double-binds that can envelop even (and especially) sympathetic mainstream officers and members, and the ways in which this can prevent issues of disability, gender, 'race' and sexuality from being recognized as relevant to the entire union membership. In other words, participation in SOGs abides by a logic of exclusivity so that, for example, only women can join the women's group, and only women can decide the agendas for change. Yet ownership of the outcomes abides by a logic of inclusivity, so that the entire union is expected to ratify these agendas, lest it risk accusations of prejudice. Thus it transpires that mainstream unionists may react with a certain apathy or alienation when they listen to the desires and demands of their self-organized counterparts – they have been excluded from the ongoing process of dialogue, but are expected to endorse and implement the outcomes. The gravity of this situation should be underscored, given that any change in gender relations, for example, will be contingent upon the engagement of dominant as well as disadvantaged subjects (see Segal, 1990; Messner, 1997).

Conclusion

I have argued for a re-conceptualization of self-organization which begins from the self-understandings of the agents in localized contexts, and which calls into question the prevailing conceptual frames to be discerned in much mainstream union and academic research literature. In the process, I have illustrated that trade union SOGs have a vital role in promoting a more diversified democracy and a more robust equalities agenda, but that a double jeopardy looms over their capacity to deliver the goods, in the guise of outer pressures towards bureacratization and inner pressures towards homogenization. Of course there are limits to what we can reasonably expect trade unions or any groups

operating within them to achieve – and on the efficacy score, SOGs seem to compare quite favourably with their host organization in terms of service-delivery to their respective constituencies.[9]

In terms of the futures of SOGs under UNISON, it is extremely unlikely that they will be disbanded – they are becoming part of 'the Establishment', although their quasi-bastardized origins lingers on in the collective memory, and their ends are still regarded as illegitimate in some quarters. Indeed, their leaders have been at the forefront of promoting self-organization in the wider trade union movement (see TUC, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995). It is rather more likely that self-organization will continue to re-mould the UNISON democracy from the inside, although in ways which its pioneers neither wanted nor anticipated – for example, there are demands by some men for a 'men's SOG' in recognition of their status as the new gender minority, and desires by some bisexuals and transgendered people for a 'queer SOG' in virtue of their exclusion from the lesbian and gay group. But the most significant constitutional change has been the recent creation of Youth Forums across the union to complement the Retired Members' Section (UNISON, 1997). This arises from the recognition of age as an important dimension of stratification in workplaces, the under-representation of younger (and older) people in the union, and of course the recruitment imperative. It is of interest here that the Youth Forums have been welcomed by the mainstream union without any suspicions about disunity and the like, and indeed that SOG activists are rather unsure about these new creatures, refusing to regard them as properly self-organized (read 'self-creating' and 'stigmatized') groupings. Indeed, the re-configuring of UNISON constituencies means that the entire notion of a 'mainstream union' may have become obsolete.[10]

Self-organization has been less influential in the private sector unions. It is not just that there is a lower union density in the private sector, and indeed the emergence of a 'Bleak House' or union-free zone (Hyman, 1997), but also that there is a more tenuous link with extra-occupational issues or what we might call a New Left-free zone. Indeed, trade unions may have to reconstitute themselves more in accordance with the Works Councils model of information and consultation rights, and any minorities within them may need to adapt their desires for recognition and representation to the model propounded by the Involvement and Participation Association (Undy, 1999). Or rather, even the marginalization of trade unions cannot side-step the questions of employer duties and employee rights, so that equality and democracy remain vital issues, even if they are displaced from trade union to workplace sites.

Whilst New Labour and the New Unionism overhang both public and private sectors, there are obvious risks in attempting to 'read off' prospects for self-organization from the conjuncture of these discursive practices. Thus it is important to remind ourselves that the NALGO SOGs flourished precisely in the era of the New Right offensive against trade unionism, and that the radical UNISON constitution was ratified by the Commissioner for the Rights of Trade Union members which had been established in part to deter unions from these kinds of 'excesses', with powers to intervene in internal union governance

(Elias, 1990). The laws enacted by New Labour and the words espoused by contemporary union leaders do, however, involve an emphasis upon individual rights as always undergirding and occasionally overriding collective rights (Undy, 1999). Whilst this is undoubtedly problematic in terms of traditional trade union solidarities, it may prove more fruitful from the perspective of those who aspire to self-organize from a marginal position. I would suggest that there may be more leeway to legislate on novel stratifications under New Labour as opposed to the New Right, and more space to negotiate on novel subjectivities under New Labour as opposed to Old Labour. However, this should not be read as an endorsement of New Labour, which has abandoned many significant strands of both the Old Labour and the New Left during its metamorphosis, indeed in ways which bring it perilously close to the New Right. Rather, the role of activists and critics will resemble that of the *bricoleur* who sutures together the remaining fragments of Left and Labour praxis and harnesses them to the circumstances of the new century.

Open University

Received 6 November 1998
Finally accepted 8 November 1999

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge an ESRC research grant (award number R00429534160); co-operation from UNISON members and officers during a contentious project; supervision from Lydia Morris *et al.* during doctoral studies at the University of Essex; and opportunities to continue reflecting upon these issues with John Clarke *et al.* at the Open University.

Abbreviations

COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees
FTO	Full Time Officer
GLC	Greater London Council (abolished 1986)
NALGO	National Association of Local Government Officers
NEC	National Executive Committee
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
SOG	Self-Organized Group
TUC	Trade Union Congress
UNISON	UK Public Sector Union (amalgamation of COHSE, NALGO, NUPE)

Notes

1 There is a significant difference between self-organization in the histories of women and black people respectively. Women trade unionists always prioritized integration over separation, and the influence of radical feminism upon female trade unionists was muted, but the black workers'

movement has been more interested in exploring the feasibility of a black-only trade union, and more influenced by the Black Power Movement. This difference is probable attributable to the more radical exclusion suffered by black and ethnic minority people in Britain (see Ramdin, 1987). There is also a significant difference between how women's unions were understood by women and men respectively. Whilst women conceived of self-organization as a vehicle for their empowerment, equalization and ultimate inclusion into the labour movement, men supported women's self-organization on the grounds that it brought more workers under the auspices of the labour movement whilst retaining the gender segregations in workplaces and unions which were endemic to women's subordination. It is also noteworthy that the abolition and absorption of women's unions in the 1920s resulted in the almost complete absence of women in trade union conferences and delegations from the 1930s onwards (see Boston, 1980).

2 For an overview of these dimensions of citizenship, see Barnes (1991) on the myriad aspects of disabled peoples' citizenship; Evans (1993) on varieties of sexual citizenship; Paul (1997) on the position of black and ethnic minority citizens in Britain; and Lister (1997) for feminist readings of citizenship.

3 Whilst all the major social theorists have broached the territories of new social movements, their schema are typically inadequate to account for SOGs in the trade union movement. For example, Habermas (1991) posits a radical disjuncture between 'old politics' which seek economic expansion and 'new politics' which are in revolt against such materialism, but this is more appropriate for the ecological and anti-nuclear movements than civil rights movements. Giddens (1991) does address civil rights movements, but regards such 'life politics' as emerging from the partial victories of 'emancipatory politics', and this leaves little space to address the ongoing struggles for basic material survival experienced by many women, black and disabled people. Moreover, these theorists have little to offer substantive debates on democracy and equality in workplaces or unions – Habermas (1996) offers a purely procedural and universalist model of democracy and Giddens (1998) discusses substantive democracy in civil society, nation-states and beyond without considering 'economic' democracy.

4 The GLC experiment is significant here, given its affinity with the NALGO experiment in SOGs – my information is that the trade union and GLC activists were aware of, but not directly involved in, each others' respective experiments. Whilst my own reading of the GLC would be a positive one, given its care and courage in stretching the boundaries of democratic citizenship, it was of course far from unproblematic. Some have claimed that there was a miscarriage of justice in relation to ordinary working class citizens, citing the fact that the GLC erected centres for women, lesbians and gays whilst presiding over cutbacks in jobs and services, and lamenting the proliferation of 'equal opportunities categories' which may mis-recognize and trivialize the politics of *ethnos* (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). Others have argued that there was a miscarriage of justice in relation to oppressed minorities, pointing to the Labour Party's enthusiastic embrace of 'identity politics' and its equally rapid retreat from stigmatized subjects when confronted with accusations of 'loony Leftism' in the media, and critiquing the assumption that lesbians and gays were simply newly discovered species of working class subjects, which may mis-recognize and trivialize the politics of sexuality (see Tobin, 1990).

5 Diluted versions of self-organization have been evident in the Labour Party and some local authorities which installed committees and caucuses for women, black and ethnic minority people and lesbians and gays – these are 'diluted' in the sense that they are often not underwritten by constitutional guarantees and they often do not result in robust commitments to representation (see Cooper, 1994; Solomos and Back, 1995). The temptation is perhaps to impute the strongest version of self-organization and group representation to the Canadian polity, which allows for the recognition, resourcing and representation of Aboriginal, French Québécois and English peoples. However, this would be to conflate self-organization with separatism. Kymlicka (1996) points out that these three groups conceive of themselves as distinct nations, and are agitating for self-government in distinct territories. In other words, nationalist pressures towards secession are antithetical to an integrated citizenship, and he juxtaposes this to the special rights to exemptions and entitlements for other cultural minorities and subordinated groups, who aspire to greater inclusion.

6 Whilst many academic commentators have endorsed varieties of active citizenship in a diversified democracy, there is a tendency to transform these into 'models' to be applied to various polities (eg, Held, 1987) and this fails to appreciate that it is precisely the celebrated processes of self-organization from the grassroots or 'margins' which attracts so much calumny from any given leadership or 'mainstream', since self-organization is precisely that which is beyond their control and comprehension. Furthermore, whatever the progress towards 'diversity' in contemporary academic debates on democracy, the hegemony of rationality in the discursive democracy and the sovereignty of majority voice/vote remain intact (eg, Benhabib, 1996). It was clear during my own research that self-organization owed its success to the unintended consequences of a vaguely-worded conference motion in 1985, that SOGs were smuggled in through the union's backdoor by the tenacity of its advocates and assistance from a few friends in high places, and that the majority of union leaders and members were opposed to self-organization in general, and the black and lesbian and gay groups in particular (see NALGO, 1987, 1988). From the perspective of many of my interviewees, the prospect of a 'majority' voting for 'minority' rights was bleak.

7 Terry (1996) provides a balanced overview of this, on the basis of his academic-advisory role to the partner unions during their negotiations, and shows that each enactment of democracy can be regarded as having its own rationale and merits. Previous researchers had acclaimed the 'participatory democracy' of NALGO (eg, Fosh and Cohen, 1990; Cunnison and Stageman, 1995) and juxtaposed this to the 'benevolent paternalism' of NUPE (eg. Fosh and Cohen, 1990) and the patriarchy or fratriachy of COHSE (eg, Cunnison and Stageman, 1995).

8 I would make a distinction here between the women's group and the other 'minority' groups. Genocide is etched into the history of black people (eg, Collins 1990), gay men (eg, Hekma *et al.*, 1995), disabled people (eg, Barnes, 1996) and of course Jews (eg, Bauman, 1989). Whatever the subordination of women, their wholesale extinction is never contemplated, if only on account of their vital role in reproduction (see Pateman, 1992), and when their outright destruction occurs, it tends to be linked to their membership of these minority groups (see Bock, 1992). Or rather, the suggestion is that self-organization may have additional layers of significance for men and women in minority groups.

9 Academics who write about trade unions from a mainstream vantage-point have tended to deride SOGs 'from the outside' and without substantiating their claims – for example, McIlroy (1988) simply asserts that the NALGO SOGs do not tackle 'bread-and-butter' issues and are 'ineffective' in the issues they do tackle. It is clear however that trade unions have long ceased to be effective in their bread-and-butter issues – average wage-rises for non-unionised firms are higher than those for unionised firms, and the strongest public sector unions are securing the worst wage deals – but this is not treated by such writers as a reason for disbanding trade unions, since they have a prior commitment to a deeper value-orientation around solidarity and justice, and they respect the myriad constraints which impinge upon trade union activities and accomplishments. SOGs have brought many people into union activism for the first time, notably disabled people (Humphrey, 1998b), and have made many inroads into exposing and counteracting workplace discriminations (Humphrey, 1999b), but they are also constrained by inadequate resources, discriminatory laws and public prejudices.

10 The 'mainstream union' was always an overburdened concept as it conflates several categories of people – FTOs, lay leaders and ordinary members. It also oversimplified reality by presuming an overriding homogeneity among these people, and then equating their typically white, male, heterosexual, non-disabled profile with the existence of institutional racism, sexism, heterosexism and disablism. It has been retained in this paper on account of its prevalence throughout the critical literature on trade union democracy, its congruence with my own interviewee's narratives, and its usefulness in framing the scene of trade union democracy from a self-organized standpoint. Nevertheless, in the UNISON context, it is rapidly becoming an anachronism, since women are now the majority in many lay committees and conferences (although not among FTOs), and disadvantaged minority groups are increasingly securing representation in all kinds of forums (although not on the NEC). In other words, there remains a task of displacement and replacement.

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