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Sociological Labour Market Theories.
A German Perspective on an International Debate

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Sociological Labour Market Theories.

A German Perspective on an International Debate[1]

Abstract

The defining characteristic of sociological labour market research today is the prevalence of empirical evidence over theory. In order to fill this gap, this contribution collects and compares selected approaches from a variety of social-theoretical traditions (e.g. rational-choice, neo-marxism, economic and sociological institutionalisms, field-theories). As a result, the existing (fragments of) sociological labour market theories are grouped into four distinct streams of thinking with a focus on economic or social operators, on the one hand, and agency or structure, on the other. In the light of current developments of social closure and protectionism of nationally embedded employment systems, the authors opt for a political sociology of labour markets based on sociological field theories.

Keywords: labour markets, inequality, political sociology, economic sociology, political economy.

1. Introduction

Despite an increase in publications in recent years, there is as yet no systematic discussion of labour market theories in contemporary sociology. The overwhelming majority of contributions consists of empirical analyses of the social consequences of labour market structures and dynamics for individuals, households, gender relations, and social inequality.

[1] This paper is based on a long-term research project at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena and Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg. A comprehensive list of the German language publications can be found in Weingärtner et al. (2015), Köhler et al. (2017) and Weingärtner (2019).

There is, however, a limited but growing number of publications which are addressing labour market structures from different theoretical perspectives. The aim of our paper is to identify relevant approaches and to develop a systematic comparison of their social theoretical foundations. Due to the size of the task, we had to restrain ourselves by selecting publications according to three criteria. *Firstly*, they address and explain income and employment risks in labour markets of societies in the global North. *Secondly*, the selected approaches explicitly understand the economy and labour markets as subsystems of society, which excludes a large part of personnel and labour economics. *Thirdly*, we focus on German language publications. Employment studies have been an integral and strong stream of German sociology for a long time. Moreover, the country is still undergoing a long and open-ended process of restructuring of the old conservative welfare and labour market regime. For both reasons, the state of the art comprehends a variety of trend hypotheses, explanatory models and social theoretical assumptions which allows for a systematic comparison of approaches. By relating our results to the international discussion, we hope to give an input for theorizing labour markets beyond the German debate.

2. Four streams of sociological labour market theories

Our objective is to compare existing (fragments of) labour market theories and organize them around their social theoretical assumptions. We will begin with a short summary of our comparison with respect to trend diagnoses (short-range), explanatory models of labour market inequality (middle-range), and explicit or implicit theoretical concepts (long-range). As a result, we identify four "families" of theories with distinct social theoretical foundations.

With respect to the short-range level of our comparison, we can observe at least four long waves of sociological research with distinct trend diagnoses on labour market inequality within Germany and internationally. The first wave of the 1970s identified persistent and

strong inequality and divisions within the working classes despite the long period of growth and – with its distinction of internal and external and primary and secondary labour markets – led to a worldwide debate on labour market segmentation (Piore, 1975; Sengenberger, 1987; see Michon & Petit, 2007; Reich, 2008) that lasted far into the 1980s. The second wave addressed the erosion of the standard employment relationship with income and employment security, parallel to increasing globalization and the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s (Beck, 1992). The third wave around the turn of the century questioned previous trend hypotheses and stressed the resilience of the long-term employment relationship (see Auer & Cazes, 2003). The fourth wave of research, parallel to the economic crises of financial market capitalism since 2008 and reinforced by the digitalization and corona discourses, again questioned previous findings and identified far reaching tendencies of commodification and precarization in labour markets (see Porta et al., 2015; Staab, 2019).

The dominant narratives of these four waves of research and publications always encountered critical or opposing trend diagnoses. To simplify matters, we can distinguish two basic positions in today's German and international debate: *dynamic divisions* stand for a conflicting coexistence of stable and unstable employment with forward and backward movements; by contrast, *re-commodification* and *precarization* stipulate a far-reaching dissolution of the areas of stability in the direction of the neoliberal flexible labour market model. Within these two families of trend hypotheses, the approaches differ – apart from empirical and theoretical differences – in their normative evaluation and either stress the social risks or identify opportunities and risks for different groups of employees.

With respect to the middle-range level, we analyze the selected theories regarding their assumptions on the driving forces of labour market inequality (see Figure 1). A screening of the explanatory models shows a multitude of determinants on the micro, the meso and the macro level. Logics of communication and decision-making play the central role for the

micro level. These in turn are influenced by the logic of the social situation which is defined by households and firms on the meso level and by markets, power relations and discourses on the macro level. All relevant approaches apply multi-level analyses and consider different economic and social determinants. However, they can clearly be distinguished by their focus on specific driving forces of labour market inequality, which connects the middle range explanatory models to long range social theoretical assumptions.

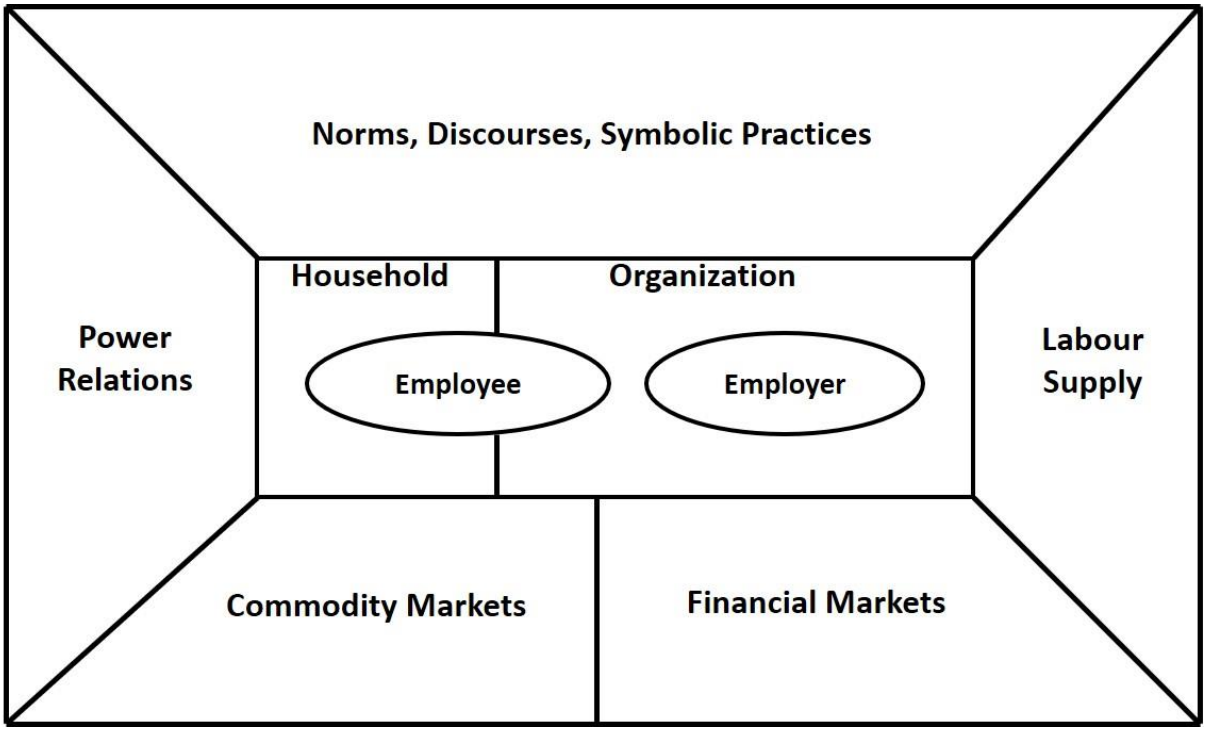

Figure 1: Driving forces of labour market inequality

Source: own research.

For several decades, sociologists and heterodox economists have been working on overcoming the old social theoretical distinctions of structure versus agency and economy versus society. The grand theories of authors like Bourdieu, Giddens and Luhmann stand in this tradition. However, our review of the literature on labour market inequality shows that there is a clear focus whenever social theories are applied to empirical analyses. We therefore compared social-theoretical assumptions with the middle-range explanatory models, in this

way identified the theoretical focus for each author, and arrived at four streams of sociological labour market theories prioritizing social or economic forces on the one hand and structure or agency on the other (see Table 1).

	Actor-Centred Approaches	**Structure-Centred Approaches**
Priority of Economic Logics	**Stream I** 1. Extended Economic Neo-Institutional-isms 2. RC-Theories of Social Closure	**Stream II** 1. Segmentation Approaches 2. Precarization Approaches
Priority of Social Logics	**Stream III** 1. Actor-Centred Sociological Neo-Institutionalisms 2. Sociological RC-Exchange Theory	**Stream IV** 1. Field- and System-Theories 2. Historical (Neo-)Institutionalisms

Table 1: Four streams of sociological labour market theories

Source: own research.

Approaches prioritizing economic logics emphasize strong economic drivers on the micro and/or the macro level (from particular market mechanisms to globalization, financial market capitalism, etc.) and postulate that labour market actors are guided by economic interests and bounded rationality. In contrast, approaches with a focus on social logics emphasize the societal 'embeddedness' (Polanyi, 2009; Granovetter, 1985) of labour markets and refer to household contexts, institutions, norms, social networks, power structures and political or cultural dynamics.

The second differentiating feature of our systematization of labour market theories is their respective position on the question of structure versus agency. Concepts with a focus on agency assume that analyses of labour market structures have to centre around the actions and

decisions of individual and collective actors. In comparison, structuralist approaches refer to emergent social aggregates as primary explanantia. When we combine both dimensions of our comparison, four streams of sociological labour market theories can be distinguished (see Table 1).

Stream I contains various approaches from the broad range of economic neo-institutionalism and rational-choice theories (RC) going back to Becker, Williamson and others. In the tradition of methodological individualism, these concepts emphasize the importance of economic interests and actions of employers and their associations. Following our selection criteria, we exclude purely economic accounts and discuss sociologically informed or extended approaches (see Marsden, 1999, 2016). Another group of authors within this stream focuses on employee's interests with concepts of social closure in the tradition of Weber, Sørensen and Parkin. Stream II contains structuralist approaches in the Marxian or Keynesian tradition which highlight macroeconomic structures and forms of regulation as major drivers of labour market inequality. Most segmentation and precarization approaches can be located in this stream. Streams III and IV, in contrast, assume a dominance of social forces in shaping labour market structures or at least an interplay between social and economic logics. In this perspective, profit- or wage-maximization is only one motive among others since communications, actions and decisions are strongly influenced by non-economic operators such as norms, values, social networks and institutions. Some of these approaches focus primarily on the micro level of individual and collective actors. Examples in stream III are actor-centred conceptions of sociological neo-institutionalism in the tradition of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Meyer and Rowan (1977), on the one hand and certain RC-exchange theories, on the other. Approaches located in stream IV can be labelled structuralist or post-structuralist as they focus on social structures or systems in the tradition of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Giddens.

3. Stream I: Theories with a focus on economic agency

This stream is comprised of socio-economic approaches which put particular emphasis on the economic interests and actions of individual and collective labour market actors. In order to conceptualize the basic economic logic of labour market mechanisms, they are drawing on ideas of neo-institutionalist personnel and labour economics (Williamson, 1985; Baron & Kreps, 1999) extending them with different sociological concepts such as power, social norms and networks (see Marsden, 1999, 2016; Hinz & Abraham, 2018).

In Germany, Werner Nienhüser has been advocating such an approach for a socio-economic theory of corporate employment policies and labour markets for a long time (Nienhüser, 2014). He characterizes his position as a sociologically 'enlightened' RC-approach. This implies both an extension of and a demarcation against new institutional economics. The author goes beyond mainstream economic assumptions on rationality and utility-maximization to propose a more open model of action in the sense of 'homo socio-oeconomicus' (Matiaske, 2004). Moreover, he systematically integrates social conditions and constraints for economic action into his analyses.

Against this background, Nienhüser constructs three interacting 'mechanisms' of corporate employment policies which combine assumptions on individual preferences and situational constraints. Utility maximization and bounded rationality form the core of the *economic mechanism*. The *power mechanism* refers to the possibility of enforcing particular interests against the will of others, always taking into account countervailing power. The *meaning mechanism* addresses cognitive interpretative processes which are based on the social constructions of meaning by individual and collective actors – for example historically contingent models of 'good' HRM-practices or hegemonic discourses on the role and appreciation of work within society. On this theoretical basis, Nienhüser conceptualizes the employment relationship as 'contested exchange' in which actors aim to realize their individual and collective

interests (utility), thereby making use of their economic and non-economic power resources (e.g. through collective bargaining or the state) and considering dominant social norms and values (meaning and legitimacy).

Short-term contracts and externalization are to be expected when tasks require low levels of human capital (level and specificity) and social capital (cooperation). In this case, employees can easily be motivated, controlled and replaced and employers have little or no interest in long-term employment as they can easily recruit personnel from the external labour market at any time. In other words: an excess supply of adequately skilled external labour leads to short-term contracts. Nevertheless, the employers' ability to realize his/her economic interests does not only depend on utility considerations alone but also on the countervailing power of labour as well as on hegemonic norms and values within the social environment. In the case of a high rate of unionization (power mechanism) and a high degree of social legitimacy of the standard employment relationship (meaning mechanism), corporate employment practices can be more oriented towards security and higher wages. The same applies to institutional conditions of the welfare state; a strong level of employment protection and high social benefits strengthen countervailing power and the legitimacy of employee-friendly policies.

Hence, a further flexibilization of labour markets is to be expected if (i) the number of complex tasks within the employment system is decreasing; (ii) market and organizational power of employees is diminishing; (iii) employment protection is lowered and/or (iv) the guiding principle of the standard employment relationship is losing social legitimacy. The German employment system today is characterized by ambivalent tendencies: despite current fears of job losses through digitalization, the number of complex tasks tends to be increasing,

while at the same time the hegemonic status of the standard employment relationship is getting weaker. Therefore, Nienhüser is clearly a proponent of the *dynamic divisions* hypothesis rather than of the idea of a far reaching general trend of re-commodification and precarization.

Nienhüser goes far beyond the theoretical architecture of neoclassical or new institutional economics. Nevertheless, his concept is assigned to the (socio-)economic approaches in stream I, since economic interests form the centre of his approach. Employers are following a profit motive which is undergoing constant historical change, constraining situational factors like union power and labour law are interpreted by rational actors and included in their decision-making processes.

A different position within this theoretical stream has been (re-)introduced into the German debate by Johannes Giesecke and Martin Groß (2012), who focus on employee interests in explaining divisions in labour markets. Their approach combines different strands of closure theory: the class-theoretical neo-weberian 'Theory of Social Closure' (Parkin, 1979) and the 'Theory of Open and Closed Positions' (Sørensen, 1983, 2000), which combines elements of class and labour market approaches. According to Giesecke and Groß (2012: 94–97), labour market structures can be traced back to closure conflicts resulting from the antagonistic interests of actors within the labour market. Since closed positions offer economic rents and long-term employment security, employees are determined to close positions permanently via institutionalization. Employers, in contrast, generally intend to destroy employee rent-potentials and open positions to the market.

In their closure practices, employees are using different resources like patents, credentials and human or economic capital. Rents are being generated by two mechanisms: information asymmetries and monopolies. Information asymmetries result from agency problems like moral hazard, hidden information and hidden intention. Monopolies – e.g. in the form of

specific human capital, employment protection, or credentials – are limiting market competition by restricting labour supply. Closure processes can be individual or collective. While individual mechanisms are bound to the accumulation of human capital (asset specificity), monopolies can only be generated through collective action. Furthermore, following Parkin's concept of 'dual closure', Giesecke and Groß distinguish top-down practices of 'exclusion' from bottom-up practices of 'usurpation'. The former are based on state regulation while the latter depend on solidarity and collective action (e.g. by unions or professional associations).

The counterstrategies of employers are diametrically opposed to those of labour (Groß, 2015: 204). They generally prefer flexible labour markets with strong worker competition and lower wages. In 'open' markets, the returns on economic capital for employers are generally higher since the majority of employment rents of employees are disappearing and only rents on specific forms of human capital can be achieved as so-called 'composite rents' (Sørensen, 2000).

Through the lens of closure theory, labour market structures can be viewed as the result of closure conflicts between different actors on the supply and the demand side. These *closure equilibria* (Groß, 2015: 204) are fragile institutional arrangements (Giesecke & Groß, 2012: 104) which can be traced back to the relative power structures between actors. The concept takes into account that in capitalist systems so-called 'free' labour markets favour the interests of employers. Countervailing closure practices by factions of employees can not only result in an increase of inequality within the working class but also reduce income differences between capital and labour (see Haupt, 2016).

On the basis of these theoretical assumptions and specific empirical indicators, Giesecke and Groß diagnose a scenario of *dynamic divisions*. Despite a growing number of precarious jobs, the process of commodification and precarization is constrained both by pow-

erful employee interests (Giesecke & Groß, 2012: 111–113), and by the significance of vocationalism and credentialism in the German system of education and professional training. Closure theories are very prominent in international labour market research. Major proponents are Weeden (2002) and Tilly (2009).

The socio-economic strand in stream I mainly represents the strong tradition of rational choice theory and analytical sociology in Germany. Hinz and Abraham (2018) are proposing a research agenda similar to Nienhüser's. They also aim at decreasing the level of abstraction in economic models by selectively integrating social logics of action and structural categories like (non-market) power, institutions and networks. A major international proponent of this socio-economic RC-paradigm is David Marsden, who developed a comprehensive theory of employment systems. His seminal work of 1999 starts with the incompleteness of the employment contract, the interests of capital and labour, transaction rules and their diffusion. Against this background, he explains the consolidation of employment systems and their societal diversity. Since then, Marsden has deepened his findings and extended his theoretical framework (2016). He distinguishes between the allocative function of labour markets and the productive function of employment relationships on the one hand and a weak and strong sense of norms and institutions on the other. Marsden argues for a synthesis, thereby integrating ideas of both traditional and new economic and sociological institutionalisms.

4. Stream II: Theories with a focus on economic structures

Similar to the previous section, approaches in stream II share the view that economic logics dominate the process of labour market structuring. However, they differ in their explanatory strategy. The focal point of analysis are economic structures at the meso and macro level and not actors and their individual or collective strategies. In the subsequently presented approaches, the regulationist notion of *accumulation regimes* (Aglietta, 1979; Boyer & Saillard, 2002), which unites theoretical assumptions on economic structures, macroeconomic cycles

and forms of political regulation, is playing a major role in neo-marxist or neo-keynesian variations. Accumulation regimes provide opportunities and constraints in the labour market to which employers and employees react according to their economic interests. Because the capital side has a structural power advantage, its interests and strategies are crucial for the (trans-) formation of job structures. Moreover, state policies and institutions, like social policies and labour law, play an important role and are integrated into the respective models as complementary factors.

The precarization approach by Klaus Dörre (2010, 2015) stands in the tradition of neo-marxist analyses of globalization and financial market capitalism (see also Harvey, 2003) and contrasts sharply with the preceding RC-approaches in stream I. His class and labour market concept is inspired by the French author Robert Castel (2003). It assumes a widespread and far-reaching tendency of re-commodification and precarization which is considered to be irreversible under the conditions of financial market capitalism. Following Castel, labour markets can be understood as a vertical structure consisting of three zones with different levels of social protection. The *zone of integration* provides security and social integration and is dominated by the standard employment relationship. It still comprises the majority of employees in Germany. Below that, however, there is an expanding *zone of precarity* which is characterized by insecure employment and the erosion of social networks. The lower end of contemporary Western societies constitutes the so-called *zone of detachment*. Hallmarks of this zone are extremely poor chances of integration into the labour market and the danger of social isolation.

According to Dörre, financialized capitalist accumulation is considered the main driver of commodification and precarization. According to the author, the logic of financialization with its short-term demands on profits and flexibility was initially transferred to the world-market oriented sector of the German economy via the ‘shareholder value’ regime of

corporate control. From there, it spread gradually – via further transfer mechanisms like privatization of public services or neoliberal labour market policies of 'activation' – into more or less all sectors of the economy and thus society as a whole.

As a result, wages, working hours and working conditions have become 'residuals' which are exposed to increased pressures of flexibilization and rationalization. Management aims to minimize fixed costs associated with core staff policies. For this purpose, the use of external flexibilization instruments such as service contracts, temporary agency work and fixed-term contracts increases. In other words: the growing economic constraints and uncertainties of companies are transformed into an increasing objective and subjective insecurity on the employee side. Financial market capitalism and precarization are therefore ultimately two sides of the same coin. In short: Dörre postulates an expansive dynamic of precarization which is not only limited to members of the zones of precarity and detachment, but also increasingly affects formally protected groups within the zone of integration.

Contrary to Dörre's diagnosis of a general trend of precarization, the modernized segmentation approach by Köhler and others (Köhler et al., 2006; Lutz et al., 2007; Köhler & Weingärtner, 2018) emphasizes the resilience of stable employment and dynamic divisions between primary and secondary labour markets. This concept stands in the tradition of theories of labour market segmentation (Piore, 1975; see Rosenberg, 2007; Reich, 2008) in general and the Munich segmentation approach by Sengenberger and Lutz (Sengenberger, 1987; Lutz et al., 2007) in particular, who, within a neo-keynesian macroeconomic framework, focus on the dynamics of supply and demand in labour markets. Within this open institutionalist approach, Köhler et al. look at firm employment systems as the basis of labour market segments and import selected concepts of transaction cost theory: problems in the availability and control of skilled labour can lead employers to establish internal labour markets to ensure em-

ployee commitment. The assumptions for the micro level are then related to macro level developments of commodity and financial markets, labour supply, power asymmetries and hegemonic discourses and lead to explanatory models and trend hypotheses.

With respect to empirical trends in Germany since the 1990s, Köhler et al. observe tendencies of re-commodification, downgrading of vocationalism and deregulation. The consequences are a growth of secondary and external markets and a modification of internal markets. The previous practical dominance and ideological hegemony of vocationally structured internal labour markets is broken. However, the authors observe a resilience and since the 2010s a comeback of standard employment and therefore predict a process of dynamic segmentation with changes in both directions.

The background for this prognosis is the strong importance of the supply side in labour markets within the theoretical model (Lutz et al. 2007). Within this framework, large parts of the commodification processes in Germany of the last three decades are not primarily explained by financial market capitalism but by a strongly growing active population due to the ‘baby boomer generation’, the increasing labour market participation of women and several significant waves of immigration into Germany from the East and the South. The authors stipulate that this process now is reversed because of demographic change and is leading to shortages of skilled labour which are reinforcing internal labour markets and stable employment. Refugees and migrants will in the foreseeable future not alter this situation since right-wing populism and labour market protectionism are strong.

Precarization and segmentation concepts have different explanatory models but are both focusing on meso- and macroeconomic structures, which is why they are sorted into stream II. Segmentation approaches have for a long time formed the mainstream of the social science literature on labour markets in Germany and internationally far into the 1980s and they are currently experiencing a comeback (Köhler et al., 2006; Michon & Petit, 2007;

Reich, 2008; Kalleberg, 2011; Grimshaw et al., 2017). However, for more than a decade, theories of financial market capitalism, commodification and precarization have dominated this stream of socio-economic structuralism (Dörre, 2010, 2015; Porta et al., 2015; see Harvey, 2003). Some authors emphasize the role of political regulation. Gender relations are introduced as additional differentiation lines. To sum up, it can be noted that, unlike in other sociological subdisciplines, socio-economic structuralism continues to play an important role in labour market research.

4. Stream III: Theories with a focus on social agency

Stream III comprises approaches which focus on the role of individual and collective actors in the labour market. In contrast to stream I, they emphasize the influence of non-economic factors on economic action and decision-making. What these theories have in common is that they base their considerations on the 'double contingency' of the employment relationship. When two actors meet (in a hyper-complex situation such as the labour market), neither can with absolute certainty determine the other's course of action. Therefore, actors are forced to either actively construct mental images of their environments and courses of action or to rely on socially established rules or models to describe and evaluate economic situations. These models stem from historically evolved and condensed observations, communications and conflicts. Economic action is thus conceptualized against socio-economic RC-approaches as a genuinely 'social' form of agency. Background for this perspective is among others sociological neo-institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; see Maurer & Schmid, 2002).

Matthias Hinze (2006) uses this toolbox to apply the notion of double contingency to the labour market. Additionally, he uses Deutschmann's concept of recognition (2002): reciprocal recognition weakens power asymmetries in the interests of both sides of the employment relationship and thereby guarantees the stability of institutionalized arrangements (e.g. long-

term employment, social protection, etc.). Only institutionalized limitations on capital interests on the company level (e.g. internal labour markets) and inter-company level (industrial relations, social security systems) can lead to a functioning exchange relationship. From this perspective, institutionalized recognition serves to generate the relative reciprocity of power relations in the labour market which mainstream economics simply takes as given.

Hinze's interpretation of contemporary trends in firm employment policies and the positional structure of the labour market revolves around the question of how mental models influence labour market behaviour. His main idea is that the standard employment relationship is losing importance and legitimacy. Based on his qualitative study of the German software industry, the author observes two strategies: either a modernization of the old model of the standard employment relationship or a flexible transactional employment relationship. In the former, security is offered while flexibility in working hours, place of work and performance goals are demanded. In the new transactional model, job security is substituted for functional equivalents. These may be marketable skills and reputation, inter-company careers and above-average incomes. With regard to the trend hypotheses, Hinze expects an open and experimental process which can support dynamic divisions as well as processes of far reaching commodification.

The German discussion features another interesting actor-centred sociological approach different from the neo-institutionalist perspective (Brose et al., 2004; Goedicke, 2012). Here, employment relationships are conceptualized as a form of social exchange between companies and households. Following Coleman (1990), a distinction is made between the ideal-typical exchange modes *hierarchy*, *trust* and *market*. Objects of exchange relationships can be various *exchange media* in the form of rights and asymmetrically distributed resources (e.g. security, money, power, love, status, recognition, commitment, loyalty, etc.). These media are partially complementary and can be substituted to varying degrees. In this perspective,

specific employment arrangements can be characterized as a particular configuration of the reciprocal transaction of rights and resources between actors within organizations and households.

The need to extend the analytical perspective to the household is derived from an increase in contingency and uncertainty on both sides of the employment relationship. Regarding the demand side, the authors assume that trust- and market-based elements are becoming more important for companies' employment policies, whereas traditional hierarchical forms of coordination tend to be declining. On the supply side, new cultural orientations (subjectivation of work), changing expectations of the content of work, pluralization in the intra-family division of labour and transformations of families' employment strategies are leading to changes in individual labour market strategies. This all leads to a situation in which employer's flexibilization interests meet the increasing needs for flexibility on the supply side.

However, Brose et al. also identify limits to the extension of market-based employment strategies. Since employees are also involved in private exchange relationships within partnership and family, they cannot work under in a high degree of uncertainty over long periods of time (Brose et al. 2004: 296). Similar to the modernized segmentation approach discussed in stream II, the scenario of *dynamic divisions* is therefore the most likely trajectory of development for Brose et al. They argue, however, that this tendency cannot be traced back to structural constraints alone but has to be derived from a contingent negotiation process between profit-oriented organizations and private households. It is expected, that the arrangement of employment stability represented by the 'old' standard employment relationship, will be preserved in a modified form ('negotiated stability'). The reason for this is that it makes contingency management and the use of flexibilization potentials easier for both employers

and employees. Modifications may then consist in the renegotiation or recombination of individual elements of the employment contract, such as in the case of opening clauses or the integration of market- or trust-based elements.

Both exemplary approaches in stream III observe processes of negotiation and experimentation in the labour market. The basis of these conceptions is the problem of double contingency of the employment relationship, the solution of which by the relevant actors is, however, conceptualized quite differently. Both approaches concur that there is currently no sign of either a new isomorphism in companies' employment policies or a stable pattern of the familial division of labour beyond the standard employment relationship. Nevertheless, Brose et al. identify tendencies of dynamic divisions in the labour market while Hinze emphasizes openness and contingency in his trend hypothesis.

While the ideas of actor-centred sociological neo-institutionalism have rarely been applied in German labour market sociology so far (see Krause, 2013 for another exception), it has gained increasing recognition in HRM research and organizational studies (see Walgenbach, 1998). Anglo-American socio-economics, in contrast, has provided several relevant approaches: recent conceptual works by Sallaz (2013), and Osterman (2011; Osterman et al. 2009) as well as Davis' studies on the end of organizational society (2009) and the rise of the platform economy (2016) have to be mentioned here. One might also retrospectively locate Granovetter's famous labour market study (1974) in this stream of actor-centred approaches despite his later ambitions (1985) to overcome the micro-macro-dichotomy. Similar ideas to Anglo-American strands of Neo-Institutionalism can be found in the French tradition of the 'Economics of Conventions' (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Diaz-Bone, 2018).

5. Stream IV: Theories with a focus on social structures

In stream IV, approaches can be found which explain inequality in labour markets with social structures like power relations, hegemonic narratives, normative and institutional orders and

conceive them as dominant or at least as equivalent to economic driving forces. An important contribution to this stream are approaches which try to apply sociological or socio-philosophical 'grand theories' like the ones of Bourdieu, Foucault Giddens and Luhmann to middle-range labour market analyses. Eversberg's post-structuralist field theoretical approach can serve as a German example. It combines Bourdieu's ideas on social fields with Foucault's concept of the dispositive.

Following Bourdieu's 'generative structuralism' (Bourdieu, 1977, 2005), Eversberg conceptualizes labour markets as a 'social field of struggle' within which habitually 'preformed' actors fight for field-specific gains ('forms of capital') (Eversberg, 2014: 97–145) and over the 'rules of the game' using power and ideologies. As a result of these conflicts between antagonistic forces, a labour market dispositive emerges which then structures labour market practice(s). Thus the labour market field is comprised of three levels: 'local labour markets', the political 'field of symbolic conflicts/struggles' and the 'labour market dispositive' (see outlook below for more details).

The multitude of social practices comprising the complex phenomenon 'labour market' can only in a very abstract sense be regarded as an autonomous social field (ibid.: 125). Due to the plural affiliations of their occupants, relative positions within the labour market are to a large extent connected to homologous positions in various other social fields (e.g. economy, politics, media, education) and thus the overall class structure ('social space').

In his empirical analysis, Eversberg describes the new power relations and symbolic order of the labour market with the term 'competence dispositive' which replaces the former 'vocational dispositive' of the Fordist era. The latter was based on educational merits and certificates and was more socially exclusive (particularly towards women and migrants). The new competence dispositive is based on job and labour market performance and on 'dividualization'. Eversberg introduces this term to denote the dismantling and selective use of workers.

A low ‘capitalization’ of an actor in the (local) labour market field intensifies tendencies of dividualization and destroys individuality (Eversberg, 2014: 40–50; 625–655). More socially ‘resourceful’ individuals are able to actively engage in market-oriented, i.e. ‘self-entrepreneurial’, strategies and practices like lifelong learning, competence management, self-marketing and networking. This results in a twofold *(re-)commodification* of labour: on the one hand, the job structures with its performance demands and, on the other, the subjective skills and potentials of the working people (activation/dividualization).

Eversberg’s political sociology considers power relations as well as dominant social discourses as major drivers for the development of labour market structures. Although structural economic changes play a role in triggering the formation of the new dispositive, their ‘processing’ in the context of social practice is of crucial importance. In particular, economic and political elite factions exert significant influence on the new market-oriented dispositive because of their strong position in the field of symbolic conflicts/struggles and their structural power position in the local labour market fields. Due to the strong emphasis on power and symbolic structures, Eversberg’s approach can clearly be located in stream IV with its focus on social structures.

Another contribution to this stream stems from Fligstein, who has been translated and widely discussed in German economic sociology (e.g. Kirchner & Beyer, 2016). His neo-institutionalist field theory (2001; Fligstein & MacAdam, 2012) is partly based on, and in many respects resembles, Bourdieu’s account of fields. The major difference is Fligstein’s strong emphasis on institutional path-dependency and his theoretical conceptualization of processes of social change. He focuses on processes of the emergence, stabilization and transformation of institutional orders.

Similar to Eversberg, Fligstein conceptualizes labour markets as ‘strategic action fields’, in which the actors’ actual and perceived courses of action are to a large extent pre-

structured, both cognitively and structurally, by hegemonic discourses and political regulation. Strategic action fields are hence defined as 'constructed meso-level social order[s]' in which actions of individual or collective actors are coordinated by 'shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the benefits and goals within the field, relations to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field' (Fligstein & MacAdam, 2012: 9). These shared understandings are called *conceptions of control,* which reflect – in Bourdieu's terms – the 'symbolic order' of fields and are created and imposed by the most powerful field actors.

Fligstein and MacAdam (2012) assume that within fields, 'actors with varying resource endowments vie for advantage' (ibid.: 10). They differentiate between 'incumbents', 'challengers' and 'governance units'. *Incumbents* are those individuals or groups that can exercise the greatest power within the field and shape the field structures according to their own ideas and interests. The *challengers*, on the other hand, can hardly influence the field structure (nor do they agree with it) due to their weaker position of power, but they have to submit to it in order to 'survive' in the field. The field-internal *governance units* are there to maintain the existing field order in the interest of the incumbents. They are to be distinguished from external influences on the field order – for example, the state.

Once a conception of control is accepted by the field actors, then the state – a complex conglomerate of political fields which Fligstein refers to as 'policy domains' – comes into play as a regulatory authority to formally institutionalize the labour market rules. These political 'domains, once constructed, reflect the relative power of workers, capitalists, politicians, and state bureaucrats inscribed in the law and the forms of regulation and intervention at the time they were formed' (Fligstein, 2001: 40). Accordingly, labour market institutions primarily benefit the field incumbents. Contrary to mainstream economics, Fligstein does not conceive of this as being either state or market failure. Rather, in a modification of the economic

concept of rent seeking, he considers it to be the basic rule of economic action: ‘Rent seeking occurs in the sense that all groups are oriented towards using their power in policy domains for their own ends. But rent seeking can be more or less venal’ (ibid.: 43). In other words: employers and employees try to design and enforce rules that restrict and shape markets in line with their respective economic interests.

The rules of labour market fields generated in the policy domain prove to be relatively stable over time (path dependency), which is why – as Fligstein argues with reference to comparative political economy – distinct national employment systems have formed in various nation-state capitalisms in the initial stages of industrialization. These field structures can only be destabilized by fundamental changes in the overall balance of power. In such cases, under certain circumstances, an existing institutionalized compromise may be terminated by some of the incumbents if they no longer benefit from it. Fligstein assumes that changes of this disruptive magnitude can only be brought about by severe external shocks like armed conflicts or increased international competition (ibid.: 76) – or a global pandemic for that matter .

Fligstein characterized the post-war German employment system as the prototype of a ‘vocational system’, in which vocational education and social security systems underpin the strong position of industrial work, while strong trade unions and the social democratic party guarantee a relatively stable ‘class compromise’. Nevertheless, in 2001 he raised the question of whether the German model is still able to adapt to crisis tendencies and predicts a change of path towards a more flexible model (ibid.: 119f.).

Beyond the concepts of Eversberg and Fligstein, stream IV exhibits a very rich and yet widely untapped analytical potential for socio-economic labour market theories. In Germany, various authors have developed theoretical and political perspectives in the tradition of Bourdieu. In this strand of thinking, Manske (2016) uses a field-theoretical post-structuralist framework to analyze the transformation of forms of subjectivation and status conflicts in the

cultural and creative industries. Apitzsch et al. (2015) focus on knowledge-intensive service industries and diagnose processes of informalization and precarization. They re-introduce network-concepts and identify an interplay of economic and social driving forces.

One of the major European labour market research groups, led by Gerhard Bosch, Steffen Lehndorff and Jill Rubery, has reinterpreted segmentation theories with ideas from historical institutionalism under the label 'New Segmentation Approach' (Grimshaw et al., 2017). In stressing the centrality of the demand side, it is still rooted in the tradition of segmentation theory. However, particular attention is given to the dynamic interactions of supply and demand. Labour markets are understood as complex social orders which are shaped by a multitude of different, more or less formalized and interdependent, social institutions – from the gender order through the structure of industrial relations to the welfare state. National employment models can be subject to either incremental or disruptive historical change induced by a multitude of both nationally endogenous dynamics (e.g. increasing female employment, demographic changes) and exogenous forces (such as globalization, financialization, or digitalization).

Within this framework, the authors attribute the structure and dynamics of national labour markets to historically evolved and 'sticky' institutional structures (Bosch et al., 2009; Rubery, 2007; Bosch, 2018). For Germany, they diagnose a partial transformation of its traditional model with a path modification in the industry sector and a path change in the service sector, which mainly benefits the powerful players in the world-market oriented industrial sector, while a large part of workers in the less well organized and thus less powerful service segments are increasingly confronted with low wages and insecurity. An opposing position within the historical-institutionalist spectrum is taken by authors like Streeck and Thelen, who

stress tendencies of conversion between various national models of capitalism (and hence labour market structures) due to the liberalization of global trade, financial markets and fiscal crises of states (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Streeck, 2017; Thelen, 2014).

6. Summary

Our article presents and compares sociological analyses of labour market structures in German language and relates them to the international discussion. To that end, existing approaches were identified and analyzed in terms of their short-range hypotheses on empirical trends, middle-range assumptions on driving forces of labour market inequality and long-range theoretical architectures. As a result, we identified four families of theories with respect to their social theoretical foundations. Table 2 provides a short synopsis of our comparison.

	Approach (long-range)	**Driving Forces (middle-range)**	**Empirical Trends (short-range)**
I. Economic Agency	Extended Economic (Neo-)Institutionalism (Nienhüser)	Employers' Interests Labour Supply	Dynamic Divisions Social Risks
	RC-Closure Theory (Giesecke and Groß)	Labour Interests Labour Supply	Dynamic Divisions Ambivalence
II. Economic Structures	Neo-Marxism (Dörre et al.)	Employers' Interests Financial Markets	Commodification Social Risks
	Neo-Keynesianism (Köhler et al.)	Employers' Interests Labour Supply	Dynamic Divisions Social Risks
III. Social Agency	Actor-Centred Sociological Neo-Institutionalism (Hinze**)**	Actors (in Organizations) Mental Models Discourses	Conflicting Interpretations Ambivalence
	RC-Exchange Theory (Brose et al.)	Actors in Households and Organizations	Dynamic Divisions Ambivalence
IV. Social Structures	Post-Structuralist Field Theory (Eversberg)	Hegemonic Capital Factions Power Structures Discourses	Commodification Social Risks
	Neo-Institutionalist Field Theory (Fligstein)	Field Incumbents Discourses Institutional Orders	Dynamic Divisions

Table 2: Synopsis of labour market approaches

Source: own research.

The modernized segmentation approach for example, belongs to stream II with its focus on economic structures. In its middle-range model, the dominant drivers are capital interests and supply-demand relations in the labour market, resulting from economic and social dynamics on the macro level. The precarization approach operates with a neo-marxist framework and highlights different driving forces in its middle-range models (global commodity and financial markets). Ultimately, the respective analyses and explanatory models provide different short-range hypotheses on empirical trends in contemporary labour markets.

Not surprisingly, the long-range theoretical assumptions show a clear affinity to middle-range models with the respective social or economic driving forces. Sociological theories with a focus on economic logics consequently prioritize different determinants within the economic system; theories with a focus on social logics refer primarily to social, political, or cultural driving forces. Interestingly, similar long-range assumptions can – via middle-range models – lead to different hypotheses on empirical trends. So, within the same theoretical stream, we can have commodification as well as dynamic divisions hypotheses.

Our pragmatic focus on German language publications proved to be fruitful. The strong tradition of sociological labour market research in Germany with its multiple controversies allowed for a systematic sorting of theories according to its different social theoretical foundations. For each one of the four streams of thinking, it could be demonstrated that they are also represented in the international discussion. We do hope that our comparative scheme shows the major differences in the architecture of approaches and encourages further development of sociological labour market theories.

Network concepts were pioneers of new economic sociology (Granovetter, White). Surprisingly, they do not play such a prominent role in theorizing labour markets today. Obviously, other middle- and long-range explanations have taken the lead in labour market re-

search. From the perspective of economic sociology, Fourcade (2007) and Beckert (2010) argue that the concept of social fields provides a more sophisticated sociological account to markets than the network idea, since it not only encompasses the relationality/reciprocity of exchange and communication but also institutions and cultural frames (see outlook below).

The ongoing debate on digitalization draws on lines of research from the 1980s and 90s on the influence of computerization on job and employment structures (Altmann et al. 1992, 2018) and seems to confirm older trend diagnoses regarding the polarization between knowledge and service work. In addition, a new wave of flexibilization appears to be emerging. However, prognoses on the impact of the current digital transformation on the labour market are depending on the respective theoretical perspectives. Approaches in streams I and II prioritize economic logics like employers' strategies to reduce transaction costs in recruitment and work. On the other hand, approaches which prioritize social logics in streams III and IV put processes of subjectivation, isomorphism and/or functional differentiation in the foreground. Our scheme can help to understand and sort the different perspectives of digitization research (see Staab, 2019).

So what can be learned from our comparison of labour market theories? First of all, it provides an overview of the state-of the-art. A systematic debate on sociological labour market theories is a necessary and potentially fruitful endeavour. Secondly, the overview reveals that all approaches and perspectives are able to highlight selected aspects of the subject in a particularly plausible way. The middle-range models illustrate different causal relations between the structure of the positional system and economic, social, political and cultural fields of social practice. There can be no right and wrong here, because the various social and economic logics put forward by the different approaches are well substantiated both theoretically and empirically. It is precisely because the distinct positions focus on different causal rela-

tions that the overdetermination of the complex phenomenon of labour markets becomes visible. However, this should not lead to a demand for an eclectic mixture of different approaches since the task of theories is precisely to reduce complexity, to simplify and to emphasize essential driving forces. This is where academic discourse over the better approach has to begin. We can only briefly sketch our own position in the concluding remarks.

7. Outlook: Towards a political sociology of labour markets

The current times of multiple and intensifying crises of global capitalism (economic, social, ecological) demand not only for a political economy but for a *political sociology* that can explain political processes leading to rapidly changing labour market regulation. Field-theoretical approaches of stream IV have distinct advantages for such an endeavour. They go far beyond the common focus on the structure of markets within a given set of institutions and systematically address the interplay of social, political and economic factors involved in the formation and transformation of the institutions themselves.

Such a research agenda could draw on the above-mentioned approaches of Fligstein, Eversberg, Bosch, Rubery and others. In order to elaborate on these theoretical concepts, it will be necessary to integrate new impulses from neighbouring (sub-)disciplines. This applies in particular to new and innovative theories of social inequality (e.g. Tomaskovic-Dewey & Avent-Holt, 2018; Giesecke & Groß, 2012) on the one hand and contemporary economic sociologies of valuation (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Fourcade & Healy, 2007; Stark, 2009; see Beckert & Aspers, 2011) on the other hand.

Following Bourdieu and subsequent interpretations by Eversberg and Fligstein, labour markets can be conceptualized as social fields (see Figure 2) in which individual and collective actors (of capital, labour and the state) fight for the accumulation of scarce resources. The field-specific goals and interests (‘illusio’) as well as the available resources of individual and collective actors – economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital – are both *economically*

pre-structured and *socially shaped*. Conflicts in the labour market field are not only about the terms of exchange itself but also about the rules of the game. The media used in these social struggles are economic and political power as well as symbolic practices (discourse politics).

In short: the crucial difference between socio-economic accounts in streams I and II and field-theoretical perspectives is that the latter are not only concerned with the economic logics and distributive outcomes of the (labour market-)*game* but also with cultural and political influences on the social construction of its *rules and goals* (Eversberg; Fligstein; see Beckert, 2010; Fourcade, 2007; Fourcade et al., 2016). Actors draw resources from labour market fields and various other social fields of practice; and they use them to influence the rules and terms of exchange between capital and labour. In contrast to the actor-centred neo-institutionalisms in stream III, field theories in the Bourdieu-tradition are therefore able to include economic determinants in their explanatory models.

The main achievement of authors like Fligstein and Eversberg is to apply Bourdieu's field theory to the labour market and to open its theoretical architecture towards questions of social change. A political sociology should extend Bourdieu's concept by selectively integrating Fligstein's ideas on the important role of symbolic conflicts and negotiations in various 'arenas' of the political sphere (*policy domains*). Moreover, following Eversberg, Foucault's notion of the *dispositive* should be applied in order to theorize transformations in the symbolic and institutional order of the labour market. Against this background, a model of three interdependent levels is required to understand the complex interactions of economic and social logics:

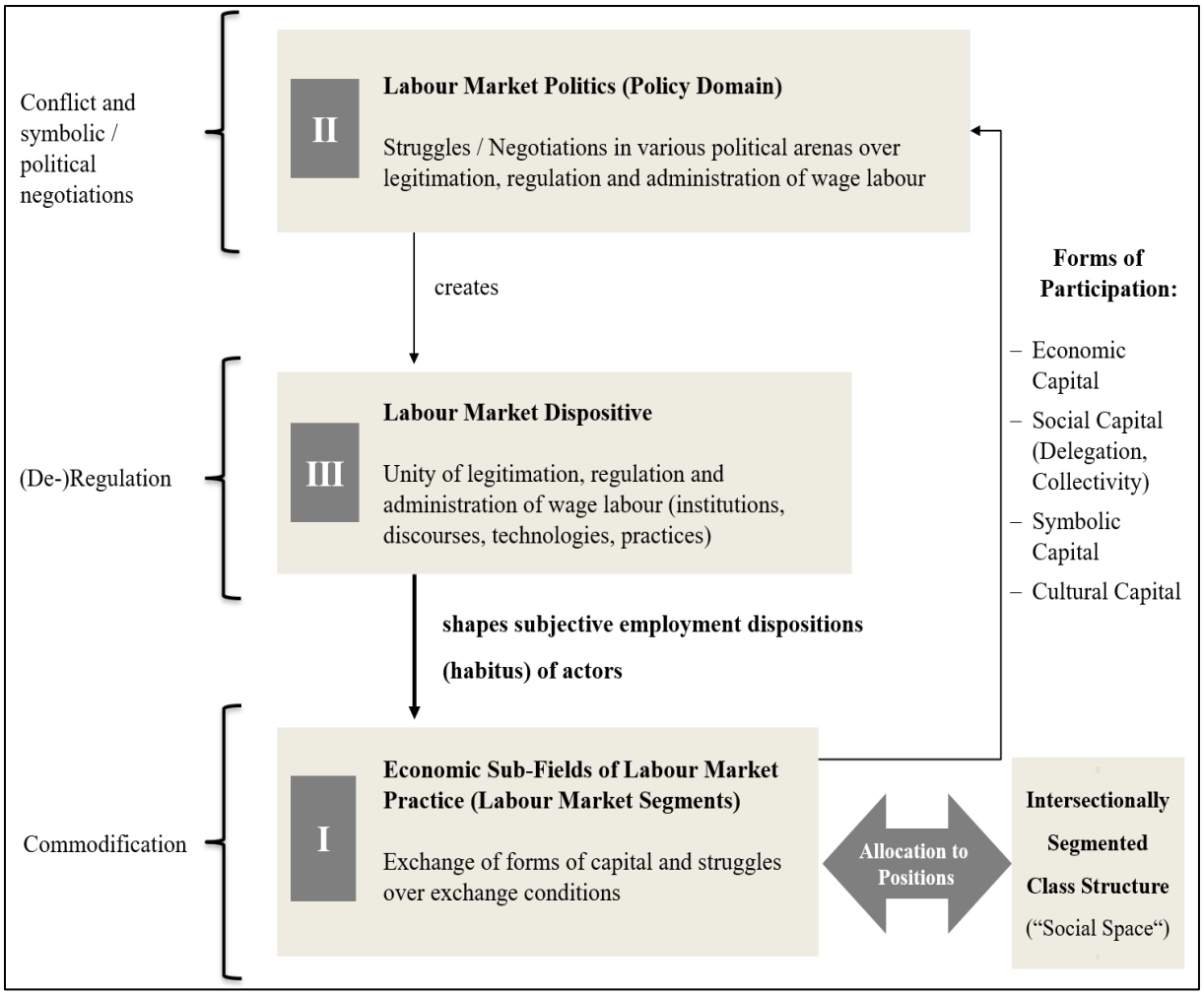

Figure 2: Three levels of the labour market field

Source: own research following Eversberg, 2014.

The *first level* of 'labour market practice' (I) comprises the smallest structuring units of the labour market field which are strongly interrelated with other economic fields (e.g. commodity and financial markets). Labour market 'sub-fields' (each with hierarchical job structures) constitute labour market *segments*, differentiated by region, sector and skills, which are often gendered and ethnically segregated; and within which struggles over different forms of capital and the exchange-ratios between them take place. The structural conditions of each sub-field form the basis of a specific 'illusio', defined by the configuration of capital forms which are embodied in a specific 'work habitus' of its actors. Dominant actors are, with

few exceptions, the employers, since they hold the power to decide on the existence, structure, and occupation of the available positions.

The *second level (II)* of the labour market field constitutes a multitude of political sub-fields or 'policy domains' (Fligstein, 2001), where decisions on the symbolic and institutional organization of labour markets are made. Within the 'policy domain of employment relations', actors aim to legitimize their (conflicting) conceptions of reality which are rooted in their field-specific habitual dispositions and were acquired through previous experiences in the labour market and in other social fields. The participants' goal in these struggles is to establish and legitimize ideologies and regulations which are favorable to their respective interests. The abilities of different individual and collective actors to influence the political process are unequally distributed; while the vast majority has to rely on *delegation* through intermediaries and *collective organization* (individual and collective social capital) to articulate their interests, others are in a more privileged position, which enables them to directly influence or even actively participate in these symbolic and political negotiations and struggles (see Gilens, 2014 for the situation in the U.S.). This applies particularly to actors who are representing powerful corporate interests and are able to mobilize high quantities of economic capital for lobbying, PR, advertisement, and the like. It is therefore safe to assume that corporate interests occupy a privileged position not only in the economic sub-fields but also within the policy domain of employment relations.

The *third level* (III) forms the so-called 'dispositive of labour' and can be described as a relatively coherent unity of legitimation, regulation and administration which represents a particular societies' hegemonic moral economy of labour (Fourcade, 2017: 668). Eversberg defines it as a 'force field' which, to different degrees, shapes work-related ideologies and practices within the working population. It emerges from practices both in the economic sub-fields (I) and in the policy domain(s) (II) as a 'structured structure', and, at the same time, it

serves as a ‘structuring structure’ for the generation of socially ‘required’ forms of labour in the economic sub-fields (Eversberg, 2014: 147–215). The dispositive consists of a multitude of discourses, technologies, institutions, and practices which aim to anchor the ‘illusio of the working society’ – that is, the belief that participation in the everyday positional struggles is worthwhile – within the dispositions of labour market actors. Elements of the dispositive range from public employment services and labour law to public discourses on the role of labour within society. Against genuine post-structuralist concepts, it is important to note that the dispositive *shapes* but does not *determine* labour market practice because of the relative stability of habitual dispositions, interests and power relations.

In line with these presuppositions, the field-theoretical approach offers an integrated praxeological perspective of the relation between class positions, hegemonic ideologies and labour market structures. Contrary to purely economic accounts and in accordance with Karl Polanyi’s famous ‘pendulum-theory’ (Polanyi, 2009), the field-theoretical perspective should therefore be able to identify and explain not only economic but also political and cultural drivers of the ongoing restructuring processes of labour markets.

The era of neoliberalism, globalization, digitalization and deregulation has led to a significant re-commodification of labour markets in the global North (see Bosch et al. 2009). First of all, formerly protected national employment systems were dissolved into global production and value chains, thereby exposing the workforces of the affluent societies to the competition of low-wage countries. Moreover, migration and women’s participation in the labour market has increased competition within local, regional, and national sub-fields of the employment system. Finally, these changes were fueled by struggles within the policy domain of employment relations which resulted in a restructuring of the labour market dispositive with modified heg-

emonic ideologies (self-responsibility and activation) as well as anti-discrimination and diversity policies accompanied by a massive deregulation of employment protection and social security.

As a reaction to these processes of subjective and objective commodification, we are witnessing a swing-back of the Polanyian pendulum. Social movements, parties and governments are questioning the legitimacy of the neoliberal concept of open and 'free' markets and the universalization of meritocratic ideologies. In many countries, the political right and some proponents of the left argue for the protection of national economies and closure of labour markets against migrants. This trend has been reinforced by the economic crises during the corona pandemic.

The outcome of this countermovement against neoliberal ideologies and practices is still open and contingent. A sociology that wants to understand these processes must try – in the tradition of Polanyi and with the instruments of field theory – to understand labour market regulation as a conflictual political process between heterogeneous social groups with differing interests and unevenly distributed symbolic, socio-economic, und political power potentials.

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