

Industrial relations in twenty-first century Europe

Currently, the second post-war generation of industrial relations (IR) researchers and activists is retiring in a context of fundamental transformations. IR in a globalised networked service economy will be very different from the industrial Fordist past. This implies huge challenges for IR actors and scholars. We therefore consider this as a convenient moment to reflect on the trajectories of IR in Europe since the articulation of modern IR systems in a perspective of future challenges. A critical reconstruction of the evolution of IR and the corresponding research traditions can open our eyes for the current interplay of continuities and changes, to see what is really new and what are just new forms of old conflicts in the context of capitalist development.

The purpose of this special issue is not a historical reconstruction but a critical reflection on the variety of IR trajectories to face current challenges in a long-term view. The re-commodification of labour force and the new dynamics of capitalist colonisation (“Landnahme” in Rosa Luxemburgs’ classical term) require a renewal of social and labour rights struggles in defence of our societies. In clear difference to functionalist interpretations of post-war welfare and employment regimes as intelligent technocrat social engineering, we insist in the social struggles and political mobilisations as the driving forces of social progress and in the de-mobilisation and weakening of the labour organisations as the main factor explaining the current race to the bottom.

The authors followed a common agreed structure of research questions which included the following topics and thus allow for an explicit comparative analysis:

- (1) How was the IR institutional system established and what are the country-specific features (context, actors, social and political struggles)?
- (2) Which are the main academic debates and research traditions on the analysis of IR in the country?
- (3) Which periods can be distinguished in the development of IR in the country and to which extent they correspond/differ to the general periodisation of post-war capitalist development?
- (4) What are the impacts of globalisation, financialisation and technological innovations on the IR system and its actors?
- (5) How do the IR institutions and actors face the current transformations since the capitalist crisis?

The selection of case studies implies always some element of arbitrariness but the eight country papers include at least one case of each cluster traditionally distinguished in the comparative IR literature (Eurofound, 2017). Denmark represents the “organised corporatism” model, Germany and Slovenia “social partnership”, France, Italy and Spain different modes of “state-centred” types, Poland and Romania stand for “transition economies”. The only missing one is the “liberal pluralism” of the UK and Ireland, which is referred in the comparative article and many contributions to recent *Employee Relations* issues (see Turner and Flannery, 2016; Martínez Lucio, 2015 and the contributions to Vol. 37, No. 6). Five Western European IR

Paul Stewart, Professor of Sociology of Work and Employment at the University of Strathclyde, supported with language editing of this special issue.



systems are contrasted by three Central European post-communist cases. Additionally, one paper explores the emerging IR at EU level and finally Richard Hyman provides an explicit comparative analysis of the current problems and challenges faced by the collective actors and institutions in Europe.

The contributions confirm two apparently contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, there is something like a “common neoliberal trajectory of IR in advanced capitalism” (Baccaro and Howell, 2011), but this does not mean the end of national varieties. All national employment models are experiencing profound transformations in the direction of institutional deregulation, decentralisation of collective bargaining, decline of trade unions and collective action, a shift in power relations in favour of the individual employer, a cutback of social services and employment protection and a hegemony of neoliberal discourse. The Fordist class compromise with its partially decommodification of the labour force and institutional domestication of capitalist dynamics was definitely abandoned in Western Europe and never reached in Central and Eastern Europe.

However, this common neoliberal trajectory and challenges still maintain important capitalist variety in terms of different political and institutional responses, trajectories and resistance. The articles of Stanojević on Slovenia, Adăscăliței and Guga on Romania, and Czarzasty and Mrozowicki on Poland show the particular problems of post-Soviet societies integrating into democratic European capitalism in a moment when these democratic capitalisms themselves were undergoing deep transformations. Stanojević analysis of the Slovenian trajectory from post-Yugoslav transition to the current European crisis capitalism demonstrates two important features. There are significant differences between post-communist countries and capitalism with its dynamic pressures on institution building and transformation has to be taken seriously (Streeck, 2011). The Yugoslav heritage is different from soviet-communism and allowed Slovenia the development of a neo-corporatist IR system in a context when neo-corporatism experienced deregulation pressures in Western European countries.

In Western Europe, the impacts of globalisation, financialisation and economic downturn hit the countries quite unevenly. In Italy, France and Spain, the governments intervened by unilateral labour market reforms deregulating employment protection and weakening trade unions. Denmark and Germany, in contrast, remained much more stable and path dependent in their corporatist institutional framework although witnessing some backdrops in their welfare states and trade union decline. In these countries, cooperative trade unions share the belief that “the road to affluent workers goes through prospering companies” (Lind and Knudsen, 2018).

These contradictions are also present in IR research trajectories always related to the empirical field. Here, the common neoliberal trajectory implies a shift from collective action and conflict centred IR towards more individual human resource management approaches from IR institutes to business schools. However, the contributions to this special issue claim for the relevance of comparative political economy theories in the analysis of employment regimes and labour market regulation. The findings show that traditional institutionalist approaches such as the “varieties of capitalism” (Hall and Soskice, 2001) are useful but limited and have to be complemented by more historical dynamic and more actor-centred concepts and methods. The case studies on Central European IR in this issue show how international organisations (IMF, EC) and national political and economic elites shape institution building processes in critical historical situations.

The multiple forms of trade union and employers’ involvement in political games and bargaining keep corporatism as an analytical concept alive. Several authors identify a transformation of traditional neo-corporatist bargaining contents, characteristic for the 1960s and 1970s, towards new forms of “competitive corporatism”, “crisis corporatism”, “bubble corporatism” or “illusory corporatism” (see Köhler, 2018; Adăscăliței and Guga, 2018;

Stanojević, 2018), where established corporatist institutions adjust their bargaining issues towards the neoliberal agenda. The contributions on Italy (Pulignano *et al.*, 2018) and France (Rehfeldt, 2018) document the recent emergence of neo-corporatist forms of tripartite concertation for political and economic reasons in countries traditionally characterised by adversarial IR and trade union fragmentation. All Southern European countries witnessed neoliberal labour market reforms fostering flexibilisation and decentralisation of collective bargaining in the context of the economic crisis after 2008 under the pressure of the Troika (EC, ECB and IMF).

Lehndorff *et al.* (2017) recently stated that the European crisis has deepened the cleavages between countries within the traditional country clusters in a process of “divisive integration” and that traditional comparative IR categories are losing its strength. However, this is no argument against the heuristic value of comparative cluster analysis but a call for more fine-tuned multivariate research on common challenges, ongoing transformations and divergent responses to the variety of capitalist transformations and IR.

Holm-Detlev Köhler

Departamento de Sociología, Universidad de Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain

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About the Guest Editor

Holm-Detlev Köhler is Professor of Sociology at the University of Oviedo/Spain. Holm-Detlev Köhler can be contacted at: hkohler@uniovi.es