In search of regional industrial culture: the role of labour organisations in old industrial regions

David Sadler
John Thompson

Department of Geography, University of Durham, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK, e-mail: d.w.sadler@durham.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

Whether in terms of the contribution made to regional economic success or as an explanation for regional failure, industrial culture has become an increasingly fashionable object of analysis. Such emphasis is partly due to the cultural turn in social science in general, and in spatially-informed analyses in particular, but it also reflects growing awareness that there are real and quite tangible cultural aspects to the regional economy. There is relatively little agreement however on what exactly it is that constitutes or creates a distinctive regional industrial culture, let alone the mechanisms by which that culture might contribute to economic performance.

At the same time – and almost as if in parallel - there has recently been growing attention paid to another perceived shortcoming in explanations of regional uneven development, the relatively limited attention that has been paid to date to the role of organised labour. It has been argued that accounts which stress the role of corporate strategies or of state policies without recognising the capacity of labour to act in and of its own initiative are fundamentally flawed. Whilst the institutional forms of organised labour might only be rendered meaningful in their relationship with corporate and state strategies, they are nonetheless deeply significant. In short, accounts of production’s many and varied spatial forms – of the interaction of capital and labour across space - are deficient without recognising that there is also a labour geography which needs to be explored and taken into consideration.
This paper therefore seeks to bring these debates together, through an examination of the ways in which the institutions of organised labour contribute to the formulation of distinctive regional industrial cultures. It first explores in outline the key characteristics of regional industrial culture and the ways in which organised labour might be implicated in the formulation, maintenance and dissolution of such cultures. These ideas are then developed through a detailed case study of the role of the main steel workers’ union in the UK, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC), in the construction and development of a regional industrial culture in Teesside, north east England. It is evident that the ISTC has played an active and often under-recognised part in this region, a role which is changing as the union seeks to adapt to new conditions. Some of the implications of these changes – which affect many labour unions in different parts of the world – are then addressed through an examination of the tensions between inclusion and exclusion in union activity. The paper concludes by tentatively identifying the implications of these different forms of union organisation for regional economic performance.

1. **Regional industrial culture and organised labour**

**In search of regional industrial culture** Recent years have witnessed the rise of explanations for differential regional economic performance which are influenced by institutional and evolutionary economics (see for instance Amin and Thrift 1994). It has been argued that understanding the varying trajectories of regions in a context of enhanced globalisation of economic activity requires the adoption of a new set of concepts. These stress institutional characteristics, path-dependency, the different ways by which firms become embedded in place, and the varied extent to which that
process occurs. All this represents more than a rediscovery of Marshall’s notion of ‘industrial atmosphere’. It reflects in particular a concern to explain the reasons behind the success of certain newly-emergent agglomerations in the later years of the twentieth century. The debate on embeddedness – key to rediscovery of the region as an object of analysis – has shifted over time from economic factors (including the vertical disintegration of the division of labour) to social and cultural explanations. These include intense levels of inter-firm collaboration, a sense of common purpose, and institutional support for local firms in the form of programmes and mechanisms for the encouragement of innovation and skill formation. In short, there is now a view that understanding regional success involves – at least in part – acknowledgement of a region’s social atmosphere, built around a series of inherited traditions and practices which have created both tangible and intangible institutional characteristics.

A significant question which arises from and is addressed by this research is, why should it be that some regions and firms are able to adapt more rapidly and more effectively than others? How, in other words, can we understand the mechanisms by which one firm gains competitive advantage over another, or by which one region adopts a different path of transformation from others which – superficially at least – possess similar, shared characteristics? For instance, Saxenian (1994) explained the contrasting economic performance of Silicon Valley and Route 128 in terms of their differing capacities as a milieu for the generation of inter-firm trust and collaboration.

\[1\] It has also been argued that the success of particular regions is due in part to the distinctive nature of their civil society, with a civic tradition of consensus and participation (see Putnam 1993). In this view of the world, regions with ‘better’ social capital produce better democracy with better economic results. Against this it has been argued that civil society is as much an arena of contest as the workplace, and that there is no automatic translation from the strength of democratic institutions to regional economic performance (Amin 1996).
- in other words, as culturally different contexts. Schoenberger (1997) sought alternatively to answer this question at the level of the firm, by focusing on the failure of many American corporations to change successfully in the 1960s and 1970s. She argued that an explanation for this was to be found in corporate culture and the fashioning of managerial identity, which structured and narrowed the possibilities of transformation. Thus her focus was on the culture of the firm as a means of understanding its strategy, and on the use and selection of information and knowledge. The firm was seen as a product of the identity of its senior managers, who are caught up in the exercise of power. When a set of new conditions (such as different forms of market or product competition) challenges the self-validation of managerial power, corporate and personal interest may come into conflict: “the need to transform the firm in order to remain competitive may encounter one of its most serious obstacles in the social being, position and perception of the people who run it” (p 147).

Whilst Schoenberger’s account provides an insight into the ways in which the internal workings of the firm might be theorised in order to explain corporate success or failure, it does not however seek to embed the culture of the firm in territory. It prioritises senior managerial identity and sees little place for regionally-specific attributes or for the role of other actors, in particular labour. Similarly, Saxenian’s prime goal was to explore regional contrasts in terms of the creation of networks of trust and co-operation, without necessarily seeking to understand the mechanisms of change as they might affect relations between capital and labour. And yet such interactions – we argue here – remain of significance in terms of our understanding of the dynamics of regional transformation and regional industrial culture.
A useful distinction can be drawn in this context between *adaptation* and *adaptability* (see for instance Grabher and Stark 1997). The former signifies a capacity to change incrementally within a framework of relatively narrow and largely unquestioned parameters (to adapt to change without posing deep questions), whilst the latter denotes the ability to ask radically different questions and to experiment with different responses. For the region (as well as for the firm) it can be argued that adaptability is an important long-term asset, particularly in the context of highly-fluid market conditions. Firms (and regions) which lack adaptability are likely to be left behind by others which are more versatile. In accounting for the problems of old industrial regions, this phenomenon has been labelled `institutional blockage’ – a process by which institutional structures have evolved which become a mechanism for the suppression of the exploration of alternative development paths, and a desire to continue instead with conventional policy mechanisms and corporate strategies.

In much of this debate however, there remains a great deal which is taken-for-granted and unquestioned, particularly when it comes to specifying the role of culture (Gertler 1997). In (somewhat programmatically) explaining the `rise of the rustbelt’ (signifying the recovery of some old industrial regions in western Europe and North America on the back of a regeneration of mature technologies), Cooke (1995, 245) laid the blame for previous problems on a “culture of defensiveness and dependence [derived] from long years of class-based solidaristic struggle”. He identified a need for “cultural change in the mentalities of members of civil society, their elected representatives and managers of business enterprises”. This prescription for cultural change involves a search for ways whereby old industrial regions might become
reflexive, associational, learning regions. The limits to learning regions have been explored elsewhere – and they are substantial (Hudson 1999) - but of greater significance here is the association of culture with knowledge and information, which is characteristic of much recent work on policies for regional renewal.

In the empirical account which follows below, we adopt a slightly different perspective on regional industrial culture, one which is less narrowly linked with notions of learning and technological change. Our account is more attuned with Storper’s (1995) sense of the region as a source of becoming in capitalism; as a construct in and of a series of untraded interdependencies which include taken-for-granted conventions and routines. Our focus is not on the ways in which learning strategies and technical change might drive or alter those practices, but rather on the capacities and actions of one particular and largely under-acknowledged contributor to them: the institutions of organised labour. Put another way, our argument here is that regional industrial culture is significant when it comes to accounting for patterns of uneven regional development, and that part – but only part – of that culture involves the traditions, expectations and capacities of labour as an actor in its own individual and collective right.

**Organised labour and the region** Despite labour’s self-evident geographical significance, there has been relatively little work until quite recently on the spatiality of organised labour. In part this reflects a disciplinary divide between economic geography and the field of industrial relations, with much of the latter being grounded in a framework which takes the national state as its presumed point of departure (McGrath-Champ 1994). This conceptual shortcoming is being addressed however, as
research has begun to consider the capacities of labour to organise over space (and the role of inter-union conflicts), and to question how labour might challenge the scale at which relations between capital and labour are constituted (see for instance Herod 1997, Sadler 1999, Wills 1998). Exploring the role of labour in shaping the economic landscape in this way requires a conceptual shift, from seeing labour as a passive recipient of change to viewing it as an active and conscious participant.

Problematising labour organisation in this fashion is significant not only because it enables labour to be taken seriously in its own right. It also involves a reconsideration of the ways in which labour is organised, and how the institutions of organised labour take shape from - and help to fashion – patterns and processes of uneven development. In the UK for example, nationally-organised trade unions exhibit marked spatial variations in their patterns of membership and organisational activity. There has been a lively debate over the reasons for and implications of this, with one argument stressing continued high levels of regional variation (see Martin et al 1996) and an alternative view suggesting that some flattening-out in levels of membership has occurred through losses in the former heartlands of the north, as these regions shed labour from their traditional (and traditionally highly-organised) industries (see Massey and Painter 1989). In part such debates reflect the relative perceived merits as explanatory indices of union density (the proportion of workers unionised) as opposed to the absolute volume of union membership. They point however to the fact that there are significant differences in the way in which labour representation takes place at the sub-national level – in other words, that there is substantial inter-regional variation in propensity to join and be active in national union organisations.
In part, this is a function of regional industrial culture, established and created through geographically-specific traditions (Martin et al 1996, 118-9):

the union and industrial relations traditions of key groups of workers, firms and industries in a region are not self-contained, but rather generate spillovers to other workers, firms and industries in the region through the course of time. Although the specific mechanisms involved are complex and are themselves influenced by the process and path of local economic development, the result is that the attitudes, expectations and behaviour of employees and employers in other industries in the region are influenced by the historical traditions and contemporary proximity of those locally dominant industries and their workforces... [O]nce this regional externality effect begins to develop, it becomes self-reproducing through a process of local institutionalisation and socialisation, thereby generating a regionally embedded set of industrial relations traditions and cultures.

These traditions are not static and unchanging, but are continuously re-made in ways that draw on and contribute to changing national and local economic circumstances. Thus, it is necessary to trace out the connections between locally dominant firms and industries, and broader aspects of regional industrial culture. Precisely how these links are established and reproduced is a matter on which there has been (as yet) relatively little research. It is this issue which is explored in the discussion of the ISTC’s influence on Teesside below, as we map out some of the detailed mechanisms through which one union has played a distinctive role in the creation of this region’s industrial culture.

A focus on organised labour’s role in regional growth prospects figures strongly in another, related debate. It has been argued that industrial relations are presently being re-cast at the regional scale; that a focus on national level developments unduly ignores the significance of more localised processes (Perulli 1993). Accounts in this tradition draw on the literature on co-operation, arguing that it is at the regional scale
that trust between management and employees can most readily be established. For example Locke (1990) described the development of geographically-delimited labour relations agreements in Italy. These incorporated questions such as training and working hours but not wages, which remained subject to national determination. They were exemplified with respect to the textile district of Biella in Piedmont, where 3,000 out of 5,000 firms and (35,000 out of 44,000 employees) were engaged in this one industry. There, unions and local business leaders had united in what he described as a ‘pact for development’, co-operating in a renewal of the region’s industrial capacity. Similarly, Kern and Sabel (1992) explored the emergence of out-sourcing arrangements in the German automotive industry. They proposed that a viable strategy for labour would entail co-operation with local firms and employers’ organisations, so as to promote the development of regionally-embedded industry-specific supply chains.

There are alternative views to this rosy picture of collaborative behaviour. Teague (1995) rejected the notion that national forms of labour relations bargaining could, let alone should, be replaced by regional systems. He argued that trust-based local arrangements binding workers and management together were far from widespread. Instead, collective bargaining was still about connective bargaining – the linking of national and local issues and structures. Similarly, others have observed how trade union organisations are reluctant to re-define the region as an independent field of their activities, preferring to focus their energies at national level (CEC 1996, 69). These criticisms are powerful, and it is difficult to envisage wholesale adoption of regional trust-based systems of capital/labour collaboration. There are nonetheless signs that the region is being seen as of increased significance within the field of
industrial relations theory, even if there is as yet little consensus on where such developments might lead.

Thus from a number of directions a consensus appears to be emerging on the significance of organised labour in the construction and re-configuration of regional industrial culture. Firstly, it has been recognised that organised labour should be conceptualised as an actor in its own right. Secondly, there is a distinct spatiality to organised labour, reflecting regional differences in union membership, density, and propensity to take collective action. These variations are a product of geographically-specific historical traditions, constructed over time through a spill-over from locally-dominant firms and industries to create distinctive regional industrial cultures. Thirdly, the literature on trust-based forms of production has stressed regional collaborative behaviour between capital and labour. Whilst such a view of the world is of questionable general applicability – and need not necessarily have the positive all-round benefits claimed by some of its proponents – the prospect of regional coalitions needs at the least to be taken into consideration. Thus in the following section we explore in depth some of the ways in which one union – the ISTC – has influenced the evolution of regional industrial culture in one region, Teesside in north east England. We begin by outlining some of the key features of the region in question, paying particular attention to its economic history and the influence of particular industries and firms in the creation of the place.

2. An illustration: the role of the ISTC in Teesside, north east England
If one industry can be said to have shaped a region, that region is Teesside in north east England, and the industry is steel. Whilst not quite the classic one-industry community associated with images of coal mining villages and steel towns the world over, industrial Teesside is nonetheless imbued with the legacies of its origins as a coal-export terminal and (following the discovery of local iron ore) an iron and steel making centre from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (see Beynon et al 1994, Briggs 1963, Gladstone 1976). The town of Middlesbrough (one of the constituent parts of the Teesside conurbation, which has a population today of around 500,000 and includes Hartlepool on the north bank of the River Tees, the one-time market town of Stockton-on-Tees to the west and a series of settlements on the south bank stretching to the modern steel plants at Lackenby and Redcar in the east, on the coast) grew from nothing to a population of nearly 100,000 in the second half of the nineteenth century, almost wholly on the back of the expanding iron and steel trade. The other major local employer – the chemicals industry – underwent a similar expansion in the first half of the twentieth century. At mid-century steel accounted for one in five of all jobs in Teesside, and chemicals a further 15 per cent. In the early 1970s, steel still employed 30,000 people, nearly all of them men.

The story since that time has been one of almost unremitting contraction in terms of employment (despite – indeed even partly because of – massive investment in new facilities), with the workforce now reduced to a bare 4,000 employees. Large-scale unemployment resulted directly from this rundown, particularly in the 1980s when the county of Cleveland (an administrative unit subsequently abolished) recorded the highest rates of unemployment in mainland Britain. Steel’s historical influence runs deeper than this however, into local politics and civil society. Production locally was
dominated by a small number of firms – Bell Brothers, Bolckow Vaughan, South Durham Steel and Iron, and Dorman Long (and chemical production too was controlled by just one firm, ICI, from its formation by merger in 1926 onwards). These firms developed pervasive and long-lasting forms of political representation built on paternalism and patronage (Sadler 1990). Teesside was thus fashioned as a series of discrete settlements – contiguous company towns – characterised by a particular kind of capital/labour consensus that was intrinsically both accommodational and localist.

The UK steel industry was nationalised in 1967 and then privatised in 1988, with one major firm – British Steel – emerging out of these re-alignments. Labour representation nationally was dominated throughout these changes by one union, the ISTC, which was created through merger of a number of pre-existing bodies in 1917. The ISTC was not the only union present in the steel trade; one consequence of lingering craft-based traditions was that even in 1967 there were still fourteen unions organising workers in different (mostly occupationally-defined) branches of the industry. It was however overwhelmingly the most significant, and this position is itself important. The ISTC has been an exceptionally moderate trade union, on the right-wing of union politics, and predominantly concerned with wages and conditions rather than broader issues. The only major national steel strike in recent times - a three-month dispute in 1980 – was contested over wages, not closures, even though it took place at a key moment in the ongoing contraction of the industry. The ISTC has been a single-industry union, expert at the detail of work-related bargaining but limited in its political ambitions. These attributes were unevenly developed across the different steel-producing regions of the UK, but clearly visible on Teesside.
Thus the role of the ISTC in this region merits close attention, for the union has been a conscious, willing and influential agent in the shaping of the place. On Teesside nationally-led centrist labour politics come together with paternalistic capital:labour relations and deeply embedded localist forms of self-identification to create the possibility for a distinctive kind of regional industrial culture. This section explores the ways in which such workplace-based social processes have evolved, and how they have impacted on (and been fashioned by) the broader community. Four issues are considered in particular: the work-related aspects of unionism in local culture, the relations (within the ISTC) between Teesside and other steel regions, the pattern of fragmentation in collective bargaining even within the plant, and a recent attempt to re-orient the ISTC – after decades of decline – into a broader, community-based organisation.

**Steel unionism and local culture** The ISTC has become, over the years, a taken-for-granted presence on Teesside, part of the social fabric of the region. Working in the industry meant joining the union, often following in the footsteps of (male) family relations. Promotion in the industry was achieved through seniority (length of service), and through this alone, whilst union activity at the local level was structured through plant- and occupation-based branches. The inherited traditions of the union in Teesside are deeply influenced by gender (the union’s first official history was titled simply “Men of steel”: see Pugh 1951). In this, they reflect both the extent to which employment in the industry is dominated by men, and prevailing images of physically arduous working conditions and of adversarial bargaining (although the reality with regard to the latter – as portrayed above - is more often one of compromise and
As Bill Sirs, who rose from a position as local official at Hartlepool to become General Secretary of the union from 1975 to 1985, put it:

In the north east, it was hard, they [management] were hard. You wouldn’t even get a cup of tea in the negotiations. You’d fight hard for every penny, and that’s how it was. It was all hard-nosed negotiations, and we did not have anybody we could sit down and associate with from the management side. They were all hard people. You could talk to them all right, but that was it. They were the employers, and you were on the other side. That was the attitude that existed.

In part such perceptions (of “hard” opponents in the guise of unyielding management) have been willingly adopted by the ISTC locally, anxious as it has been to maintain its position over other (minority) unions representing particular groups of workers employed in steel production, and to consolidate its image as a single-industry, specialist union. The ISTC’s attitude has been that it organises the vast majority of workers in the sector, and therefore should have the leading role in any negotiations. As long as other unions recognised and accepted this, local relations remained amicable:

I’ve never had any problems with other unions locally, and vice versa. They know where they stand, as long as they know they come second there isn’t a problem.

Clive Lewis, former Divisional Officer^2

This attitude is also reflected in the belief that the ISTC is able to benefit from its exclusive focus on steel, in terms of a greater intimacy of knowledge about the industry:

Our wish to be a single-industry union goes back over a hundred years. There are clear benefits in that the problems [of the industry] are known and

^2 The ISTC employs a number of full-time regional officials known as Divisional Officers or Divisional Organisers. In addition the branches elect members from the constituency of branch secretaries to an Executive Council, which is the ultimate decision-making body of the union. There is also an Annual Delegate Conference which provides a forum for broader consultation and participation.
understood by all concerned. The bigger unions are fudged together because what they do is set up specific groups within the general union. All that does is bring together a number of specialist unions and pretend that it’s a general union. We prefer to be honest. No manager could ever point his finger at me and say that I did not know what I was talking about.

Brian Connolly, former Divisional Officer

The prevailing self-portrait of the ISTC on Teesside thus includes a number of attributes which cross over into (and derive from) local industrial culture. These are socially constructed and depicted as a “natural” reflection of work in the industry, dependent on specialist (one-time craft) skills which are passed on from generation to generation (and therefore requiring an expert union presence), dominated by men, and built on an apparent inevitability of high levels of unionisation. There is more than a degree of elitism in the ISTC’s attitude towards other unions, built around its claims to be the most comprehensive and knowledgeable representative of labour in steel. Such features have historically structured the nature of the engagement between the ISTC and the local Teesside economy.

**Relations with other steel regions** These cultural qualities are sharpened by a distinctive regional identity, which sets steel workers on Teesside apart from those engaged in the same industry elsewhere in the country. Such differences have been encouraged by corporate strategy, as management has sought to play one works off against another:

The attitude generated by British Steel is one of divide and conquer. There were five integrated plants [until Ravenscraig closed in 1992], and not one of them was safe. So everybody said that they will do everything they can to protect their plant, so it’s not our one that closes and another one does.

Mick Adams, Divisional Officer
This territorial competition was also, however, built on long-standing traditions of inter-regional difference within the union. Historically, the ISTC’s power-base has been within south Yorkshire and south Wales, reflecting the concentration of membership in these regions (this is also evident in the composition of the Executive Council, which has seven members each from south Yorkshire and south Wales, three from the north east of England, two from the Midlands and one each from Scotland and the south east of England – although it should also be noted that the central office based in London is a powerful centralising force). Steel workers in south Wales have been viewed with particular suspicion on Teesside, as John Batstone (a former branch secretary) described in relation to the three-month 1980 national strike:

We suspected that the people in south Wales had an agreement before the strike even started. They made an agreement very quickly immediately following the strike. Everything that they [south Wales] agreed to appeared in our agreement. Some of their stuff didn’t suit us and we wanted it changed. British Steel became masters at playing one off against another.

These perceptions carried forward into the way in which bargaining was structured following privatisation of the company in 1988:

Different cultures have arisen in the different businesses that British Steel was divided into. In my view, the Welsh culture is softer than the Long Products culture [the company was divided into two divisions – Strip Products, mostly south Wales, and Long Products, including Teesside]. British Steel have exploited these differences. It’s harmed the union, because different areas have different expectations. One group may come to an agreement that in the end is a detriment to other groups because British Steel see that as a green light, and they will hang on through our resistance until they manage to find a way through it. They have realised that they can use the Welsh as a lever. For instance, both the north east and Wales used to negotiate on wages in April. In 1992, British Steel tried to change our negotiating until October. We wouldn’t have it. The next year, British Steel moved the Welsh to October. So British Steel managed to break up the negotiations and set us against the Welsh. They’ve done it with the job evaluation exercises, they’ve managed to get it in Wales but not yet here. The Welsh have a history of doing that, they’ve gone for employment packages, changes in manual pay – British Steel have always gone to Wales first. We think the Welsh are a bit weaker, so we tend to hold out for more up here and we have managed to do so a little bit. It has caused
difficulties on our Executive Council from time to time, and British Steel know it.

Tony Poynter, Executive Council member

These inter-regional tensions partly also reflect political differences, constructed without any assistance from management. Within the national politics of the ISTC, Teesside and Scotland were once closely aligned:

There was a certain affinity between the Executive Council members in the No. 2 division [north east England] and the ones in No. 1 [Scotland]. They tended to be classed in the same political group. Politics used to play a large part in who your friends were within the EC. When No. 1 division was thriving, before Ravenscraig closed, it was a highly politicised region and the EC members used to be very close to ours. There’s only one EC member in Scotland now. But things aren’t the same. The EC isn’t as politicised as it used to be. Left and Right just aren’t as important as they used to be.

Mick Adams, Divisional Officer

Put another way, the ISTC on Teesside has defined itself in territorial terms over the years. This process has been encouraged by a managerial strategy of “divide and conquer”, but has also been internal to the politics of the union. Workers in south Wales have become associated with conflicting priorities in wage and other bargaining arrangements. Thus a second set of cultural attributes include a degree of territorial chauvinism, a conscious recognition – even ready acceptance – of difference from workers in the same industry elsewhere in the country.

The union within the plant This is not to suggest that the ISTC operates uniformly across the various steel plants on Teesside. As with any large organisation, the reality is much more complex. There is an ongoing tension between the ways in which Teesside differs from other steel regions, and the potential for small-scale variations in procedure, agreement and conditions within the region. The ISTC is particularly
susceptible to such localised practices as its constitution guarantees a high degree of freedom of action at the level of individual branches over such issues.

This autonomy was increasingly realised in practice after the 1980 strike, and given further impetus by privatisation. Branch officials took their cue from an increasingly devolved pattern of industrial relations bargaining:

The strike cleared out the older people. People who had been trade unionists for a long time were replaced by younger blood. Branches became much more responsible for what they were doing, rather than following instructions from the national union. Branches tended to ignore the national ideals, and get on with things locally as best as they could. Privatisation accelerated the autonomy of the branches. By that time, people were doing lots of their own deals. Branches are now massively more autonomous. They can decide what they want to do for themselves, then do it. They won’t take any notice of national officials, if they want to do something they’ll do it.

Mick Mannion, Executive Council member

One consequence of this decentralisation has been a strengthening of local collaborative behaviour in particular parts of the plant between management and union officials:

Before, there weren’t such good relationships at local levels. Now, because you’re dealing with people on a day-to-day basis, you tend to have a better relationship. British Steel have worked on that, they’ve realised that you’ve got to have a relationship with the union because they realise, I think, that a traditional industry such as steel has a strong union base. The relationship with management has changed, it’s not as confrontational. In this works they understand us, we’re no soft touch here, and they know it.

Tony Poynter, Executive Council member

Thus enhanced autonomy at branch level has fostered a more consensual style of management-union relations at that level.
Within the works there are marked differences in the capacity of particular branches to both define and achieve their objectives:

The strongest branches have always been the BOS plant [the steel making plant], the Concast [continuous casting of molten steel], and the Beam Mill. Management understand that too. These people don’t agree to everything, but their relationship with management is good. They’re also the best paid branches. It’s all about doing deals. The worst branches are the ones that won’t do deals, they always end up at the back of the queue.

Mick Mannion, Executive Council member

These variations partly reflect the differing traditions of each branch:

The Concast branch has always been the strongest because of the continuity of its officials. I was branch secretary for 23 years. Colin Wildon, my successor, he’d been active in the plant for years before he took over from me. The BOS plant is a little different. They have the same people on the committee, but they tend to rotate the personnel every two or three years. So there’s continuity there too, but in a different way. But continuity is the most important thing, that and realising you have independence and autonomy in your own branch.

Dave Hunt, former secretary, Concast branch

In part too such differences reflect the position of these branches at the core of the overall production process, and their one-time monopoly of specific craft-based skills. Even if these skills are now less significant (with the advent of large-scale automation), they have left a legacy:

The BOS and Concast branches tend to be well-run, active, and they have more formalised systems of organisation. They feel a little bit elite, they have the old sort of artisan ethos about them, they see themselves as the cream. Years ago, they laid down strict branch rules, and they still make sure that when people come into these branches they conform. That discipline leads to people being educated into their ways and continuing on in the same vein.

Bernard Pike

The strongest branches traditionally in Teesside are the steel plants, the BOS and Concast plants. In the end, we’re a steel plant, and if we don’t make steel we’ve got a problem. Over the years the branches concerned have had a lot of success in using this weapon. That’s why they are strong branches. The members can rule the roost. The proof is that the Concast workers are the highest paid [manual] workers around here.
Such issues of intra-union communication are likely to be of increased significance as the company seeks further changes to the organisation of work:

On the one hand we’re a national union with national objectives, but each individual branch can go off and do exactly what it wants. The union has national objectives, but if one individual branch, without breaking any of the rules of the Confederation, wanted to do something that was totally different, they have the right to do it. At the moment, we have an enabling agreement for Teamworking on Teesside. If one branch wants to opt out of that Teamworking Agreement and go it on their own, then they’re quite entitled to do that.

Colin Wildon, secretary, Concast branch

This latest challenge to union organisation – teamworking – was introduced locally in the 1990s. For an industry built on principles of seniority and hierarchical authority, the introduction of self-managing teams under a team leader (and incorporating workers from more than one union) represents a substantial departure. It also poses quite fundamental problems for union organisation within the plant:

I think that Teamworking will have one hell of an effect on local union representation. I've got no objections with Teamworking in principle, it's the model of Teamworking they want to impose that I have a problem with. I believe it is a deliberate attempt to negate the influence of the trade union.

Mick Adams, Divisional Officer

Such views are based on the assumption that the introduction of teamworking represents an attempt to align workers’ interests more closely with those of the company, and less with those of the union – to interpose a new and different level of communication and dialogue within the plant. They also – in part – reflect the ISTC’s traditional attitude to the involvement of other unions in the industry.
A third defining characteristic of the ISTC on Teesside is therefore its highly fragmented pattern of activity and authority within the plant. Building on long-standing traditions of branch autonomy, collaborative bargaining at the micro-level has flourished in recent years. Branches most central to the production process – those at the core of the steelmaking activities – have used this position of relative strength to extract particularly favourable agreements from management. Such deals implicitly question the national organisation, whilst more recent developments in the organisation of work – the introduction of teamworking – also challenge the very nature of trade unionism. In terms of contribution to local industrial culture, then, the ISTC brings a focus on highly workplace-specific issues of wage and conditions bargaining, and a respect for seniority and hierarchy that sits uneasily with new forms of work organisation.

**A new direction? The ISTC and community unionism** Faced with a catastrophic fall in membership, the ISTC at national level – arguably somewhat belatedly – recognised the need to act in the 1990s. Recruitment and retention of members became a priority, resulting in some change to organisational remits:

In the last few years the roles of the Divisional Office and the branches have changed significantly. We have now moved to what we call Priority One, which is recruitment. We are trying to change what we have become over the years, which is a servicing union, to an organising union. We’re attempting to give power back to the local [branch] officials in the local area. They effectively look after themselves a lot more than they have been doing. They were dependent on this office a lot of the time. Instead of trying to solve their own problems they phoned us and got us to sort things out. What we’re trying to do now is empower the local officials, to leave us free in this office to go out and recruit new members.

Mick Adams, Divisional Officer
In the process, full-time employees of the union (the Divisional Officers) have been somewhat upstaged by branch officials elected on to the union’s governing body, its Executive Council. As one branch official put it:

It appears to be the EC that is taking a lot of the power. I don’t like it, EC members are supposed to be at work as well. I think their role should perhaps become a full-time role. The EC members seem to be becoming full-time officers given the amount of time spent in negotiations. I don’t speak to the Divisional Officers as much as I used to. It’s really only administrative matters that I bother them with. I think the EC are taking over. There’s no reason to get in touch with the full-time officers, because if you want to discuss agreements, it’s the EC members who know the whole details.

Adrian Cook, works representative, Redcar coke ovens

Such perceptions are shared in the Divisional Office:

The Divisional Office does not have the autonomy it used to have. Head Office used to leave the Divisions to get on with their own business and provided nothing happened to contravene the rules of the constitution, there wasn’t a lot of interference. As a result of the new policies a lot of that autonomy has been taken away, and it has gone to the branches and Executive Committee members.

Mick Adams, Divisional Officer

Thus the recruitment drive has encouraged a changing set of internal union responsibilities.

It is difficult to under-state the perceived significance of the ISTC’s conversion to its new role of “organising” rather than “servicing”. Launched in 1992 as the “Fresh Start” initiative, the union has attempted to break with a near century-old tradition of focusing on the steel industry, and instead broaden out its membership base. This has been rationalised in terms of a continued need for the union to be seen to be supporting steel communities, even if most (or in some cases all) of the jobs provided directly by the steel industry have gone. In this way, the ISTC is seeking to transform
itself into what it calls a community union, as described by General Secretary Mick Leahy:

The hardest thing for us to come to terms with has been the contraction of the steel industry. The ISTC aren’t short of cash, when compared with the rest of the union movement. What were we to do? Manage decline? Or alternatively, keep the best traditions of the union alive by recruiting in the steel communities? Most of our former members and their families that live in steel areas work in industries that have replaced steel jobs. Most of those industries are low-paid, non-unionised, and employ a great deal of women. Because of our commitment to the steel industry and the associated communities, we thought we could put something back whilst regenerating the union. We’re being quite successful in the transition towards a community-based organisation.

This “community-based” organisational model has been put in place on Teesside, as elsewhere:

There are people out there living in ex-steel communities, and chances are they live with or are related to ex-steelworkers. Our line is that if they aren’t in a union they aren’t being represented properly and getting the benefits they deserve. In the first few months of the campaign we weren’t even managing to check the losses we were sustaining [in steel]. We’re now at the stage where we’re still making losses at British Steel as they downsize, but as recruitment continues we’re managing to stand still. We’re hoping to build on this. That would help us to remain an independent trade union rather than become a section of the AEEU or the TGWU [the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union and the Transport and General Workers Union, both significantly larger, general unions].

Mick Adams, Divisional Officer

As Teesside’s Divisional Officer hinted, another driving force behind the ISTC’s campaign is a desire to maintain its independence. Despite large-scale job losses in steel the ISTC remains financially robust and would be a highly attractive take-over prospect for other unions. As Assistant General Secretary Eddie Lynch explained however:

We have no plans to merge with anyone. We’re particularly financially sound. For example, if you take the AEEU, to have the per capita asset ratio that we have at present they would have to have assets of £1.6bn. They’ve been trying it on with us for years, on the one hand they’re always trying to put their arm
around us and help us, but next minute they’re trying to undermine our recruitment.

Or as Ted Markham (Hartlepool branch secretary) put it somewhat more directly:

It’s a means to keep our union as an independent union. If we say that we’re going to stay just as a steel union, I can’t see us being able to keep our independence.

Several different motives therefore coincide in the Fresh Start campaign: a wish to recruit new members and to stay independent, legitimised by expressions of continued support for present and former steel communities.

The ISTC is not of course alone amongst trade unions in seeking to expand (or at the very least shore up) its membership base. Its position is justified by arguing that it is not seeking to compete with other unions, just recruit from non-unionised workplaces and only in steel communities:

Some other TUC-affiliated unions don’t really like us parking outside non-unionised workplaces and trying to recruit, as we’re outside what they see as our traditional base. They’ll go round and leaflet the day after and that tends to undermine us. But we are staying in the steel communities. We never see ourselves as a general union. We see a responsibility to those people [in steel communities] and we’ll continue working with them.

Eddie Lynch, Assistant General Secretary

To date the ISTC has confined itself to the manufacturing sector in its attempts to recruit new (non-steel) members, although there are signs that pressure is building to recruit even more broadly. Clive Lewis, a former Divisional Officer placed in charge of the recruitment drive (and subsequently retired) voiced the following concerns:

It’ll go wider than I wanted it to. I wanted to stick to manufacturing, rather than places that make sandwiches, or call centres. It’s OK in Division Two, they’re staying in plastics and chemicals. In Scotland it’s electronics. I can’t see the ISTC becoming the new TGWU or anything like that. We’re a manufacturing union. I wouldn’t want supermarket workers in the ISTC – they
should go and join USDAW [the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers]. Fundamentally, if the ISTC stick to manufacturing, you’ll find that people tend to have the same kind of problems. There’s no way we can relate to bloody supermarkets. No chance.

The whole process also raises questions about precisely how such new members are represented within the ISTC. Some see the prospect of different categories or grades of membership:

I can possibly see a two tier union forming. You will always have the strong people bound together by the workplace, because of their obvious common interest. Whereas a community union will have lots of little areas of representation that won’t have the same bond.

Tony Poynter, Executive Council member

The ISTC’s conversion to community unionism therefore involves it in re-defining the nature of its relationship to other unions and to other workplaces.

Behind the Fresh Start campaign are two unanswered and difficult questions: whether the union should be seen to be preparing its members still employed in steel jobs for redundancy via support for retraining, and whether there is still a “steel community” in some of the regions blighted by decades of retrenchment in the industry. Some resources have been devoted to training programmes for members presently employed in steel, on the grounds that if they are laid off or take voluntary redundancy, they would be prime targets for “Priority One”:

We want to retrain our people, be part of inward investment, give our people transferable skills, so that if they leave the industry they can get a job elsewhere. British Steel seem to consider this a waste of our money. We have the money to do it though, and we spend more per capita on education and training than any other UK union.

Mick Leahy, General Secretary
Whether places such as Teesside remain dominated by steel is however an even more
difficult and contentious question, on which there are conflicting views:

I think that Teesside still is a steel community. There were 20,000 to 30,000
steel employees at one time. It’s now 4,500. But there are a lot of people out
there who have been members of the ISTC. One of the strengths of the ISTC is
that we have always had a good system of communication within the
branches. I think there are a lot of people out there who were thankful to have
been ISTC members. There are people out there who will encourage younger
people to join, no matter what their jobs. So there is a wider link to the
community, the ISTC has brought people together.

John Batstone, former branch secretary

I don’t think that there is this steel community ethos. The community has been
destroyed. Twenty years ago, people would agree that a steel community
existed on Teesside. Now I’m not too sure, even if you include those who have
worked in the industry. There’s no doubt of the importance of the steel
industry, but I think the identity has gone.

Tony Poynter, Executive Council
member

The new community focus thus raises some uncomfortable long-term questions over
the impact of both the steel industry and the union in present and former steel regions.

Summary This assessment of the ISTC’s role in Teesside has focused on four
questions. It has shown that many of the cultural attributes of the union in the region
are related to the nature of work in the industry – if not in a necessary fashion, then
contingently through the way in which images of work and the working environment
have been socially constructed. Craft-based occupational hierarchies and seniority-
dependent career progression have underpinned the ISTC’s conscious efforts to be the
“specialist” representative of labour in the industry, whilst popular perceptions of
steelmaking as a physically demanding activity best suited to men are also reflected in
a portrayal of conflictual bargaining conditions. Secondly, the distinctiveness of
labour in steel on Teesside – and more generally in the region – has been constructed
in part through conscious strategies of localism, of difference – of self-identification
as being apart from other steel regions. Thirdly, it has been shown how inside the plant there are long-standing tendencies towards branch autonomy and fragmentation, which have if anything been intensified by recent changes in the organisation of both work and of the union itself. At the micro-level there is a clear tendency towards the formation of consensus with management built in and through a focus on highly workplace-specific issues (and this exposes the part-ideological nature of accounts of bargaining which stress managerial intransigence). And finally, this section has explored the reasons for and implications of the ISTC’s conversion to community unionism, stressing its consequences for the relationship between the ISTC and other unions, and the questions that it poses over union organisation and its relationship to place. These latter questions are investigated briefly below.

3. Exclusion/inclusion? Community unionism and the traditions of organised labour re-visited

This section examines two aspects of the ISTC’s conversion to community unionism and of the union’s longer-term impacts on Teesside’s regional industrial culture. It focuses on some of the tensions and issues thrown up by the new recruitment drive, and on the role of the union as a source of stability.

Historically, the ISTC on Teesside and elsewhere in the UK has been a profoundly exclusive organisation, reflecting even to the present day its origins as an institution closely akin to a craft guild. Many of its branches have been organised on the basis of job structure or trade group, a series of divisions which derive from the occupational history of the steel industry (Bowen 1976). For instance the following trade groups were once recognised: blast furnace (including coke plant), smelters (all types of steel
production), rolling mills, tinplate and Welsh sheet, malleable iron, tubes, “nut, bolt, rivet, nail and light iron and steel”, “steam, hydraulic, electric service, engineering and maintenance”, clerical, and general labourer (Upham 1997, 6). The legacies of this history built on occupational segregation – both internally, and in terms of differentiation from other groups of workers – still linger on. Whilst in some respects the conversion to community unionism might be regarded as a radical departure, it is in other ways far less of a transformation that it might appear at first sight.

It is best seen as a belated response to falling membership and an attempt to preserve a degree of independence, but without any more fundamental reappraisal of the role of the union with regard to local communities. Thus the aspects of `community unionism’ stressed by Tufts (1998) for the case of Canada – in particular a conscious effort on the part of unions to work more closely with other community-based groups – is a world away from the ISTC’s goals. His definition of community unionism – “an organisational model still in an embryonic stage of development… characterised by the formation of coalitions between unions and non-labour groups in order to achieve common goals” (p 228) would not be recognised by many in the ISTC. Nor would attempts at mobilising a more confrontational rank-and-file ideology and countering bureaucratic centralism, as seen for example in the New Directions Movement in the US Union of Auto Workers (UAW) (Dandaneau 1996, 7-33). Rather, the ISTC sits squarely within a centrist tradition in the organised labour movement, even with its present recruitment drive. Hyman (1996, 70-73) identified a five-fold typology of models of trade union identity. The ISTC relates well to his first category, built around an occupational elite as the focus of action, and exclusive representation as the key function. Attempts to re-define inherited union objectives clearly face a difficult
challenge. The ISTC has set out on the path of questioning its constituency and its relationship to social change in the context of new economic conditions, but it still has a long way to travel.

Thus the union’s historical role on Teesside is best understood as a source of innate conservatism in the region’s industrial culture. Whilst influential in the amelioration of some of the earlier hazardous working conditions in the industry (on which see Bell 1985), it has hardly been at the vanguard of social reform since then. At both local and national levels the ISTC has been concerned above all else with the detail of workplace bargaining. It has been a conscious, willing participant in (and co-writer of) the narrowly-defined rules of this game, without questioning what the game is, or why it is played that way, still less what might be an alternative in the longer-term. In these ways then – and as documented in detail above – the ISTC has been an influential element in the institutional blockage of the region, part of the reason behind its limited capacity for adaptability.

4. Concluding comments

In this paper we have sought to explore the role of organised labour in the continual and ongoing creation and re-constitution of regional industrial culture. We have stressed the significance of sub-national differences in labour organisation, and the ways in which geographically-specific traditions of workers in key firms and industries spill over to other firms and industries within a region. We have explored in depth the mechanisms through which one union – the ISTC – has influenced the
evolution over time of one region’s industrial culture, focusing on Teesside in north east England.

This case study identified three distinctive aspects to the union’s role in shaping regional industrial culture. Firstly, many of the cultural qualities created in and through the engagement between the union and the place are related to the nature of work in the industry. Particularly significant here is the way in which ideologies of steelmaking as a set of diverse occupational activities have been socially constructed. The hierarchical and seniority-dependent job pattern has been the foundation stone for the ISTC’s strenuous efforts to be the ‘specialist’ representative of labour in steel, which has led to its separatist attitude towards other unions organising workers in this industry and more generally within the region. Secondly, there is a strong current of regional identity amongst workers in steel on Teesside (or at least as expressed by their representatives). This has been constructed in part through conscious articulation of differences from – even suspicion of – workers in the same industry elsewhere in the country. Thus notions of a nationally-constituted class of workers in steel need to take account of this deep-felt reality. And thirdly, recent tendencies have been towards micro-level fragmentation within the works, as those branches most central to the overall production process (dependent as it is on the continuous production of molten steel) have made use of their bargaining position so as to exert differing terms and conditions from workers elsewhere in the plant. This process has been built on emergent small-scale consensual relations between management and labour, which mirror in many ways the long tradition of the union as a highly accommodative bargaining partner at national level.
Finally, we have also explored the ISTC’s conversion to (a particular brand of) community unionism. We have interpreted this as a potential source of challenge to the union’s traditions, but one which faces an uncomfortable legacy of occupation-derived segregation and exclusion. We have stressed this aspect of the union’s past because this is still – at present – its most significant contribution to Teesside’s regional industrial culture. Without wishing to downplay its role in the creation of better working conditions, the union has become a partial source of institutional blockage in the local economy. It has been influential in – an active part of – the creation of a distinctive regional culture of consensus and compromise which has proved deficient in the fundamental task of asking the difficult questions about future alternative directions for the local economy.

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