

Book Review

Suzuki, Akira (ed) (2012) *Cross-National Comparisons of Social Movement Unionism: Diversities of Labour Movement Revitalisation in Japan, Korea and the United States (Trade Unions – Past, Present and Future, Vol 18)*. Bern: Peter Lang. ISBN 978-3-0343-0868-7

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This edited volume, the 18th in a series edited by Craig Phelan, is a welcome addition to the body of scholarship that has attempted to apply the notion or concept of ‘social movement unionism’ (SMU) to different national contexts. The term first emerged in the 1980s and applied to the South African and Brazilian contexts, and was later applied to the revitalisation of unions in the United States, which gave it a particular emphasis. This volume interrogates the diversities of labour movement revitalisation across three national contexts, namely Japan, Korea and the United States, as well as Australia in one chapter.

The 18 chapters capture a wide range of trade union experiences apart from the familiar industrial unionism of Europe, North America, Brazil and South Africa. These include the enterprise unions in Japan, which have a tradition of cooperation with employers, and at the margins small ‘community’ unions (also called local or regional unions) which individuals can join and women’s labour NGOs, which have an SMU orientation. In South Korea enterprise unions also predominated, but were more militant and less embedded. A move towards industrial unionism over the past decade and a half, as a revitalisation strategy to organise ‘non-regular’ or informalised workers, did not succeed, given the opposition, as in Japan, of regular workers to informalised labour.

Like Japan, what the authors term ‘social movement unionism’ in South Korea remain at the margins of the union movement, as regional general unions and women’s unions, all focussed on non-regular workers. However, unlike Japan, two enterprise unions stand out as ‘SMU-oriented unions’, namely the New Core Enterprise Union and the E-Land General Union, in that they organised and engaged in struggles on behalf of non-regular workers, and forged alliances with social movement organisations – a legacy of the pre-1987 mobilisations against the authoritarian state.

In this sense some of the South Korean experience is similar to that of the USA, where social movement unionism emerged within established unions such as SEIU, CWA, HERE and UNITE – but remain a small minority within the broader union movement, which unlike their Japan and Korean counterparts were of the business union type.

The book draws on Gay Seidman’s definition of SMUs based on the study of unions operating within authoritarian states in ‘late industrialising countries’, namely Brazil and South Africa, and Kim Voss’s definition based on studies of unions in industrialised countries, namely the USA. The book sets out the common properties of SMU in both contexts as follows: the setting of broad goals beyond business or economic unionism; forging coalitions with social

movement or community-based organisations; and operating outside the framework of established institutions.

Key differences, however, are identified. While in the former unions are part of a broader struggle for democracy, within a context of 'pre-institutionalised industrial relations', in the latter they are struggling against neo-liberal restructuring, a period of 'de-institutionalisation'. Unions fighting for political democracy tend to act in a 'vanguardist' manner towards other social movement organisations, in their struggles against management and the state, while unions in industrialised countries, in their struggles against management and neoliberal globalisation, tend to relate to other organisations on an equal footing. In the former the workers involved tend to be semi-skilled male workers in metal industries, while in the latter they tend to be informalised, precarious workers, often in low-paid service sectors jobs, many of whom might be immigrants and women.

This is a useful way of comparing SMUs in different contexts, and while Japan fits more easily into the 'de-institutionalising' framework, South Korea never quite reached a stage of full institutionalisation when it became an industrialised country within a relatively short period. Another way of looking at it, is to describe unions fighting alongside liberation or democracy movements as expression of 'ant-systemic' SMUs, in that their targets are both management and the state (and often the entire capitalist system); while SMUs operating within liberal democracies such as the USA could be termed 'social justice' SMUs, fighting for reforms within the system (see Pillay 2013).

Confining SMUs in late-industrialising countries to semi-skilled metal workers, however, is misleading. While these workers may have been at the forefront of forging SMUs in South Africa and Brazil, in South Africa, for example, the Congress of SA Trade Unions had affiliates in a range of sectors, including other manufacturing sectors (such as chemicals and paper and wood), mining, transport and the municipal unions, that adopted SMU-type profiles in the 1980s.

Another shortcoming is the manner in which SMUs are defined, a weakness that emerges most clearly in the discussion of political campaigns in Australia, the USA and Japan. There is no attempt to distinguish social movement unionism from political unionism – a distinction Seidman herself makes (clarifying a conflation of the two by for example Webster and Lambert in their studies of South African unions in the 1980s). SMUs are characterised by their *independence* from political parties, even when they do forge alliances with them. Political unionism, however, while going beyond the workplace and embracing broader societal issues, often in alliance with other groups, is characterised by their *subordination* to political parties, the most graphic examples being unions in India and France. When unions engage in campaigns for political parties during elections, their independence can be compromised. In South Africa today, COSATU displays characteristics of both social movement and political unionism, in that it often asserts its independence, and engages in mass struggles, but remains wedded to the 'national democratic' project of the ruling party, and dare not forge meaningful alliances with movements and groups that are too critical of the ruling party. Were the unions campaigning for political parties in the USA, Australia and Japan displaying characteristics of SMUs, or political unionism? Does the adoption of social movement type practices to garner voter support amount to SMU-type behaviour, or are they expressions of political unionism?

Finally, is union 'revitalisation' always an expression of social movement unionism? At times the two seem conflated, whereas it is possible for unions to revitalise but remain narrowly confined to workplace issues. In addition, expressions of aspects of SMU-type behaviour, such as framing workplace campaigns within a broader attack on neoliberalism, are very thin instances of SMU-type behaviour. In Japan the general unions and NGOs forged hardly any alliances with movements in broader society; whilst in South Korea alliances that were formed tended to be in support of workplace struggles, and not union support for community struggles.

Nevertheless, even if these are thin expressions of SMUs, both in terms of their limited range of SMU-type behaviour and their tiny presence within the labour movement, these studies of Japan and South Korea, alongside the USA, are important contributions to our understanding of union behaviour in contexts unfamiliar to the English-speaking world. The chapters are rich in empirical detail and well-written, and deserve to be widely read by labour scholars throughout the world.

REFERENCES

Pillay, D. (2013) 'Between Social Movement and Political Unionism: COSATU and Democratic Politics in South Africa', *Rethinking Development and Inequality 2*: 10-27.

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