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Theme 5: Methodology: Which theory, theories and methods do we need and want in comparative IR? Sub-theme 5A: Paradigms in industrial relations research

Classical theories and new trends within the field of Industrial Relations – Changing pattern of social stratification and the need for new understanding within the theoretical field of industrial relations

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‘Can Industrial Relations be viable if union density is less than 10 percent and if labor unions are popularly viewed as narrow special interests groups that harm competitiveness? In other words, is the decline of organized labor a sword of Democles hanging over the field of industrial relations?’ (Budd 2004: 189)

Taking the above quite from John Budd as a starting point this paper will discuss one of the major challenges to the field of industrial relations, namely the declining importance of the classical collective actors like trade unions and employers association within the field of industrial relations. The paper will discuss how social stratification in late modern societies have changed during the last twenty to thirty years leading to a more individualized society. Individualization are one of the challenges that are confronting the traditional systems of industrial relations in Western societies. Individualizations tends to undermine the traditional collective oriented systems of collective bargaining. Industrial relations research have traditionally focused on collective actors and collective bargaining. The question asked in the paper is, what kind of theories are need in order to understand and conceptualize labour markets and industrial relation in a world that is less and less committed to collective actors and collective actions. How can we understand and conceptualize labour markets in which the traditional major industrial relations actors do not play the same role as they used to play. Industrial relations research need to be able to conceptualize industrial relations as a system that does not primarily consists of collective actors. Industrial relations research need to understand how changing patterns of social stratification change the field of industrial relations.

Selected biography


