



'An injury to all'

Thomas Swann

review of

Ahlquist, J.S. and M. Levi (2013) *In the interest of others: Organizations and social activism*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. (PB, pp.315, £19.95, ISBN 9780691158570)

'An Injury to One is an Injury to All'. This slogan of the Industrial Workers of the World has come to represent the claim that trade union activities should extend beyond the interests of the unions' members and to a broader 'community of fate', as John S. Alquist and Margaret Levi call it. Indeed, rather than looking at organisations in general, their book focuses on trade unions, US and Australian transport trade unions in particular. It examines the factors that allowed certain unions to act outwith their narrow remit of looking after their members' best economic interests and instead, or rather as well as (and this is an important point in Ahlquist and Levi's argument), operate with a view to broader ideas of social justice. That is, union members are motivated to view farmers in the global south, for example, as a group they, as dockworkers or truckers in the US, can and should act in the interest of. As the authors state on the first page of their book, '(w)e ask why some organizations move beyond the particular and particularized grievances that are the *raison d'être* of the organization and engage in political actions, especially those that have little or nothing to do with members' reasons for belonging' [1].

The great strength of this book comes from the rigorous and patient analysis of empirical data carried out by Ahlquist and Levi, scholars in political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Ahlquist) and the University of Washington

and the University of Sydney (Levi). It is an extremely well-written and well-structured account which takes the reader through the authors' underlying positions, hypotheses and empirical analysis in such a way that readers like myself, who have little or no prior understanding of behavioural economics or trade union studies, can for the most part follow with relative ease. I should point out that as a one-time member of the most recent incarnation of the Industrial Workers of the World, mentioned above, I do have a political interest in trade unionism, just not an academic one. My interest in political and activist organisation more generally is the specific lens through which I read this book, and while I found much of the more economic or game theoretical analysis impossible to understand given my lack of grounding in these fields (the second chapter, for example, includes a hefty amount of equations that I am afraid I am unable to appreciate), I do not doubt the value of it within the framework the authors have chosen to work in. As I am in no position to challenge that framework and their use of specific quantitative or economic tools (I am sure a rehashing of the most basic philosophical arguments against quantifying decision making would appear as hopelessly naïve, although that is not to say that others more versed in philosophy of science and sociological methodology would not have legitimate arguments against the approach Ahlquist and Levi take), I instead want to focus here on the conclusions the authors draw in terms of a model of organisations acting, as they say, in the interest of others.

The unions studied in the book are divided across two categories: business unions and social movement unions. The former are defined as 'those whose commitments are to the welfare of members exclusively', with the latter being 'those committed to the social welfare of members and the larger society' [10]. Ahlquist and Levi consider two unions in each category: the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the International Longshore Union, in the first, and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) (now merged with the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA)), in the second. Of the four considered, only the last, the WWF/MUA is, as the name would suggest, Australian, the other three being US unions. The contrast between the business and social movement unions is stark. In the business unions examined, not only is their focus narrow and deals only with their own members' welfare but the leaders award themselves high salaries (in some cases they were the highest paid union officials in the country) and working hand in hand with politicians, lobby groups and, in the case of the infamous Jimmy Hoffa, the mafia. It is the social movement unions, however, that are the real focus of the book. Their leaders are generally less well-paid and their extra-union affiliations are not with the political mainstream or the mob but with left-wing parties like the Communist Party. The social movement unions

discussed share stronger commitments to democratic accountability within the union as well as political activism outwith.

One of the key notions Ahlquist and Levi deploy in their analysis is 'communities of fate' and they define it early on in their study: '(t)he community of fate', they write, 'identifies those the organizational members perceive as engaged in similar struggles for similar goals. Organizational members view their welfare as bound up with that of the community' [2]. Crucially, this extension of the community from those within the organisation, i.e. those paying membership dues to the trade union, to those in similar social and economic situations, i.e. the working class – although the authors do not use this term as such, involves not only a feeling of interconnectedness between people on different sides of the planet but also shapes 'common beliefs about what action is possible for the organization and its members' [*ibid.*]. In other words, the very idea of the community of fate is bound up with the idea of being able to act as that community: it is not simply saying 'we are one' but 'we are moving as one', an idea not dissimilar to that of the Multitude in Hardt and Negri (2004). This is important in so far as it shifts the focus of the discourse of the community of fate, for its members, from a passive idea of being all subject to the same forces to a more activist understanding of resisting together. Resisting, in this case, as the authors show, means resisting the actions of employers and governments.

This definition is built around the feelings of community among members of the trade unions. Indeed, the communities under discussion are, the reader is left to believe, imaginary in the sense that the authors do not discuss whether there was or is direct contact with or actions of reciprocation on the part of the other members of the communities of fate; i.e. those the union members are acting in the interest of. The main thrust of the book, however, lies in explaining the actions of the leaders of the unions and not the actions or ideas of the members themselves. Whether unions act in the interest of others comes down to, the authors argue, whether the leadership can convince the membership to go along with their own political projects. They restate their thesis as such: 'sustained political mobilization requires an ideologically motivated founding leadership cohort who devises organizational rules that facilitate both industrial success and coordinated expectations about the leaders' political objectives' [6]. The political activism of union members is reduced in the book to 'contingent consent' with the leaders' political preferences.

This is not to say that the authors argue that the members of social movement unions do not share these preferences. They dedicate their sixth chapter to showing how and why union members develop specific political beliefs during their time in the union. But their approach does, I would suggest, privilege the

view that the organisation's goals and the leaders' goals are synonymous. While I can appreciate the empirical and perhaps theoretical difficulty in establishing the goals of an organisation irrespective of the views of the leaders (as is clear upon reading the book, pronouncements on behalf of the organisation almost always come from the leaders), the relationship between the two is certainly presented as largely uni-directional insofar as the organisation is depicted at times almost as a tool for leaders to advance specific political causes and not the other way round, with the leaders being considered spokespersons of organisations.

It may well be a feature of top-down organisations like trade unions and the historical records they keep that empirical work on events in the past precludes a research method that would include the perspective of the members. Much of the empirical analysis is based on documents held by unions or produced by leading members and includes debates and activities that took place throughout the twentieth century, so obviously ethnographic work would be impossible. The authors do draw on oral accounts from members of the unions discussed, but this focusses on preference formation and consent to leaders' demands; it fails to consider the power of members in shaping the organisational culture and goals of the union and the thesis that leaders are responding to members' demands and not the other way round. The authors touch on a number of examples where members carried out wildcat strikes (unofficial strikes not conducted in accordance with union policy) [98], otherwise opposed union leaders and got their way and came to the realization 'that they could act on their own behalf' and of the 'pleasure of agency' [169], but these are very much mentioned in passing and are not used to provide support for an alternative thesis: that union members engage politically on the basis of autonomy and are consciously aware of their power to do so. Ahlquist and Levi do point out that they 'are not arguing for "great men" or that the attributes of a few individuals are sufficient for explaining all our outcome of interest' [25], but while they may be at pains to avoid such an approach, their analysis does tend to lean toward this.

Another interesting discussion the research in the book brings up is the role of information and communication in the organisational structure of trade unions. Ahlquist and Levi write that in the case of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, for example, the leaders 'have always engaged in considerable communication with the rank and file, using newspapers and meetings for purposes of both information transmittal and stimulus to action' [136]. Communication plays, therefore, two roles within the organisation: firstly, it keeps members informed of what is happening and, secondly and as a result of the first, it stimulates them to political action. While the authors do not make this point explicitly it is clear from their research that communication has a key role in creating the possibilities for action. They do, for example, say that leadership

in social movement unions encourage worker education and 'labor schools' 'in order to improve the capacity of members to organize and act strategically in their own interests but also as a way to influence how members come to think about what they should and can do about the larger world in which they live' [137]. This deserves further discussion.

On the one hand, what the authors seem to be suggesting is that education and media are used to help form the preferences and beliefs of the members of the organisation. This is in line with their general argument that the members of the organisation largely follow the political plans of leaders who have provided for them materially. The leaders in this case provide the strategic worldview necessary for allowing the members to form the preferences desired of them. For example, Harry Bridges, the leader of the ILWU for some forty years, had a column in the union's newspaper in which he 'offered his perspectives on causes on which he felt the ILWU should act' [137]. This is supported in the sixth chapter based on accounts from members [e.g. 168].

On the other hand, the spread of information and the use of communication might also suggest a more autonomous account of political action within the unions, with member's being educated, and self-educated, with the effect of increasing their own ability to shape the union's political activism. While much of the research contained in the book may preclude support for such a thesis, as discussed above, there are hints in the accounts from members towards this. For example, for all their effort to show that communication and information come from the leadership, Ahlquist and Levi do include mention of self-education on the part of the workers and that '(m)uch of what they reported learning was communicated in [...] dense, close groups of co-workers' [176]. They quote one retired member of the Waterside Workers Federation as saying that '[working in the holds with other unionists] was like being at school everyday. School on the waterside' [*ibid.*].

This could well suggest a cybernetic account of the political action that took place: i.e. that the information provided not only by the leadership but by networks of members allowed for the formation of preferences and shaping of political actions in an autonomous way. Indeed, one could even suggest, in line with the work of Stafford Beer (e.g. 1974) on organisational cybernetics, that an organisation requires the autonomous participation of its members and that explanations that rely on a centralised and top-down account miss this crucial aspect in their analysis. Without a broader range of data than is included in the book it is impossible to provide sufficient evidence for this alternative thesis, but the mentions of autonomous political action and education and information

sharing do suggest that the alternative is at least worth considering in the case of the unions discussed.

An interesting avenue for research on contemporary union activism along the lines of the latter thesis would be to examine the role of social media in facilitating this type of autonomy on the part of union members. While Ahlquist and Levi do mention the use of YouTube by the Maritime Union of Australia's film unit in providing educational resources for members [138], this is still within a one-to-many model of communication and not the many-to-many model offered by social media (Swann, 2014). Recent examples of trade unions using social media include the Hotel Workers Rising union in the US which offers an iPhone app that allows customers to choose a hotel that employs union labour (see: www.hotelworkersrising.org/hotelguide). A more many-to-many example is the Stop and Frisk iPhone and Android app from the New York Civil Liberties Union (not a trade union, granted) which allows witnesses of stop and frisk actions by the police to send details which will then be recorded by the NYCLU while also being transmitted to members of local communities to warn them that a stop and frisk action is taking place in the neighbourhood (see: www.nyclu.org/app). A similar example is the Greek website and app that maps strikes and other union actions (see: www.apergia.gr).

That Ahlquist and Levi do not engage with contemporary happenings around social media is of course not a problem given that their book aims at a historical study of social movement unions, but the focus on top-down leadership and communication structures and the assumption of rather unengaged followership on the part of union members is a shame. The several examples they touch on of autonomous action by union members suggest that an alternative to their thesis is realistic and should be studied. This is perhaps all the more pertinent given the shift that can be seen from a hierarchical model of political organisation to a more horizontal and networked form over the last few decades. Examining union activism from the perspective of autonomous, networked arrangements of politically active and engaged workers (again the notion of the Multitude is important here, as is the work of social movement theorists such as Maeckelbergh (2009) and Feigenbaum et al. (2013)) could perhaps provide a more important lesson for contemporary social movements in terms of preference forming and reinforcement, consistent and long-term commitment to political goals and successful education and communication strategies. Ahlquist and Levi's book is, however, clearly a very impressive piece of research and, while I cannot comment on this with a view to its intended field, contains a great deal of insights that are of key interest to those working on political organisation in general and social movements and activism more specifically.

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