Contested communities: geo-histories of unionism

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite being increasingly touted as the kind of fundamental transformation needed for union survival, “community unionism” is typically ill-defined and poorly explained. This paper seeks to provide greater precision of terminology and context through a series of geographically-informed historical studies.

Design/methodology/approach – Through explaining and synthesising the work of a number of scholars from different disciplines, the paper develops a framework for a “geo-historical” analysis. It begins not with community unionism as such but with a more open exploration of the relationship between unions and social formations at, for the most part, the local scale. Empirical material, based on original qualitative studies, is presented for one industry, Australian mining, across different places and time periods but concentrating most upon the iron ore regions in Western Australia where recent struggles over union renewal and form have been particularly intense.

Findings – This paper argues two things about community unionism: that this union form is not without historical antecedents and, more importantly, that its structure, nature and prospects can be better understood if analysed through a number of concepts which geographers have recently developed to explore the intersections between work, community and employment relations. More needs to be done to explain not only the nature and emergence of community unionism but also the very real problems it faces in sustaining itself, let alone transforming union movements overall. The findings point to the varied forms which so-called community unionism may take as well as to the challenges to its current forms, including from within the labour movement itself.

Originality/value – The value of the paper lies in its theoretical innovation, drawing on a range of disciplines, and its attempt to situate community unionism precisely – conceptually, historically and geographically.

Keywords Trade unions, Globalization, Labour, Mining, Communities, Australia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite being increasingly touted as the kind of fundamental transformation needed for union survival, “community unionism” is not always well defined or explained. It also appears to be inchoate and fragile in actual practice, perhaps more so in countries like Australia and Britain than in the USA from where a great deal of the literature about community politics and community unionism has thus far come. More explanation is required of community unionism’s origins and forms and of the problems it faces in defining and sustaining itself, let alone in transforming union fortunes overall.

The approach taken to analysing unions in this paper is best described, following Wills (1998a, b), as “geo-historical”. The paper is based on the assumption that the “presentism” (Patmore, 2006) which marks much discussion of unions and work in general is, to say the least, unhelpful. Community unionism is not without historical antecedents; contemporary orientations and strategies are often drawn quite consciously from or against readings of the past. The structure, nature and prospects of unions can be better understood if analysed not only in temporal contexts but also...
within frameworks recently developed by geographers to explore the nature of work and employment relations. The empirical sections report upon qualitative studies of unionism in the Australian mining industry, across different places and time periods. Although much of the discussion of community unionism has (quite rightly) focussed on metropolitan centres and the growing service sectors within them, the mining industry and its local sites of production remain vitally important in resource economies. Further, because relationships between capital, unions and local communities in these sometimes isolated places have long been important, there is much to learn from revisiting them in the light of contemporary debates about union strategy.

Rather than assuming either the existence or even the desirability of community unionism, the paper approaches the subject matter more openly. It focuses on the forms that local unionism takes and on the varied ways in which unions interact with elements of the local social formation in which they are placed. In doing so it does not overlook the relationships in which unions are enmeshed at other scales. The paper begins by briefly examining the terms “community” and “community unionism” themselves (see Tattersall, 2006; also this volume). It goes on to show in detail how a historically-informed spatial analysis might shape any study of unions and community. The paper then explores three historical and contemporary cases, all in mining but in different places, arguing that geo-histories reveal how capital and the state shape labour but that, nonetheless, unions have made and remade history and space.

Community and unions
Although there has been less discussion of community unionism in Australia than in the USA or the UK, with only passing mentions in union policies (TUTA, 1996, pp. 15-19; Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU, 1999, pp. 39-41)), there is now a growing debate about it (Ellem, 2003; Rainnie and Drummond, 2006; Tattersall, 2006, 2007; Buttigieg et al., 2007). Here, as elsewhere, there is no agreement about what exactly the term means. It is understood in different ways: closer organisational relationships with groups in a particular locality; the joining of “industrial” with “community” issues; a locally-specific form of unionism; or some combination of these. There is also a related set of arguments as to what community unionism should be about. Some see community unionism as reaching beyond instrumental alliances to build “reciprocal” community unionism and to argue that unions themselves must be fundamentally transformed (Banks, 1992; Tufts, 1998; Wills and Simms, 2002), not least through their engagements with communities of identity, based in gender or ethnicity (Fine, 2005a, b; Cranford and Ladd, 2003). Others have, for some time, been going further, seeing identity politics as labour’s “last best hope”, with a transformative power that unions are deemed no longer to have. Groups based in identity are described as social movements; they are favourably contrasted with the tired bureaucracies that are unions, and, more broadly, they are favourably compared to “old-fashioned” class politics (from as early as Touraine, 1974; for a critique see Dunn, 2006).

These problems of definition arise in part from the term “community” itself. This word is understood in a range of quite different ways: the physical space beyond sites of paid work, or specific (usually local) places, or as communities based in identity, faith or indeed nation (see Taksa, 2000; Wills, 2001; Tattersall, 2006 for different approaches to this problem). There have of course been attempts to clarify the meaning of community from at least as early as Tonnies in the nineteenth century. Many of
these are associated with somewhat romantic, pre-industrial or, today, anti-global meanings (Massey, 2005). This confusion about community underpins much of the ambiguity in the term community unionism. Making a virtue of these different usages, Tattersall (2006) frames different elements of community unionism in similar terms. She identifies three meanings of community: community organisations, common interests, or place itself. She argues that community unionism can be thought of in those three ways too: through coalitions with organisations, working with identity groups, or building locally-specific power.

Tattersall’s clarification is important for the approach taken in this paper, suggesting two other lines of inquiry. First, setting up the problem in terms of the relationship between unions and community is difficult, not only because of imprecision about the terms but also because this phrasing separates workers from places or groups they may be part of, while treating community as given and homogenous. For this reason, a more specific term such as “local social formation” to mean institutions and social relationships in a particular place is useful. It also allows us to treat relationships between unions and such formations in a way that is sensitive to contingency. Instead of looking at unions or local organisations, class or identity politics, we are looking at the relationship between these structures and processes. Second, this approach makes clear why a geo-history of unionism is important. Unions have always, necessarily, related – somehow – to “the locality”. Therefore, “history matters”. Furthermore, union development has not been linear or uncontested (see, for instance, Craft, 1990; Craypo and Nissen, 1993; for Australia: Patmore, 1997; Thornthwaite, 1997; Labour History, 2000). So too does geography matter. The geographies implicit in talking about community unionism should be made explicit: union development literally “takes place”; that is, it happens in (and often seeks to reshape) specific locations.

**Geographies of work, community and unionism**

Most of the keywords for this special issue of the journal – identity, isolation, and community – are eminently geographical terms. To interrogate them fully, we need to embrace not just geography as a setting but to accept that space is analytically significantly and socially constructed, not simply natural and given (Lefebvre, 1991, first published 1974; Harvey, 1982; Massey, 1984; Soja, 1989). Arguments for a geographical reading of employment relations arise from claims that all relationships are necessarily spatial relationships. These arguments have been fuelled by two apparently dominant trends which are themselves spatial, the globalisation of production, markets and culture and the decentralisation and even individualisation of the regulation of the employment relationship (see McGrath-Champ, 2005 for a rare geographical reading of this; also O’Neill and Fagan, 2006; on the geography of employment relations, Ellem and Shields, 1999; Herod et al., 2003; Rainnie et al., 2007).

Herod’s (1997, 1998) work has been important in asking how labour itself “makes space”. He argues, in essence, for a “labour geography” which has two aims: not only to “spatialise” the study of employment relations but also to put labour’s agency into the study of geography. He draws on Harvey’s studies of capital’s power to make not only modes of production but also space itself. For Harvey (1982), investment, disinvestment and the creation of different sites of accumulation mean that capital continues to sustain itself despite apparent crises. In so doing capital creates “differential space” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 52). Herod agrees that places are likely to vary from one another because of the
“uneven development” of capitalism but he shows that labour is not simply a by-product of this process. Labour can be a spatial agent through its own alliances, visions of place and choices of scales of action, from the local to the global. In short, then, “the geography of capitalism is not always the prerogative of capital” (Herod, 1997, p. 16; Fagan, 1991).

To build on these foundations – the general claims that “space matters” and that labour may be a “spatial agent” – we can utilise three specific concepts: the mobility of capital and labour; place consciousness; and geographical scale. The concepts will help to explain the central concern here: the relationship between the making of unions and the making of particular places.

We begin with the question of mobility, with the familiar claim that capital is more powerful than labour because it is a more mobile resource. This argument is perhaps now overplayed in discourses of globalisation, with concepts such as jobs flight, off-shoring, “rustbelts”, and the rise of “footloose” capital being taken for granted. However, differing mobility is an important geographical element in the proposition that when employers and employees meet in labour markets and workplaces they do so in an unequal way. This assessment of the nature of power in the employment relationship lies at the heart not just only of radical scholarship and politics but also in mainstream pluralist assumptions underpinning collective labour law. Employees must necessarily offer their capacity to work to employers in order to earn a living. However, employers may, to various degrees shaped by law and labour markets, withhold, terminate, alter or relocate that employment. These arguments constitute the key point of entry for this paper’s analytical framework.

When disaggregated, this argument about mobility becomes more complex, but also more useful. In brief, not all firms are equally mobile, and some operations are not mobile at all; the mobility of workers varies too, and some are not weakened by immobility. The “rootedness” of labour can be a source of power as local institutions and cultures build labour’s power in particular places (see Savage, 1998; Walsh, 2000 for analyses of service sector unions based on these readings of mobility). We should note too that the mobility of labour seen with the rise of migrant and “illegal” labour and, in Australia, new visa categories for temporary entrants certainly does not empower those workers. Rather, their mobility arises from their very lack of power. None of these qualifications mean that mobility is any the less important. They do mean that the geographies of community and unionism associated with it are complex and contingent.

The unions examined in this paper provide one set of examples of the importance of understanding geographies of mobility. Specific operations in mining (though not necessarily companies themselves) are place-bound. Capital cannot readily re-locate. It therefore loses the power advantages otherwise derived from mobility. For particular global firms, often among the world’s largest, “the local” is therefore important, and, as we shall see, often troublesome.

The second concept is “place consciousness”, the forms of which arise directly from mobility. This is the set of “ideas about, and also the discursive construction of, social practices in particular places”. It usually compares one place with another or compares one locality with national or regional norms (Ellem, 2006; Ellem and Shields, 2001). Specific firms and individual employees meet in workplaces and regions and towns and cities, in “communities”. Their orientations to space are as different as their mobility in and over it. Storper and Walker use the term “place-bound” to describe labour’s immobility, arguing that labour may establish social institutions which outlive
their founders. “[L]asting local communities and cultures [are] woven into the landscape of labor” (Storper and Walker, 1989, p. 157). Harvey (1989, p. 19) sums it up nicely when writing of workers in cities but his points applies in general: “[u]nlike other commodities, labor power has to go home every night”, and we might add every morning after the night-shift.

Beynon and Hudson (1993, p. 182) set all this out most clearly:

Not all capitals are equally mobile, and not all working people are equally immobile, but in general capital is more mobile than labor. Locations that, for capital, are a (temporary) space for profitable production, are for workers, their families and friends places in which to live, places in which they have considerable individual and collective cultural investment; places to which they are often deeply attached, and which may hold powerful emotional ties and socially endowed symbolic meanings for them.

This dichotomy leads them to conclude (with some qualifications) that we can see “space as the domain of capital . . . and place as the meaningful situations established by labour” (Beynon and Hudson, 1993, p. 182). The qualifications are important though. Because mobility does vary, “capital”, or at least local employers and managers, may have “cultural investment” and develop their own “symbolic meanings” in particular places (for a recent, powerful reappraisal, see Massey, 2005). It is often in the struggle between meanings that communities, employment relations and the space for unions are defined.

Beynon and Hudson provide an essential reference point and, for the studies of mining sites which follow, a very powerful analytical tool.

These are important insights for many reasons, not the least of which is that particular spaces are not neutral, not just given locations. Nor are labour and capital simply forces from “out there”; they are constituted by each other in particular spaces. For example, in examining the decline of unions in the USA, Clark (1989, p. 241) shows how place and unions come together, or fall away. He argues that crisis faced by unions is “more than a crisis of membership [because] . . . the welfare of unions is no longer consistent with the welfare of communities”. By this he means that communities have been set against unions, blaming them for job losses and for management decisions. The other side of this is also important: when labour is truly locally embedded, it can be a powerful force.

To focus on the local is not to isolate it from other scales. How do unions (and the “local” itself) interact with “the national” and “the global”? One set of answers lie in geographers’ fascination with the third major concept to be explored, namely scale. An alternative term, “level”, is familiar enough in politics – levels of government – and in employment relations – levels of bargaining and regulation, and is not of itself problematic. However, it tends to be associated with the same uncomplicated readings of the social which take space as given, geography as merely physical. In its more theoretically sophisticated and arguably more useful forms, scale is understood not as fixed but made, and therefore not as hierarchical (Herod and Wright, 2002, pp. 4-12; Castree et al., 2004, pp. 96-8). Thinking of scale in these ways means that the relationship between scales becomes important and, critically, that the “global” is not necessarily hegemonic (Gibson-Graham, 2002; Sadler and Fagan, 2004; Ellem, 2006). For our concerns with community and unionism in this paper, scale is analytically significant because it helps to illustrate how unionism in one place relates to other forms of unionism, to other places and to other social forces at all scales. In turn, this sheds light on how all those interactions make or re-make community.
In this framework – which recognises the importance of scale and the power of rhetorics of globalisation – what do we make of the local scale, where so much of the discussion of community unionism necessarily, if implicitly, takes place? The local (the scale and nature of which is not uncomplicated, as the next section will show) does not disappear with globalisation. In his work on local labour markets, Peck (1996, p. 13) writes in the same spirit as those scholars assessing mobility over, and orientations to, space when he describes how particular geographies, and particular labour markets, are created: “capital seeks the local conditions most conducive to profitable production”. The result, he argues is that “geographies of labour are formed at this intersection, where flows of capital accumulation collide with the structures of community” (Peck, 1996, p. 16). This is not to say the local scale is necessarily the domain of labour. Indeed, Jonas (1996, p. 325) turns this argument on its head to argue – importantly for this paper – that geographical distinctiveness is in large part generated by a:

[...]

local labour control regime [...]

an historically contingent and territorially embedded set of mechanisms which co-ordinate the time-space reciprocities between production, work, consumption and labour reproduction within a local labour market.

These important statements need to be developed further. At the risk of over-simplifying, Peck appears to underplay capital’s agency in making the structures of (a pre-formed) community. Jonas (1996, p. 328), though acknowledging that resistance takes place, understates labour’s agency in control regimes as he focuses on how labour is “integrated into production”. After all, in many mining towns, capital actually created the first physical structures of community, and labour was the prime driver in creating local bargaining regimes.

To draw this section together, we ask: how does recognising the spatiality of social relations help us to make sense of debates about community unionism? The three inter-related sets of concepts introduced here allow this question to be answered in the next section. First, the differing mobilities help to explain how community unionism may come about. Second, place consciousness explains why community unionism takes particular forms. Third, scale reveals more precisely just what “the local” means, and how unions shape and are shaped by other social forces and ideas. Combined, these approaches will help us to understand how unions and communities themselves are made, un-made, re-made. The next section uses this framework to sketch the historical development of local unionism in two Australian mining sites before turning at more length to a contemporary study in the iron ore industry.

Mine, community and union
The obvious importance of physical geography in all these cases might lead us to think that the physical alone is significant. Geology, of course, is vital because of the location of rich ore bodies or coal reserves. That these mining sites are isolated from metropoles and, in two of the three cases, have harsh semi-desert environments adds to the importance of physical geography. However, such a focus is inadequate. The very existence of these places as sites of capital accumulation (having, it must be said, dispossessed indigenous peoples or pastoral forms of capital, or both) is predicated not simply on geology but also on economics, not on isolation but integration; that is, integration with global flows of capital and labour and with export product markets. Global resource companies have transformed local places. Even synthesising the global
and the local only begins to tell the story because of the importance of national and state unions and regulatory forms. Following Massey (1994, pp. 138-9), therefore, this paper looks not just at global-local tensions and capital-labour relations, but at the relationship between them, between physical isolation and economic integration in specific locations – to understand human geography, that is, how social forces themselves make space.

**Unions over community: Broken Hill**

The hard-rock mining city of Broken Hill in the State of New South Wales lies about 1,000 kilometres west of the capital city, Sydney. The local union movement in this isolated place was for most of the twentieth century so powerful that the city was widely regarded as the union town par excellence (for an international visitor’s view, see de Vyver, 1960). Broken Hill’s unionism was not a form of community unionism in any of the senses described in the earlier parts of this paper. Its history, however, is an instructive example of a locally embedded and quite distinct form of unionism. In an economically strategic centre, a unionism developed that at first was militant and class-based, later to become anything but this.

From the mid-1920s until the 1980s, the decisive agent in the labour movement was the local unions’ peak body, the Barrier Industrial Council (BIC), formed after an 18-month-long mine strike in 1919-1920 in which workers won a 35-hour week. Sustaining such a lengthy dispute was of course, impossible without local support and indeed political action. Broken Hill’s voters elected a socialist expelled by the Labor Party, Percy Brookfield, who by sheer chance, held the balance of power in the State Parliament after the 1920 election and used this power to drive home the miners’ victory (Ellem and Shields, 2006). At first it seemed that the successful strike would enhance the local power of the most militant strike strategists, the syndicalists. Their consciousness of place was all but indistinguishable from a militant class consciousness which built upon Broken Hill’s reputation as a mecca for radicals, attracting working men and women from all over the world. For them, union and community were, however physically isolated, centrally located in global capitalism and, at the same time, envisioned as the geographical base for a challenge to Australian capital. A collapse in ore prices and mine employment, along with a wider retreat from syndicalism across the country and the globe, undercut this particular vision of place (Ellem and Shields, 1996, 2001).

New definitions of class and place emerged. As the local economy recovered, the BIC co-ordinated a unionisation of mine and town which undercut further the power of the militants within the local working class. This mobilisation drew on inter-union support and the use of consumer boycotts to force local shops and suppliers into line. Without the support of mineworkers and their families, this organising campaign would not have succeeded. By the late 1920s, Broken Hill had been transformed into the “all-union town” that it remained until the 1980s. This new set of local practices and place consciousness was not, however, based upon cross-class alliances. Rather, the local bourgeoisie was splintered by the unions. The only exceptions to this were alliances with small businesses which had family connections to the mineworkers (Ellem and Shields, 2002).

The BIC also presided over a very special geo-politics of labour, which took four forms. It defeated the left-wing unionists at every turn in establishing this regime
(Kimber, 2001; Ellem and Shields, 2000). First, the BIC developed a unique local system of collective bargaining for all unions which was all but independent of the national and state arbitration tribunals regulating the formal working conditions of almost all other Australian workers. Second, through the BIC, the local unions enforced gender regulation of the labour market by banning married women’s access to paid work. This rule dated from a recession in 1926-1927 and was made possible by the BIC’s prior success in making the town a site for union labour only. Thirdly, the BIC regulated commodity prices, following attempts by the mining companies to establish company-controlled retail outlets. Here, the BIC did reach out to the “community”, as consumer boycotts drove a wedge between the town’s employers, making allies of the small employers (Ellem and Shields, 2002). Fourthly, during the Great Depression, the BIC introduced a spatial qualification for jobs. From 1931, only males born in Broken Hill, living there for at least eight years, or married to a woman who met these requirements were admitted to union membership and jobs. This provides a perfect example of labour defining space and exercising power within it. The unions defined the very geography of the local, the local labour market, along with its gender structure (Ellem and Shields, 2000; Howard, 1990, pp. 87-9). Labour may have been mobile in coming out to “the Hill” initially, but after that the local unions chose an immobility which then became a source of masculinist, class power over employers.

This unique set of local intersections in a global industry was transformed from without in and after the 1970s. Exhaustion of ores and reductions in employment eroded the power of the mining unions. The Supreme Court effectively undid compulsory unionism and the State Labor Government’s equal opportunity legislation did the same for the marriage bar by 1981. In 1986, mine management insisted on the abandonment of many traditional work practices, leading to the longest strike since 1919-1920. When the State Industrial Relations Commission stepped in and settled the dispute, the local regulatory regime, and with it the BIC, suffered an all but fatal blow (Howard, 1990, pp. 101-103; Ellem et al., 2006).

For most of the twentieth century, the Broken Hill unions defined the very geography of local labour markets and the place consciousness of the townspeople themselves. This form of unionism came undone as ores ran low and the global mining companies shifted away. Based on immobility and the control of the town, the BIC’s power and its version of place consciousness could not survive these changes, especially as the state apparatus “intruded” into local affairs. When the BIC’s power fell, this particular form of local unionism – insular, masculinist, politically conservative but at times industrially militant – and its intersections with the local social formation also collapsed.

**Unions in community: Wollongong**

The history of unions in and around the City of Wollongong (80 kilometres south of Sydney), is illustrative of an engagement with the local social formation which has been rather more akin to those imagined in the recent community unionism literature. In this mining and steel-producing site, the unions were not quite the all-powerful force they were in Broken Hill but they operated more “reciprocally” with the local social formation. The locality was shaped by global as well as local forces, drawing labour, after World War II, from across the world, notably Southern Europe. The unions managed this change in the composition of the working class. They survived economic
threats at the end of the twentieth century rather better than was the case in Broken Hill.

Place consciousness and union power were not based on splintering and subordinating local traders as this was not feasible in this more complex local economy. Equally, as the militant Broken Hill workers had done a generation earlier, workers defined their unions in terms of relations with, not in isolation from, the wider world. The best known example of this came in 1938 when workers placed bans on the Dalfran, a ship loaded with pig iron for, the workers claimed, the Japanese war machine (Richardson, 1984; Lockwood, 1987; Eklund, 2002).

As in Broken Hill, the relationship with the local social formation was shaped by relationships within the working class. Coal-mining was the predominant form of capital accumulation at first. The miners were organised into one key union which meant that there was little chance for other unions or companies to divide them (Ross, 1970; Nixon, 2000; Markey and Nixon, 2004). From the 1930s, the steelworks at Port Kembla became at least as important as mining in the integration of (male) labour and the wider community. Having decided to establish a steelworks there, shifting operations from Lithgow, capital came to be very firmly rooted in the Wollongong region. Its labour supply came to be the same — most people both lived and worked in the region until the 1980s. In the years immediately after World War II, the local unions marked themselves out from others. No sooner was war over than a strike began at the Broken Hill Proprietary’s (BHP) steelworks which lasted over three months and rankled with other unions as much as with employers (Sheridan, 1989; Nixon, 2001; Markey and Nixon, 2004). In the 1949 coal strike, which saw most unions and the national labor government attack the militants, the local movement remained united. In that very year, the labour council assumed its current name, the South Coast Labour Council (SCLC), as the scale of its operation extended further down the coast (Nixon, 2001; Markey and Nixon, 2004).

Unlike Broken Hill, the city remained open to labour from around the globe. Driven by employer demand and facilitated by the state, the expanding and diverse labour force became integrated with local unionism. These workers became unionists in large numbers (Quinlan, 1982, 1986) so, as the city became more ethnically diverse, it retained its class cohesion. The Federated Ironworkers Association, the main union for these men, had been one of the great prizes seized by right-wing unionists from the Communists in the early 1950s. For a time, local union unity was broken when the union quit the left-wing SCLC — and came under some local criticism for being out of touch with the changing membership base. However, in December 1970, when a left-wing team led by an Italian worker won control of the local branch, the union re-entered the local fold. The now more representative SCLC came to undertake peak level bargaining for all the steel unions (Murray and White, 1982; Castles, 1997; Markey and Nixon, 2004). Throughout the post-war boom, the SCLC campaigned on schooling issues, argued for a university in the City of Wollongong, and worked closely and successfully with pensioners’ groups, migrant groups and, unlike the BIC, working women’s groups (Nixon, 2001; Markey and Nixon, 2004). The unions had made their mark through the integration of labour with other local social forces.

Against this backdrop, a massive restructuring by capital and the state took place in the 1980s, with a third of the steelworks jobs disappearing and many major mines closing down (Schultz, 1985). But the union traditions survived. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, white-collar unionism was strong in both public and private
sectors and the SCLC had retained its power for and over its affiliates (Markey et al., 1998, 2001). Local labour also maintained its work with local groups, notably in banning work on development projects to which residents’ action groups were opposed. Nonetheless, job losses associated with restructuring did undercut union power (Rittau, 2001; Markey and Nixon, 2004). Despite support for campaigns against job losses in coal as well as steel, the unions were not quite the central players in the local scene that they had been.

Unions in Wollongong did not badge themselves as community unionists but for most their existence, largely driven by left-wing politics, they did forge “popular fronts” and “community alliances”. For a time, too, in the 1980s and 1990s, this coalition-building even included some employers, the national state and other non-local capital fractions in an attempt to moderate the impact of global restructuring (Rittau, 2001). Arguably, place consciousness, union practice and community relations were never as masculinist and parochial as in Broken Hill. Following the logic of Clark’s argument, the power of unions endured because unions and community remained in lock step for much of the time.

In search of community: the Pilbara

In the Pilbara, unlike Broken Hill or Wollongong, mining remains the core market activity. The Pilbara is in the North West of Australia’s largest State, Western Australia. Of the three cases examined here, this is perhaps the most amenable to “physical determinism”: the Pilbara has one of the largest iron ore bodies on earth; it lies over 1,600 kilometres from the State capital of Perth; its climate is extreme: very hot, arid, yet prone to monsoonal floods. Forms of unions have been powerfully shaped by the very striking intersections of the economic and the physical to which Massey alludes. Work and non-work, workplace and community, issues necessarily overlap in physically isolated places such as the Pilbara. These sites truly are merely instrumental for capital. Arguably this was so when capital first came to the Pilbara, dispossessing one “community”, the Indigenous peoples, many of whom became labourers in the cattle industry and indeed went on strike in 1946 – a strike which never ended (Hess, 1989).

In the Pilbara’s mining industry, the richer the social fabric and the stronger the sense of shared community, the greater the local demands are likely to be on the companies. It was the companies who built the original physical communities in that they built and ran the towns. This, however, empowered labour precisely because it created a community space and local social networks. The companies acceded to union-based bargaining regimes which also built local union power. A distinctive pattern of employment and social relations quickly emerged after mining began in the 1960s; local union structures operated with a striking degree of independence from far off national and state parent bodies. In the inland mining towns, and to some extent in the ports, union and community formations were closely linked. Although not described as community unionism, it is clear that at least an inchoate form existed in the sense that unions worked closely with local clubs, sporting teams and were closely involved in “non-work” local issues (these paragraphs are drawn from Dufty, 1984; Thompson, 1987; Thompson and Smith, 1987a, b; Swain, 1995; Read, 1998, pp. 347-60; Hearn Mackinnon, 2003; Tracey, 2003; Ellem, 2006).

The seemingly strong unions and complex social networks did not survive when attacked by mining companies in 1986-1987 and again in 1992-1993. In 1986, a new,
aggressively anti-union management took over at one of the largest companies, Robe River. In a long and rancorous dispute, the local unions were all but destroyed, activists were run out of town and, eventually, the remaining workers were placed on individual contracts. The “community” was bitterly divided between unionists and “staff labour” and facilities in the towns went into a decline from which they have never emerged. Six years later at Hamersley Iron, unions were wiped out. After 1993, unions had no voice in the making of those parts of the Pilbara controlled by Robe and Hamersley – now part of the Rio Tinto conglomerate. Whatever community meant, it was constructed without unionism, so much so that one union official would later describe these parts of the Pilbara as “Rio Tinto territory” (cited in Ellem, 2006, p. 377).

The companies had overcome the problems imposed by their own immobility. They had constructed not only a local labour control regime based on de-unionisation and individual contracts but also a consciousness of place that was anti-union, and they divided labour by space and time. They were helped in this by physical geography: the companies’ sites are hundreds of kilometres apart from each other and their mines and ports are similarly separate. The companies built upon this geography by enforcing mobility on their workforces, chiefly through fly-in/fly-out arrangements (under which workers fly in, usually from Perth, are accommodated on site, and flown home when off roster) and the use of contractors. Therefore, the labour market is not at all contiguous with the sites of production. So when “labor power has to go home every night”, some of the time that home will be hundreds of kilometres away, and labour will go home for a week, not just the night. To say that geo-history complicates the story is to put things mildly. But it also enriches our understanding of it, and of the problems and potential for unionism of whatever kind (Ellem, 2003).

By the mid-1990s, BHP, soon to become BHP-Billiton, was the only operator in the Pilbara with a unionised workforce. When it resolved to remove any effective union presence in 1999 and put the workforce on individual contracts (as at Rio Tinto), this set in train developments which put new kinds unionism back on the agenda, not only at BHP but also at one of Rio’s sites, Hamersley Iron. At first, the unions’ prospects looked grim when almost half the BHP workforce signed individual contracts quite promptly. The unions’ response was multi-scalar. A national legal strategy attempted to show that the unions had been dealt with unlawfully. This eventually failed, but the contract offers were suspended for 12 months pending a final judgement, allowing the unions time to regroup. The key response was a national peak union initiative and local activism, including engagements with and making of local groups. The national support came from the ACTU. The ACTU provided a full-time official to lead an “organising” program which, like similar strategies in the USA and the UK, was a workplace, delegate-focused renewal strategy (ACTU, 1999; for a full discussion, see Ellem, 2002).

Local union structures were transformed: the five mining unions worked together locally in a combined Mining Unions Association and activists revamped communication structures (the remainder of this section draws on Ellem, 2004, 2006). A network of women established action in support of partners, a group which set up its own website, ran speaking tours and sent delegates to union meetings. Resistance was also articulated at the local political scale in council elections in Port Hedland. In April 2001, when BHP offered new contracts, there was almost no uptake. The unions had survived, their strategy having been by no means confined either to workplaces or courtrooms.
Place consciousness was at the core of the response. The unions deployed the local as a central rhetorical device. They drew on local traditions and resources to reconstruct unionism; they imagined the Pilbara still as a union place. This is not to say that the local strategy was all that mattered. It was the relationship between the local and national that was productive. Few union officials foresaw the breadth of the change that would follow from “organising”: the emergence of a de facto single-union form, with a strong community focus. This came neither from “above” nor “below”, but from the intersection of the two in a geographically distinct setting. The strategy was successful because it resonated with local tradition.

This change in union fortunes – compared to defeats in 1986-1987 and 1992-1993 – resonated elsewhere in the Pilbara. Rio Tinto, now the owner of Hamersley and most of Robe, had to alter its arrangements when a new State Labor government legislated to phase out individual contracts during 2003. The company opted for a non-union collective agreement, which required a ballot of employees. At Hamersley Iron, nearly 60 per cent of the workforce voted against the proposed agreement.

Sensing an opportunity, the mining unions agreed, in June 2002, to combine through the ACTU to fund an organiser to co-ordinate a campaign to re-unionise Hamersley Iron and win a union agreement. This attempt to rebuild unionism was based on learning from the experience at BHP. With no access to the mine sites, the re-organisation was literally community-based; that is, meetings took place in the towns, in homes, halls and pubs. It was also so in its issues: spending as much time in discussions with miners’ partners as the workers themselves, drawing out concerns about schooling, healthcare and community social facilities. A new local body, the Pilbara Mineworkers Union (PMU) was established as a shop-front union to cut across existing union coverage and to address community as well as workplace issues. When the unions raised their profile, they did so in the towns, with an “organising blitz”.

In each site, the unions faced massive obstacles. At BHP, the main problem lay with national laws and court decisions which allowed employers to require new employees to sign AWAs. The unions continued their multi-scaled resistance, working with local groups set up to demand better services and arguing at the global scale, through the UN, for collective bargaining rights. At Hamersley the problem lay within union ranks. Just as wage negotiations between Hamersley and the PMU began, national officials of one national union, the Australian Workers Union, broke ranks with the other unions to engage in direct discussions with management, using the national award system which other unions had agreed to sidestep in favour of the fairer state system. Because national laws and agreements over-rode state coverage, this move undercut the PMU and any hope for a new kind of unionism. This foray into new unionism fell foul of traditional, nationally-scaled arbitration orientation of unions and inter-union rivalry. The strategies of the PMU remained intact, however, at BHP, where the local unions, with national unions in agreement, formalised their co-operation by establishing the BHP-PMU.

This story of “half-renewal” in the making of unions, community and their inter-relationship makes clear how and why geo-history matters. At every step of the way, all the players in this saga tried to read and make history and geography in the Pilbara. The importance of what mobility means for power and practice, how place is imagined and the complexity of the relationship between scales could hardly be clearer. In this case, there was a kind of engagement between community and unions which
at once resonated with the Pilbara’s past and yet, at the outset in 1999, was not anticipated as a formal strategy. However, partly because the companies had so effectively remade place, the unions struggled to find and mobilise community in the Rio Tinto sites while internal union movement machinations delivered the killer blow to their hopes.

Conclusion

There is now something of a global, or at least Anglophone, debate about community politics and local forms of unionism. What can the studies of mining unionism in Australia reported upon here contribute to this debate and to a more adequate theorisation of union forms in general? Rather than summarise the empirical analysis, this conclusion reframes it in terms of the concepts developed earlier in the paper. The key to the argument here lies with the importance of space. Some of the most innovative studies of community unionism have drawn in whole or in part on geographical insights but for the most part scholars in employment relations have been reluctant to do so. This is surprising because some definitions of community unionism are explicitly geographic and most refer to the local scale.

The nature of mobility lies at the heart of this analysis of mining sites. The common factor in all three cases is that for long periods, capital was fixed in place once it had displaced other forms of production. When capital became “un-fixed”, as in two of the cases here, or found ways to overcome its immobility, as in the third, the local unions’ power was much reduced, but by how much, and in what ways, depended on the nature of the local economy and on the types of relationships which unions had forged at a range of scales, chiefly (but not only) the local.

Originally, as relatively late developing, non-metropolitan sites of production, all three sites drew on labour markets which were not local. In Broken Hill, the unions then made a virtue of, and enforced (a gendered) immobility. In Wollongong’s case, the sources of supply in the post-war boom were global. Labour mobility was critical to union power and local social relations. Labour was located in a city where the borders of union and community overlapped until the restructuring of the 1980s pushed many workers to seek jobs elsewhere. In the Pilbara, scarcity of labour and isolation at first helped make unions powerful and weave them into other local social forces but later, when the companies turned against unions, labour mobility was enforced through fly-in/fly-out arrangements which isolated and undercut the unions.

Based in these different but changing forms of place, place consciousness was also variable and significant. In Broken Hill it changed from open and class-based to insular and localist. To simplify somewhat, it was a consciousness which began with capitalism as the enemy and ended up with outsiders as the foe. In Wollongong, despite a change from mining to steel and despite an increasingly diverse workforce, the unions were more or less less united and they worked from the 1930s on to embed themselves in local politics and to work with other groups for local change. In the Pilbara, the sense of place was highly contested but in general was transformed first by unions and then back again by employers from the late 1980s.

The relationships that unions developed in these particular places are explained by these factors and by the socio-spatial choices which union leaders and activists made. That the unions were so strong and that the local economy relatively simple meant that the conservatives who came to control Broken Hill’s unions felt that they had no need
of community unionism. The place consciousness they developed was, in part, about unionism “over” community. In Wollongong, a more complex economy and a different vision of class politics drove a mutual engagement with local social forces; place and class combined in more open ways. In the Pilbara, things were at once more extreme and more volatile; at first the companies developed the structures of community but the unions took these over and also the regulation of work and labour markets. Neither victory lasted: the unions’ power was checked as these global employers fought back locally and nationally. In the most recent engagement lies perhaps the clearest case of a community unionism driven by geographies of work and power. It was also one all but defeated by those geographies, and by inter-union rivalries.

The overarching point in all the cases studied here is that even the impact of the mobility of capital and labour is not a given but itself is socially constructed and therefore variable through time and space. What also emerges is something perhaps underplayed in much discussion of unions today – the importance of agency and politics. It is quite clear that no matter how circumscribed by place, the past and capital’s power, the forms of engagement and unionism that emerged in these contexts were shaped by politics – that is, by ideas and internal arguments – which affected how unions responded to the world around them.

A note on method
The empirical work in this paper is based upon original, joint-authored work on Broken Hill and original, sole-authored work on the Pilbara, in both cases drawing on manuscript and interview sources; full details can be gleaned from the secondary sources cited here. The section on Wollongong relies on the work of others.

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Further reading


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2. 2010. Red and Green:. *Labour History* 1-16. [CrossRef]