Employee interests in multinational companies: European Works Councils and the problem of articulation

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Research project

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Agenda

1. Research and Literature: Merits and Challenges
3. Methods
4. Empirical Results
Research and Literature

- Wide range of empirical studies: valuable insights into structures and practices of EWCs
- Focus: EWC; other institutions as a context or resources for the EWC
- Problems:
  a. Studies tend to **overestimate the importance** of EWCs
  b. IR as **unitary collective actors** with shared goals and strategies
  c. The **articulation** – defined as the interplay between different institutions and levels of representation – is neglected and/or not analyzed systematically
- Our approach: Focus on multi-level systems of ER in MNC; interplay actors and institutions – impetus by restructuring?

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Multi-Level System of Interest Representation

- **Global**
  - WWC
  - EWC
  - BLER
  - company repr. bodies / union coordination
  - local representation bodies, union delegates

- **Europe**
  - GUFs
  - Europ. Trade Union Feds

- **National**
  - National Trade Unions

- **Local / plant**
  - (Local) Trade Unions
Levels of interest representation: “action fields” (Haipeter/Hertwig 2013)

- Theory of Structuration
  - Interpretation scheme (dimension of signification)
  - Expectations and justifications (dimension of legitimation)
  - Specific set of resources (dimension of domination)

- Theory of Strategic Action Fields
  - Strategic action fields are a socially constructed
  - Social skills of actors: framing interpretation schemes and interests, coalition building, mobilization

- Concept of Articulation
  - Organisational coordination in associations (Crouch)
  - (Partial) fixation of meaning, interests and identities (Laclau/Mouffe)
  - Coordination of interests between and integration on levels of IR
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Actors & Institutions - Structuration Theory

Structure

Signification (meaning)

Legitimation (Norms, expectations)

Domination (authoritative and allocative resources)

EWC culture, identity, routines, symbols, visions, common strategies ...

EWC agreement, budgets, meetings, chairperson/staff ...

Communicate

Sanction

Exert power

Action
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Patterns of Articulation

- Dominated Articulation
- Comprehensive Articulation
- Disarticulation
- International Integration
Methods

- 10 company case studies: episodes of restructuring
  - 4 companies: metal sector
  - 3 companies: chemical sector
  - 3 companies: service sector
- HQ in Europe: 4 in Germany, 6 outside Germany
- Semi-structured interviews: 55 WWC and EWC members, employee representatives national company level + local level, trade unionists
  - Each MNC: 3 European countries
- Analysis of documents (press releases, company reports, agreements)
Patterns of Articulation: Case Studies

- **Dominated Articulation**
  - Synthetic
  - Postal Service

- **Disarticulation**
  - Rubber
  - Wholesale

- **Comprehensive Articulation**
  - Chemicals
  - Steel

- **International Integration**
  - Power
  - Med Tech

Integration vs. Coordination
Empirical Findings

Variety of articulation patterns

- Factors accounting for a higher degree of articulation:
  - Dedicated actors: social skills, commitment
  - Interpretation schemes: added value of transnational interest representation
  - Resources: transfer of power resources
  - Restructuring: can foster articulation, but not necessarily
  - Management attitudes: willingness to cooperate, management acknowledges transnational interest representation
  - MNC characteristics: country of origin, concentration workforce
Empirical Findings

Articulation and output:

- High degree of articulation increases the scope of action of employee representatives at national and local level

- Output: not confined to transnational agreements, also: access to information and flow of information

- Dominated articulation vs. comprehensive articulation:
  - Dominated articulation: depends on the good-will of the dominant group
Conclusion & Outlook

- Systematic consideration of the interdependence of and interactions between a multiplicity of institutions and actors operating at different levels
- Better understanding and explanation of the structures and practices of employee representation in MNCs
- In-depth analysis of articulation in different countries (national and local level)
  - within MNCs
  - across different MNCs
Thanks for your attention!

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