

# There is power in a union

## Trade union organization, union membership and union activity in Sweden

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Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Friday 22 September 2017 at 13.00 in Nordenskiöldsalen, Geovetenskapens hus, Svante Arrhenius väg 12.

### Abstract

This thesis investigates what factors affect union organization and, to some degree, union activity in the face of declining union density in the majority of Western countries. Union structures have been changing in recent decades, not only in terms of declining membership but also because women and white-collar workers are becoming a more stable part of the membership base, whereas previously highly organized groups, such as blue-collar workers, are in decline. The point of departure for this thesis is that union density changes must be understood on several different levels. Thus, we must investigate changing union density in light of changing institutional settings, changing labour market structures and changing norms and values on the individual level. The thesis consists of three empirical studies investigating union density changes and union activity in Sweden, and an introductory chapter that develops the theoretical and empirical (historical) background. The empirical studies investigate: (1) whether and how the influence of various aspects of class and ideology on union organization have changed over time, (2) the effect of structural change on union density increase and decline, and (3) what factors influence different attitudes towards industrial action among Swedish employees. Results show that union density decline in Sweden since the mid-1990s cannot be explained by any forceful shifts in the labour market structure or individuals' opinions and/or attitudes related to trade unions to any significant degree. Union density decline in Sweden is of a general nature. However, an increasing divergence in union density across various categories of employees, including, e.g., private-sector vs. public-sector employees, young vs. older employees, employees of foreign origin vs. employees of Swedish origin, and the atypically employed vs. employees with standardized employment, is observed. Moreover, previously strong predictors of union membership, including class identity, ideology, sector of employment and type of employment contract, are in decline, but they still influence union organization and attitudes towards industrial action.

**Keywords:** *union organization, union density, union activity, social class, ideology, structural change.*

Stockholm 2017

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-145563>

ISBN 978-91-7649-882-8

ISBN 978-91-7649-883-5

ISSN 0491-0885



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ISBN print 978-91-7649-882-8

ISBN PDF 978-91-7649-883-5

ISSN 0491-0885

Printed in Sweden by Universitetservice US-AB, Stockholm 2017

Distributor: Department of Sociology, Stockholm University

To my mother and father who  
have inspired my interest in  
the social in general, and in  
issues related to class in  
particular



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# Acknowledgements

And so here it is – the end. The end of five plus years working on a dissertation and to some extent the end of an era. The work with this dissertation has not only brought me new insights and new knowledge, but also to a new city, a new home and new people. For all of this, I am very grateful.

First of all, I want to thank my supervisor Magnus Bygren for guiding me through this, at times, very confusing process. In the beginning, when I had no clue of what I was doing, Magnus pushed me through and gave this dissertation a direction. At the end, Magnus has been tremendously helpful in guiding me to the finish line. Thank you also to Michael Tåhlin, my assistant supervisor. Michael's perspectives, comments and suggestions have been of great help to me in the process of writing this dissertation. Thank you to Charlotta Magnusson, who commented on my manuscript at my final seminar and helped me find the focus I needed to finish all of this.

To Hernan, my roommate. You are very aware of all the things you have done for me, I hope. But I want to thank you once again, officially. In particular, you have saved me from many frustrating hours spent in front of the computer trying to figure out mistakes in my STATA codes, or finding the right codes. But more than that, you have been a friend, and you have always encouraged me. This journey would have been more difficult and lonelier without you.

To all other colleagues at the department and at SOFI, where I spent some time during this process: thank you!

Last but not least, thank you to my family for your love and support. To my mother and father, and to my dear sister Karolina. To my grandfather who have taken such an interest in this journey. To all of my friends, in Gothenburg and in Stockholm. And to Erik. Most of all, to you. You have made this all possible. You give me strength, and most of all you keep me calm. Thank you.

Johanna Palm  
Stockholm, August 2017



# Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna avhandling är att undersöka vilka faktorer som påverkar facklig organisering, och i viss mån facklig aktivitet, i ljuset av sjunkande facklig organisationsgrad i en majoritet av s.k. västliga länder. Detta är en fråga som många forskare har ägnat tid åt att förstå, men trots det kvarstår flera frågetecken. Den fackliga strukturen har delvis förändrats genom att både kvinnor och tjänstemän numer utgör en mer stabil del av den fackliga medlemsbasen medan organisationsgraden bland arbetare går nedåt. Samtidigt minskar betydelsen av tidigare starka determinanter för medlemskap, exempelvis arbetsplatsorganisation, till följd av ökad flexibilitet och osäkra anställningsformer på arbetsmarknaden.

Utgångspunkten för avhandlingen är att förändrad facklig organisationsgrad och studiet av den individuella benägenheten att gå med i facket måste förstås på flera plan. En annan viktig aspekt för att kunna förstå nuvarande trender rörande facklig organisering är att vi också behöver förstå tidigare trender – för att förstå nuet måste vi förstå det förflutna. I förhållande till studieobjektet för denna avhandling innebär det att förändringar i facklig organisering behöver belysas utifrån förändrade institutionella förhållanden, förändringar i arbetsmarknadsstrukturen och förändrade normer och värderingar. I avhandlingen läggs särskilt fokus på betydelsen av strukturomvandlingar på arbetsmarknaden i ljuset av institutionella förändringar samt effekterna av olika aspekter av klass och ideologi på facklig organisering. Vidare undersöks även attityder till facklig aktivitet i form av stridsåtgärder.

Avhandlingens empiriska del utgörs av tre skilda studier vilka samtliga utgår från en svensk kontext. I den första studien undersöks huruvida och på vilket sätt betydelsen av klass, klassbakgrund, klassidentitet och ideologi för benägenheten att vara fackligt organiserad har förändrats över tid (1990-2011) bland svenska anställda. Resultaten visar att samtliga av de nämnda faktorerna har fått minskad betydelse för benägenheten att vara fackligt organiserad. Trots det återfinns ett positivt samband mellan facklig organisering och de nämnda faktorerna, med undantag för klass. Resultaten visar vidare att effekten av dessa faktorer delvis skiljer sig åt mellan olika kategorier anställda, och att effekten av klass och klassidentitet är starkast bland kategorier med lägre organisationsgrad.

I den andra studien undersöks vilken betydelse strukturomvandlingar på den svenska arbetsmarknaden har haft för både facklig uppgång och nedgång

i Sverige mellan åren 1968-2010. Resultaten i denna studie visar att nettoeffekten av strukturomvandlingar är låg, medan bruttoeffekterna är större. Nettoeffekterna förklarar ingen del av den fackliga uppgången mellan 1968-1981, och endast 13-16 procent av nedgången mellan 1991-2010. Samtidigt visar resultaten att exempelvis ökningen av den offentliga sektorn bidrog till ökad facklig organisering mellan 1968-1981, medan minskningen av densamma samt bl.a. minskningen av andelen industriarbetare bidrog till minskad facklig organisering mellan 1991-2010.

I den tredje studien undersöks, med hjälp av såväl statistisk analys som kvalitativa intervjuer, vilka faktorer som påverkar skilda attityder till fackliga stridsåtgärder bland svenska anställda, med särskilt fokus på aspekter som rör klass, klassidentifikation och klassbakgrund. Resultaten visar att klass, både på ett materiellt och subjektivt plan, har stark effekt på attityder till fackliga stridsåtgärder. Klassbakgrund och klassidentitet kopplas samman med skilda uppfattningar om rättvisa vilket påverkar synen på fackliga stridsåtgärder.

Sammantaget pekar resultaten på att flera olika faktorer samverkar gällande, framför allt, minskad facklig organisering. Såväl strukturomvandlingar som förändrade normer och värderingar och institutionella faktorer har bidragit till minskad facklig organisering i Sverige.

# 1. Introduction

This thesis addresses the issue of what affects trade union organization, trade union membership, and, to some degree, trade union activity in the face of declining union density in the majority of Western capitalist countries. This is a topic that has been of great interest to many researchers for some time, and at this point, numerous studies on this topic have been published, particularly in an international, Western context. However, although much interest has been devoted to what may primarily affect union density decline and the propensity to be organized in a union on both the individual and structural levels, I will argue that inconsistencies in the literature indicate more research is still necessary to enhance our understanding of these phenomena (cf. Schnabel, 2013). This is true, particularly in light of changing union density structures where, for example, women and white-collar workers are becoming a more stable part of the trade union membership base in many Western countries, whereas the proportion of organized blue-collar workers is declining (Scheuer, 2011; Schnabel & Wagner, 2005; Visser, 2006). Simultaneously, the significance of previously strong predictors for union membership, such as work place organizations, is becoming weaker because of increasing job insecurity and flexibility, and shorter tenure (see, e.g., Bryson et al., 2011; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Kelly, 2015). Moreover, the interest in these issues has been less prevalent in the Swedish context compared with many other Western countries, although great changes regarding both union density levels and the institutional settings surrounding the Swedish trade union movement has occurred, in particular in the past two or three decades (for exceptions, see, e.g., De Witte et al., 2008; Kjellberg, 2013, 2010; Lindberg & Neergaard, 2013; Peterson et al., 2012).

The primary gaps in the literature revolve around (1) how the effect of various predictors has changed over time and (2) how various predictors and factors vary in effect in different institutional settings. To some extent, these two aspects are related to one another since institutional settings vary not only between countries but also over time within countries. In particular, previously uniformly assumed predictors of union density decline, such as structural changes in the labour market and economic cycles (recession), have been questioned to some extent (Schnabel, 2013; Western, 1997), whereas the long-term effect of other predictors of union membership, such as ideology, remains unclear. Meanwhile, the relationship between certain aspects that could shed more light on the mechanisms that explain variation

in union membership, including the relationship between class background, class identity and ideology, still need to be more thoroughly investigated.

The point of departure for this thesis is that changes in union density levels, and in the individual propensity to be organized in a union, must be understood on several different levels and that it is important not to overemphasize one aspect over others. Furthermore, to be able to understand changes, we must know what we are comparing to. Accordingly, to understand the present, we must understand the past. Thus, we must investigate and attempt to understand these changes in light of changing institutional settings, changing labour market structures and changing norms and values on the individual level, e.g., the potential influence of increased individualization and the changing impact of ideologies. Aiming to contribute to the understanding of how and why union density has changed, and primarily declined, over recent decades, this thesis provides robust and reliable tests of the differences in effects over time for various predictors of unionization in the Swedish setting. Thus, I particularly focus on the relationship between class, class background, class identity and ideology and whether and how the effect of these factors has changed over time in Study I. Study II provides a robust test of the impact of structural changes (in light of institutional changes) on union density increase and decline. Study III contributes with an investigation of what factors affect the attitudes towards industrial action among employees, with a special focus on both material (income, working conditions, degree of control) and idealistic (the influence and meaning of subjective perceptions of class, class background and class identity) aspects of class. The empirical studies are situated in the Swedish context containing the population of Swedish employees, and the period of investigation in the three different studies spans over approximately 40 years, from 1968 to 2011.

## 2. What is a trade union?

The first question that must be addressed here is what a trade union really is. At first glance, the answer might seem obvious. It is an organization that gathers employees on a voluntary basis with the purpose of enhancing, protecting and defending the employees' interests vis-a-vis the employers. Following this very simple definition, which is, if not fully truthful, then at least not fully incorrect, one can conclude that trade unions are some type of interest group (cf. Allern & Bale, 2017). However, already, some problems with this very simple definition and the conclusions to which it leads occur. Trade unions are not and have never been identical. Rather, many different types of trade unions do, and always have, exist(ed), and with that variance, differences in purposes and goals as well as interest definitions also exist (cf. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hyman, 2001). In the following, I will discuss some of the most influential contributions in the literature regarding how to define and understand what trade unions are and what purposes they serve.

### 2.1 Trade unions as revolutionary class actors? The Marxist tradition

The greatest issue at stake, at least in the early writings, of the Marxist tradition has concerned the revolutionary capacity, or character, of trade unions. Are trade unions revolutionary class actors, or merely short-sighted economic organizations? Marx himself, and even more so Engels, altered his view somewhat over time regarding this issue, from a more optimistic to a more pessimistic view. In general, their view was that trade unions, in their immediate role of fighting for better wages and working hours, were not merely significant actors, but indeed absolutely necessary under a capitalist system. They improved the workers' conditions, at least in times of prosperity, while simultaneously, they united the working class and reduced the competition between workers. However, both Marx and Engels argued that this immediate struggle with capital was too narrow and needed to be extended into a (political) struggle against wage slavery and the capitalist system. Accordingly, trade union struggle was perceived as necessary but insuf-

ficient since it could not by itself challenge the capitalist system in any real manner (Engels, 2010 [1845], 1881; Marx, 1847, 1866). That said, Marx and Engels initially had a strong belief in the role of trade unions in the shaping of the revolutionary consciousness of workers for the necessary political struggle for socialism. The immediate struggles that occurred in its regime, regardless of the limits of those struggles, raised rage among the working class and was essentially viewed as “schools of war”, as “[...] the military school of the working-men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided [...]” (Engels, 2010 [1845], p. 224). Marx stated that he was convinced that strikes were an “[...] indispensable means of holding up the spirit of the labouring classes, of combining them into one great association against the encroachments of the ruling class, and of preventing them from becoming apathetic, thoughtless, more or less well-fed instruments of production” (Marx, 1853, p. 43). Thus, although trade unions were not necessarily considered to be revolutionary agents, they were viewed as very significant actors in the process of shaping the conscious worker. However, in time, this view became more pessimistic. Essentially, what altered the view on trade unions for Marx and Engels was a more sophisticated view on what factors affected the workers’ class-consciousness and the formation of a revolutionary class. In the later writings, the previously more deterministic view of how class struggle would come about became more complex. In particular, the trade union struggle was not viewed as shaping the revolutionary political struggle but rather as potentially hindering it. Trade union struggle was now viewed as being more or less purely economic, and not political, in its nature (see Engels, 1879, 1881). This alteration was, as noted, partly theoretical but certainly also empirically driven. Marx, and particularly Engels, observed how the British (English) trade unions, and specifically their leaders, seemed to abandon the political struggle for the working class as a whole and the struggle for the end of wage slavery, instead incorporating the union struggle of parts of the class, i.e., the craftsmen, into the liberal political parties (Engels, 1874). The combination of lacking the necessary working class party and of failing to unite the working class as a whole, rather than to simply organize it by trades, was what marked the failure of the British working class and its trade union movement. The conclusion that this was not an exception but rather the example of trade unionism was what made both Marx and Engels somewhat sceptical about the revolutionary capacity of trade unions (Kelly, 1988).

Although Marx, and even more so Engels, accordingly came to view the potentially revolutionary capacity of trade unions as less prominent over their life-course, their view was still more optimistic compared with some of their followers, such as Lenin and Luxemburg. The Leninist view of trade unions is characterized by great concerns about the limits of trade unionism. In his view, trade unions were too short-sighted, emphasizing short-term gains in wages and working conditions rather than functioning as class actors

in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism and the capitalist class. They were essentially economistic organizations, and the struggles of the trade unions were merely self-defence from the workers *within* the capitalist system (Lenin, 2004 [1902], p. 27, my emphasis). Therefore, they generally only produced trade union consciousness rather than revolutionary consciousness. This line of thinking is connected to the notion of the labour aristocracy, which essentially refers to the more privileged stratum of the working class, in both national and international respects, a stratum that comes into being “when the economic circumstances of capitalism make it possible to grant significant concessions to its proletariat, within which certain strata of workers manage by means of their special scarcity, skill, strategic position, organizational strength, etc., to establish notably better conditions for themselves than the rest” (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 29; cf. Lenin, 1955 [1916]), a stratum that, accordingly, lacks, and does not promote, revolutionary consciousness and/or action. Nevertheless, Lenin did see potential for trade unions as class actors, in the sense that even the short-term struggles could help develop the political consciousness of workers. This type of struggle was viewed as the spontaneous outburst of the working-class struggle. However, since the struggle of the working class was not limited only to the economic spheres of life, i.e., to the relations in the factories, etc., it had to address all spheres of society. What was absolutely essential to prevent trade unions from becoming purely short-sighted and economistic organizations and to develop the spontaneous struggles was, accordingly, the incorporation of political struggle, i.e., the incorporation of the revolutionary party that would promote both revolutionary consciousness and political struggle (Lenin, 2004 [1902], p. 27-28). This view was shared by Rosa Luxemburg, who similar to Lenin, argued that trade unions essentially only struggled to regulate capitalism and by no means fought to abolish it (Luxemburg, 1906). However, Luxemburg also saw a potentially revolutionary capacity within trade union organizations, under certain conditions. In her view, the mass strike, or revolutionary political strikes, could in fact occur as revolutionary class struggle. That is, if, under revolutionary states, the state would oppose strikes, the issue and the struggle would become political, and the trade union action would thus become revolutionary (Luxemburg, 1906).

To conclude, in the Marxist tradition, trade unions and the spontaneous struggles of trade unions are viewed as organizations and actions that may enhance class-consciousness and that may therefore, under certain conditions, function as some type of class actors, at least potentially. However, the main conclusion about the essence of trade unions in this tradition is that they in fact tend to hinder class struggle, when the political struggle is not included, since they are essentially economistic organizations with short-term goals and purposes. In that sense, one could say that in the Marxist tradition, trade unions, when they are not committed to fulfilling their full

potential, are generally viewed as a sort of market agent that functions within the capitalist system without actually challenging it.

## 2.2 Trade unions as monopolistic, economic actors: The neoclassical tradition

In the neoclassical (or orthodox) tradition, scepticism towards trade unions derives from a very different perspective, compared with the Marxist tradition. Here, unions are perceived as a threat to the capitalist system, primarily because they operate as monopolistic actors in terms of labour supply and therefore prevent the free market from being truly free (Booth, 1995; Friedman, 1962). In this tradition, the (perfectly competitive) market is assumed to consist of free agents who negotiate with each other on equal terms, and the outcome of the labour market, similar to all other markets, is simply driven by supply and demand.<sup>1</sup> Thus, trade unions constitute a problem since their purpose is to increase the influence and power of workers by strength in numbers and thereby reduce the competition between workers, with the ultimate goal of increasing their members' wages (above competitive levels) and working opportunities (Booth, 1995; Oswald, 1985; cf. Naylor, 2003). This form of organizing thus prevents market mechanisms from functioning properly by creating allocative costs, particularly when considering the neoclassical assumption that the supply of labour is limited (Lewis, 1954). As stated by Friedman (1962), among others, the consequences of the interruption of market forces caused by trade unions are essentially increased income inequality among workers and increased unemployment. This outcome is caused by the fact that trade unions are able to raise the wages of their members but only at the expense of non-members and job opportunities. The general assumption behind this argument is that when the increase in wages is not met by an increase in productivity and hence also in surplus, job opportunities in union firms/industries are lost to compensate for the higher production costs.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, this creates a labour surplus in non-union firms/industries, causing the wages in those industries to decrease (Friedman, 1962, p. 125; cf. Booth, 1995, p. 53-54, 60-61 and Freeman & Medoff, 1984). Accordingly, from this perspective, trade unions are generally perceived as harmful to the economy and to society as a whole (Freeman & Medoff, 1984).

How, then, do unions obtain monopoly power in the labour market? According to Booth (1995), the most essential aspect revolves around being

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<sup>1</sup> This means that the value of a product is not related to the costs of its productions but to its (perceived) utility, i.e., to how requested the product is (cf. Naylor, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Hence, if the presence of a union contributes to increasing the surplus, the union is not considered a threat in standard economic models (Naylor, 2003).

able to organize all, or the vast majority of, workers within a specific industry to be able to control the labour supply in that industry and hence successfully exert power in the form of strikes. Thus, the goal is to prevent firms/organizations from replacing the workers with other workers in case of strikes and hence to be able to increase wages and improve working conditions using that resource. This implies certain conditions must be met for trade unions to be successful. Most essentially, the labour supply cannot be infinite. If, for example, employers may relocate their production, at reasonable costs, to areas where the majority of workers are not unionized, then the union is not a monopolist in the supply of labour and is accordingly not able to exert its power efficiently. Hence, unions are particularly vulnerable in industries that operate internationally, i.e., in which the labour supply is less limited. In industries in which the monopoly of labour supply is easier to obtain due to, e.g., a scarcity of skills or high turnover costs, making workers difficult, lengthy and/or expensive to replace, trade unions are more likely to become successful (Booth, 1995).

To conclude, the essence of trade unionism in the neo-classical tradition is its monopolistic character, which disrupts the economic laws of perfect competition. In this tradition, the union is thus primarily viewed as a market agent.

### 2.3 Trade unions as differentiated actors: Ideal types, mixed purposes and goals

As is evident from the discussion above, trade unions and trade unionism may be defined and understood in very different ways, much so depending on the theoretical starting point that one uses, which will deeply reflect the very nature of how unions are perceived. Moreover, trade unions have been found to differentiate from each other based on empirical observation and evidence. Among other things, trade unions differ, both across countries and over time, in what emphasis they place on the economic versus the political aspect of trade unionism and to what degree these aspects are coordinated. Further, trade unions differ in terms of their degree of militancy and in whether strikes and other forms of industrial action are perceived as a last resort of action. Richard Hyman (2001) has identified three different ideal types of trade unionism, mainly applicable to the Western context, which will form the basis for the discussion in this section. The ideal types are based on the assumption and empirical evidence of a multiplicity of trade union organizational forms found in different times, active in different institutional settings and based on different ideological views. Although different trade union movements accordingly emphasize different aspects related to trade union activity and function, Hyman argues that they all must relate to

the core elements of trade unionism, namely, the market, class and society, the elements that also constitute the basis for the ideal types. In that sense, Hyman (2001) expands the typology from those who generally discuss unions only in terms of class and the market (see, e.g., Streeck & Hassel, 2003; Western, 1997; cf., e.g., Hall & Soskice, 2001; Pontusson, 2005; Streeck & Thelan, 2005).<sup>3</sup> The different ideal types are to some extent similar to those discussed above. Thus, some aspects will be familiar to the reader by now. However, the main purpose of this section is to critically observe and discuss the limitations of different unilateral views on trade unionism when attempting to understand and study trade unionism, its characteristics, success, failure and developments, etc.

### 2.3.1 Business unionism

The main purpose of trade unions within business unionism, which is based on the view of trade unions as (economic) market actors and which has generally been most prevalent in the early British and more persistently in the American contexts, is to simply enhance and promote economic benefits for their members by attempting to regulate and control the labour market and its outcomes through collective bargaining (Booth, 1995; Hyman, 2001; Streeck & Hassel, 2003). In this tradition, political issues are generally perceived as outside of the unions' purpose and scope, simply because political involvement is not perceived as necessary, or even desirable, in the pursuit of the economic interests of the members. For example, trade union leaders in the US in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century strongly opposed political welfare policies and reforms (Hattam, 2014). By organizing primarily skilled workers by trade (or craft), the various trade unions aim to promote their members' interests, defined as higher wages, reasonable working hours and more secure employment, within a specific trade (or industry) based on market principles (Hyman, 2001). Accordingly, this type of union activity does not require political power, provided that the trade unions' right to organize and negotiate for their members is recognized by law (Streeck & Hassel, 2003). Thus, trade unions of this type are not class actors aiming to organize the working class as a whole, nor are they social partners primarily viewed as active within a greater social system. They function within and as part of the market. Their primary interest and aim lies in promoting their own members' economic, job-related interests "here and now". The premise for the growth of this specific type of trade unionism, which first appeared in the early 19th

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<sup>3</sup> Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013) discuss four types instead of three, distinguishing more thoroughly between different types of coordinated institutional systems (i.e., social democratic systems and those based on social partnership) and between social democratic and communist traditions (also, see Visser, 2009). However, for the purpose of the discussion in this section, the three typologies will suffice.

century in the UK and somewhat later in the US, was liberal environments in which the political rights of working-class *men* generally included the right to vote, etc. (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Streeck & Hassel, 2003).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the union struggle did not have to include these broader political aims at its beginning, and unions were generally able to produce social rights and welfare benefits for their members through their organization and the bargaining system, thus not depending on political actors and the state for that. In fact, producing social rights and benefits within the union rather than by a political struggle was, to some degree, viewed as a prerequisite for successful union organization since it created an incentive for workers to join the unions (cf. Webb & Webb, 1897).

Accordingly, a common feature among trade unions within the business trade unionist tradition is to view trade unions as (ordinary) actors active in a market, specifically in the labour market. The organizational form is generally decentralized, and the ties to political parties are loose (cf. Hattam, 2014; Western, 1997). However, no labour market, regardless of how it is structured and/or (de)regulated, is a free market that functions independently of the political system. As argued by Polanyi (1985 [1944]), the market society, defined as “an economic system controlled, regulated and directed by markets alone” (p. 68), is in fact a specific economic and political system embedded in a social system. Hence, the way in which political actors regulate a specific (labour) market, and the actors within that market, will inevitably affect the circumstances under which a union is active, thus regulating the union’s possible choices of action and the scope of its influence (cf. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hyman, 2001; Western, 1997).

The discussion above implies that unions cannot fully function as simple market actors, because the market does not exist on its own, without or regardless of political regulation and political decisions. As stated by Western (1997, p. 7), “markets *are* institutional settings”. Accordingly, if trade unions are embedded in a system that is, at least to some extent, politically administered and regulated, then they must relate to the political (i.e., procedural) aspects of that system if they wish to be successful. Not least are the legal framework and the rules for (the forms of) trade union existence (how to organize, e.g., centralized or decentralized, closed-shop systems or open organization) and the bargaining system of fundamental interest for trade unions (Hyman 2001, p. 14; Western, 1997; also, see Hyman, 1989; Streeck, 2010). Moreover, functioning as pure market actors is inevitably insufficient for trade unions under certain conditions. As discussed in Section 2.2 above, trade unions must be able to control the labour supply to be successful market actors. Hence, in times of recession, the power of the union has been weakened and the ability to improve wages and working conditions through

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<sup>4</sup> Women were, as is well known, not included in the universal suffrage of these early times in any country.

bargaining has decreased due to labour surplus. In such instances, many business unions have instead drawn on moral arguments of the dignity of workers to improve conditions or to avoid deteriorations (Hyman, 2001). An alternative choice of action would be to attempt to influence institutional settings such that they enhanced the power of trade unions also in times of recession (cf. Brady, 2007; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Western, 1997). Following simple market logics is simply not enough for trade unions if they wish to be successful.

### 2.3.2 Class struggle unionism

The idea of trade unions as actors active in the class struggle clearly stems from the Marxist tradition, which has been discussed in more detail above. However, even in the early stages of (the practice of) this tradition, disagreements, or differentiations, about trade union strategies, roles and purposes can be found. In particular, trade union movements took different paths regarding revolutionary and reformist strategies and regarding the connection between the economic (industrial) and the political wing of the labour movement. Both the Swedish and the German trade union movements had strong connections to the Social Democratic parties of each country early on. However, whereas the German trade union movement ‘broke loose’ from these ties in favour of purer trade union policies instead of political objectives, as the union movement gained relative autonomy from the party early in the 20th century (Ebbinghaus, 1995; Hyman, 2001; Streeck & Hassel, 2003), the bond between the Swedish trade union movement and the Social Democratic party remained strong (Allern et al., 2007; Jansson, 2017). Moreover, although the Social Democratic parties of the 19th century were socialists aiming to abolish the capitalist system, this changed in the 20th century when reformism grew stronger. Accordingly, the character of trade unions connected to these parties generally started to resemble business unionism more over the years because the overarching project of overthrowing the capitalist system was replaced by reformist strategies devoted more to the immediate struggle for better wages and working conditions “here and now” (Hyman, 2001, p. 21). Meanwhile, in France, Italy and Spain, for instance, some of the trade unions had a much stronger revolutionary character during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with stronger ties to the communist or syndicalist movements (Allern & Bale, 2017). Differences aside, a common feature within class struggle unionism is that the separation between the economic (i.e., pure trade unionism) and the political struggle is not at all as distinctive as within business unionism. Rather, the two go more or less together, and in some cases, the political struggle is, or has been, superior. For some, although certainly not all (see, e.g., Allern et al, 2007; Howell, 2001), trade unions within this tradition, the ties with the political branch remain strong, and class rhetoric is sometimes still strong. Another distinct feature of this

type of unionism is centralization. Rather than organizing workers by crafts, socialist trade unions generally struggled to unite the working class; hence the emergence of industrial unions and central confederations (Hyman, 2001; Western, 1997; also, see Korpi, 1983).<sup>5</sup>

The development of unions as active in the class struggle working closely with, or subordinated to, primarily Social Democratic parties is generally related to the struggle for universal suffrage and union rights (see Kjellberg, 1983; Korpi, 1978; Streeck, 2010; Streeck & Hassel, 2003; Therborn et al., 1978). In countries where the union movement took this form, unions generally continued to struggle for social rights through politics after these initial fights. Thus, social policies were (are) primarily politically administered and decided, rather than administered and offered by union organizations *per se*.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, strict divisions were drawn between social policy and issues that were controlled and regulated by collective bargaining, in which unions had more direct involvement. This line was possible to draw because of the mutual understanding between unions and employers on what issues should be regulated by collective agreements, i.e., issues directly related to the labour market such as wages and working conditions (Streeck & Hassel, 2003; cf. Ebbinghaus, 1995). Because both parties of the labour market agreed to regulate these issues, they were not subjected to political involvement in the form of labour law, etc.<sup>7</sup> However, this division also required that the unions could indirectly influence politics and social policies. Hence, the electoral success of the political wing of the labour movement is of great significance. In that sense, the division is also related to strong labour movements (cf. Allern et al., 2007; Korpi, 1978; Therborn et al., 1978).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The exceptions to this development are the syndicalist trade unions, which did not incorporate the parliamentarian political struggle into their movements and which did not favour centralized bureaucratic forms of organization (see, for example, Allern & Bale, 2017; Hyman, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> This is, for instance, the case in Sweden, compared to the US, the stronghold for business unionism, where unions offer social rights and benefits such as health care (Hattam; 2014; Streeck & Hassel, 2003). However, trade unions in Sweden are beginning to offer social benefits, particularly in the form of private health insurance. This change and its (possible) implications are discussed further in Section 3.4.

<sup>7</sup> Fulcher (1991) argues that the absence of repressive legislation in Sweden demanded that employers would organize. Hence, different perspectives differently explain this development. In the case of Sweden, however, the employer associations developed in close cooperation with the political right but soon became an interest group of the employers alone (Therborn, 1992). However, in Britain, where the employers' organization was weaker and where legislation was a stronger tool compared to collective bargaining, in contrast to Sweden, the repression of unions was performed by the state rather than by employer organizations (Fulcher, 1991). Hence, the political development and the development of the trade union movement and industrial relations are closely linked.

<sup>8</sup> As argued by many scholars, the state in a capitalist democracy has a class bias towards capital and employers. That is, it tends to want to regulate labour more than capital, and the influence on state policy is generally stronger for capital compared with labour (see, e.g.,

Thus, why did (the majority of) the socialist trade unions develop from being revolutionary to, albeit still being more committed to political objectives compared to business unions, becoming ever more concerned with the immediate struggles of the “here and now”? In the words of Hyman (2001), the main explanation is to be found in the paradox of class struggle unionism. This paradox is mainly built on two different aspects. First, no trade union can ignore the immediate struggle for better wages and working conditions “here and now”. Not only do union members demand it, but they also have generally been empirically shown to be more committed to that struggle compared to the political struggle. Moreover, whereas class struggle strategies involving more direct fights with employers (e.g., strikes and other forms of industrial action) sometimes involve high risks, collective bargaining has been found to be relatively effective in terms of improving the wages and conditions of workers, and it involves less risk. Thus, it is generally easier to maintain long-term support for this less risky strategy among workers (Hyman, 2001), particularly when it is combined with social security policies and welfare reforms on behalf of the state, as in the case of Sweden, for example. The degree of militancy is thus also closely related to the objectives of the political wing of the labour movement, which, as discussed above, generally overthrew the goal of abolishing capitalism in favour of attempting to control it. Thus, corporatist rather than militant trade union strategies were favoured by the political wings of the labour movement and more or less demanded by trade unions to maintain political support (cf. Jansson, 2017; Korpi, 1970). Second, trade unions are, to some extent, inherently dividing in their nature. Although many (former) socialist unions, as noted, have developed industrial unions and central confederations to overcome the divisions and unite workers, this strategy in practice has turned out to be only partially successful. For one thing, male skilled workers have maintained a large influence in most Western union movements as a legacy of the early union movements. This can be observed not least by the fact that up until recently, trade union membership has been heavily male-dominated in many Western countries (Visser, 2003). In general, most union movements have favoured full-time workers over part-time workers, the permanently employed over the temporarily employed, men over women, etc. The overarching question of whether trade unions can truly unite the working class when the conditions within that class differ very substantially thus still awaits its answer (Hyman, 2001).

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Fulcher, 1991; Hyman, 1989; Kelly, 1988). However, other scholars, including Korpi (1983), argue that labour may possess effective control of the state and that the political control of labour is more effective than industrial power.

### 2.3.3 Trade unions as social partners

The origin of trade unions as social partners stems from explicit challenges to socialist trade unions and the notion of class struggle in certain parts of Europe, namely, continental Europe (e.g., Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria.). A common feature among these countries is that they were not only ideologically divided but also religiously divided, and hence, the corporatist institutions that developed in these countries generally sought to consolidate these divisions (Allern & Bale, 2017; Ebbinghauss, 1995; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hyman, 2001; Streeck, 2010; Streeck & Hassel, 2003).

The core of the challenges to the socialist trade unions in these countries did not come from the bourgeoisie but from the Catholic Church. In the Church's pursuits of defending its own power and position within society, it strongly opposed the working class's organizing itself in defence of its interests vis-a-vis the capitalist class. Instead, it proposed collective organization that included both workers and employers, in the same organizations. Thus, Catholic trade unions emerged in opposition to socialist and communist unions in many European countries. In some countries, they emerged as organizations for workers only, whereas in others, as "mixed corporations" including employers. Either way, the general focus of these unions was not conflict (strikes were not permitted by the Church) but industrial peace. Although the Church demanded respect for workers' rights, it did not want to challenge the system (Hyman, 2001; Streeck & Hassel, 2003; cf. Ebbinghauss, 1995).

However, over time, these unions were forced to adapt to the actions and success of the free socialist unions, partly as a result of the demand of their own members.<sup>9</sup> As stated by Hyman (2001), this change was connected to the changing demographics of these unions, with an increasing proportion of blue-collar workers rather than white-collar workers, who generally were the core of the members of these unions in their early stages. Thus, as a consequence of adapting to these changing demographics, many of these unions became more militant and more autonomous from the Church.

Meanwhile, during and after World War I (WWI), many unions, including the socialist but non-communist unions (i.e., those connected to Social Democratic parties), in European countries became more explicitly reformist, and in light of the war (and, not least, revolution), many of them gave preference to rebuilding the industry and the economy of their countries. Thus, aiming to restore industrial peace and the capitalist economy, integrative unions working more closely with employers and, in some instances, the state, also became more common within the socialist tradition (Hyman,

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that I do not argue that Catholic workers were generally much less militant. This is not true; in many cases, they were (Hyman, 2001). This discussion refers to the different forms of unionism and how they came about.

2001).<sup>10</sup> After World War II, this type of unionism was more or less established throughout Europe (Ebbinghauss, 1995; Streeck & Hassel, 2003).

Thus, to some, though partially varying degree, the common feature of integrative trade unionism – “social partnership” – is to restore social order and the economic system (i.e., capitalism). This implies that the relationship between the union (i.e., employees) and employers is not viewed as entirely antagonistic. Rather, the two parties are perceived to have at least some degree of common goals and interests in terms of economic development and/or relative peace in the labour market. However, because the integration derives from different perspectives, as noted in the discussion above, it is also based on different ideologies. Accordingly, Therborn (1992) identifies two different forms of integration/corporatism; one that stems from the notion of consensus and another that stems from the notion of institutionalization of conflict. In the first, which is most commonly associated with the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Germany and which stems from the religious division of the working class, the focus lies on social partnership. In these countries, the electoral success of the labour parties has been obstructed by religious division, and hence the institutional settings of the trade union movement reflect this in that the representation of various (religious and non-religious) trade unions in the corporative system is institutionalized. Moreover, the form of representation reflects the preference for consensus in both the economic and political spheres (cf. Ebbinghauss, 1995; Streeck & Hassel, 2003). In the second, stemming from socialist trade unionism and generally associated with the Nordic countries, the focus lies on compromise. In the latter, the focus on “social wages”, e.g., social spending and benefits, which is beneficial to all and not exclusive to union-members, has been more prominent (Hyman, 2001; cf. Streeck, 2010).<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3.4 The diversity of trade unionism

The discussions in the sections above illustrate that trade unions are complex organizations, with complex functions, goals and strategies. Although a trade union may have as its primary goal to simply increase its members’ wages and enhance their working conditions, no trade union can ignore political issues altogether since macro-economic issues and labour law frame the settings – the rules and conditions – under which a union is active. Hence, to ignore influencing these settings may very well counteract the unions goals

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<sup>10</sup> This chapter should not be regarded as claiming to tell the full story of these very complex developments. Rather, I seek to paint broad pictures at the expense of details. For a more thorough review on this topic, see Hyman (2001, chapter 4).

<sup>11</sup> Although there is no clear distinction between the concepts of social partnership and compromise in the literature (see, e.g., Huzzard et al., 2004), I have chosen to distinguish between them to emphasize the different historical developments of cooperative unionism. It is important to note, however, that this distinction is not necessarily fully established.

and purposes. Furthermore, social integration should not be confused with a denial of conflicts of interests, although a change in the economic system is seldom either possible or desirable within this tradition. Cooperation is in many cases rather based on strategic choices to maintain influence and/or to restore organizations in situations in which high degrees of conflicts risk to destroy the movements. Hence, cooperation may include a more or less clear class rhetoric. Regardless of how clear or diffuse a unions class rhetoric is, all trade unions remain class actors of some sort because unions divide workers from employers and hence, inevitably, to some extent, represent workers' interests and identity as being divergent from (conflicting with) those of employers (Hyman, 2001).

However, the extent to which unions emphasize these different aspects is clearly related to their historic developments (Ebbinghaus, 1995). Accordingly, changing the scope and strategies of a trade union may not be simple.



### 3. The Swedish context: Swedish trade unionism

In this section, the development and distinct character of the Swedish trade union movement(s) will be discussed in more detail. This discussion will be related to the sections above, thus framing the specific Swedish context in relation to various forms of trade unionism. The core of the discussion will revolve around the development and characteristics of the Swedish blue-collar trade union movement, not only because it was the first to develop but also because that movement is the one that has affected Swedish industrial relations the most.

#### 3.1 The early years: from class struggle unionism to the wake of reformist ideals

If the early British trade union movement and the American trade union movement are to be considered prototypes of business unionism, whereas, for example, the Dutch and the Belgian trade union movements are prototypes of (a sort of) social partnership unionism, the early Swedish trade union movement may be considered a prototype of class struggle unionism (cf. Hyman, 2001). Although the first trade unions in Sweden, formed in the 1870s, were craft unions and although they formed a few decades before the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) was founded (Korpi, 1978), the Swedish trade union movement very quickly developed into a highly centralized movement with strong ties to the political wing of the labour movement. The Social Democratic Party (SAP) was founded predominantly by trade unionists in 1889, and nine years later, in 1898, the LO was founded. Several of the LO's first board members belonged to the SAP, and in 1908, direct affiliations of local unions (and their members) to the SAP were decided upon (Jansson, 2017; Korpi, 1981a, 1978). Hence, the intimate and durable relationship between the two wings of the Swedish labour movement was firmly established early on.

In the early stages of the Swedish trade union movement's existence, the separation between the economic and the political struggles was quite vague. Trade unions and the SAP took on the struggles for both trade union rights and political rights alongside one another, demanding an eight-hour work-

day, universal (and equal) suffrage, and the right to form trade unions (Hyman, 2001; Korpi, 1978).<sup>12</sup> In 1902, LO organized a nationwide strike in support of universal suffrage.

Industrial conflicts were further very high in Sweden in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The capitalist class's opposition and resistance to trade unions was high, and the power of the employers was strong as the employers too became organized early on and obtained strong support from and were closely affiliated with the political right (Therborn, 1992).<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1899, a law that made attempts to stop strike breaking illegal was passed (Korpi, 1978). Even though embryos of the later (highly successful) corporatist system between the LO and the Employers Association (SAF) emerged already in 1905, when collective bargaining first started to appear, and in 1906, when a compromise between the LO and the Employers Association that recognized the unions official right to exist and to organize workers but also employers' right to freely hire and fire workers and to manage and distribute work was agreed upon (Decemberöverenskommelsen), the relationship between the two parties remained highly conflictual for a few more decades. The employers' strong position at this point in time did, not least, become evident in conjunction with the great conflict of 1909. The general strike in that year, which was proclaimed as a response to the employers' threat of lock outs, was lost, and the density level of the LO was halved (Korpi, 1978, p. 77).

Although the Swedish trade union movement did not suffer from divisions in religious and/or political terms as strong as those of many of the European trade unions (see, e.g., Allern & Bale, 2017; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hyman, 2001), the struggles between the syndicalist trade union movement and the LO, in addition to the communist opposition within the LO, were evident in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1917, the political wing of the labour movement, the SAP, was divided into one reformist and one communist part as Sweden's Social Democratic Left Party (now the Left Party) was founded. Although the SAP remained in control of the union movement after the division, this control was partially won through the conscious and strategic suppression of the communist opposition within the trade union movement (Svensson, 1994). In the 1920s, the LO further strategically sought to create a working-class identity formed around reformist ideals, in opposition to the more conflict-oriented and revolutionary ideals of the syndicalist trade union movement and of the communists (and in opposition to the earlier ideals of the movement itself). In this process, trade union leaders enhanced a working-class identity built on dignity, discipline and peaceful solutions instead of class struggle, hence

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<sup>12</sup> Although trade unions were never forbidden by law in Sweden, as in many other countries, they were at this point not formally recognized by employers (Therborn et al., 1978).

<sup>13</sup> The Employers Association (SAF) was founded in 1902.

alienating the movement from ideals of conflict (Jansson, 2012; 2013). Thus, although strong divisions within the movement were avoided, the peaceful internal history and development of the Swedish trade union movement should not be exaggerated.

As part of the strategy of the LO and, not least, the SAP's (Jansson, 2017) to form a reformist and less conflict-oriented trade union movement and to create more peaceful industrial relations, the Collective Bargaining Act was established in 1928. The main purpose of the Act was to establish industrial peace through the infliction of a peace obligation during the currency of agreements. The Collective Bargaining Act was met with scepticism and criticism by a majority of the LO-affiliated federations. It was argued that its restriction of the right to take industrial action was too profound and that it weakened the trade unions' power while not contributing to solving the fundamental conflicts in the labour market (Korpi, 1970). However, in a few years' time, the law became accepted within the movement, and the transformation of the Swedish trade union movement's identity and ideology from a class struggle movement with a focus on conflict to a reformist movement with focus on cooperation and peaceful relationships, albeit still focused on (gradually) transforming society by political means, was firmly on its way.

### 3.2 The Swedish model, industrial peace and increased equality: the corporatist era

In the 1930s, the coordinated system of industrial relations in Sweden became firmly established. These relations were institutionalized as the Swedish model, which is based on (yet) a(nother) historical compromise between labour and capital, more or less established in conjunction with the 'basic agreement', generally called the "Saltsjöbadsavtalen", in 1938. The core of the Swedish Model is self-regulation of the labour market by the labour market parties, i.e., the trade unions and the employer associations. Hence, the parties of the labour market are solely responsible for industrial peace and conflicts, in addition to wage setting and collective bargaining (Elvander, 1988).<sup>14</sup> This self-regulation, however, came with obligations; both the industrial climate (conflicts vs. peace) and the wage setting were supposed to regard the wellbeing of the economy of society as a whole. Accordingly, it is important to note that the Swedish model emerged at a point in time when industrial conflicts were high (as testified to, not least, by the shootings in Ådalen in 1931), and that the compromise was prompted by

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<sup>14</sup> The full legal right for the parties of the labour market to single-handedly deal with bargaining and conflict in the labour market was recognized a few years before Saltsjöbadsavtalen, in 1936 (Korpi, 1970).

threats of political interventions (i.e., labour laws) in the industrial system by the Social Democratic government (Jansson, 2017; Korpi, 1970). Thus, the self-regulation is to some extent regulated in its nature.

Whereas the early ideals of socialism had been abandoned by the trade union movement (and the SAP), a preference for equalizing distributional policies in both the economic and the political spheres was a significant aspect of the Swedish model, and the model was successful in terms of generating both industrial peace and income equality (Anxo & Niklasson, 2006; Korpi, 1983). The increased equality can largely be attributed to the macro-economic system, which aimed to limit inflation and create full employment. As part of this system, the principle of “solidarity wages” emerged. The principle aimed to retain the wages and the wage claims in profitable firms and sectors, whilst the wage rates in the less profitable firms and sectors were allowed to increase. The aim of the policy was thus to generate wage-harmonizing effects (i.e., equal pay across firms in the same sectors [Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013, p. 10]), avoid the dumping of wages and force rationalization (or shutdown) on less profitable firms and sectors. The system also included active labour market policies that served to relocate unemployed workers to unionized sectors, keeping the unemployment levels and the costs of relocation down by training efforts and generous unemployment funds (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Western, 1997).

The Swedish trade union movement also firmly established its highly centralized bargaining systems and its highly class-segmented trade union organizations, which are other core elements of the Swedish model, at this point in time (Kjellberg, 1998; Pontusson, 2005). These principles are deeply related to the preference for industrial unions over craft unions in the Swedish trade union movement, affecting both how workers are organized and the level of centralized bargaining. Although industrial unions did exist and were the officially preferred form of organization of the LO as of 1912, in the 1930s, 9 out of 47 confederations, organizing one out of seven union members, were still based on trades/crafts (Korpi, 1978, p. 78). However, in the post-war period, development towards industrial unions proceeded more rapidly and became the standard model of organizing members within the movement (Korpi, 1981a). The class-segmented base of the Swedish trade union movement also became firmly established in the post-war period, when central confederations for unions organizing white-collar workers emerged (the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees [TCO] in 1944 and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations [SACO] in 1947). The earliest trade unions organizing white-collar workers appeared in the 1930s. At that point in time, the proportion of organized white-collar workers was considerably lower than that of blue-collar workers, but in the 1970s, the levels had become much more even (Bruhn, 1999; Korpi, 1978). As stated by Bruhn (1999), the emergence and growth of many white-collar trade unions later connected to the TCO is related to the proletarianization

and feminization of many white-collar jobs, both in terms of who filled the positions (e.g., increased working-class and female recruitment) and in terms of content and conditions. This is also reflected in that, early on and up until the 1970s, many of these unions were quite radical and incorporated more or less the same rhetoric and ideology towards employers as the LO affiliated federations. At that time, employers were defined as the main opponent among the TCO federations, in contrast to the emphasis on the differentiation of white-collar workers and their expertise compared with blue-collar workers (Bruhn, 1999, p. 59-60) common among the SACO federations. In contrast to both the LO and TCO federations, the SACO federations were further based on professions, not industry. Although the TCO adapted a radical rhetoric at this point in time, both the TCO and the SACO claimed neutrality from political parties. Maintaining a distance from both political parties and the LO has also been a strategy for membership recruitment for both of these branches of the Swedish trade union movement, although mainly later on for the TCO (Jansson, 2017).

Hence, Swedish white-collar unions, particularly the SACO-affiliated unions, have a much stronger resemblance to business unionism compared to the blue-collar movement. Although the Swedish (blue-collar) trade union movement had moved away from its early ideals of class struggle unionism, certain elements of this type of unionism most certainly also remained when the elements of cooperative unionism prevailed. The preference for industrial unions and the separation between blue-collar and white-collar unions, in addition to the institutionalized cooperation between the economic and political wing of the labour movement, are core elements of this (cf. Hyman, 2001). However, what may be viewed as a particular form of social partnership unionism, characterized by the “institutionalization of conflict” (Therborn, 1992), had emerged.

### 3.3 The rise of conflicts and the break from collective bargaining: the radicalization of the trade union movement and employer opposition

At the end of the 1960s, the long period characterized by high economic growth and industrial peace came to an end as industrial conflicts once again rose to high levels. In particular, this was a period in which wildcat strikes became prevalent, mainly as a result of dissatisfaction regarding increased rationalizations affecting working conditions and regarding wage growth, particularly in the manufacturing sector. Because many of the strikes at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s were unofficial (e.g., the miners’ strike at LKAB in 1969-1970 and the forestry workers’ strike in 1975), the strikers did not obtain financial support from their trade union federations. However,

the financial support obtained from the independent syndicalist trade union (SAC) enabled prolonged conflicts (Junesjö, 1998).

This rise of, particularly unofficial, conflicts and a strong leftist opposition within the LO resulted in the proposition and implementation of labour market legislation meant to not only enhance the influence of workers (Jansson, 2017) but also to strengthen the influence of the LO on workers (cf. Junesjö, 1998). The Codetermination Act (MBL), implemented in 1976, included a prohibition against financial support from independent unions in case of strikes. However, the act also included extended rights to take industrial action during the currency of collective agreements regarding issues that were not included in the agreement. Hence, the act restricted unauthorized conflicts but extended the right (scope) of authorized conflicts. Other radical reforms aiming to increase the power of workers' vis-a-vis employers include the Employment Protection Act (LAS) and the Wage Earner Funds. The Wage Earner Funds originated from a proposition made by the Metalworkers' Union. The union and its members were dissatisfied with the fact that the solidarity wage-setting model penalized those working in profitable manufacturing industries. By restraining the wages in these industries to maintain equal pay for equal work, these firms made enormous profits. As stated by Meidner (1981), this generated increased inequality between workers and capitalists (p. 308). The original proposition suggested 20 percent of these profits should be handed over to workers in the form of company stocks. This very radical proposition, which was backed by the LO, thus aimed to include workers in the ownership and control of firms, to an extent of majority ownership (Meidner, 1981). However, the proposition changed markedly before it was implemented in the 1980s. Among other things, the share units that could be transferred into the funds were restricted to 8 percent. In the early 1990s, the funds were abolished, and as argued by Pontusson and Kuruvilla (1992), the funds did not achieve increased economic democracy.

The era of radicalization within the Swedish trade union movement thus introduced a break from the Swedish model, on the initiative of the LO, in that conflicts, co-determination and job security became issues that were regulated by law and not solely by the labour market parties. Meanwhile, employers' opposition grew stronger, and in 1983 the central bargaining broke down as the employers association (VF) and the blue-collar union (IF Metall) in the engineering industries signed a separate agreement (Elvander, 1988). Hence, the bargaining system became more decentralized, not only relocating power to local unions but also weakening the bargaining position of the working class as a whole, increasing the elements of individualized wages and hence the wage drift. Meanwhile, in 1987, the SAP decided to abandon the collective membership of local unions in the party and hence made all membership individual (Allern et al., 2007, p. 614). Although the ties between the LO and the SAP also remained strong after this, this mo-

ment represents a historical break that, among other things, implies the weakened political influence of the movement.

The 1970s and 1980s represent a part in the history of the Swedish trade unions that is characterized by diverging trends. Whereas the influence of the movement was strong during the 1970s, it became weaker in the 1980s. The corporatist elements of the movement, in terms of both institutionalized collective bargaining and the closeness of the political bond with the SAP, were challenged (cf. Ahlén, 1989; Allern et al., 2007; Anxo & Niklasson, 2006). Meanwhile, the density levels were record high in the mid-1980s; hence, the organizational power of the movement remained strong.

### 3.4 Challenging times: increased fragmentation, increased income inequality, and union density decline.

The past three decades of the history of the Swedish labour movements is, compared to previous periods, mainly characterized by challenges. The corporatist elements have been strengthened once more in terms of the rebirth of central (industry-level) collective bargaining in the late 1990s, the bargaining coverage among Swedish employees has remained high (Kjellberg, 2013, p. 58), and the institutionalized cooperation between the economic and the political wing of the trade union movement has remained largely stable (Allern et al., 2007; Anxo, 2012; Jansson, 2017); however, the union movement have been weakened in terms of both influence and density levels.

Several challenges have faced the movement during these decades, including the increased internationalization and competitiveness of the production (globalization), economic recession(s), an increase in flexible and atypical work, privatizations, the weakened political power of the SAP (and a changing ideology within the party), and institutional changes such as the increased influence of the state on the wage formation via the foundation of the Swedish National Mediation Office (Medlingsinstitutet), the dismantling of the Ghent system (Claesen & Vierbrock, 2008) and increased fees for unemployment funds. Meanwhile, unemployment rates have grown and income inequality have risen.

The increased offensive in the 1990s from employers in the manufacturing industry - the Federation of Swedish Industries (in 2001, Sveriges Industriförbund merged with the SAF to become Svenskt Näringsliv, SN) - aiming to decentralize the bargaining process and individualize wages even more, resulted in a coalition between the blue-collar and white-collar unions within that sector that forced collective bargaining at the industry level and then the central level to return (but still containing more local power than previously) (cf. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Kjellberg, 2013, pp. 59-60); however, the threat of relocation by many multinational companies

has made unions more defensive and the focus on company competitiveness and cooperation with employers to save jobs more prevalent. Hence, many unions have embraced “social partnership” more at the expense of employee interests, thus alienating themselves more from the “institutionalization of conflict” that previously dominated Swedish corporatist relations (cf. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Huzzard et al., 2004; Hyman, 2001; Therborn, 1992).

Moreover, the white-collar unions have gained in power at the expense of the LO-affiliated unions, not least as a consequence of the structural changes in the labour market, with increasing proportions of white-collar workers and decreasing proportions of blue-collar workers. However, the organizational strength of the white-collar unions, compared to that of the blue-collar unions, has also been enhanced by the increased costs of the unemployment fund fees and the union fees introduced by the centre-right government in 2007, which generally hit the blue-collar unions much harder (Kjellberg, 2010; also, see Study I and Study II). The professional unions, in particular, have further largely welcomed the increased decentralization of the bargaining system and the possibilities for increased wage dispersion that it has generated (cf. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). Many of the white-collar unions affiliated with the SACO and the TCO have further made a break from the previously sharp division between the economic and political issues within the Swedish model (cf. Streeck & Hassel, 2003) by introducing private health care insurance to their members (see Skoglund, 2012). This type of development, which is a clear step towards (even) more business-like unionism for these unions, and the weakened political power of the SAP thus threaten to undermine the universal welfare system and the previously effective collaboration around economic and political issues between the blue-collar unions and the SAP.

## 4. What are trade unions good for?

The labour market is generally considered one of the most prominent arenas for the distribution of power within society (cf. Wright, 1997; Korpi, 1981b; Furåker, 2005). As stated by Walter Korpi, the asymmetrical internal relationship between the parties of the labour market gives rise to “[...] latent conflicts of interest between sellers and buyers of manpower concern(ing) the distribution of rewards and results of production, and also the control in the production organization and in the economy” (Korpi, 1981b, p. 189). Accordingly, the inherent social relations and the power balance in the labour market influence the lives and life chances of individuals’ in both direct and indirect ways with regard to working conditions and incomes as well as more general aspects of their life conditions, including health and living/housing conditions, and education. Further, as discussed above, unions are deeply embedded in this conflict, whether it is acknowledged or not, because the labour market, and the conditions for union organization and activity, are politically regulated. However, as observed above, the ways in which various trade unions aim to, and, for that matter, are able to, influence the conditions for their activity differ. This implies unions have a more or less great influence and impact on the societies in which they exist and on the individuals who live in them.

### 4.1 Unions’ impact on wages and wage inequality

As stated above, some scholars have expressed concerns about the impact of unions on wages and wage dispersion, arguing that the monopolistic character of unions generates problems with both competition and increased wage dispersion between workers (Friedman, 1962; Johnson, 1975). Setting aside the issue of wage dispersion in general for a moment, the majority of the literature supports that unions provide a generally positive impact on wages for their members, although the amount of the union wage premium varies both between countries and industries and over time (see, e.g., Blanchflower & Bryson, 2004; Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Jakubson, 1991; Vella & Verbeek, 1998). The findings in the literature further suggest that the magnitude of the union wage effect differs among different categories of employees and that it is generally higher among (unskilled) blue-collar workers and among minorities. This suggests that the union wage effect generally generates

wage compression among union members (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Gosling & Machin, 1995). Moreover, the argument that unions generate increased wage dispersion is highly contested, and the evidence in the literature suggesting the opposite is massive (Asher & Defina, 1997; Brady et al., 2013; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). As stated by Freeman and Medoff (1984), trade unions generate increased wage equality mainly due to three trade union effects: “(...) lower inequality of wages within establishments, (...) equal pay for equal work across establishments, and (...) wage gains for blue-collar workers reduce inequality between white-collar and blue-collar workers” (p. 78).

However, discussing the impact of trade unions on both wages and wage inequality it is insufficient to simply compare trade union members and/or union industries to non-union members and non-union industries. In countries where union density in general is low and where the existence of unionized and non-unionized sectors (i.e., strong divergence between different groups of workers in terms of unionization) is more evident, such as the US and the UK, the wage effect of unionization is generally higher. In contrast, in countries where union density is generally high and more evenly distributed among different categories of employees, such as Sweden, the impact is lower. In the latter case, the general discussion tends to focus on wage compression rather than on wage dispersion (cf. Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Hibbs & Locking, 1996). Thus, the issue of the impact of trade unions on wages and wage dispersion is not straightforward. It seems that although unions generally produce less wage inequality, it is above all the degree of unionization, i.e., union density, which affects the degree of wage inequality. Accordingly, although unions generally have a positive impact on wages for their members, this impact does not generate as much increased wage equality in countries with low union density (cf. Rueda & Pontusson, 2000). This argument is strengthened by studies showing that the union wage effect is stronger in regions with lower union density in the US (Freeman & Medoff, 1984, p. 50), thus indicating that in regions with higher density, the wages for unionized and non-unionized workers are more comparable (cf. Acemoglu et al., 2001; Brady et al., 2013; Machin, 1997). Another argument supporting this thesis is that the increase in wage inequality and union density erosion have generally occurred simultaneously in many Western countries (Asher & DeFina, 1997; Gosling & Machin, 1995; Machin, 1997; Pontusson, 2013; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, studies that investigate functional income distribution (i.e., the wage share of national income)

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that I do not argue that de-unionization is the only factor explaining increased wage inequalities since the 1980s. Certainly, factors such as an increased demand for skilled labour and the declining degree of centralized wage-setting systems, among others, have also contributed to this development (cf. Blau & Kahn, 1996). However, as stated by Rueda and Pontusson (2000), the influence of de-unionization is most significant.

highlight the weakened bargaining position of labour as significant in relation to increased income inequality (Stockhammer, 2017; cf. Bengtsson, 2014). However, it is important to note that not only union density levels but also the degree of bargaining coverage have been found to reduce income inequality (see, e.g., Brandl & Traxler, 2011; Fitzenberger et al., 2013; Rueda & Pontusson, 2000). Although union density and bargaining coverage often correlate, the bargaining coverage is substantially higher than the union density level in several countries, including France and Germany. Moreover, it suggests that the institutional settings (affecting the bargaining system) have a direct impact on wage inequality. Hence, it is important to also consider institutional settings when studying, and discussing, the trade union impact on wages and wage inequality.

## 4.2 Unions' impact on social policy and macro-economics

The impact of trade unions generally transcends the scope of earnings and working conditions. Although to varying degrees, trade unions also (strive to) influence social policy and macro-economic issues. This generally includes a broad range of issues, such as the principle(s) for wage setting (e.g., the collective bargaining system), taxation (e.g., income distribution policies), welfare benefits/social spending and employment policies (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Western, 1997).

The degree to which trade unions are able to influence these issues primarily depends on three different but correlated aspects: the institutional settings surrounding the trade union movements, the link between trade unions and political parties and the strength (in numbers) of a trade union, i.e., trade union density (Allern & Bale, 2017; Allern et al., 2007; Brady, 2007; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hamann & Kelly, 2004; Hooge & Oser, 2016; Streeck & Hassel, 2003; Western, 1997). Because several of these aspects are further related to (the historical formations of) trade union ideologies and goals (see Section 2.3), the history of a trade union also tends to affect its political influence in the present to a high degree. Trade unions that developed collaborations with political parties early on in their existence generally possess more political influence than trade unions that emerged independently of political parties. The former type of union has also largely been able to influence the institutional settings in which they are active in ways that enhance both union density and the political influence even more (cf. Hyman, 2001; Streeck & Hassel, 2003; Western, 1997). Hence, these aspects tend to reinforce, or weaken, one another. For example, as demonstrated in previous sections (see, e.g., Section 3.2), for several decades, the Swedish trade union movement, with its strong ties to the Social Democratic

Party in government and its high density levels, was able to influence not only policies towards enhancing employment in unionized sectors but also broad class interests in terms of full employment and universal welfare benefits. Furthermore, the movement was able to create institutional settings that favoured union growth, including for instance, union-run unemployment funds. In contrast, in the US, for example, where the connection to political parties is much weaker (no formal ties exist), union density is low, and the trade union movement and the bargaining system are highly decentralized, the political influence is, and has always been, very low (cf. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hattam, 2014; Western, 1997).

Thus, the strategic interaction of unions with political parties, and the electoral success of union-friendly parties (Brady, 2007; Korpi, 1983), is of great significance for unions' influence on social policy and macro-economic issues. However, the link between trade unions and political parties has been declining in recent decades, and hence, the political influence of trade unions has generally been weakened. In particular, this is the case of the link between blue-collar trade unions and Social Democratic parties (Al-lern & Bale, 2017; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Howell, 2001; Kelly, 2015). As a consequence of structural changes in the labour market in the form of decreasing proportions of blue-collar workers and increasing proportions of white-collar workers, the strategic position of blue-collar trade unions has been weakened in terms of both declining density levels and potential voter mobilization. Meanwhile, the ideological approaches of Social Democratic parties have shifted towards the centre of the political spectrum, and the parties' strategies have shifted towards primarily attempting to win middle-class voters in pursuit of electoral success (Baines & McBride, 2014; De Waele, 2014; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Streeck, 2014; Streeck & Hassel, 2003). Thus, the bond between blue-collar trade unions and political parties is weakened for several reasons. However, there still exists variation in the strength of the link between blue-collar trade unions and Social Democratic parties as well as between mixed unions/predominantly white-collar unions and other political parties; hence, there is also variation in the remaining political influence of unions (see Al-lern et al., 2017; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013).<sup>16</sup> For example, as discussed above, the link between the Swedish LO and the SAP remains strong in terms of, for example, representation in decision-making bodies and financial support from the union to the party. Hence, the LO is still able to influence political decisions and policies to some degree, even though the

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<sup>16</sup> The political influence of white-collar unions has traditionally been less prominent because most of these unions have been politically independent. For instance, this is the case in Sweden (Jansson, 2017). However, some exceptions exist, mainly in continental Europe (see Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hyamn, 2001).

scope of the influence has been restrained by the turn to the political centre of the SAP (cf. Jansson, 2017).



## 5. Explaining union density and union membership

In this section, I will discuss and evaluate some of the most influential theoretical perspectives on union organization and union membership. The focus will be on perspectives that aim to explain both the individual propensity to be organized in a union and perspectives that aim to explain union density. These include perspectives on institutional and structural levels as well as the group and the individual level. I will also discuss my own contribution to this field of study related to the findings produced, and the gaps identified, in previous research.

### 5.1 Institutional perspectives

As discussed to some extent in the previous sections, the institutional framework under which trade unions are active deeply affects their ability to act and their ability to organize employees. In this section, I will elaborate on what institutional factors have been found to influence trade unions' power and ability to organize workers, in different contexts. The primary focus will lie on factors that explain union density since issues revolving union influence have been discussed in the previous sections. However, I will start by discussing some of the most influential theoretical elaborations of the institutional perspective.

Many, although certainly not all, scholars who emphasize the significance of institutions do not simply aim to explain what institutional conditions are favourable for producing stable and high trade union organizing and trade union influence; they also include a primary purpose of explaining how *peaceful* (and, hence, from their perspective, functional) industrial relations occur. This institutionalist tradition stems from a pluralist perspective that emphasizes the significance of the power division within a society, and within the labour market, to maintain functional and peaceful relations that serve the interests of society as a whole (see Clegg, 1975; cf. Hyman, 1989). In this tradition, trade unions are viewed as significant actors within in the labour market, with the main purpose of representing the interests of employees and, hence, of counter balancing the power of employers (see, e.g., Clegg, 1976). Thus, the underlying assumption of this tradition is that once

the interests of both employers and employees are represented in an institutionalized manner, preferably in the form of collective bargaining, the power balance between the parties in the labour market is practically even and the relationship is built on concessions and compromises. Although trade unions may have emerged as a result of fundamental conflicts between employees and employers and hence have historically resulted in the upsurge of frequent industrial conflicts, the institutionalization of these relations, according to this perspective, has resulted in more stable, peaceful and functional relations based on the notion of compromise (Ross & Hartman, 1960).

However, since the empirical evidence has shown that different institutional settings are more or less likely to produce industrial peace, some advocates of the pluralist institutionalist perspective further argue that certain institutional settings are “better” than others (see, e.g., Clegg, 1976; cf. Ingham, 1974). As argued by Clegg (1976), the most significant aspect revolves around the bargaining system and its level of centralization, further related to differences in employer organization and state intervention. Put simply, Clegg argues that a centralized bargaining system, which leaves little room for the individual action of local unions, will yield fewer conflicts compared to decentralized systems in which local unions have higher degrees of freedom of action. Since this perspective favours peaceful relations, institutional settings that generate/favour compromise and peace (i.e., generally speaking, the Swedish/Scandinavian institutional settings) are viewed as “better” (cf. Fulcher, 1991).

Although the significance of institutional settings has been incorporated in most explanations of the differences in union density and union power/influence, as well as in the differences in strike patterns, across countries (see, e.g., Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Kjellberg, 2001; Western, 1997; Brandl & Traxler, 2009; Ingham, 1974; Pontusson, 2013), the pluralist institutionalist perspective has been the subject of a great deal of criticism. First, it has been criticized for its tendency to explain everything in terms of institutions, and hence, for disregarding other significant aspects. However, the most profound criticism of this perspective revolves around its incapacity or, rather, unwillingness to address power. Hyman (1989), for instance, argues that since the main issue of this perspective is representation in the form of bargaining per se, the outcome of the bargaining is omitted from the (power) analysis of the relations between unions and employers. Hence, if trade unions participate in bargaining that results in a deterioration of working conditions and wages, then the pluralist institutionalist perspective will still consider both parties to be equal once a compromise has been reached (Hyman, 1989, p. 84). Thus, not only is the argument that trade unions and employers are equal in terms of power once their relationship is institutionalized false, but it also deliberately disguises the fact that employers/capitalists, by controlling the means of production, always have more power than unions (see, e.g., Eldridge, 1973; Korpi, 1983; Korpi & Shalev, 1979). Moreover, the

pluralist institutionalist perspective has been criticized for its lack of power analysis on account of the state. In the pluralist institutionalist perspective, the state is assumed to be a neutral actor (Clegg, 1975). However, as argued by several scholars, the state generally acts to preserve the system and is therefore employer-biased (see, e.g., Hyman, 1975; Kelly, 1998). Although some scholars argue that the bias of the state is not definitive but may shift according to political power (see, e.g., Korpi, 1983; Western, 1997), it cannot be ignored that the state, by shaping the (institutional) relations within the labour market, affects the conditions of industrial relations in any given context (see Hyman, 2008; cf. Polanyi, 1985 [1944]).

In light of this criticism, Western (1997) formulates an institutionalist perspective that differs substantially from the pluralist perspective. Western's main concern is not whether institutions render industrial peace but whether and which institutional settings generate the most favourable opportunities for collective action and mobilization, i.e., high levels of union density. Western explicitly discusses institutions in terms of class organization, arguing that where class relations are strongly institutionalized, the probability of (high and stable) collective organization and action increases substantially, and vice versa (Western, 1997, p. 7). In his perspective, the state is thus not neutral but rather a central aspect of the institutionalization of class interests and relations (cf. Korpi, 1983). Accordingly, although he does not discuss the power of the state in substantial terms, he not only acknowledges but also emphasizes the significance of how Social Democratic governments have created institutional settings favourable to trade unions, for instance, by supporting public sector unionization (Western, 1997, p. 8). In contrast to the pluralist institutionalist perspective, the outcome of the institutional settings, in terms of equality, etc., is further central to Western's perspective (for a further development of this perspective, see Brady, 2007).

### 5.1.1 Empirical evidence of the impact of institutions on trade union organization

Most studies that investigate the influence of institutional settings on trade union organization and influence focus on one or more of the following aspects: the degree of centralization regarding (1) the trade union movement and/or (2) the bargaining system, the existence of a Ghent system (i.e., whether the system for unemployment funds is union-run) and the degree of workplace representation (i.e., the institutional foundations that promote or hinder workplace representation).

It is argued that a centralized trade union enhances union organization for several reasons. Kjellberg (1998), for example, argues that the centralized trade union movement in Sweden has enhanced organization by generating higher degrees of class unity and hence less division within the working

class. Western (1997) argues in a similar manner, emphasizing the significance of centralized union organization in terms of reducing both competition between different union federations and the costs of organizing by redistributing the costs across different sectors (thus mainly enhancing organization in more difficultly and costly organized sectors, such as private services). Regarding centralized bargaining systems, Western (1997) argues that the historical conditions that have created these institutions, i.e., the mutual recognition of the labour market parties (see Section 2.3.2), have also rendered less employer hostility against unions. Hence, the costs of organizing (in terms of resistance) are reduced (cf. Kjellberg, 2013).

Furthermore, union-run unemployment funds enable trade unions to maintain membership (and control) among the unemployed, particularly when membership in unemployment funds requires trade union membership. Hence, in countries with union-run unemployment funds, increasing unemployment generally generates higher union density levels, whereas in other countries, the union density levels generally decrease in times of economic recession (Brady, 2007; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Western, 1997). Thus, unions become less vulnerable to economic cycles and are able to counteract the market logic. Workplace representation is argued to enhance union density, not only in terms of pure visibility but also in terms of affecting the norms and the tradition, i.e., the social custom, of being organized (Kjellberg, 2001; Ebbinghaus et al., 2011). Hence, institutions that favour workplace representation enhance union organization (Brady, 2007; Fazekas, 2011).

The evidence supporting the impact of different institutional settings on trade union organization is massive. Several studies investigating cross-national differences in union density find that the existence of a Ghent system, centralized unions and bargaining systems and/or high levels of workplace representation are strongly associated with higher degrees of union density (see, e.g., Brady, 2007; Checchi & Visser, 2005; Ebbinghaus et al., 2011; Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Ebbinghaus, 2002; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Western, 1997). The one factor that generally has been found to best explain the differences in union density is the Ghent system (Ebbinghaus et al., 2011; Schnabel, 2013; Scruggs, 2002; Van Rie et al., 2011; Visser, 2002; Western, 1997). Whereas union density varies somewhat between countries with highly centralized trade union movements and bargaining systems, this variation seems to be related to the existence of union-run unemployment funds. For example, whereas Norway and Austria have lower union density levels compared with Sweden and Denmark, despite high levels of centralization, this situation can partly be explained by the fact that both Norway and Austria implemented compulsory unemployment insurance instead of union-run funds (Western, 1997).

However, the explanatory capacity of the significance of institutional settings has decreased with regard to diverging levels of unionization across

countries, generally as a result of the dismantling of favourable institutions, including processes of decentralization, lower degrees of workplace representation and the erosion of the Ghent system in many countries (Baccaro & Howell, 2011; Bryson et al., 2011; Western, 1997). Although this development partly explains the decreasing levels of organization in countries with previously favourable institutional settings (see, e.g., Brady, 2007; Böckerman & Uusitalo, 2006; Kjellberg, 2013), the rectification of the institutional settings across countries with highly differing degrees of union density creates problems for this explanation, even when considering the path-dependency of collective regulation (cf. Baccaro & Howell, 2011; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). Hence, considering the effect of institutional settings is generally insufficient as a sole explanatory factor for the changing union density levels both within and across countries.

## 5.2 Structural perspectives

The main structural explanations found in the literature revolve around two different aspects. The first focuses on structural changes in the labour market and the work force, e.g., shifts from manufacturing industries to private services, shifts in the class structure, and increasing participation in the labour market of women and foreign-born workers. The second focuses on the impact of economic cycles, that is, economic booms and recessions. These explanations thus (mainly) focus on union density changes rather than on why individuals join a trade union in the first place.

In the following, I will discuss the empirical evidence found in the literature for each of these perspectives, and its implications for our understanding of union density changes.

### 5.2.1 Empirical evidence of the impact of structural changes in the labour market on union density

The effect of structural, or compositional, changes in the labour market on union density changes (mainly declines) is somewhat contested in the literature. It is argued that shifts from highly unionized sectors (e.g., the manufacturing industry and the public sector) to less unionized sectors (e.g., private services and the private sector in general) and the increased proportions of labour market participation of weakly unionized categories of employees (e.g., women, foreign-born employees, white-collar workers and the atypically employed) have negative effects on overall union density. In general, shifts from manufacturing sectors to private services are argued to affect union density because the cost of organizing (in terms of employer resistance and in terms of establishment size) are lower in the manufacturing industry

and the public sector and the tradition/social custom of being organized is higher in these industries compared to private services and the private sector in general (see, e.g., Ebbinghaus et al., 2011; Kjellberg, 2011; Schnabel, 2013). Moreover, the proportional increase in the labour market of women, foreign-born employees, white-collar workers and the atypically employed is argued to negatively affect union density primarily because these categories of employees have lower attachment to the labour market and/or possess more individualistic attitudes (Kjellberg, 2013; Schnabel, 2013). Hence, both the lower attachment to the labour market and individualistic attitudes make these categories more difficult to organize.

Although several studies find support for the impact of some of these factors (for evidence that shifts from manufacturing sectors and/or public sector decline has effected union density negatively, see, e.g., Bryson & Gomez (2005), Farber (2005), Lee (2005); for evidence that atypical employment and cohort-effects have effected union density negatively, see, e.g., Blanchflower (2007), Ebbinghaus et al. (2011)), many factors have been observed to demonstrate mixed results between both countries and studies. In a review of the field, Schnabel (2013) finds that the only factors that present stable effects are shifts from the public to the private sector, the size of the establishment (i.e., the decreasing proportion of individuals employed in large establishments), age/cohort and atypical employment. Meanwhile, the effect for shifts from manufacturing to private services industries and the increasing proportions of female employees, foreign-born employees and white-collar workers is somewhat unclear. Additionally, regarding atypical employment, most studies only control for the impact of the employment rate, whereas the impact of temporary employment requires further investigation (cf. Fitzenberger et al., 2011; Schnabel & Wagner, 2007).<sup>17</sup> However, regarding structural shifts from, e.g., manufacturing industries to (private) services, I argue that the main issue revolves around the magnitude of the effect and, to some extent, the interpretation of the results in light of different institutional settings. Most studies investigating the effect of structural shifts from highly unionized manufacturing industries to weakly unionized sectors do in fact find that these shifts have contributed to union density decline; however,

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<sup>17</sup> The impact of various forms of atypical work is not understudied in the literature as a whole, but rather in this particular sub-field. For instance, Goslinga and Sverke (2003) study union attitudes and turnover intentions among traditionally and atypically employed (including the permanently vs. the temporarily employed) in Sweden, Italy and the Netherlands. Their results suggest no substantial differences exist between these categories regarding either union attitudes or turnover intention. Similarly, studying the willingness to strike among employees with standardized and non-standardized contracts, Jansen et al. (2014) observe no significant differences. However, we know that the atypically employed, both those working part-time and those with temporary employment, are less organized (Kjellberg, 2010; Schnabel & Wagner, 2005); hence it is important to study the impact of the growth (and/or decline) of these categories separately on overall union density changes.

the magnitude of the effect differs quite substantially not only across countries (i.e., depending on the institutional settings) but also between studies (i.e., depending on the data and specification) and between different time periods (the effect seems to be decreasing over time) (see, e.g., Bryson & Gomez, 2005; Böckerman & Uusitalo, 2006; Fitzenberger et al., 2011; Green, 1992). Hence, although we may conclude, in line with Schnabel (2013), that the effect of structural changes has most likely been exaggerated, these changes contribute a partial explanation regarding, in particular, union density decline. The impact of these changes on union density increase is further understudied. Hence, investigating that relationship may enhance our understanding of union density changes. However, because structural changes will not tell the full story, other aspects must be considered as well to fully understand changes in union density. For example, this includes discussing the potential impact of certain structural changes in light of various institutional settings (and changes) and thus developing our understanding of how these factors affect various countries in different ways, as well as how and why the effects vary over time. This is something that I aim to contribute in this dissertation.

## 5.2.2 Empirical evidence of the impact of economic cycles on union density

For a long period of time, the influence of economic (business) cycles on union density dominated the debate about union density changes. The argument behind this explanation for union organization and influence heavily relies on the assumptions that poor economic performance, affecting levels of (un)employment, prices and wages, negatively affects workers' individual and collective power and strengthens employer resistance (cf. Brady, 2007; Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). In that sense, the arguments are linked to orthodox economic assumptions about trade union power being linked to the ability to possess monopoly power of the labour supply (see Section 2.2). In support of this theory, many (predominantly older) studies have presented evidence that union density levels in fact decrease during economic hardships and when unemployment increases, whereas union growth is associated with economic growth, employment growth and, to some degree, reduced levels of unemployment (see, e.g., Bain & Elsheikh, 1976; Bain & Price, 1983; Schnabel, 1989). However, this type of explanation has also been widely criticized for various reasons. Schnabel (2002), for example, discuss the deficiencies of many studies that use a business cycle model in distinguishing between short-term cyclical trends related to economic performance and long-term trends of shifting labour market structures (see, e.g., Carruth & Disney, 1988 for exceptions). More significantly, however, business cycle models are unable to explain cross-country differences

in union density. Hence, several studies have found that institutional settings better explain union density compared to business cycle models since these models are able to explain differing levels of organization across countries with similar economic developments (see, e.g., Brady, 2007; Checchi & Visser, 2005; Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Western, 1997; also, for similar results regarding conflict patterns, see, e.g., Brandl & Traxler, 2009).

### 5.3 Explaining individual propensity to be organized in a trade union and union activity

The previous two sections have focused on factors that explain trade union density. In this section, the focus will lie on factors that explain trade union membership, i.e., the individual propensity to be organized in a trade union, and trade union action. In the empirical sections of this dissertation, the focus primarily lies on theories revolving around collective mobilization and class. To limit the scope of this (theoretical and empirical) review, this issue will be the primary focus in this section as well.

Furthermore, theories of collective mobilization and collective action are at the core of sociological discussions about the nature of society. In this section, I will not be able to engage in that debate for too long. That said, it is nearly impossible not to touch upon these issues when discussing different perspectives on collective mobilization and action related to trade unions.

#### 5.3.1 The Olsonian logic of collective action: a discussion and a critique

Much of the earlier discussions about collective mobilization and collective action in industrial relations research has revolved around Mancur Olson's (1971) theory of collective action (stemming from utilitarianism) and the now famous problem of "free-riders". Olson's primary concern is why, and under what conditions, rational self-interested individuals who aim to maximize their (individual) interests act or formulate collectively in the pursuit of collective goods, for example, in the form of trade unions. His argument is based on the assumption that individuals' actions are based on cost-benefit analysis and that the rational individual chooses the line of action that benefits him/her the most. His main focus is to explain how large groups or, in this case, large trade unions are able to form. He argues that the logic of collective action (related to public goods) differs between small and large groups because it is easier to "free-ride" on a public good produced by a large group. The reasons for this phenomena are that in a large group, the individual contribution to the cause is negligible and hence no one will notice if one does not contribute. In small groups, on the other hand, "free-

riding” will be noticed. Hence, Olson’s argument is essentially that “unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, *rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests*” (Olson, 1971, p. 2). Thus, the essential argument is that no rational individual will join a trade union if membership is not compulsory, unless the benefits provided by the trade union, in terms of private goods in the form of, e.g., access to employment or welfare benefits, are large enough (i.e., exceeds the costs) (cf. Booth, 1985). Hence, benefits that are accessible without membership, i.e., public goods such as union wages, are not incentive enough for the rational individual to not join a union. He/she will then instead “free-ride” on those benefits, by accessing them without contributing to the costs. As a result of this argument, Olson concludes that the most important factor enabling, and hence explaining, the existence of trade unions is compulsory membership and coercion in the form of strikes and “coercive picket lines”, i.e., the closed shop system (Olson, 1971).

However, Olson’s argument has been criticized from various directions. Most notably, it is empirically observed that (large national) trade unions exist without compulsion, without controlling labour market entrance, and without coercion related to the closed-shop system. This is the case in Sweden, for example. Hence, other aspects must (also) motivate individuals to join trade unions.

Without questioning the core of Olson’s argument about how rational individuals in the absence of compulsion or private goods will “free-ride” on the public goods produced by trade unions, Booth (1985) formulates a critique of Olson that revolves around what the private goods offered by trade unions actually are. Primarily aiming to explain why individuals join trade unions in the lack of closed-shop systems, she suggests that the private good offered by unions is not material goods in the form of welfare benefits, etc. but non-material goods in the form of reputation. Booth’s argument, which is based on social custom theory (see, e.g., Akerlof, 1980; Naylor, 1989), is that in the case of forming large groups such as trade unions, the social custom of the community/group is a strong incentive to adapt to group norms as a means of avoiding negative sanctions from other community/group members. Thus, if the norm is to be a union member, then the risk of reputation losses, in terms of being a “scab”, is a strong enough incentive to make many individuals join. Hence, the private (monopoly) good offered by a trade union is accordingly not being a “scab” (Booth, 1985).

Another, more profound criticism of Olson’s arguments stems from a critique of his notion of rationality and of the assumption of the inherent self-interest of individuals. This line of criticism thus questions Olson’s core argument, namely, that an individual’s choices of action are primarily driven by the outcome of those actions (cf. Elster, 2000), and it generally includes a

criticism of both rational choice theories in general (e.g., of the notions of rationality and intentionality) and the orthodox economic view of the individual and the (labour) market. John Kelly (1998), for example, questions the assumption of a zero-sum game between workers in the labour market as postulated by Olson, arguing that rather than being competitors in terms of the public good, as firms are, individuals joining a trade union do not compete with one another over public goods but with employers (and/or consumers). Hence, Kelly argues that the rationale for individuals in the labour market to free-ride on the union-produced public good is largely exaggerated because unlike firms, their gains are not at the expense of one another (Kelly, 1998, p. 71). Accordingly, this line of criticism also questions the neo-classical assumption that if trade unions do not increase the surplus, then the union wage effect will result in job losses. Although attributing rational choice theories some merits for introducing self-interest as a driving force behind collective action and for their precise modelling of the decision-making process, Tilly (1978) criticizes the tradition for not contributing to explaining why certain interests rise and change. This line of criticism thus mainly addresses the notions of rationality and interest, that is, that the definition of rational choices is incidental to the definition of interest, which, according to Tilly, is largely underdeveloped. By defining individuals' interests based on their own definitions, it is very likely that one (1) ends up ignoring unarticulated interests of high relevance and/or (2) misinterprets false interests for real interests (Tilly, 1978, pp. 29, 37). In line with these criticisms, I would like to further emphasize the limits of this theory in terms of explaining when and why belief systems vary not only across groups but also among individuals belonging to certain social groups and in terms of explaining how and why various belief systems influence individuals to participate in collective action (or not) (cf. Edling & Rydgren, 2014). In the following section, we turn to theoretical perspectives that aim to contribute to explaining these aspects.

### 5.3.2 Social movement theory: theorizing collective mobilization among subordinated groups

Social movement theory that focus explicitly on mobilization aims to explain collective mobilization and action from a very different perspective compared to Olson (1971). The theories discussed here draw on recourse mobilization theory, grievance theory and interactionist perspectives.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to a focus on rationality and self-interest, aspects that revolve around collective interests (and grievances) and social identity are at the core of the explanation within this perspective. Thus, the focus lies on the realization of col-

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<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, this section focuses on a selection of social movements theories, and should not be confused with a full account of this very broad and rich tradition.

lective interests, instead of on selective incentives, and on how world views, mediated by collective identification, affect the realization of those interests (cf. Edling & Rydgren, 2014; Kelly, 1998). However, the aim of this theoretical perspective is similar to that of Olson: to explain when and why individuals mobilize and take collective action.

Social movement theory, as developed and elaborated by Tilly (1978), McAdam (1988) and Kelly (1998), among others, generally invokes a conflict perspective on the study of collective mobilization and action. In relation to the labour market, this implies that workers are defined as occupying a subordinate position within labour relations and that their collective interests oppose those of employers. Thus, one issue that is of great significance to this perspective is how workers come to define their collective interests. Kelly (1998) argues that collective interests are, to some degree, socially constructed. The main reason why he uses the term socially constructed in this sense is his will to emphasize the fact that trade unions, particularly trade union leaders and officials, have the power and ability to construct, i.e., define, workers' interests in the workplace in favour of collective action (or not) (cf. Benford & Snow, 2000). Hence, the *definition* of interests will shape workers' strategies and, more importantly, their *willingness* to act, in terms of whether and how to pursue their interests, within the labour market. However, this is but one aspect, although a significant aspect, of social movement/mobilization theory.

As proposed by Tilly (1978), five different components are central to the study of collective mobilization: interests, organization, mobilization, opportunity and (forms of) action. Tilly defines interests as “the shared advantages or disadvantages likely to accrue to the population [the contender, my note] in question as a consequence of various possible interactions with other populations” (Tilly, 1978, p. 54).<sup>19</sup> Hence, interests are defined in a collective manner, and they are relational and conflicting, that is, depending on the actions of others, and opposed to other groups. Organization is defined in terms of how (what aspects of) a groups structure affects its ability to form collectively. Organization is thus related to collective identities, which constitute unifying structures. In the case of collective organization in the labour market, collective identities such as class identity and identification with one's co-workers thus become significant. Mobilization is defined as a process of acquiring collective control of the necessary recourses that enable action in terms of, for instance, labour power (and the threat of withdrawing it). Opportunity revolves around a group's relationship with other groups, including, e.g., relative power, repression, and the opportunities to pursue

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<sup>19</sup> In Tilly's analysis, interests are generally defined in subjective terms. Hence, he gives preference to a group's own definition of its interests, as opposed to “objective” definitions (Tilly, 1978). Although his perspective owes much to orthodox Marxism, his definition of interests is thus not solely materialistic.

common interests. Collective action is simply defined in terms of a population's collective action in pursuit of its interests. Regarding all of these aspects, Tilly gives preference to the economic and political life and to well-defined groups (Tilly, 1978, pp. 7-8, 54-55). All aspects should further be regarded as processes of more or less favourable structures, etc. for collective mobilization and action to occur.

However, the basic question of how a certain interest definition comes about, and how it comes to be defined as collective, still requires an answer. Kelly (1998) argues that it is essential to differentiate between interests that may lead to collective mobilization and those that do not. Because interests were defined as disadvantages above, the essential task ahead is thus to explain how, when and why these disadvantages give rise to collective mobilization and action. In line with McAdam (1988) and Gamson (1995), Kelly argues that a sense of grievance is essential for this to occur. That is, the disadvantage must be perceived as unfair or as unjust and illegitimate, whereas the demands of the subordinated groups must be perceived as right (or fair) (Kelly, 1998, p. 29). In terms of collective mobilization and action in the labour market, these sets of arguments imply that certain conditions must be met for collective action to emerge. First, a dissatisfaction must be perceived as unfair, hence, it generally must break a set of rules, e.g., the employment contract (cf. Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004), or perceptions of fair wages and/or the distribution of recourses between employees and employers. Second, the demands stemming from this dissatisfaction must be perceived as legitimate. Hence, the ideological framings of a disadvantage become central in relation to whether it is perceived as illegitimate and whether the demand is perceived as right (cf. Kelly, 1998; also, see Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, 2004). As we have observed in previous sections, different trade union movements stem from different ideological perspectives. Thus, a trade union's identity and framing of what is right and wrong become central in relation to its capacity to mobilize. Third, the demands must be perceived as achievable. This relates to perceptions of the power balance between workers and employers and to threats of retribution, repression, etc. (i.e., to opportunity structures). In the case of trade union mobilization, not only the institutional settings but also the degree of employer opposition thus become significant. Moreover, grievances must be attributed to a concrete agent. In the case of collective mobilization and action in the labour market, that agent must be the employer. In the process of attribution, and hence in the framing of an issue, social identities play a crucial role (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Because social identities not only enhance a sense of belonging that involves distancing from, and sometimes the stereotyping of, others but also affect individuals' belief systems (Edling & Rydgren, 2014), it helps to define what agent to attribute. Hence, a social identity as a worker, which is opposed to that of an employer and which may involve stereotypical perceptions of employers, thus helps define the employers as being re-

sponsible for the group's grievances. Hence, social identities enable individuals to perceive their interests in collective rather than individual terms and hence turn individuals into collective agents (cf. Kelly, 1998).

However, since a multitude of different social identities are generally available for a single person and no social identity is thus "natural", the issue of how a particular social identity emerges and becomes relevant must also be addressed. Edling and Rydgren (2014) argue that social categories that are salient are more likely to generate strong identifications compared to less salient categories. They further argue that one of the aspects that influences the salience of a social category is whether it affects individuals' welfare, i.e., the distribution of recourses and rights, etc., in a systematic manner (Edling & Rydgren, 2014, p. 11). In that sense, class could be argued to have the potential to generate a strong identification that affects individuals' belief systems because class strongly affects individuals' allocation of recourses (Korpi, 1985; Wright, 1997). Kelly (1998) further argues that the process of interaction between (trade union) leaders and workers in the workplace is central for increasing the salience of the social category of workers, and of class, by visualizing grievances and injustices for the worker collective and in the process of attributing guilt for these grievances. Hence, trade union leaders' framing of issues as unfair and illegitimate (or not) is potentially highly significant for the emergence of collective action in the labour market (cf. Edling & Rydgren, 2014, p. 12).

### 5.3.3 Empirical evidence for theories on collective action and mobilization: a discussion about merits and limitations

Most studies that investigate what factors affect the propensity to be organized in a union and union activity include aspects that are emphasized in social movement theories and/or rational choice and social custom theories. However, the emphasis placed on different aspects varies significantly between studies.

It is widely acknowledged that instrumentality, that is, the perceived benefits of a union membership in terms of, e.g., better wages and working conditions and job security (i.e., union efficiency) affecting cost-benefit analysis, and social custom (i.e., norms and social support) affect the propensity to be a union member, to remain a union member and union activity and participation (see, e.g., Akkerman et al., 2013; Booth & Chatterji, 1995; Charlwood, 2002; Cregan, 2005; Ebbinghauss et al., 2011; Green & Auer, 2013; Hammer et al., 2009; Hodder et al., 2017; Peetz, 1998; Tapia, 2013; Troubøl & Jensen, 2014; Visser, 2002; Waddington & Whitston, 1997; Waddington, 2015; Zacharewicz et al., 2016). However, the degree to which, in particular, instrumentality but also social pressure influence these aspects is somewhat unclear and contested, and the mechanisms behind the effects of social cus-

tom are generally somewhat unclear and underdeveloped, particularly in studies investigating union membership.

For example, Hodder et al. (2017) observe that a combination of perceived injustice and union instrumentality (in terms of strike activity and efficiency) motivates employees to join a union (cf. Cregan, 2013), whereas Blader (2007) finds that perceptions of procedural justice and social identification better predict attitudes towards unionization than instrumental factors. Similarly, Brown Johnson and Jarley (2004) find that perceptions of procedural justice and union justice better explain union participation than instrumental factors. Both Cregan et al. (2009) and Metochi (2002) further find that the influence of trade union leaders on members' willingness to participate in union activities is highly significant. More specifically, Cregan et al. (2009) observe that non-calculative group-based collective identities, reinforced by the activities of a transformational leadership (i.e., charismatic leaders that arise from within a group, built on an emotional relationship between the leader and the group [Cregan et al., 2009, p. 704-705]), strongly predict union members' loyalty and willingness to work for the union, even when controlling for instrumental aspects (cf. Kelley & Kelly, 1994). Meanwhile, Green and Auer (2013) find that although union identification is positively associated with union participation, this effect is moderated by perceived union instrumentality. Hence, it seems safe to say that all of these factors (i.e., instrumentality and social identification, perceptions of justice and the mediating role of trade union leaders) are of great significance and help us understand both why individuals join unions (or not) and whether they participate in various union activities. However, which of these factors has the strongest influence remains difficult to determine. Moreover, whether selective goods are more important than collective goods when measuring the impact of instrumentality is also unclear (see, e.g., Waddington, 2015; Waddington & Whitston, 1997).

Visser (2002) provides an extensive and thorough test of rational choice and social custom theory by controlling for both the impact of selective goods (rational choice) and pro-union attitudes among co-workers and family (social custom), and the results suggest that the perception of high costs and low risk of reputation losses (in terms of flexible work and the perceived level of unionization and pro-union attitudes among co-workers) as well as the influence of parents (in terms of parents' union status) strongly affect the propensity to be a union member (p. 417). Although this study enhances our understanding of what factors affect union membership, the fact that Visser (2002) does not study what mechanisms cause different attitudes towards unions leaves a gap in this understanding. Most notably, interaction variables between selective goods and union attitudes and between parents' membership status and union attitudes, which could potentially shed more light on what factors generates different union attitudes, are not included in the analysis.

However, Visser (2002), Allvin and Sverke (2000), Blader (2007) and Newton and Shore (1992), among others, demonstrate that the issue of pro-union attitudes is of high relevance for our understanding of union organization and activity and not simply in terms of social pressure. Hence, we must study the mechanisms that generate pro- (or anti) union attitudes more thoroughly. Unlike Visser (2002), Allvin and Sverke (2000) shed more light on this issue by distinguishing between different forms of union attitudes/commitment: alienated members, instrumental members, ideological members and devoted members (who are devoted in terms of both instrumentality and ideology). They find that the central factors that account for different degrees and forms of commitment are age and ideology; ideologically committed and devoted members present socialist values to a higher degree than instrumentally committed and alienated members. Although this result may not seem surprising and although Allvin and Sverke (2000) do not study union membership, it takes us one step closer to understanding what mechanisms shape different attitudes towards unions. Hence, studying these aspects more thoroughly in relation to union membership may enhance our understanding of why individuals join unions (or not).

## 5.4 Modelling (changing) trade union density, membership and activity

Evidence from previous research suggests that certain aspects are more relevant to study than others to explain and understand union density changes, union membership and union activity. Most notably, not only union attitudes, ideology, perceptions of justice, social identification and the role of trade union leaders but also instrumentality and social custom are found to predict both union membership and union activity. However, how some of these aspects are related to one another and, in particular, what mechanisms explain different union attitudes and different ideologies remain somewhat unclear. Moreover, whether and how the effects of certain of these aspects have changed over time also remain unclear.

Evidence from the literature further suggests that union density changes cannot simply be understood in terms of individual predictors. The institutional settings that strongly affect the terms under which a union movement is active have a strong influence on its capacity to attract members as well, both in terms of how these settings enable or hinder unions in influencing macro-economic issues in union-friendly ways and in terms of the costs of organizing. Moreover, structural shifts in the labour market from highly unionized sectors to weakly unionized sectors, the increase in flexible employment and changing class structures, among other things, affect overall

union density levels to some extent, although to varying degrees both across countries and over time. Hence, it becomes evident that a broad range of factors must be considered to understand and shed light on the complexity of the issue at stake.

Class is a central notion in relation to trade union organization and activity, not least in the sense that trade union movements descend from early class organizing in many, although not all, countries. However, also in countries in which trade union organization did not start as the organizing of class, the organized subjects primarily belonged to the working class in the early days. The significance of class for the study of union organization and activity is also evident in the fact that class has generally been found to strongly predict union organization and activity, although the effect of class has been diminishing in terms of explaining union membership (see, e.g., Deery & Cieri, 1991; Ebbinghaus et al., 2011; Schnabel & Wagner, 2005; Scheuer, 2006). Class is generally viewed as a predictor of union membership and activity because it captures different needs for collective voice related to different amounts of power resources among various categories of employees but also with regard to homogeneity in terms of both preferences and working conditions within various classes. However, many (recent) empirical studies within the field do not elaborate on the concept of class but simply treat it in terms of various occupational positions, generally by differentiating between blue-collar workers and white-collar workers or by using a more elaborate operationalization, for example, SEI and EGP. However, in many cases, the implications of these differentiations are not discussed or elaborated. Hence, the various theoretical interpretations and meanings of class, which are deeply related to issues of power, are rarely thoroughly discussed in that context (for exceptions, see, e.g. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Kelly, 1998; Western, 1995).

Similarly, issues regarding ideology are generally prevalent in studies focusing on union attitudes and commitment and in some studies investigating the propensity to be organized (see, e.g. Allvin & Sverke, 2000; Ebbinghaus et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 1980; Jensen, 2017; Kollmeyer, 2013). However, the degree to which ideology is related to underlying factors varies substantially. As stated in the previous section, many studies do not consider what aspects influence different attitudes towards unions. Although several studies have included ideology as an underlying factor, most studies stop there, and hence, the factors affecting different ideological perspectives remain somewhat unclear. Certain exceptions to this situation exist, however. For example, Barling et al. (1991) contribute with a thorough investigation of how family socialization affects union attitudes among young individuals and their intention to join a union. The point of departure for Barling et al. (1991) is that parents' union membership status is an insufficient predictor of union attitudes because: "An individual may be a member of a union and still express anti-union attitudes; conversely, non-unionized individuals may

express pro-union attitudes but not have the opportunity to opt for representation” (p. 726). Instead, they study the effect of children’s perception of their parents’ union attitudes, of their perception of their parents’ union participation and activity, and of work related beliefs. They find that the perception of the parents’ union attitudes as well as Marxist and humanist work beliefs<sup>20</sup> via socialization directly affect children’s union attitudes, whereas parents’ perceived union activity and participation does not (cf. Kelloway & Watts, 1994).

Although Barling et al. (1991) are far from being the only researchers who emphasize the significance of studying the underlying mechanisms that may explain different union attitudes and behaviour (see, e.g. Deery & Cieri, 1991; Griffin & Brown, 2011; Kelly, 1998; Klandermans, 1984, 1986), these aspects are less prevalent within the field compared to many other issues, particularly with regard to studying union density change and decline. In this dissertation, I provide a comprehensive study of what mechanisms may affect the individual propensity to join a trade union by focusing on the effects and relationship between class, class background, class identity and ideology, inspired by arguments proposed in social movement/mobilization theories of the significance of social background and social identification for individuals’ belief systems. In particular, I contribute with a systematic study of whether and how the effects of these factors have changed over time in terms of predicting union membership. Moreover, I study the effect of these aspects on attitudes towards industrial action among Swedish employees and hence capture what factors affect union power and influence not only in terms of density levels but also in terms of the willingness to act (cf. Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013). I further contribute with a systematic study of the effects of structural changes on union density increase and decline in the Swedish context. In particular, I focus on shifts from manufacturing to service sectors, shifts from the public sector to the private sector, the effects of increasing atypical employment and changes in the class structure in light of changing institutional settings, aiming to provide a broad and comprehensive picture of what factors affect the changing union density in Sweden.

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<sup>20</sup> Marxist work beliefs are described as stressing the significance of more control over the workplace for workers, to minimize exploitation and alienation. These beliefs are assumed to enhance pro-union attitudes. Humanistic work beliefs are described to stress that work should be meaningful and fulfilment (Barling et al., 1991, p. 726).



# 6. Methodology

## 6.1 Concepts, data and analytical methods

### 6.1.1 Definition and operationalization of key concepts

#### *Union density*

At first glance, union membership and union density may seem to be quite straightforward concepts to study; they simply require a distinction between individuals who are union members and individuals who are not. However, although this may be true in terms of union membership, the concept of union density requires a definition in terms of its population. For example, many individuals who joined a trade union during their active working life remain members when they are retired. Moreover, several union federations recruit members among students who are not yet active in the labour market. Further, in Sweden it is (still) quite common to be a member in a union when one is unemployed or on long-term sick leave. Hence, when measuring union density – the proportion of a population that is unionized – the definition of the population will affect the outcome. Thus, the definition is generally sensitive to comparisons between countries due to, e.g., uneven levels of union organization among retired individuals, students and the unemployed.

Union density is generally defined as the total union membership rate as a share of the number of people who could potentially be union members. Hence, the measure includes the share of the labour force that could potentially be employed, thus excluding the self-employed and employers. In practice, two standard methods of measuring union density are used: gross density and net density. Whereas gross density includes students, the unemployed and retired individuals, thus measuring union density among individuals within a certain age span who could potentially be members, net density includes only the employed, thus excluding not only retired individuals but also generally (although not always) the unemployed and students.

In this thesis, I define union density in terms of net density. Thus, I exclude retired individuals and the unemployed. In Study II, students are also excluded, whereas students who are active in the labour market (i.e., students who work part-time) are included in the population in Study I and Study III.

## *Class*

Similar to Erik Olin Wright (1997, 2005), and other neo-marxist scholars, I would like to stress the significance of class as a relational notion. That is, instead of simply discussing class in terms of (labour market) positions, class should be understood in terms of social relations in the sphere of production and the effects of these social relations. This implies that class should not primarily be considered in terms of distributional patterns and/or life chances but in terms of relations of exploitation. Exploitation may be defined in terms of a power relationship based on mutual dependence, in which one group's welfare is dependent on another group's scarcity (cf. Engels in Marx & Engels, 1953, p. 510). Exploitation functions in terms of exclusion: the exploited groups are excluded from the ownership of the means of production, whereas the owners are able to appropriate welfare out of the work of the exploited groups. Hence, whereas the exploited groups are dependent on the work and the wages offered by the owners, the owners are dependent on the work of the exploited for their welfare. Accordingly, a mutual but unequal relationship of interdependence exists between the two groups, giving rise to antagonism and conflicting interests between them (cf. Wright, 1997, pp. 10-11).

However, it is insufficient to simply divide classes between those who own the means of production and those who sell their labour power. To understand and be able to analyse the effects of class relations, particularly in terms of trade union organization and activity, further distinctions must be made. Wright argues that there exist contradictory locations within class relations and "privileged appropriation locations within exploitation relations" (Wright, 1997, pp. 19-20, 22), built on authority and expertise. Authority is related to aspects of domination and control, and it addresses issues of the degrees of control in the work process. Certain categories of employees, namely, supervisors and managers, possess what Wright terms delegated capitalist power in that they control other employees and parts of the work process. Hence, they possess contradictory positions within class relations because they control certain aspects of the work process but are themselves also controlled by capitalists and hence dominated within class relations. This particular position also enables them to possess what Wright terms "loyalty rents", in the form of higher wages and hence a higher degree of appropriation of the produced surplus. Expertise, on the other hand, is related to issues of scarcity. Employees who possess scarce skills or expertise obtain strategically advantageous locations within class relations because the scarcity of those skills and expertise, and the obstacles that exist in terms of obtaining them, enables them to obtain higher wages in the form of "skills rent". Moreover, the possession of expertise generally generates more control over one's work because the work tasks are more difficult to monitor. Hence, skilled employees and experts may also possess contradictory loca-

tions within class relations (Wright, 1997, pp. 20-22; cf. Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992).<sup>21</sup>

The discussion above implies two things: (1) that the theoretical definition of class affects how scholars perceive and define employment relations (in terms of the emphasis on conflicting vs. mutual interests) and (2) that different categories of employees, located in various class locations, have different needs not only for a collective voice but also for different forms of collective voice and collective action. I will primarily focus on the second point in the following but bear in mind the first point, given that it relates to different forms of organizing and action on behalf of various categories of employees. The most significant aspect related to the discussion of different needs for a collective voice for various categories of employees relates to the degree to which their power is collective versus individual. Because of the mutual dependence within relations of exploitation, all employees possess some degree of power. However, for employees who lack scarce skills and expertise, this power resource is weak on the individual level since it is easier for the employer(s) to replace them. Accordingly, the need for both collective bargaining and collective action in the form of, for example, strikes is more prevalent among blue-collar workers (both skilled and unskilled) than among various categories of white-collar workers, particularly compared to the more skilled white-collar workers and those with authority positions, i.e., those who possess contradictory class locations (cf. Korpi & Shalev, 1979; Wright, 1997). Moreover, whereas the lived experience of workers who are dominated and controlled by others within the sphere of production is assumed to prompt a collective identification and solidarity with one's fellow workers, enhancing the propensity to become organized in a union, individuals who possess contradictory locations within class relations have a tendency to identify more with the employers, and hence, their propensity to become organized in a union is lower (cf. Wright, 1997; 2005).

As the discussion above implies, blue-collar workers have both a greater need for collective organization and a higher propensity to be organized, based on their incapacity to act individually and the lived experience of their material reality, in terms of being dominated and controlled, for example. However, not all white-collar workers possess contradictory locations within class relations, and therefore it may be expected that the need for collective organization is strong among certain categories of white-collar workers as well. Furthermore, collective organization in a trade union may be prompted by factors that are less collective in their nature, such as selective incentives in the form of, for example, private insurances and/or legal advice. Hence,

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<sup>21</sup> Wright's operationalization of class is similar to that of ESeC, in that it differentiates between expertise and authority and in the discussion of delegated capitalist power vs. delegated authority (see, e.g., Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). Hence, the major difference lies in the theoretical emphasis on relations of exploitations made by Wright (1997).

although I argue that studying class relations is significant for understanding variation in union organization, it is not the only factor of importance.

The operationalization of class in the empirical studies stem from SEI (Socio-Economic Index) (SCB, 1982).<sup>22</sup> This operationalization, which was partly chosen out of practical reasons, has the advantage of being comparable with the majority of studies within the field. Because the class-cleavage of the Swedish trade union movement (i.e., the division into different trade union confederations: the LO, the TCO and the SACO) also follows this division, it is fruitful to use when studying trade union organization and activity. Similar to EGP, SEI predominantly makes use of criteria concerning skills and technological character to distinguish between employees (see Erikson et al., 1979; SCB, 1982; cf. Thålin, 2007). Hence, this operationalization primarily captures the distinction of skills/expertise.

### *Class background, class identification and ideology*

The notion of class background is more straightforward than the notions of class identification and ideology, particularly in terms of how it is measured. The notion of ideology is complex because it refers to (durable) belief systems (Benford & Snow, 2000) (about not only, for example, equality in terms of the distribution of wealth but also the social relations between employers and employees) not only on the individual level but also on a societal level. Moreover, measuring ideology has become more complex in recent decades because the socio-cultural cleavage dimension has risen considerably in significance at the expense of the traditional socio-economic dimension (see, e.g., Rydgren, 2012). The notion of class identification relates to the notion of social identity and identification, which has been more thoroughly discussed in previous sections (see Section 5.3.2). In this section, I will relate that discussion more directly to the notion of class identity and class identification and to the concept of class consciousness. However, the main issue at stake here is to discuss how the concepts of class background, class identification and ideology are defined and used in the empirical studies in this dissertation. Hence, the primary focus lies on how these notions are interrelated. For that reason, the discussion of the definitions will be somewhat limited.

Both class identification and ideology aim to partly measure (the degrees of) class consciousness. Class consciousness may be defined as a collective consciousness of class within society. In that sense, class identification can be viewed as a proxy for class consciousness, in that it measures the degree to which individuals identify with a specific class and hence whether indi-

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<sup>22</sup> The three empirical studies contain different levels of specification in the operationalization of class because the various data used are more or less restrictive in terms of information. For more detailed information about the operationalizations, I refer to the individual studies.

viduals perceive society as a class society (cf. Cighén et al., 2001; Fantasia, 1995). Although this is a simplistic definition of class consciousness, it is a somewhat conventional use of the concept. Moreover, it becomes more meaningful when related to aspects of collective organization and action, i.e., to trade union organization and activity, since it is then more directly related to issues of class formation and activity (cf. Wright, 1997). As noted in previous sections, group identification, e.g., class identification, is based on conflicting interests between “us and them”, i.e., between the in-group and the out-group. Hence, in the context of the empirical studies, class identification also aims to partly capture issues of opposition between classes, more specifically, between the working class and managers/employers. In this process, ideology is another crucial factor. Not only does ideology shape individuals’ perceptions of the relationship between employers and employees and hence affect the ability of individuals to identify and mobilize collectively, but it also shapes the perceptions of (in)justice, for instance, in terms of the reward systems in the labour market. Thus, it affects the process of attribution. Because attribution is a crucial factor for collective mobilization, ideologies that promote conflicting interests between employers and employees, attributing to employers’ injustices in terms of, for example, poor working conditions and low wages (i.e., ideologies that enhance a working-class consciousness), will enhance collective mobilization. In contrast, ideologies that link issues of equality to personal ability and effort, and hence attribute injustices to the individual, will not enhance collective mobilization (cf. Ferree & Miller, 1985).

In research regarding union organization and activity, class background, in the sense of social origin, generally aims to measure and explain how socialization in childhood affects the propensity to be organized and/or participate in a union. It is assumed that the attitudes and beliefs of significant others may be adopted and hence affect both belief systems (i.e., ideology) and the propensity to be organized (Ebbinghaus et al., 2011; Schnabel & Wagner, 2005; cf. Edling & Rydgren, 2014). Hence, a working-class origin is assumed to positively affect the propensity to be organized in a union, whereas, for example, a self-employed origin is assumed to negatively affect the propensity to be organized. In the empirical studies of this dissertation, the concept of class background is used in a similar manner. However, the definition used in this thesis relies more heavily than many other definitions on the Marxist assumption that the (objective) interests of a group or an individual derive from lived experiences of the material reality. That is, the manner in which one experiences the material aspects of class, also early in life, will affect one’s belief systems. Hence, the social background of an individual is assumed to affect not only the material interests of that individual but also, more significantly, the realization (i.e., the consciousness) of those interests in terms of how the social interaction and socialization in the family enable individuals to perceive their interests (cf. Ferree & Miller,

1985). Hence, I place more emphasis on how material aspects, via social interaction and socialization, affect individuals' belief systems. Thus, in the empirical studies, class background is mainly thought to have an indirect effect on union organization and activity in terms of its effects on social identification in the form of class identification, further affecting ideological perspectives (cf. Bengtsson et al., 2013; Edling & Rydgren, 2014). For that reason, I also include interaction variables that measure this relationship in the statistical analysis.

In the statistical analysis in Study I, I measure class background in terms of the respondents' subjective perceptions of their class background. Similarly, class identity is measured in terms of how the respondents subjectively perceive what class to which they currently belong, taking into account not only their own occupational status but also that of their current family (i.e., the partner). Ideology is measured in a conventional manner, in that the respondents place themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 indicating very left-leaning and 10 indicating very right-leaning. Hence, I do not control for the effect of the socio-cultural cleavage dimension. In the qualitative analysis (Study III), class background is once again measured in terms of subjective perceptions. However, in that analysis, class identity is given a more restrictive meaning, in that the informants did not have to ascribe any identity to themselves.<sup>23</sup>

### 6.1.2 Data and methods

The general aim of this thesis is to produce a broad and representative picture of what factors affect (changing) union density, union membership and union activity in the Swedish context and to shed more light on what mechanisms explain union membership and activity among different categories of employees. The focus lies on studying the impact of structural changes in the labour market and the work force as well as on the (changing) influence of various aspects of class and ideology. To that end, various time-series data containing populations that are representative of the Swedish population have been used. In addition, I have collected qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews. Accordingly, the thesis contains a certain degree of a multi-methods approach.

In this section I will primarily focus on data description. The methods used will be briefly mentioned. Hence, for more information on the methods, I refer the readers to the individual studies.

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<sup>2323</sup> For further information, see Study I and Study III.

### *Study I*

In Study I, I use individual-level, cross-sectional time-series data taken from the National SOM (Society, opinion and mass media) survey. The SOM survey is a postal survey that has been collected on a yearly basis since 1986. Each survey is conducted similarly to enable comparisons over time (Vernersdotter, 2012). The survey revolves around three major themes: society, politics and mass media. It includes numerous questions about, e.g., politics and society, in addition to social background and trade union affiliation (SOM, 2017).

Each partial survey is based on a nationally representative sample of individuals (foreign citizens are included as of 1992). The number of respondents has generally increased over time and includes a sample of 2,500-9,000 individuals. The age span has also increased from including individuals aged 15-75 to including individuals aged 15-85. The response rate varies between 52 and 67 percent gross and 57 and 71 percent net (the latter excludes deceased individuals, individuals on long-term sick leave, individuals who have left the country and individuals who do not speak Swedish) (Vernersdotter, 2012).

The data used in Study I include information from 1986 to 2011, and the population includes employed individuals aged 18-64. The methods used in Study I include descriptive statistics and logistic regressions.

### *Study II*

In Study II, I use individual-level, cross-sectional time-series data taken from the Level of Living Survey (LNU).<sup>24</sup> The LNU consists of six waves and includes information on a broad range of issues, including health, education, working conditions, social background, occupational status and union membership. The survey has been conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews in 1968, 1974, 1981, 1991, 2000 and 2010. The population contains of a national probability sample of individuals aged 18-75 in 1991 to 2010, and 15-75 in 1968 to 1981, including a sample varying between 6,500-7,300 individuals. The response rate has varied between 90.8 percent in 1968 to 72 percent in 2010. The first survey was conducted on behalf of the Low Income Investigation in 1968, aiming to study the distribution of a range of resources and indicators of the level of living of the population (Eriksson, 2014; LNU, 2017; Manzoni et al., 2010).

The data used in Study II include information from all six waves of the LNU. The population includes employed individuals aged 18-64. The methods used include descriptive statistics, logistic regression and Fairlie's non-linear decomposition method of difference between compositional changes and changes in coefficients (see Fairlie, 2005).

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<sup>24</sup> The LNU consist of both cross-sectional data and panel data (Eriksson, 2014). However, in Study II, I use the data in cross-sectional form.

### *Study III*

In Study III, I use a mixed-methods approach including both statistical data and in-depth interviews. I use individual-level, cross-sectional data taken from a postal-survey conducted by Statistics Sweden (SCB) in conjunction with the Labor Force Survey (AKU) in 2006. The survey consists of a random selection of (employed) participants in the Labor Force Survey, including 1,851 individuals aged 18 to 64, which is the population used in the study as well. The response rate was 72 percent (52 percent out of everyone asked to participate) (Furåker, 2010).

Moreover, the data consist of ten (semi-structured) in-depth interviews with employees conducted at separate occasions during 2013 and 2014. The sampling of respondents was both random and purposive, to the degree that a variation in class locations, gender, age and sector of employment was strived for, whereas certain characteristics (e.g., working class, male, working in the private sector) were of particular interest with regard to the purpose of the study (cf. Harding & Seefeldt, 2013). The respondents vary in age (between 26 to 60 years) and occupation (e.g., factory worker, taxi driver, social worker, nurse, finance worker) as well as in gender, class location, sector of employment, type of employment contract and workplace size.

The analytical techniques include thematic qualitative analysis (TQA), descriptive statistics and OLS regression.

## 6.2 Ethical considerations

Trade union affiliation and activity are issues that are sensitive to the individual. However, the statistical data used in the studies of this dissertation do not contain individual data that may be traced back to any individual. Moreover, the collection of the data, both the statistical data and the qualitative interviews, has followed the Swedish Research Council's (Vetenskapsrådets) ethical principles for research in the social sciences and humanities regarding information, consent, confidentiality and usage. Hence, all participants have given their informed consent, and the informants have been able to alter the terms of or withdraw their participation. No names of informants or of workplaces have been disclosed (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). Moreover, the access to LNU data has been the subject of an ethical review by the Regional Ethical Board because of the sensitivity of longitudinal panel data.

## 7. Overview of the studies

### 7.1 Study I (published)

In the first study of this dissertation, I investigate the role of (different aspects of) social class and ideology in union organization in Sweden, aiming to determine whether and how the influence of these factors has changed over time. The study consists of an empirical analysis of individual-level time-series data, taken from the SOM survey, covering the 1990-2011 period. For the purpose of comparison over time, the data are divided into three different time periods ([1] 1990-1997, [2] 1998-2004, and [3] 2005-2011).

The main results of the analysis show that both class-related aspects, such as objective and subjective class, class background/origin, and ideology have become weaker determinants of union membership in the Swedish context during this period of time, particularly among previously highly organized categories of employees. However, the results also show that although the influence has decreased, individuals from blue-collar homes, individuals with a blue-collar identity and left-oriented individuals still have a higher propensity to be organized compared to individuals from white-collar homes, individuals with a white-collar identity and right-oriented individuals, respectively. Accordingly, this result indicates that traditional aspects of class loyalty are still significant determinants of union organization levels and that emphasizing class identity and/or cohesion and ideology might be favourable for the trade union movement. Further, no evidence is found to support the hypothesis of stronger vanishing class loyalty among the young in particular. Moreover, the findings suggest that the influence of these factors differs between different categories of employees, and that the influence of class and class identity is particularly strong among categories with less tradition of being organized, including individuals employed in the private sector, employees who work part-time, employees with a low income, and male employees in general.

### 7.2 Study II (submitted)

In the second study, I proceed to investigate the role of structural change in union density in the Swedish context. In light of changing union density levels during this time period, the aim is to investigate to what degree the

union density increases and declines are driven by shifts from the private to the public sector (and vice versa), changing class structures, shifts from manufacturing to service industries and increasing proportions of atypical employment. Using individual-level cross-sectional data from the 1968-2010 LNU, including six waves, this study provides decompositions of the impact of structural change on union density increase between 1968 and 1981 and union density decline between 1991 and 2010.

The results from the empirical analysis show that, in general, the net effect (that is, the total effect) of structural change is weak whereas the gross effect (that is, the effect of individual factors) is generally stronger. In total, none of the union density increase can be explained by structural change, and only a small part (14-16 percent) of the union density decline is explained by these changes. However, some individual factors are found to contribute to both the increase and the decline. In particular, increasing public sector employment is found to increase union density by 2 percentage points between 1968 and 1981. Declining proportions of unskilled workers and increasing proportions of individuals with a working-class background are also found to contribute to union density increase. The decline in public sector employment, changes in the class structure, declining proportions of employees in the manufacturing industry and in large establishments, and declining proportions of employees with permanent contracts contribute to the decline in union density between 1991 and 2010.

### 7.3 Study III (submitted)

In the third study, I investigate what factors influence attitudes towards industrial action among Swedish employees. Unlike the previous two studies in this dissertation, this study does not include longitudinal data and does not directly concern the question of union organization per se but relates more directly to collective action (although in a union regime). This study uses a mixed-methods approach that includes both cross-sectional survey data and in-depth interviews, aiming to better understand what mechanisms affect the phenomena. It draws on research on collective mobilization in the labour market, mainly studies on militant attitudes and actual strike activity, with a focus on interactionist perspectives. The study adds to previous research on collective action in the labour market by showing that social class has a strong influence on attitudes towards industrial action, in terms of both its material effects (i.e., its effect on wages and working conditions) and on the subjective level, linking both class background and social (class) identities to different perceptions of (in)justice, helping explain the preference for different strategies (i.e., individual or collective) in relation to job dissatisfaction.

## 8. Concluding remarks

As the discussion in the previous sections imply, trade union density and trade union influence and power are related to issues of power and the power distribution within society. Trade unions affect not only individuals' wages but also the income distribution within countries and regions (see Section 4.1), in addition to macro-economic policies related to employment issues and welfare benefits (see Section 4.3). Hence, studying the (changing) union density and activity in Sweden implies studying the (changing) power relations within Swedish society. In the following, I will discuss how the results from the three empirical studies contribute to the understanding of union density (change) and union activity. Moreover, I will discuss the potential impact of union density decline in Sweden on the distribution of power between different categories within society.

### 8.1 Discussion: Explaining union membership changes in Sweden and the implications of density decline

In general, the results from the empirical studies in this dissertation do not support that any forceful shifts in either the labour market structure or individuals' opinions and/or attitudes related to trade unions to any significant degree can explain the union density decline we have witnessed in Sweden since the mid-1990s. We observe an increasing divergence in union density across several categories of employees, including, e.g., private-sector vs. public-sector employees, young vs. older employees, employees of foreign origin vs. employees of Swedish origin, and the atypically employed vs. employees with standardized employment, which could potentially be harmful for the trade union movement in the future if the organizational patterns persist and weakly organized groups of employees continue to grow as a proportion of the work force. However, the most striking observation in the empirical studies is that the union density decline in Sweden is general in nature. That is, a decline is observed among all categories of employees (see Table 2, Study II). Moreover, traditionally strong predictors of trade union membership, such as class background, class identity, ideology, establishment size and public-sector employment, still predict union membership among Swedish employees, albeit to a declining degree. Class and, in partic-

ular, class identity are further found to be particularly influential among categories with a weaker tradition of being organized, including the young and low earners (see Study I). These factors are also found to predict attitudes towards union activity in the form of industrial action among Swedish employees (see Study III). Hence, the results seem to support previous research indicating that the need and support for trade unions remains strong, particularly among the working class (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Berglund, 2011; D'Art et al., 2008).

The findings further suggest that aspects of instrumentality influence both attitudes towards industrial action and union membership, which is in line with previous research (Green & Auer, 2013; Hodder et al., 2017). Attitudes towards industrial action are influenced by instrumental reasons primarily in terms of how the cause of a strike, i.e., its perceived benefits, and employment security affect the attitudes. Union membership, on the other hand, is influenced by instrumental reasons, in that the propensity to be organized is generally lower among the highest and the lowest earners, which suggests that cost-benefit analysis seems to affect the propensity to be organized, albeit for very different reasons. Moreover, the institutional changes implemented in 2007, which has been suggested to explain the majority of the decline in union membership that occurred in the years after that (see Kjellberg, 2010, 2011), increased the costs of being organized substantially, particularly for employees with lower incomes. Hence, these institutional changes clearly shifted the perspective of cost-benefits analysis for union members, in that the price for the same “service” rose drastically for a large proportion of (working-class) union members more or less overnight.

However, although instrumentality clearly affects union membership and activity, the results in Study I and Study III suggest that social identification, particularly class identification, class background and ideological perspectives, may better explain the variation in attitudes towards industrial action and in union membership. Hence, as argued by Edling and Rydgren (2014), Ferree and Miller (1985) and Kelly (1998), among others, the findings in this study suggest that individuals’ (material) interests and, more specifically, how these interests affect an individual’s belief system, which further affects an individual’s perceptions of reality in terms of, e.g., perceptions of fairness, and their ability to attribute guilt for injustices to a concrete actor are strongly influenced by social identification. The results in this dissertation suggest that, in particular, (the perceptions of) one’s class background and class identity are related to different belief systems that affect collective mobilization and action in the labour market (see Study III). In that sense, the results contribute to our understanding of what underlying factors motivate collective mobilization and action. However, the results do not tell us much about why the influence of these factors has declined over time. Nevertheless, we know that this process has occurred simultaneously as class voting and class identification have been on the decline in Sweden (Cigéhn

et al., 2001; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2013). We further know that the salience of socio-economic issues and of class politics has been declining in the public discourse and among political parties as well as in voting behaviour in recent decades (Allern & Bale, 2017; Oscarsson & Demker, 2012; Rydgren, 2012, cf. Streeck, 2014). Hence, it is reasonable to assume that the declining salience of the conflict between labour and capital in the political arena and the public debate has affected the salience of identities and beliefs linked to that conflict and that class identities therefore have become weaker (cf. Edling & Rydgren, 2014). This hypothesis and other hypotheses aiming to explain the patterns observed in the studies are an important aspect for future research, in addition to research investigating whether the patterns found in the studies in this dissertation are also valid in other countries.

Although various aspects related to class have been found to be of significance for trade union organization, the results in this study, in line with Kjellberg (2010, 2013), suggest that the Swedish working class is losing organizational strength, whereas organization among professionals in particular remains strong. Hence, the union density decline in the past couple of decades has generated a shift in strength between different categories of employees, which may also affect the political influence of the respective union confederations. More significantly, though, the organizational power of the working class, particularly that of unskilled workers, has declined substantially in relation to employers during the past couple of decades. Other exposed and vulnerable categories of employees, such as employees of foreign origin and the atypically employed, have also lost organizational strength. Hence, many of the most exposed categories in the labour market are losing power vis-a-vis employers. Furthermore, as noted above, the political support for parties that emphasize working-class interests (e.g., SAP) is clearly decreasing (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2013). Hence, the working class is losing power in both the economic and political spheres, much in line with developments in other Western countries (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Kelly, 2015). That said, the Swedish trade union movement remains strong in an international perspective.



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