

## Understanding trade union cultures

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Guglielmo Meardi\*

## Understanding Trade Union Cultures

### Interests, culture, institutions

The articles by Klemm, Kraetsch and Weyand and by Hürtgen provide refreshing new perspectives on the comparative study of trade unions and industrial relations, all too often locked into naive assumptions that words mean the same things in all national contexts. The neglect of culture by comparative industrial relations studies is in striking contrast with the opposite tendency in the field of International Human Resource Management, which focuses often on different national cultures as explanation of different practices across countries within the same multinational companies (Hofstede 1980). It is appropriate to discuss whether such a gap is theoretically justified. In addition, these two articles are remarkable in questioning the cultural assumptions that researchers themselves have, in their ethnocentric tendency to treat as 'normal' their own situation, and as 'cultural' those that deviate.<sup>1</sup> Both Klemm et al. (2011) and Hürtgen (2011) deeply, if differently, challenge not merely the Central Eastern European (CEE), but also the German perspectives as far from value-neutral.

Comparative industrial relations studies have long preferred rational choice, structuralist, Marxist or institutionalist approaches, with the latter becoming increasingly popular. Rational choice, by focussing on interests, tends to neglect that interests need to be recognised, defined and expressed – which are three particularly complex processes especially in the case of collective interests. Indeed, different unions express quite different interests, such as procedural rights, wage gains, social security, public policies or working conditions improvements. Structuralist approaches, such as Marxist, have often sidelined culture as no more than a 'false consciousness' – indeed, the best comparative study of European trade unions published in the last ten years, which follows a broad Marxist approach, never even mentions culture (Hyman 2001). Institutional approaches, finally, have an explicit antipathy for culture, seeing it as merely an expression, and never an explanation, of institutions. In such a theoretical landscape, the actual meaning behind industrial relations concepts (i.e. 'strikes', 'union member', 'works council') remains often unproblematised, in favour of comparisons of crude indicators 'at a distance'. Culture is then left aside, as a convenient 'emergency' variable, to account for the 'unexplained residua'. As it is just the last tool in

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<sup>1</sup> A famous example is the first major comparative industrial relations book, Dunlop's (1958) *Industrial Relations Systems*, where the more culturally distant national industrial relations systems are from the USA, the less functional they are.

the toolbox, culture is then rarely considered seriously, and it ends up being often misused.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, institutions and culture, if they are often opposed theoretically, share a conceptual characteristic. Their definition is often so far-stretched, that the concepts become too broad to be operationalised as independent explanatory variables. Both refer to systems of relatively stable, foreseeable rules. For instance, the family, religion and education are considered as institutions, but also as cultural forms and ideological constructs; similarly, technology is one aspect of culture for cultural sociologists, but an institutional construction by institutionalists. Sometimes, the theoretical opposition between institutional and cultural explanations is just a matter of wording and (undefined) definitions. Radical, ‘hard-line’ culturalist and institutionalist standpoints are easy to distinguish depending on whether they attribute the prominent role to the sphere of ideas or that of ‘hard’ institutions such as the state. But most research is more difficult to classify, as it leans towards constructivist approaches where both ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ processes, combined, construct reality (Berger/Luckmann 1967), and where culture is institutionally framed, but institutions are culturally reproduced. In this sense, the two articles published in this issue, despite paying a strong attention to culture, are not culturalist, but sociological (of culture). Accordingly, culture is seen as “historisch etabliert” (Klemm et al. 2011: 301), or else framed in a structural, power-dense “transnationale Raum der normative Auseinandersetzung” (Hürtgen 2011: 326). It is not merely about ideas, but also about processes (Klemm et al.) and praxis (Hürtgen). It is more than a dependent variable (something to be explained), but falls short of a true independent variable.

A comment piece in *Industrielle Beziehungen* is not the right place to address sociological debates on culture and institutions, but it is an excellent opportunity to shed light on these concepts in a more inductive way, by looking at the intriguing example of cross-national trade union communication. The following two sections, therefore, will deal respectively with the idea of trade union cultures, and then with the specific case of relations between unions from Western and Central-Eastern Europe.

### **Trade union cultures between nation, world and workplaces**

The seminal work by E.P. Thompson (1963) on the ‘English’ working class has shown in the most compelling way how working class organisation is not merely the product of socio-economic features, but also the long and complex outcome of cultural practices, and in particular, of *national* cultural practices: E.P. Thompson wrote of an *English*, not *British* working class, whereby the culturally-constructed national community is more important than the ‘hard’ institution of the state. It also shows that culture is

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<sup>2</sup> As one example of this frequent tendency, I can mention the response of a researcher at a recent conference, when asked about the reasons of the large pay gap between men and women in Ireland. After some hesitation, his eyes lit up and he answered: ‘it is the Catholic culture’. In fact, Catholic countries in Europe tend to have a *smaller* gender pay gap, as a side effect of their large gender employment gap – but it did not matter, everybody in the conference room was slightly disappointed that there was nothing better than a cultural explanation, but nobody challenged its actual content.

not at all in contradiction with structural concepts like class – in fact, it clarifies and strengthens them.

Trade unions have grown in such cultures, and the articles by Klemm et al. (2011) and Hürtgen (2011) detect very interesting ‘boundaries of meaning’ in different locations. Klemm et al. highlight in particular how co-determination is taken for granted in Germany, but seen with suspicion by trade unions in CEE, and as a result, the meaning of solidarity itself changes. German unionists expect their counterparts to the East to be solidaristic by playing the same game of representation and collective bargaining. The ‘poorer’ Central Eastern European unionists, however, see solidarity, rather than as a principle for representation, as a redistributive principle, and therefore expect the Germans to accept a certain redistribution of chances, i.e. jobs, from the West to the East. Hürtgen’s analysis is more dynamic across time, and points at how, with European integration, the reciprocal representations of Germans and Central Eastern Europeans have changed, from a sort of German ‘hegemony’ to ‘competition’. Regardless of the different explanations, both articles make a very strong case for the idea that trade union discourse cannot be understood without reference to local cultures.

Culture-sceptical scholars will be hard to convince, though. Klemm et al. themselves admit that there is more than culture at play. They do it first, as highlighted by Hürtgen, when they stress the ‘understanding of the actual position in Europe’ (Klemm et al. 2011: 306), where the ‘actual position’ has a materialist dimension. But even more so, I would add, when they combine, as explanations of different union perspectives, ‘the differing negotiation/action contexts [Handlungskontexte] and solidarity traditions’. Thereby, they put at the same level a cultural explanation (solidarity traditions) and a very materialist one (the negotiation contexts), and two case studies are not enough to test which explanation is the most valid one, that is, whether different solidarity traditions really have the effect that Klemm et al. attribute to it, or, rather, are the mere discursive manifestation of the real explanatory variable, that is the institutional and economic negotiation contexts. I can only auspicate that future research will be able to test the explanatory power of these two, very different perspectives, by operationalising them in a discrete manner, but that will be very difficult. Selecting case studies where the negotiation contexts are constant, but the traditions different, and vice versa, is extremely difficult, although there have been some interesting attempts.<sup>3</sup>

One criticism that Hürtgen raises on Klemm et al.’s work, is that it focuses on ‘national’ cultures, neglecting more complex ‘multi-level’ cultures and in particular the transnational level. In fact, while Hürtgen’s multi-level approach is very welcome, it is not actually precise to label Klemm et al.’s work as methodologically nationalist. The authors do refer to a ‘relatively unitary national framework’ (Klemm et al. 2011: 303), but they argue in a rather accidental way. Their comparison is not between nations, but between historically constructed regions. The research covers European Works Council’s representatives from three countries (Germany, Czech Republic and Hun-

<sup>3</sup> For instance the comparison of ‘militant’ and ‘moderate’ unions by Bacon and Blyton (2002), who, however, limit their research to one national context – confirming that the nation is not necessarily the most important level of trade union culture definitions.

gary), but it does not undertake any comparison between Czech Republic and Hungary,<sup>4</sup> limiting itself to contrasting Western Europe (or at least that part of it with strong employee representation rights at company level) and a post-communist, nationally undifferentiated CEE. Had they ventured in their research to Poland, they would have found a completely different dimension for the concept of solidarity, due in particular to the historic role of the Solidarity trade union – in fact, if the concept of solidarity appears as a ‘devalued concept’ to Klemm et al.’s (2011: 305) Czech interviewees, in Poland it is actually, as an opposition concept, even more popular than in Germany.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, from the focus on the distinction between the two sides of the former Iron Curtain it derives, logically, that similar differences may be found, within Germany, between old and new Bundesländer (Hürtgen reminds of the ‘betrayals’ during the 2003 IG Metall strike). Klemm et al. appear therefore implicitly aware of both supranational (the Eastern bloc) aggregation and intra-national variation. Their real argument is rather more specific than a reference to ‘national culture’: the existence of a major cultural divide between Western and Central Eastern Europe – and I will return to it in the next section.

There is indeed no doubt that union culture varies along more axes than just nationality. On the specific point of solidarity, the best sociological insights on worker solidarity focus on everyday shared experiences, which are likely to be at a much smaller scale than the nation (Zoll 1992). In my own comparison of Polish and Italian unionists in the 1990s, I had found that on some aspects the kind of factory and of local community was more important for union identities, than national variables, and that the ideological divide between different Italian unions was often larger than the one between Italian and Polish trade unionists (Meardi 2000). Later on, I have even argued that national union models do not even exist, but just some sorts of ‘styles’ so, which do not always follow national boundaries (Meardi 2012a), and that in many regards economic sectors are more important than nations in explaining industrial relations differences (Bechter et al. 2011).

Yet, given that ‘methodological nationalism’ has recently become a kind of ‘easy target’ in the social sciences, and that Hürtgen already provides, in her paper, a tight critique of it, I prefer to act here as a devil’s advocate, by reminding that if nations are not the beginning and the end of culture, they are not dead or irrelevant either, as hyper-globalisation theorists suggest. Law, political traditions and language are particularly important factors that operate mostly at the national level. Despite the strong dualisation and company differentiations trends mentioned by Hürtgen, at least at the procedural level union practices and possibilities are still most strongly determined by national frameworks: there is hardly any labour law at lower or higher levels than the nation state. Politically, state traditions might not be as influential as they were twenty

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<sup>4</sup> To anybody ignoring the cultural differences between Czech Republic and Hungary, I recommend the enjoyable reading of ‘The Good Soldier Švejk’ by Jaroslav Hašek (1923).

<sup>5</sup> Despite a certain crisis, the concept of solidarity did not disappear from Poland after 1989, and it is still very powerful. It is rooted in a broader Catholic/peasant ethics (Tischner 1981), and still in 2005, Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński won the elections by calling for a ‘solidaristic Poland’.

years ago (Crouch 1993), but still unions relate to the political sphere in different ways country by country, which strongly affects their discourse. But from a cultural perspective, it is striking that Klemm et al. do not mention what can be considered as the most important national cultural determinant: language. In fact, it is regrettable that none of the two articles specifies in what languages the interviews and the analysis took place.<sup>6</sup> As Hyman (2004: 273) put it, one reason of ethnocentrism in industrial relations is that ‘industrial relations scholars speak different languages’: language should be paid careful attention in comparative studies. National differences have been stressed also by a recent important book on ‘social Europe’ by Barbier (2008), who sees them as rooted in different languages. When Klemm et al. (2011: 310) write of ‘Übersetzungsbedürftigkeit solidarischen Handelns’, they can be taken by the letter. Translation is a very sensitive, high-risk operation in comparative studies, as well as in the operation of European Works Councils themselves (Miller et al. 2000).

### **An East-West ‘clash of civilisations’?**

Both Klemm et al. and Hürtgen choose an excellent field for the study of trade union differences in international co-operation: the East-West divide within the EU. The border between old and new member states constitutes an unprecedented test of international trade unionism, given the geographic proximity, the strong economic integration but also the very different political traditions and the enduring socio-economic gap. This gap was already visible in the 1990s (Meardi 2000), and on the eve of EU enlargement raised well-grounded fears of ungovernability. The experience of the EU integration, even if it has not confirmed any disaster foreseen by Euro-sceptics, and despite relative economic success in many new member states, has not narrowed down the social divide with western Europe, especially in the field of industrial relations (Meardi 2012b).

At the level of multinational companies, while early studies had been cautiously optimistic on East-West co-operation within EWCs (e.g. Voss 2007), more recent and in-depth research such as the one in this issue of *Industrielle Beziehungen* has pointed at enduring difficulties. Frictions between employee representatives within European Works Councils have been explained in different ways and are therefore an interesting test for opposing theories. The two poles are interest-based explanations and culture-based ones, but I will argue that other mid-ways are practicable.

Bernaciak (2010, 2011), in her analysis of Polish-German union relations within three important EWCs (Volkswagen, MAN and General Motors) resolutely asserts the viability of interest-based explanations. Such approach follows the perspective of Hancké (2000) in early works on the EWCs, pointing at the fact that EWC representatives are above all national representatives. Bernaciak is less pessimistic than Hancké, insofar as she detects conditions under which both Eastern and Western EWC members can have an interest in co-operation: notably, when Germans can offer Poles information and organisational resources in exchange of a commitment not to under-

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<sup>6</sup> From the quality of the quotes and from the international composition of the research teams, however, it can be presumed that they were conducted in the respondent’s language, and that the analysis was on both original and German translation.

cut German locations. These conditions, however, are fragile, and whenever German unions have other ways (i.e. political ones) to protect their locations, or whenever the Poles do not need organisational help, co-operation will not occur. Bernaciak's work is sophisticated, as it goes beyond simple structuralist frameworks merely distinguishing economic sectors, by pointing at a number of company-level factors that explain intra-sector variation in international union co-operation. The importance of company-level contingent conditions had also been detected by my own studies of automotive multinationals in Poland, Hungary and Slovenia (Meardi 2012b), but Bernaciak goes beyond it through a specific focus on interests.

The question that Bernaciak does not answer is where trade union interests come from. She limits herself to assuming that unions are always interested in maximising jobs for the workplace they represent. The assumption is reasonable, but essentially false: trade union interests are not given, but vary (jobs, wages, rights, politics etc). This is where constructivist approaches step in. In Bernaciak's case studies the fact that Polish-German union co-operation functions relatively well at Volkswagen, and quite badly at MAN, might be due also to the fact that the Polish Volkswagen workforce is young and largely trained in Germany or by Germans, while that of MAN is older and has not had much direct contacts with German colleagues. The different socialisation processes may have framed the interests of the two company unions differently: joint interests with the Germans at Volkswagen, competing interests at MAN.

The constructivist approach may help in highlighting the socialisation process. One example of this approach is provided by Greer and Hauptmeier (2008) on the case of European and Global Works Councils in Western Europe and USA, pointing at the roles of 'political entrepreneurs'. A similar, bottom-up application on East-West union co-operation comes from Kahancová's (2010) study of a large multinational in France, Belgium, Poland and Hungary. Kahancová detects, like Klemm et al. and Hürtgen, strong diffidence between Eastern and Western EWC members, but she finds that it is the Eastern trade unionists to have the strongest commitment to co-operation, thereby challenging rational-choice approaches like Bernaciak's. However, unlike Klemm et al., Kahancová does not see a strong East-West divide in industrial relations as an explanation. In fact, in her company case study industrial relations are adversarial in France and Hungary, but co-operative in Belgium and Poland: it is therefore not economic geography that matters, but the beliefs and experiences of union reps at the plant level.

Constructivist approaches risk being merely descriptive, though. The contributions in this issue of *Industrielle Beziehungen* propose that a more specific focus on certain cultural dimensions may have more explanatory power. Yet what is this specific East-West cultural divide, and is it really that powerful to threaten a sort of 'clash of civilisations' within EWC? For Klemm et al., the main factor is the different understanding of union representation and co-determination in CEE. This is an interesting finding because within Western Europe representation (and in particular its everyday practice) had been considered as a unifying common feature between different national trade unions, despite of all institutional differences (Dufour/Hege 2002). But for Klemm et al. there is a major gap between the tradition of co-determination in Ger-

many and the low-trust industrial relations of CEE. As a result, solidarity is impossible: the Eastern representatives fear that their German counterparts hide, behind the rhetoric of solidarity, the protection of their interests. This is a finding of strong relevance, because similar diffidence can be found also at the confederation level, such as in East-West discussions within the European Trade Union Confederation on the freedom of movement of labour or of services. A similar gap in representation traditions had been detected by Tholen(2007), who commented with disappointment: “the rejection of works councils in the Czech Republic is naive and stems from the ignorance of the actual mode of operation of the German dual model” (Tholen 2007: 59). Klemm et al.’s article, instead, is careful to avoid assuming that it is the Eastern reps to be ‘ignorant’, rather than the Germans: such an assumption would be, in their words, a form of ‘Nostrifizierung’ according to a presumed ‘Entwicklungsmodell’. It also avoids any easy reference to essentialist cultural or psychological ‘communist legacies’, as it is often done in management studies: those legacies might have been important in the 1990s (Crowley/Ost 2001), but can hardly be the main factor more than twenty years after the fall of communism.

Hürtgen goes even further on this point, by criticising how western tendencies to treat CEE as ‘developing countries’ are not just ethnocentric, but also plainly false, as they ignore the major industrial upgrading that has occurred in CEE. In my own research (Meardi 2012b), I had detected the cultural effects of such upgrade, for instance, in the Polish plant of a large German multinational, where Polish workers proudly pointed at the fact of having achieved a better performance than any German plant on the dimension ‘Ordnung und Sauberkeit’ – a dimension with strong symbolic relevance in German-Polish relations (think of the colloquial term ‘polnische Wirtschaft’).

For Hürtgen, the implication of such upgrade is the end of a ‘German hegemony’ and the beginning of relations marked by competition. The image of a ‘German nostalgia’ for a previous time of uncontested authority is convincing, and to some extent can be generalised to other western countries. Even in a country like Italy, not used to be considered as an economic model, in the late 1990s unionists displayed a strong nostalgia for times when they were more protected from international competition (Meardi 2000). However, I am not sure that the strong idea of ‘hegemony’ reflects the perception of the German socio-economic model in CEE in the 1990s accurately. The idea of ‘social market economy’ was not just unpopular with CEE politicians, who were looking at Chicago rather than Bonn, but it did not have such strong influence even on trade unions. In Poland, Ost and Weinstein (1998) detected a strong pro-privatisation, pro-managerial attitude among trade unionists, who accepted that capitalism would be in the interest of workers. Moreover, on the cultural and political level, the relations with Germany were actually tenser in the 1990s than they are now: let us remember the strong Czech resistance (including by trade unions) against the sale of Škoda to Volkswagen in 1990, and the strong resentment among workers from CEE against the restrictive attitudes to immigration among German unions.

Hürtgen’s second point on an increase in competitive tensions is more convincing. On this point it can be underlined that it is not only workers from CEE who ‘undercut’ their German counterparts, given that also reverse relocations occur. In



fact, the position of German trade unions is ambivalent and their self-identity would require deeper analysis. If on one side they may feel that low wages in CEE provide unfair competition, within western Europe the evolution of Unit Labour Costs since the introduction of the Euro shows that if a country has engaged in wage dumping, this is Germany, where trade unions have not ensured that wages kept pace with productivity, causing major competitiveness problems to Southern European countries. Extending Hürtgen's focus on competition, it can be argued that the recent frequent anti-German feelings among unions from Southern Europe (reportedly visible at the ETUC Congress in Athens in May 2011) combine both of the reasons of discontent that Klemm et al. had detected: the resentment for German excessive influence, and the resentment for non-co-operation on wages.

All these developments make the issue of the meaning of transnational union solidarity all the more cogent. Just like in any workers' association, competition among workers is actually the *reason* for union organisation, not its denial. The point is how that process of competition avoidance that occurs socially in the workplace can be reproduced at the international level.

If there are such strong macro-economic influences, it could be questioned how far cultural misunderstandings can be overcome simply by improving mutual information. When Fiat took over two Polish factories in the early 1990s, it provided intensive expert cultural training on Poland for its Italian managers to be sent there. The Italian managers completed the training very successfully, demonstrating sophisticated knowledge of all possible cultural misunderstandings. But once they arrived to Poland, they immediately reverted to those stereotypes that had been taught to abandon: in other words, if social relations remain very uneven, mere information remains at a superficial level and does not change the actual attitudes.

There are however reasons to be less pessimistic on cultural understanding between trade unions from the East and the West. Some studies show that when the social encounters between the two sides are deeper than mere two-days EWC meetings with the mediation of interpreters, better mutual understanding and better co-operation develop. Gajewska (2009) has detected a number of occurrences at different levels. Hardy and Fitzgerald (2010) have highlighted good co-operation between Polish and British trade unions on migration, an issue which is apparently sensitive, but also allows closer contacts and knowledge that it may be the case between far away plants of multinational companies. A natural extension of a culture-sociological approach is therefore a focus on the communication and networking practices that can allow overcoming obstacles in international trade union practices: a transnational network approach, focusing on socialisation rather than structure (as the EWC) might be a way forward.

## Conclusion

There is a world of difference between culturalism and taking culture seriously. Rejecting culturalism as an essentialist, anti-sociological explanatory approach has pushed industrial relations towards the entire neglect of culture. These two articles fill the gap by taking culture seriously, adding interpretative insights in the best of sociological tradition: as Weber had taught, interpretative sociology is not taking cultures at face

value as given, but understanding their different rationalities.<sup>7</sup> The articles by Klemm et al. and Hürtgen do not simply testify a complex East-West divide in union identities and cultures, which must be taken into consideration in order to understand different trade union discourses. They also engage in interpretation and explanation, looking at industrial relation practice and multi-level political and economic developments, indicating promising avenues for further research.

This is also relevant at the policy level. Barbier (2008), when pointing at language as main component of national cultural differences within Europe, pointed at the Erasmus program for student as one instrumental policy to foster a ‘social Europe’, although with the major limitation of being mainly restricted to middle-class youths. Perhaps what is needed for the European Works Councils and European trade union co-operation is an Erasmus program for trade unionists.

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<sup>7</sup> In the famous example of religion (Weber 1905), the relation between Calvinism and the spirit of capitalism is neither direct nor essentialist, because there is nothing in Calvinist theology that would inherently support capitalism, but rather indirect, through a psychological byproduct, and is complementary, rather than alternative, to materialist explanations.

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