Employee Relations 19,5

Received June 1997

The future of trade unionism: injustice, identity and attribution

John Kelly
Department of Industrial Relations, London School of Economics, London, UK

Why have UK trade union density and strike activity declined so dramatically since 1979? A fairly comprehensive answer, acceptable to many researchers, would embrace the five sets of factors identified in Metcalf (1991), namely the business cycle, workforce composition and the policies of the three main actors, state, employers and unions (see also Waddington and Whitston, 1996). Recession and mass unemployment have decimated the traditional heartlands of trade unionism in private manufacturing; rising real earnings, as well as union weakness, have reduced the incentive for employees to unionize or to act collectively; the workforce increasingly comprises groups such as women, part-timers, service sector workers and employees in small establishments which have traditionally proved difficult to unionize and mobilize for collective action; anti-union legislation has all but removed the legal props for trade unionism and hindered the capacity of unions to engage in effective collective action while state policy in general has been geared to union marginalization and exclusion; employers themselves have become increasingly reluctant to grant recognition to unions; and finally unions themselves have (at least until recently) devoted few resources to organizing non-union workplaces.

Comparative analysis has reinforced rather than modified these conclusions. The national union movements that have recorded density rises (or small density declines) through the 1980s and 1990s have shown significant departures from the UK experience: less hostile governments (Sweden and Norway), lower unemployment (Germany until 1995 and Finland) and a key union role in the administration of some state benefits (Belgium and Denmark) (Visser, 1994). While decline has proved the most common fate of union movements in the advanced capitalist world since 1980 it has not been the universal experience. Even within countries it is worth noting that union fortunes have turned out to be very uneven and in the UK membership loss has been very heavily concentrated among the unions organizing manual workers in industry. By contrast, unions in some parts of the service sector have been operating in stable labour markets and buoyant product markets and have consequently experienced membership growth throughout the 1980s and 1990s, e.g. unions in health (Royal College of Nursing, Society of Radiographers), higher education (Association of University Teachers), the local and central state (Fire Brigades Union, Prison Officers Association, National Association of Probation Officers), entertainment (Equity) and finance (Banking, Insurance

Employee Relations, Vol. 19 No. 5, 1997, pp. 400-414.

and Finance Union in the 1980s and UNiFi). Again, decline has been the dominant but not the universal experience and in thinking about the future of unionism we should not lose sight of this fact.

It is when we try to assess the relative significance of the correlates of union growth and decline, in order to guide policy and make predictions, that disagreements begin and the problems start to arise. Some have argued that state policy and business cycle factors explain most of the 1980s decline and the anti-union laws are only a minor part of the story (Disney, 1990), while others have claimed that the latter explain the whole of British union decline down to 1986 (Freeman and Pelletier, 1990). Some believe that changes in workforce composition are a significant part of the explanation (Green, 1992; Visser, 1994), whilst others consider them to be almost wholly irrelevant (Disney, 1990; Kelly, 1990). Some are convinced that structural factors are critical (Bain and Price, 1983), while others believe that unions themselves can make a substantial difference to membership and density levels (Mason and Bain, 1993; Undy *et al,* 1981). To compound these differences, researchers have used different types of data (qualitative and quantitative), different methods of data collection and analysis (interviews as part of case studies and regression analyses) and different units of analysis (single union, sector and national union movement). Debates around these substantive and methodological issues are very familiar and have been well-rehearsed in the literature, but what is less clear is how they might be resolved so that we could arrive at an agreed and precise understanding of the dynamics of union growth and decline. Yet even if we were to agree on the relative weights of the different correlates of union growth and decline, it would still be difficult to offer clear-cut predictions. For example, falling unemployment and increased union organizing efforts should facilitate union growth, but there is no guarantee they will necessarily do so. What will also prove crucial are the beliefs of workers about unions and union power and the social processes through which workers are persuaded that they have interests that conflict with those of their employer. These are topics, however, on which there has been comparatively little research (at least in the UK, although there is far more in the USA: see Barling *et al.*, 1992).

In this article I want to concentrate on two relatively new approaches to the future of unionism which may throw fresh light on the subject by focusing on the neglected topics of worker attitudes and social processes. The first has been advanced by Hyman in a series of recent papers and consists of an analytical framework for examining what he calls trade union identities (Hyman, 1994a; 1994b; 1996). The second, known as mobilization theory, derives from the literature on social movements and seeks to explain how individuals are transformed into collective actors and mobilized for action against their opponents (Kelly, 1997; 1998; Klandermans, 1997; Tilly, 1978).

Trade union identities

According to Hyman, any assessment of the future of trade unionism must comprise an analysis of its internal dynamics, and an appreciation of the mutual

interaction between these dynamics and what he calls the identity of the union. The analysis appears to be pitched at the level of individual unions but in principle there seems no reason why it could not be extended to national union movements. Graphically it can be shown in Figure 1.

The identity of a union (to be defined shortly) emerges out of the interaction between the four components in the figure, namely interests, organization, power and agenda. Under each of these headings Hyman reviews key debates in the literature and documents the complexity of the issues. For example, unions can define and pursue a narrow range of interests, around wages and working conditions or they can broaden the definition of members' interests to embrace issues such as training, career progression and equal opportunities. Interests can be defined in more individualistic or more collectivist ways or in various combinations. Similarly, the claims presented by unions to employers and government (the unions' agenda) can be narrow or broad in scope. Under the heading of organization, Hyman reviews debates around bureaucracy and democracy, stressing the importance of membership participation and the need to theorize in more detail the roles of union leadership. Finally he underlines the importance of context, and in particular the balance of power, arguing that traditional methods of exercising power, such as the protracted strike, may be inappropriate in a slack labour market and among service workers whose withdrawal of labour will hurt customers or clients.

The interaction between interests, agenda, organization and power gives rise to what Hyman describes as different union identities. The term is not strictly defined but appears to comprise the union's basic orientation and mode of action, as depicted in Table I.

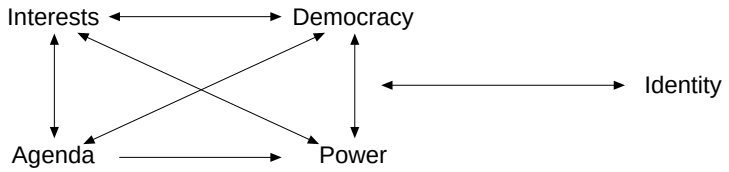

Figure 1.
Hyman's model of trade union dynamics

Source: Hyman (1994a, p.120)

Focus of action	Key function	Ideal type
Occupational élite	Exclusive representation	Guild
Individual worker	Services	Friendly society
Management	Productivity coalition	Company union
Government	Political exchange	Social partner
Mass support	Campaigning	Social movement

Table I.
Five alternative trade union identities

Source: Hyman (1996, p. 70)

As can be seen, each identity consists of a principal actor, who, forms the focus of union action, a dominant pattern of behaviour in relation to that actor and a summary label for the type of organization bearing such an identity[1].

What are the implications of Hyman's framework for the future of trade unionism? His own conclusion is that union prospects depend on the pursuit of a broader definition of members' interests than in the past, on the adoption of a correspondingly broad agenda, and on the use of different methods of struggle more in tune with the contemporary balance of power. In addition his framework is valuable in drawing our attention to the variability of interests that can be represented by trade unions and in raising the issues of how interests come to be defined and of the role played by union leaderships in that process. I shall return to these issues in the discussion of mobilization theory, but for the moment I want to pursue some of the problems of the identity framework.

The first and perhaps most obvious concern is the lack of a clear-cut definition of identity. In itself that might not be thought a serious deficiency because it can be readily put right, but the lack of conceptual definition does give rise to a second problem. Are the different union identities alternatives among which unions or union movements can choose, or is it perhaps the case that in practice unions are likely to display features of all of them at different times?

Take the case of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (the AEEU). It represents an occupational elite of skilled workers through collective bargaining; it supplies individual services such as financial packages and legal advice to its members in the manner of a friendly society; it co-operates with employers in raising productivity and has in the past been involved in political exchange with governments. What is the identity of the AEEU? Is it all of those in Table I or none of them? It is also unclear whether unions can choose among the identities on offer or whether they are in fact heavily constrained by circumstances and traditions. What options, for instance, were open to the UK's general unions in the 1980s who wished to organize and represent unskilled workers, but were faced with a government and employers increasingly hostile to any kind of relationship with them? Finally it is unclear whether the identity framework maps out the "one best way" for all unions (a broader definition of interests, broader agenda, new methods of struggle) or whether the most appropriate identity is contingent on circumstances. Is the best option for a public sector union of skilled professionals also best for a multi-occupation, multi-industry union aiming to represent and recruit both skilled and unskilled? To be fair these are gaps in the identity framework rather than fundamental flaws and there is no reason, in principle, why they could not be filled. But even these gaps still leave open certain key questions about the formation of interests. It is that topic which comprises the core of mobilization theory and it is to that theory we now turn.

Mobilization theory

Under what conditions will a set of individuals come to acquire a sense of common interests, join an organization and participate in collective action directed towards an opponent? These questions have preoccupied researchers into social movements such as the womens', peace and environmental movements of recent years, and have given rise to a body of work that we can collectively term mobilization theory. The best route into this literature is through the work of the Marxist social historian Tilly (1978), who proposed that a useful theory of collective action (and its absence) must have five components, dealing respectively with interests, organization, mobilization, opportunity and the different forms of action (see Figure 2).

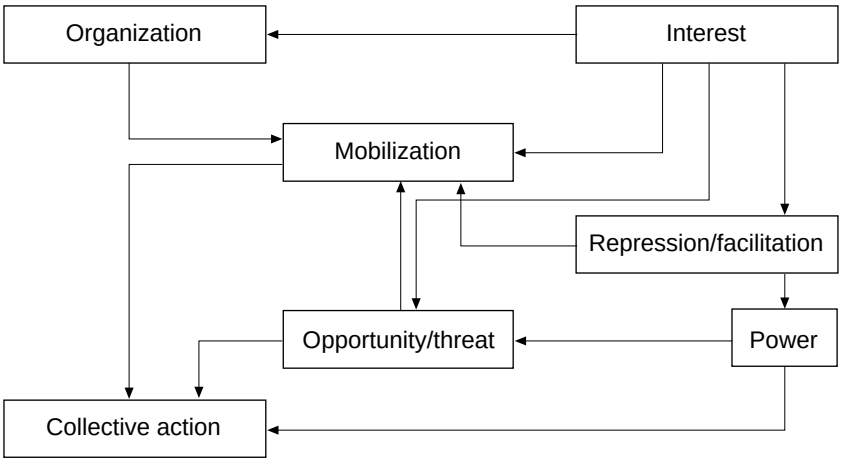

Figure 2.
Tilly's mobilization model

Source: Tilly (1978, p. 56)

The fulcrum of the model is interests and the ways in which members of subordinate groups come to define them. To what extent do they believe their interests to be similar to, different from, or opposed to, those of the ruling group? Do they define their interests in individual, semi-collective or collective terms (or some combination), and if the latter, then to what group or groups does the term refer: an informal group, a department, a social class, etc? The concept of organization refers to the structure of a group, and in particular those aspects which affect its capacity for collective action. Examples include centralization of power and inclusiveness or scope of representation. Mobilization refers to "the process by which a group acquires collective control over the resources needed for action" (Tilly, 1978, p. 7), or the ways in which individuals are transformed into a collective actor (Tilly, 1978, p. 69). The concept of opportunity is itself divided into three components: the balance of power between the parties, the costs of repression by the ruling group and the opportunities available for subordinate groups to pursue their claims (Tilly,

1978, p. 55). Ruling groups may be said to engage in countermobilization in order to change subordinate definitions of interests, to thwart the creation of effective collective organization and to repress attempts at mobilization and collective action (see Franzosi, 1995, Ch. 8). Finally, people must be willing to take collective action, the forms of which can vary according to the balance between interests, organization, mobilization and opportunity.

One implication of Tilly's framework is that it is meaningless to ask whether people are individualists or collectivists: people can be either depending on the situations in which they find themselves. White collar workers locked into a career path may seek to improve their working lives through individual efforts to gain promotion, and through collective organization and action to secure rises in pay and improvements in job security. By the same token we can rethink the issue of whether there has been a significant decline in worker "collectivism" and, if so, whether this attitudinal shift accounts for some of the recent fall in union membership and activity. Phelps Brown (1990) for instance argued that the post-war growth of affluence, skill levels and geographical mobility had eroded a working class collectivism historically rooted in absolute deprivation, poverty and the economic and political weakness of labour. Within Tilly's framework it is simplistic to ask if there is more or less "collectivism" among the workforce. Does the question refer to interest definition, or to levels of organization, or to the ease with which workers can be mobilized or to the actual levels of collective action? What account is being taken of the adverse balance of power, of the costs of collective action during economic recession, and of the lack of receptivity of government and some employers to workers' demands? It is important to disentangle the different components of collectivism because they do not necessarily hang together. A decline in the incidence of collective action may indicate a change in workers' patterns of interest identification but it could just as readily reflect a change in the balance of power or weaknesses in mobilization. Phelps Brown's broad brush approach to this topic and his idea that workers can be readily categorized as individualists or collectivists ignores both the complexity of the concepts and the degree to which different modes of action are situationally specific.

Tilly's ideas may seem a little removed from the topic of union growth because of their focus on collective action. But central to Tilly's theory is an issue that lies at the heart of union growth, namely the way in which employees acquire a collective definition of their interests. Theory on this topic has been usefully developed by McAdam (1988) whose ideas on how this comes about are shown in Figure 3.

The *sine qua non* for collective interest definition is a sense of illegitimacy, the conviction that an event, action or situation is "wrong" or "unjust" because it violates established rules or conflicts with widely shared beliefs or values (Beetham, 1991, pp. 15-20; see also Gamson, 1992 and Klandermans, 1997 for similar ideas). McAdam (1988) identified two other components of "cognitive liberation", the assertion by employees of their rights and the perception of personal efficacy. It is not enough for employees to feel aggrieved: they must

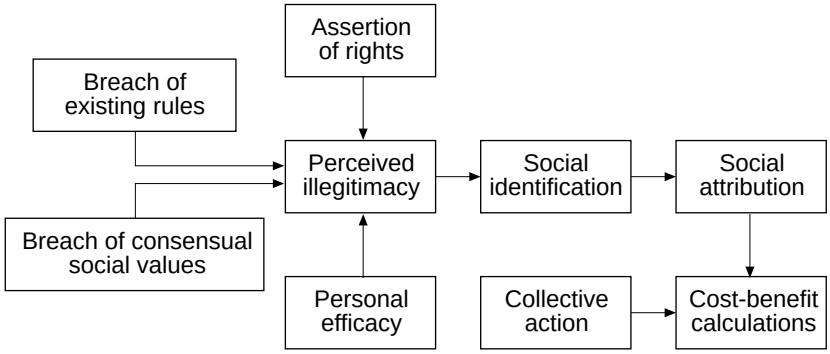

Figure 3.
McAdam's model of collective action

Source: Adapted from McAdam (1988)

also feel entitled to their demands and feel that there is some chance that their situation can be changed (Gamson, 1992, p. 8). Both points raise crucial questions about the sources of social beliefs and take us into a discussion of ideology. In the context of the employment relationship, ideologies play at least three significant roles: they help identify the most salient features of the relationship, such as the wage-effort exchange; they supply a set of emotionally-loaded categories for thinking about this exchange in terms of group interests, e.g. exploitation, social partnership; and they provide a set of categories and ideas that label the interests of one's own group as rights. In Snow and Benford's (1992) terms ideologies "frame" an issue, event or situation. Injustice (or illegitimacy) frames are critical for collective organization and action because they begin the process of detaching subordinate group members from loyalty to ruling groups (or in Marx's terms converting a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself).

How does a set of individuals with a sense of injustice or illegitimacy coalesce into a social group with a collective interest? According to social movement theorists, there are three critical processes in effecting this transition: attribution, social identification and leadership. An attribution is an explanation for an event or action in terms of reasons, causes or both. The action can be one's own or other peoples'; it can involve individuals or groups; and there is no presumption as to whether attributions are "true" or "false". By convention attributions are classified along three dimensions: personal (or internal) causes versus external (or situational), stable versus unstable factors, controllable versus uncontrollable factors (Hewstone, 1988, Ch. 3). Mobilization theorists argue that collective action flows from external, controllable attributions, i.e. workers must blame management for their problems and believe that management could have acted differently. External uncontrollable attributions such as reference to economic conditions or market forces will inhibit collective action by failing to identify an agency that can provide an appropriate target for action. Attributions of blame to groups such as

management presuppose that employees belong to and identify with social categories such as "us" (the employees) as against "them" (the management).

If arguments about injustice and who is to blame for it are to give rise to collective organization, then the presence of leaders (or activists) is required since they play a series of critical roles in the overall process of collectivization: first, they help construct among workers a sense of grievance or injustice. Second, they promote group cohesion and identity: group identity encourages workers to think about their collective interests; it discourages any tendency to free-riding; and is likely to facilitate negative stereotyping of management. Third, it is leaders who urge workers to take collective action, a process of persuasion that is assumed to be essential because of the costs of such action and the inexperience of many people with its different forms and consequences. Finally, leaders will have to defend collective action in the face of countermobilizing arguments that it is illegitimate (for examples of all these types of leadership action see Fantasia, 1988).

What are the implications of mobilization theory for the future of trade unionism? Although the theory has often been used to explore the determinants of collective action, it can just as readily illuminate the broader process of collectivization that have been overlooked in the traditional literature, by reference to injustice, the role of social identity in attributing blame to management and the role of leadership. This is not to say that structural factors such as the level of unemployment or the content of labour legislation are of lesser importance. The point is that structural factors create a more or less favourable environment for the collectivization of the workforce, but do not in and of themselves generate a sense of injustice or identity: those outcomes have to be constructed by activists and other opinion formers.

Empirical evidence

In this section I propose to examine the available UK evidence that relates to the key mobilization variables of injustice/grievance, identity, attribution and willingness to act collectively. Much of the evidence will be taken from *British Social Attitudes*, an annual opinion survey of a representative sample of approximately 3,000 members of the UK adult population. The surveys began in 1983 and the most recent was conducted in 1995 and written up in late 1996, so on some items we have a time series spanning 13 years (see Jowell *et al.,* 1984-1996). There are two other data sets that we can also draw on, the first of which is the national *Employment in Britain* attitudinal survey, carried out in 1992 and comprising a sample of 3,458 employees (Gallie and White, 1993). The second is the data assembled by the Citizens' Advice Bureaux from callers to their offices throughout the UK (NACAB, 1990; 1993).

Injustice and grievances

One possible explanation for the decline of union membership and activity is that fewer and fewer employees experience work-related grievances that are sufficiently serious to encourage unionization. Whether because of changes in

workforce composition, lowered expectations of employment or better management (perhaps through HRM policies) the argument would point to a decline in the incidence of workplace discontent and thereby suggests that the future for trade unionism is likely to prove bleak. If we look first of all at the broad incidence of grievances over the past ten years we actually find a very different picture (Table II).

Table II. Numbers of work-related grievances reported to Citizens' Advice Bureaux, 1983-93

Year	Number of grievances
1983	469,000
1987	625,735
1990	709,570
1993	882,257

Sources: NACAB (1990, p. 4; 1993, p. 5)

Far from declining, the level of worker grievances about employment almost doubled between 1983 and 1993. A similar picture emerges from comparative time series data on job satisfaction between 1985 and 1995. In the ISR study of seven major European countries it was UK workers who showed the steepest decline in overall job satisfaction, from 64 per cent satisfied in 1985 to 53 per cent in 1995 (ISR, 1995, Figure 3). Most of the grievances logged by the Citizens' Advice Bureaux emanated from the non-union sector and in view of its expansion throughout this period then some rise in grievances might have been anticipated (NACAB, 1990, p. 5). But this can only be part of the story because the number of non-union employees rose over this period by approximately 31 per cent, whereas the number of grievances rose by a staggering 88 per cent. If we turn to *British Social Attitudes* data we have evidence on attitudes to pay and decision-making at the workplace, shown in Table III.

Asked whether the gap between those with high and those with low incomes is about right, too little or too large, a large and growing percentage of the general population has described them as too large. This item, however, measures a very general attitude which may or may not correspond to peoples' views about income differentials at their own place of work. Yet when employees were asked about their own situation a similar trend emerged. Although the absolute numbers are smaller than on the previous item, a growing percentage, up from 38 per cent in 1984 to 50 per cent in 1995, believes that pay differentials at their own workplace are also too large. How far this perception translates into a sense of grievance is not clear because when asked if their own pay is reasonable, a stable 55-60 per cent of employees have said "yes" over the past ten years. On the other hand asked whether their pay will keep up with rises in the cost of living (an example of what mobilization theorists would call a consensual social value), a significantly higher percentage

	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
Perception of gap between high and low incomes as too large										
In the UK (% all agree)	75	77	78	79	80	81	80	85	85	87
At own place of work (% employees agree)	38	39	39	41	45	47	44	46	52	50
Perception of own pay as reasonable										
(% employees)	55	56	55	54	56	59	63	60	56	58
Belief that own pay will rise by less than the cost of living or not at all										
(%employees)	36	38	32	27	38	33	31	44	48	42
Employees' say in decisions affecting their work										
(% having a say)	–	62	–	51	50	–	54	52	–	–
(% satisfied with say)	–	63	–	53	54	–	54	47	–	–

Sources: Hedges (1994); Spencer (1996)

Table III.
British attitudes to pay and participation 1984-95

in the 1990s think that it will not when compared to the 1980s. If we turn to employee views about participation in workplace decision making, then the evidence seems fairly unequivocal: a declining percentage believe they have a say in decisions affecting their work and we can observe a corresponding fall in the level of satisfaction with participation[2].

Overall what does this evidence tell us about employee grievances throughout the past ten years or so in the UK? If anything it suggests that more employees, not fewer, have become discontented with some aspect of their work and so the decline in trade unionism over this period cannot be accounted for by a fall in the volume of employee discontent. By the same token the rise in employee grievances underlines the potential basis for a resurgence of trade union activity.

Identity and attribution

As mobilization theorists argue, grievances are necessary but not sufficient for employees to become collectivized. What is also essential is that workers blame the employer or the management for their problems. After all, if aggrieved employees believed they could resolve their problems through discussion with management, then their incentive to unionize would be correspondingly diminished as the US literature on union joining has shown (Barling *et al.*, 1992; Premack and Hunter, 1988). Therefore if managements have improved their systems of employee communications and consultation since 1980, then such changes might help account for the continued decline in unionism. On this topic

the *British Social Attitudes* data is far from perfect since it comprises items measuring general attitudes towards management and trust in management rather than attribution for workplace problems. Nevertheless it is worth recording because *ceteris paribus*, employees who are critical of management are less likely to identify with them and will be more receptive to the argument that management is to blame for their problems (see Table IV).

Asked whether management would "try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance", the evidence shows that levels of mistrust in management among the general population have risen significantly, if not spectacularly since 1985, rising sharply in 1986-7 and steadily thereafter. Likewise there has been a recent steady growth in the numbers of people who believe business benefits owners at the expense of workers. Even more revealing are the questions that have been put to employees, where the two management items from *British Social Attitudes* have charted a significant deterioration in workers' assessment of the quality of management-employee relations and the quality of management itself. A small but steadily rising percentage of employees believes that relations at their workplace are not very good while there has been a steep decline in the percentage who think their workplace is very well managed, from 30 per cent to 23 per cent. The differences in some of these numbers over a 12-

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995
Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance (% all)											
Agree			51.5	51.6	60.9	61.3	57.9	62.7	63.4	64.0	
Disagree			24.6	27.3	19.8	19.0	19.2	15.4	15.0	14.2	
Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers (% all)											
Agree				53.9	51.1	52.8	52.4	49.5	54.8	60.1	61.7
Disagree				19.0	22.1	21.5	22.6	18.5	17.0	13.6	15.3
In general how would you describe relations between management and other employees at your workplace? (% employees)											
Very good	37	36	38	34	34	32	38	34	31	29	30
Quite good	47	47	45	47	48	49	44	45	47	47	45
Not very good/not at all good	15	16	16	19	18	18	17	21	20	24	24
In general would you say your workplace was: (% employees)											
Very well managed	30	28	28	27	26	26	26	25	26	22	23
Quite well managed	50	51	53	52	54	54	55	55	52	54	54
Not well managed	20	19	18	20	20	18	19	20	21	23	23

Table IV.
British attitudes to management

Sources: Jowell *et al.* (1984-1996)

year span may not seem especially dramatic but by the normal standards of attitudinal change these are in fact significant shifts.

In the light of this evidence we can suggest two general propositions: first, it seems very unlikely that we can account for declining unionization in Britain by reference to improvements in the management of employees. This is not to deny the existence of such improvements but rather to suggest that they have failed to translate into more positive attitudes on the part of employees. Second, the growing mistrust of management is potentially good news for trade unions because it implies that recruitment literature focused on managerial deficiencies is likely to fall on receptive ears.

Yet even if this point were to be accepted it does not necessarily follow that employees will join unions. Indeed as we discussed earlier, writers such as Phelps Brown (1990) and Bassett and Cave (1993) claim to have identified a generalized decline in the willingness of employees to resolve workplace problems by collective means. If this claim is true it suggests at least two significant problems for the future of trade unionism. First, its long-term growth requires increasing recognition from employers for collective bargaining, yet employer resistance may require that employees take collective action to enforce their demands for representation. Any reluctance on the part of employees to act collectively could well hinder the spread of recognition agreements and therefore the recovery of union membership. But even if workers secured recognition rights from an employer, their reluctance to act collectively could well result in an enfeebled form of unionism that was unable to extract many concessions.

British Social Attitudes cannot tell us much about the willingness of employees to organize and act collectively at the workplace, but it does contain very interesting time series data for the general population. People were asked to imagine there was an unjust Bill going through the House of Commons and to say which of several forms of action (if any) they would take in response. The options ran from mild forms of activity such as contacting an MP or signing a petition to one of the classic forms of collective action, the protest or demonstration (see Table V).

The evidence shows that far from being less willing to engage in such action, people have actually become more willing to do so over the years. As a check on the reliability of the data, people were also asked to report if they had in fact

Table V. Percentages of the British population who would protest/demonstrate against an unjust bill

	Percentages					
	1983	1984	1986	1989	1991	1994
Percentage that would protest	8	9	10.5	14.0	13.6	16.4
Percentage that has never been on a protest demonstration	2	N/A	5.7	8.4	9.1	8.9

Source: Jowell *et al.* (1984-1996)

ever demonstrated and the numbers are sufficiently small to suggest that on the whole respondents are probably being honest. If we take this data at face value it does raise the interesting question as to why total trade union membership continued to decline despite falling unemployment between 1986 and 1989 and again from 1994. One hypothesis which can be derived from mobilization theory is that employees are deterred from joining because they believe unions are simply too weak to be able to resolve workplace injustices. Evidence from *British Social Attitudes* shows that a growing number of people have indeed come to believe unions have too little power, a perception which would certainly not encourage them to join (Table VI).

Table VI. Trade unions in Britain have too little power (% agreeing)

	1983	1986	1989	1994
Percentage agreeing trade unions have too little power	5.0	11.1	18.5	28.4

Source: Jowell *et al.*, (1984-1996)

Conclusions

The future of trade unionism depends partly on structural factors, such as the level of unemployment, over which unions can exercise very little control. Yet even a favourable environment will leave unions with the task of "collectivising employees", of persuading them that they have interests in common with their fellow workers which are antagonistic to those of the employer and which require for their resolution some form of collective organization and activity. It is these processes which form the subject matter of mobilization theory and hence of this article. The theory focuses in particular on a sense of injustice as a precursor to collective interest formation and also incorporates the role of identity and attribution. Using *British Social Attitudes* data to shed light on these themes threw up interesting results.

Over the past ten years or so employees have become increasingly dissatisfied with the amount of "voice" they can exercise over workplace decisions and have become increasingly critical of the pay differentials between the highest and the lowest paid groups, both in society as a whole and within their own workplace. Nor do employees regard these outcomes as inexorable trends in the face of which employers and managers are simply helpless. On the contrary, there is a growing lack of trust in, and criticism of, management. Finally, it is also clear that in the face of injustice a growing percentage of the population is prepared to join an organization and participate in collective action, such as a demonstration. Taken as a whole the evidence suggests that union decline in the 1980s and 1990s cannot be accounted for by reference to a decline in employee grievances; it cannot be explained by growing trust in management, consequent on better management of the workplace; and it does

not derive from a generalized decline in peoples' willingness to act collectively. All of this evidence actually augurs well for the future of trade unionism since many of the essential attitudinal prerequisites for recovery are in place.

The central problem now faced by unions is the perception that they may be too weak to "make a difference". We know this belief has been overcome in the past, but what we do not know is the precise mechanisms through which this attitudinal change comes about. Greater legal rights for unions ought to make a difference and so too should an increase in strike frequency, especially if the latter is associated with a rising union win rate, since both developments ought to erode the perception of union weakness. But this area is one in which we really do need more research.

Notes

1. In an earlier publication Hyman (1994a, p. 134) had presented four rather than five identities. In 1996 he added the idea of the union representing an occupational elite.
2. The Employment in Britain survey reported that just 32 per cent of employees believed they would have a "geat deal" or "quite a lot" of say in decisions about the way they did their job (Gallie and White, 1993, p. 38).

References

Bain, G.S. and Price, R. (1983), "Union growth: dimensions, determinants, and destiny", in Bain, G.S. (Ed.), *Industrial Relations in Britain,* Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 3-33.

Barling, J., Fullagar, C. and Kelloway, E.K. (1992), *The Union and Its Members: A Psychological Approach,* Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Bassett, P. and Cave, A. (1993), *All for One: The Future of the Unions*, Fabian Pamphlet 559, London.

Beetham, D. (1991), *The Legitimation of Power*, Macmillan, London.

Disney, R. (1990), "Explanations of the decline of trade union density in Britain: an appraisal", *British Journal of Industrial Relations,* Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 165-77.

Fantasia, R. (1988), *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Franzosi, R. (1995), *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Postwar Italy,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Freeman, R. and Pelletier, J. (1990), "The impact of industrial relations legislation on British union density", *British Journal of Industrial Relations,* Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 141-64.

Gallie, D. and White, M. (1993), *Employee Commitment and the Skills Revolution*, Policy Studies Institute, London.

Gamson, W.A. (1992), *Talking Politics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Green, F. (1992), "Recent trends in British trade union density: how much of a compositional effect?", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 445-58.

Hedges, B. (1994), "Work in a changing climate", in Jowell, R., Curtice, J., Brook, L. and Ahrendt, D. (Eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 11th Report*, Dartmouth, Aldershot.

Hewstone, M. (1988), *Causal Attribution: From Cognitive Processes to Collective Beliefs,* Blackwell, Oxford.

Hyman, R. (1994a), "Changing trade union identities and strategies", in Hyman, R. and Ferner, A. (Eds), *New Frontiers in European Industrial Relations,* Blackwell, Oxford.

Hyman, R. (1994b), "Introduction: economic restructuring, market liberalism and the future of national industrial relations systems", in Hyman, R. and Ferner, A (Eds), *New Frontiers in European Industrial Relations,* Blackwell, Oxford.

Hyman, R. (1996), "Changing union identities in Europe", in Leisink, P., van Leemput, J. and Vilrokx, J. (Eds), *The Challenges to Trade Unions in Europe: Innovation or Adaptation,* Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.

ISR (1995), *Employee Satisfaction: Tracking European Trends*, ISR International Survey Research, London.

Jowell. R. *et al.* (Eds) (1984-96), *British Social Attitudes*, (annual), Dartmouth, Aldershot.

Kelly, J. (1990), "British trade unionism 1979-89: change, continuity and contradictions", *Work, Employment and Society*, special issue, May, pp. 29-65.

Kelly, J. (1997), "Long waves in historical industrial relations: mobilization and countermobilization in historical perspective", *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, Vol. 4.

Kelly, J. (1998), *Mobilization, Collectivism and Industrial Relations,* forthcoming.

Klandermans, B. (1997), *The Social Psychology of Protest,* Blackwell, Oxford.

McAdam, D. (1988), "Micromobilization contexts and recruitment to activism", *International Social Movement Research*, Vol. 1, pp. 125-54.

Mason, B. and Bain, P. (1993), "The determinants of trade union membership in Britain: a survey of the literature", *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 46 No. 2, pp. 332-51.

Metcalf, D. (1991), "British unions: dissolution or resurgence?", *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 18-32.

NACAB (1990), *Hard Labour*, National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureau, London.

NACAB (1993), *Job Insecurity*, National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureau, London.

Phelps Brown, H. (1990), "The counter-revolution of our time", *Industrial Relations,* Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 1-14.

Premack, S. and Hunter, J.E. (1988), "Individual unionization decisions", *Psychological Bulletin,* Vol. 103 No. 2, pp. 223-34.

Snow, D.A. and Benford, R.D. (1992), "Master frames and cycles of protest", in Morris, A.D. and Mueller, C.M. (Eds), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory,* Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Spencer, P. (1996), "Reactions to a flexible labour market", in Jowell, R., Curtice, J., Park, A., Brook, L. and Thomson, K. (Eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 13th Report,* Dartmouth, Aldershot.

Tilly, C. (1978), *From Mobilization to Revolution,* McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.

Undy, R., Ellis, V., McCarthy, W.E.J. and Halmos, A.M. (1981), *Change in Trade Unions,* Hutchinson, London.

Visser, J. (1994), "European trade unions: the transition years", in Hyman, R. and Ferner, A. (Eds), *New Frontiers in European Industrial Relations*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Waddington, J. and Whitston, C. (1996), "Collectivism in a changing context", in Leisink, P., van Leemput, J. and Vilrokx, J (Eds), *The Challenges to Trade Unions in Europe: Innovation or Adaptation*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.