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Article

International and Comparative Industrial Relations: Report on the Annual Conference of the German Industrial Relations Association (GIRA), 10.-11.10.2013 in Erlangen

Industrielle Beziehungen

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International and Comparative Industrial Relations. Report on the Annual Conference of the German Industrial Relations Association (GIRA), 10.-11.10.2013 in Erlangen

The following report summarizes the activities and outcomes of the German Industrial Relations Association (GIRA)¹ annual conference which was held at the University of Erlangen (Germany) from 10-11 October 2013. The economic and financial crisis of 2008 has shown that national systems of industrial relations are getting more and more interdependent, so this year's GIRA conference was dedicated to „International and Comparative Industrial Relations“. The congress was attended by around thirty international delegates including students, practitioners and academics from the social and economic sciences as well as law.

After a short welcome by *Ingrid Artus* (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg), board member of the GIRA and host of the conference, *Stephen J. Silvia* (American University, Washington D.C.) opened the event with his talk *Holding the Shop Together: German Industrial Relations in the Postwar Era*. According to Silvia, prevailing arguments regarding the “erosion” or “exhaustion” of the German industrial relations system are too simplistic, because they do not disaggregate the system into its components for precise assessments. Silvia, in contrast, undertook separate evaluations of the legal framework, codetermination, trade unions and employers associations in order to make a more nuanced appraisal of postwar German industrial relations. He argued that main pillars of the German industrial relations system remain sound. Yet, membership in most trade unions and employers associations has dropped. Silvia's quantitative and qualitative analysis of membership decline suggests that the ‘social milieu’ of organized labour is the principal factor associated with unionization. The talk closed with trade unionists' responses to membership decline (e.g. union mergers, organizing strategies). Debate on Silvia's presentation focused on his operationalization of ‘social milieu’, which was based on membership in one political party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Also, it was inquired whether his analysis was overemphasizing stability (and therefore neglecting the changing role of the state, etc.).

Hagen Lesch (Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln) continued with a presentation on the coordination of wage policy in Europe (*Lohnpolitische Koordinierung in der Eurozone: Ziele, Interessen, Hindernisse*). He sketched the (severe) current differences in wage policy within Europe, introduced the EU-Monitoring on wage policy, which tries to coordinate those different approaches, and gave insight into the positions of social partners. Interests of management and labour concerning wage policy in general and forms of coordination specifically are highly divergent. However, both social partners reject tighter coordination by the European Union. This may well have to do

¹ For further information see www.giraweb.de.

with the fact that the aim of European wage policy in itself is multi-layered and ambiguous. Hence, Lesch concluded that EU-Monitoring enhances transparency, but to sanction countries for non-compliance of coordination rules needs to be treated with great care. Discussion of Lesch's talk centred possible additions to his analysis, e.g. to include interests of supranational actors or the micro level (in other words, the implementation of monitoring rules).

After those first two talks the conference delegates participated in a guided tour of the STAEDTLER Werke in Nuremberg in the afternoon. STAEDTLER Mars GmbH & Co KG is one of the oldest industrial companies in Germany and renowned for high quality pencil making. The visitors were able to see the different production steps of pens as well as the computerized high-bay warehouse. The plant tour was followed by conversation with management and labour representatives. After the staff manager had illustrated the employment structure and politics of the company, he was commented by the leader of the Betriebsrat. The ensuing conversation examined precarious forms of employment within the company and global working conditions.

In the evening, a member's meeting of the GIRA took place. The agenda included the appointment of a new board member, because Ingrid Artus is stepping down after six years. The members voted unanimously for *Britta Rehder* (Ruhr-Universität Bochum), single candidate and recommended by the board members due to her various activities in favour of the GIRA. Furthermore, on this occasion the GIRA Best-Paper-Award 2011/2012 for early stage researchers was awarded. It was given to *Markus Hertwig* for his paper *Patterns, Ideologies and Strategies of Non-statutory Employee Representation in German Private Sector Companies* (Industrial Relations Journal, 42(6): 530-546). In his laudation, *Hansjörg Weitbrecht*, member of the jury, acknowledged Hertwig's work especially for his efforts to eliminate misunderstandings about the 'German model' of non-statutory firm level employee representation (NSR) in the Anglophone context. The awardee appreciated the distinction and shortly presented his research approach (mainly case studies in German private companies) as well as the four types of NSRs which arose from his research.

On Friday the conference started with a talk by *Marco Hauptmeier* (Cardiff University, UK) (presenting a paper written in collaboration with *Ian Greer*, University of Greenwich, UK): *Organizing Competition – Management Whipsawing in Multinational Companies*. By 'management whipsawing' the organization of competition within multinational companies is meant, particularly competition for allocation of products to plants. The researchers traced whipsawing strategies in such companies from 1980 until 2010 by doing archival research and interviews with managers, unions, and so on, in three empirical cases in the automotive industry (GM, Ford and VW). They detected differing patterns of whipsawing (namely 'rhetorical/discursive whipsawing', 'coercive whipsawing', 'hegemonic whipsawing' and 'formal bidding'). A major goal was to find out how those different types of management whipsawing can be explained. Hauptmeier and Greer distinguished a set of factors which shape whipsawing strategies and which, consequently, have to be taken into account (e.g. structural conditions within MNCs, market conditions and management strategy). Discussion questioned whether 'patterns' found were de facto patterns, or rather different levels of intensity within one pattern. Further comments suggested to specify different management

goals of whipsawing and to integrate the role of company culture to explain strategies. A broader debate addressed the challenges those strategies pose for trade unions and employment relations.

The second paper, *Women on Corporate Boards in Europe: A Review of the Literature*, by *Anja Kirsch* (FU Berlin), sketched the discourse on women in corporate boards and presented the current situation regarding quotas for female directors in Europe. Kirsch then went on to systematize the academic debate on the gender composition of corporate boards, which concentrates on two main questions: First, why are women present in some boards and absent in others? And, second, what difference does it make whether or not there are women on corporate boards? Her analysis of those questions was based on a systematic review of 74 papers in SSCI and A&HCI listed, English language academic journals between 2000 and 2013. Evaluation of this literature (with reference to publication date and place, kind of journal as well as theoretical and empirical approach) indicates that further research is needed, such as on the influence of institutional and cultural contexts, on how female directors contribute to boards, or on the effects an increase in women on boards have on female employees. Debate addressed whether Kirsch's sample produces a systematic bias, because only English language publications in selected papers were included (whereas book chapters and so on were excluded from the start). More fundamentally, it was brought into question whether there is a causal relation between corporate boards and performance of companies, irrespective of their gender composition.

Stefan Kirchner (Universität Hamburg) (and *Sven Hauff*, also Universität Hamburg) lectured on *Matching Work Place Situation and Work Values. A Cross-national Analysis of Differences and Convergence Trends*. Based on the well-known fact that employees' experiences of a mismatch between individual work values and the actual workplace situation differs across countries and time, Kirchner and Hauff examined those institutional differences and potential convergences. Their empirical analysis build on ISSP data from 1989 and 2005 for the USA, Great Britain, West Germany, Norway and Hungary and considers mismatches in the dimensions job security, income, career, interesting job and independence at work. To theorize cross-national differences and dynamics in mismatch positions a scheme was introduced, distinguishing situations of "deprivation", "adaptation", "dissonance" and "relative fit". Amongst other things, results confirm categorical institutional differences which mainly are in line with assumptions by Varieties of Capitalism theory. Also, no general convergence of mismatch positions can be determined (except for 'job security' and 'income' between USA, GB and GER). Instead, parallel trends of convergence and divergence can be identified. Feedback on the talk involved theoretical aspects, including on how to conceptualize mismatch. It was inquired whether the introduced scheme is able to grasp dynamics and, more generally, whether the presented results possibly indicate that Varieties of Capitalism approaches hit the wall. Besides, methodological aspects came up, e.g. undesirable side effects of the (quantitative) research design and challenges posed by uncertain causal relations.

The fourth, and final presentation on that day was provided by *Markus Hertwig* (Institut für Arbeit und Qualifikation, IAQ) and *Luitpold Rampeltshammer* (Universität des Saarlandes) (presenting a paper written together with *Valentina Mählmeier*, Wissen-

schaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, WZB). It concentrated on strategies during the recent financial and economic crisis in Europe (*Aktivierung, Stagnation, Desintegration. Entwicklungspfade Europäischer Betriebsräte während der Finanz- und Wirtschaftskrise*) and compared the changes which occurred in the European works councils (EWCs) of three automotive manufacturers (Ford, GM and Honda). Aim was to understand which factors account for the changes observed, guided by the assumption of a systematic relation between company structures and structures of EWCs (namely in form of a 'structural fit'). To examine those issues the authors draw on case study evidence from several projects that were carried out between 2007 and 2012. Conceptually, EWCs were characterized as Non-Profit-Organizations within Profit-Organizations. To understand their actions, structures and coordination patterns plus institutional effects and corporate culture were considered. The three cases exemplify different responses of the EWCs to the crisis. All three reactions have a slight growth of activity in common, notably an increase in transparency and information. By and large, conclusion lead to a rather gloomy picture: EWCs which were passive before the crisis did not get active during the crisis, overly complex demands may well lead to 'implosion' of such committees and well-working EWCs seem to be heavily dependent on trust and personal networks. Still, all in all the authors came to a somewhat positive assessment. This optimistic position was challenged in the ensuing argument, especially against the backdrop that GM is commonly seen as a positive example of EWCs, which in the light of the findings seems debatable. Moreover, the generalizability of results was made a subject.

Overall, the conference gave an impressive insight into the versatility of Comparative Industrial Relations, a research field which holds a lot of promise. This was illustrated by fruitful discussions with a relatively heterogeneous audience.

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