

Contributed Article¹

Industrial Relations and the World Economic Crisis in the Context of Globalisation: From Europe to the World

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(translated from the Italian by Joseph Halevi **)

Within the Crisis of Globalisation

It would be difficult to maintain that prevailing theories of industrial relations have been able to comprehend the tendencies that emerged in the recent world economic crisis (Sapelli 2008). State of the art discussions and scientific predictions circulating in Europe shortly before the crisis were dominated by functionalist theories.² According to these approaches, the European monetary union and the liberalisation process should have brought about, through a mechanical institutional and social adjustment, a convergence in the behaviour of individual actors and especially the behaviour of the collective bodies through which interest groups are organised. These views, which failed entirely to perceive the approaching crisis, affirmed the universal validity of so-called neo-corporatist concentration.

As it is well known, these theories did not account for the harsh reality of the actual mechanisms of deregulation at the general societal level, reflected both in the history of industrial relations in the United States, and more recently in the diffusion of the neoliberal revolution. In Anglo-American capitalism, the latter has manifested itself both at the societal level and at the level of the business enterprise. A comparative analysis of the literature of the 1990s highlights very different sets of reaction models. An early, bold analysis of employer organisation responses was that of Peter Sheldon (1998; see also Bamber et al 2004). The main conclusions that can be derived from this literature will now be synthesised (Crouch and Traxler eds 1995; Van Ruyssevelt and Visser eds 1996; Ferner and Hyman eds 1998).

In France, the main actors in the process of resistance and of defending country-specific institutions were seen to be the government and entrepreneurs who favoured the regulation of the enterprise bargaining process. Following the French neo-mercantilist tradition, the national impact of European

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processes was, as a consequence, rather weak. The French model also prevailed in the case of Belgium where agreement between government and trade unions to pursue a strong centralisation of the industrial relations system is now being subjected to serious crises. What is interesting in these cases is the extraordinary degree of institutional 'stickiness' and resistance relative to the pressures for deregulation. By contrast, the Dutch case is different since the prevailing sentiment favours partnership between government and business, mutually engaged in a moderate transition towards a much more decentralised and flexible system (see, for example, Visser 1998).

Spain — following the practice of previous Socialist administrations — is characterised by the strong role of government which pushed for institutionalisation at all levels of the industrial relations system, while actively pursuing an equally strong policy aimed at increasing labour market flexibility. From this perspective, Spain is perhaps the country where privatisation and liberalisation processes had the most significant consequences for industrial relations. The root causes of the situation in Spain are to be traced to the unravelling of the corporatist mechanisms of the Franco regime, which have not been replaced by a stable industrial relations process in either central or local bargaining. Further evidence comes from Portugal which, since the end of the Salazar regime, has been going through an experience comparable to the Spanish one.

From the perspective adopted so far, it should not come as a surprise that Scandinavia is the other area where the liberalisation pressure is quite strong. Here the crisis of pro-labour governments is extremely deep. It has opened the road to the hegemony of business among the social actors guiding the dynamics of change in industrial relations. Entrepreneurs have been leading the system towards a wide-ranging deregulation and decentralisation, potentially heralding an epoch-making change in the existing system of relations. But in this case too, the transformation has occurred by means of systematic institutionalisation and with great attention paid to the dynamics of industrial relations. In this regard, see the exemplary essay by Kjellberg (1998). The aim is still to control worker organisations, albeit in different and less rigid forms than those attempted in the past.

My thesis about the auto-referentiality, within specific countries, of employer and union responses, is confirmed also by the Scandinavian case. There, the system of industrial relations was in crisis for years. Globalisation fell like a hammer on the pro-labour inspired mechanisms of social aggregation which were already in crisis internally. Yet, the very same mechanisms generated reactive and creative responses to crisis, almost a model of resistance *à la* Polanyi (1944). They are a new version of the social actions which were identified also in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century when, as elsewhere, the advent of market capitalism elicited reactions from hitherto feudal and agricultural-mercantile societies (Sapelli 1986, 1997). Obviously today the problem is different and I will come back to this question further below in the essay. Just the same, it is astonishing to observe the widespread and pervasive nature of this process of auto-referentiality — although it acquires different forms, since

the social organisms from which the phenomenon arises differ from each other. Naturally, these models of 'reactive resistance' are to be compared with that of the United Kingdom. In this country, government policies have imposed a deep de-socialisation of labour relations and of the industrial relations system. Government action is thereby leading the controversial process of their industrial relations liberalisation.

Italy, for its part, generates among foreign (and often Italian) observers a sense of bamboozlement. Usually the country is ranked among those where the transformation process is deemed to be led by a partnership between employers and the national unions, on the basis of the Pact signed in 1993 (following a logic that began much earlier known as the 'Lodo Scotti'³). The Pact advocates a form of 'institutionalisation from above' of industrial relations, albeit coupled with a strong emphasis on enterprise bargaining. It aims at a pervasive, decentralised system of industrial relations from below. In the Italian case, therefore, there is a strong influence coming from the European processes but the final outcome is uncertain because of the weak social basis of this neocorporatist pact.

If we now concentrate the analysis on Europe as a whole, there emerges, from a meticulous reading of the relevant literature, a more complex picture. To begin with, we must state clearly that Italy partakes in several destinies, expressing more than in any other 'country' its deep social heterogeneity and its marked political, economic and, obviously, juridical de-institutionalisation. The process of auto-referential resistance has a common feature in all European countries. In it, there co-exist segments of older industrial relations with segments of new ones. Such co-existence can be found also in the legal system through older acquired norms and the subsequent stratifications. We come up with a sort of 'European epiphany of industrial relations', whose traits are still uncertain and undefined.

For instance there is, on one hand, a group of countries where, undoubtedly, both the practices and the theories of neocorporatism — hence their significant levels of institutionalisation — weigh heavily on the industrial relations system (Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium). Nevertheless, the very same countries exhibit in a strong manner both the prevailing role of employers and processes of contractual decentralisation. Undoubtedly, Northern Italy falls within this class of countries.

On the other hand there are countries, like the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, where the system of regulation in labour relations is quite lax. It is weakly managed at the corporatist level and decentralisation is rather strong: these characteristics also mark industrial relations in Southern Italy. And what about countries like Greece — the Northern part of it, Portugal, and the South of Spain where in the maze of informal jobs and small to very small firms, labour regulation is virtually absent? This group represents a case where regulation never happened — a fact that has led to the unchecked domination of employers within the social system. The poorest areas of the Mezzogiorno — the South of Italy — the most de-institutionalised, partake the same features and destiny of this group of countries.

At any rate, Italy is quite far from countries like Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Here, the 'resistance' mounted by the previous corporatist system is very strong but it is coming apart under the rise to prevalence of employers' social action. However as I have already pointed out, this fact is not denting trade unions' membership and the highly institutionalised nature of the system. On these topics, see the excellent essays by Visser (1996) and Crouch (1998). Swinging between centralisation cum neocorporatism on one hand, and decentralisation cum deregulation on the other hand, is the distinctive feature of changes underway at present, all the resistance to them notwithstanding. The social systems and their components (firms and trade unions) are reacting to these changes by looking more to the past than to the future. This is true of any vital organism after all, but vital organisms contain the very germs of their eventual decay.

Between Entrepreneurs and the State

It is important to stress that the 1990s unveiled with increasing clarity a social and political phenomenon which, in Europe began to appear already in the 1980s, namely the deregulation and liberalisation activities of business entrepreneurs. These activities too were part of society's active reaction to globalisation and to the macrorigidities created by the European unification of markets. Yet the reaction itself unfolded in deep contrast to the orientations of labour unions. For this reason, the activity of business entrepreneurs has tried to establish control over the state apparatus which, however, is also subject to pressure from labour unions, mostly via the mediating role of political personnel.

Thus the new 'neocorporatism' in the making, that some authors attempt to describe with outdated theories, is full of unknowns. Colin Crouch understood the issue, but when he spoke about the difficult middle path between 'laissez faire' and '*corporatism continuum*', he did not draw all the necessary conclusions. These would have required a redefinition of the second pole of an alternative, unfolding historically and in the social division of labour. For this outstanding scholar, the possible alternative resides in a mixture between macro and micro regulation to prevent [system, labour market and social] segmentation: ultimately, he sees the stability of the system as depending on the centralisation of the industrial relations system. Whenever centralisation fails or turns out to be too costly, subsidiarity intervenes but always in a policy-making context where, according European Union's practice, the last word belongs to national governments. Crouch (1995) grasped the risk emanating from this model: the danger of falling into new forms of protectionism. Yet he said nothing about the possible outcomes of such protectionism, nor did he express himself on the implications for growth or for industrial relations.

To my mind, the reason for the intense neoliberal activism by business also in the area of industrial relations lies, historically, in the greater participatory role of business associations brought about by market liberalisation. There is a body of more or less consolidated theories that attempt to explain the formation and development of business associations (Zan 1992; Ferrante and Zan 1994).⁴ All these theories fluctuate between two analytical poles.

The first group of theories sees the push towards business associations as arising from the rational calculations derived from the evaluation of the benefits obtainable from such a move. Obviously the hypothesis based on rational calculation takes into account the institutional framework in which the formation of a syndicate may or may not occur. If, for instance, the same benefits can be obtained without forming an association, the potential for free riders will be so strong as to cast doubts upon the lifespan and even the very formation of the association. This is the case with benefits which are legislated on the basis of the principle *erga omnes* (as for the wage workers and the trade unions), as opposed to those legislation which apply the benefits only to the members of the association.

The second polar group of theories explains the formation of associations first and foremost as a process of growth and, gradually, of institutionalisation of collective identities. These find in the organised form an instrument of perpetuation and reproduction of both their identity and of the representation of their interests. Indeed, this is the crucial point. The form of association through which employers seek representation involves the delegation of a rather wide variety of material and psychic resources to those entrusted to act as representatives of employer interests and identities. It is possible to do so only by identifying the interests of which one is the bearer and the interpreter. Such identification implies self-recognition on several grounds. Firstly, it requires employer spokespeople to see themselves as the bearers and interpreters of certain identifiable interests, and secondly to identify as engaged social actors who aspire to morally realise themselves by attaining those interests. But to do that it is necessary to construct oneself as a moral person, to identify oneself as a bearer of the identities to be represented, seen as specific ones which, in order to be recognised require the formation of associations. For the above reasons I place myself within the last group of theories, albeit with all the caution and openness to criticism which is required for academic research, as both a cognitive and a moral attitude, as I tried to demonstrate in my works on *Intersind*⁵ (Sapelli 1996), and especially in that on *Federmeccanica* (Sapelli 1990).⁶

My thesis is that the growth of liberalisation and so called 'globalisation' have strongly increased the motivational tensions experienced by entrepreneurs and have greatly strengthened their expectations regarding an expanded role in the definition of citizenship systems. This is shown also at the intellectual level by the rediscovery, in recent years, of the concept of civil society.⁷ Results obtained by the studies of employer organisations by Sheldon and Thornthwaite (1999) seem to confirm my theoretical research. Although their focus is the Australian context, they offer, because of their conceptual framework, wider interpretative results of very great interest. The authors analyse the behaviour of business associations within the framework of strategic choice and strategic decision-making, by considering the tight fabric of the factors determining associative behaviour. Their research goes from the impact of macro-economic and macro-institutional factors and of the structures and processes of industrial relations to the strategies and typologies of trade unions' membership. Then they analyse the strategies of the business associations with which the labour unions at the

centre of the study interact. In this context, associative strategy stems, on one hand from the mediation between this set of determinants and the historical roots⁸ of the system of industrial relations, and on the other the objectives set by the business association on which its membership and leadership are based (Sheldon and Thornthwaite 1999; see also Sheldon and In Jun 2006).

The strategy of the business association emerges for what it is in a historical sense: a voluntary and relational process which adapts itself to actual conditions precisely because it sets itself objectives shared in its social action. This action overcomes what too often appears at a first sight, internal divisions and organisational weaknesses which do not, however, call into question the attainment of longer term objectives. Hence we are very far from the model of corporatism that at the beginning of the 1990s was still being suggested in the wake of a complex work by Lijphart (1984). In that work, the author sought to establish the links between his conception of corporatism and consensual or associative democracies, whereas pluralism was seen as the domain of majority-based democracies (Lijphart and Crepaz 1991). Let us leave aside the fact that consensual democracy and corporatism are quite separate and different concepts which, contrary to the cited studies, do not appear together (Keman and Pennings 2005). Rather, the central problem consists in that all the forms of so-called corporatism belonged to economies which were still closed to the full extension of the market. In these economies, the political classes exercised such a strong role in the allocation of resources which would be dismantled in the 1990s as if it were a true external diseconomy. Pluralism and conflict, as they now emerge, appear as biblical monsters for those who are not accustomed to them.

The world and European picture is now becoming more complicated because of the current economic depression, of stagnation with a low propensity to invest, of the fall in raw material prices⁹ of price deflation also in the innovating sectors, of the feeble tendency of domestic demand to grow, and of structural unemployment. The contradictions of European industrial relations to day emanate from these factors.

Trade Unions and Neo-Communitarianism

European Trade Unions have made a very clear choice inspired by a vision of continuity rather than of innovation. This choice belongs to a tendency which manifests itself also in continents very different from Europe, such as Latin America. Here in the countries with the strongest trade unionist tradition, we witness the deepest differences and most contrasting dynamics of trade unions' activities. This is due to the role which the political classes still play in the system of industrial relations, a role that has been on the decline in Europe (Astudillo 1999). For this reason, it is necessary to proceed on the basis of comparative studies more intensively than has occurred so far.¹¹ In Europe, as in South America, labour unions aim at strengthening statist neoprotectionist tendencies as well as strengthening the resistance against globalisation. As a consequence, unions try to promote at the industrial relations level policies consistent with the above tendencies rather than with the

orientations favoured by business associations and by the micro-molecular entrepreneurs who support all-out deregulation. Labour unions have historically implemented their strategy in a well tested manner. Whenever their power of representation was strong and the fragmentation of that representation was limited, unions attempted, often with success, to trade social peace and moderation in contractual and wage bargaining, for a co-management of the processes regulating industrial restructuring and the other changes underway, resulting in 'neocorporatist pacts'. The mechanism known as 'supply side corporatism' arose from the process outlined above.

It is therefore necessary to examine carefully what has happened in a world subjected to the growth of capitalist value-creation in order to grasp the nature of social and industrial relations in countries that once defined the process, and in those that later attained the industrialisation stage and, with it, the construction of a system of negotiation rules. The interpretative model based on the once-leading industrial countries is no longer productive in a heuristic sense. What happens in India, Australia and Korea, can be of great help to understand what happens or what will happen in Europe. If I was to be asked about the most significant event in industrial relations at the end of the last century, I would point to the causes that led in the 1990s to the unexpected strike wave in South Korea, a country once taken as the paradigm of authoritarian conflict-less industrialisation (See for example Tongzen 1998; Benson and Zhu 2008). South Korea is an exemplary case of the explosive effects of the newly conquered rights to strike and to organise labour unions, conquests that stemmed from the need to open up the labour market and make it more flexible under the pressure of competition and of the struggles for civil and social rights. This process has been amalgamated with an enterprise bargaining reality which, while undergoing deep modifications, has also provided the main criteria for the social action which, after 1987, unfolded in radically new forms. The context within which the negotiations of the 1987–1990 period took place determined the nature of both the strikes and the settlement agreements reached. The lesson from the Korean social struggles is important methodologically as well as normatively. It relates to the conviction that market liberalisation can go hand in hand with a rise in the level of social conflict. From this perspective, the institutional orientation of the social parties, unions and business, and of the government/state, can be a crucial determining factor as can be the pre-existing bargaining procedures and practices (Bognanno, Budd and Lee 1994; Jeong 2007).

A further corroboration of the above observations comes from the Indonesian case. Until the end of the 1980s, Indonesia was dominated by a dictatorial military-family structured regime born out of the *coup d'état* of 1965 (when hundreds of thousands of members of the strongest Communist Party in Asia were eliminated). During the 1990s, Indonesia too was shaken by a strike wave. The strikes, unpredictably, disrupted the traditional negotiating mechanisms, existing for decades after what had been left standing by the dictatorship of the 1957 rules which attempted to set up a national and enterprise bargaining system. Contrary to the South Korean case, in Indonesia economic liberalisation policies did not give rise to strikes. These have been

controlled by a set of rules with some degree of legitimisation. In Indonesia the conflict developed against the dictatorship and against the lack of recognition by the State of the freedom of organising unions and of the freedom to strike. In this way, an unbridgeable crack opened up in a mechanism of social regulation founded as much on terror as on a patron-client set of relations of a dyadic and vertical kind (Hess 1997; Ford 2007).

Korea and Indonesia constitute very different cases. Yet they have in common a distinctive and unique aspect arising from the traits of the relation between the State and the economy in Asia even in the context of market liberalisation. Whereas in Europe, North America, and Australia, globalisation has turned upside-down the relations between the nation, the State and the economy by placing the first two at the service of the third, in Asia, by contrast, the economy is still at service of the power of the nation, despite all the American efforts to change the situation (see for example Bobrow 1999). I am convinced that the roots of Asian neo-mercantilism are in the capacity of the Chinese dictatorship to keep operating as a mixed economic system (being both centralised and relatively open to the market). The Chinese capacity to keep functioning as a mixed system enables all of Asia to resist against the blows of liberalisation, since the United States and the United Kingdom cannot proceed towards a neoliberal control of nations which are still a rampart against communism and that the advance of the market may weaken and undo faster than its own consolidation. This is different from what occurred in Europe after the collapse of Soviet Stalinism, which has made it possible to operate in a neoliberal fashion without any significant geostrategic problems.

This situation has an important distinctive consequence for the system, or rather for the emerging bedrock of the procedures and practices of labour negotiations and bargaining in industry and services in Asia. In the countries of Asia, the State and the historical mechanisms of industrial relations cannot operate in what I described as a 'Polanyi-type manner' (Polanyi 1944). That is, they cannot operate through complex mechanisms of defence against the rise of new forms of social relations which (because of the stratification of supranational rights and the role of supranational representative systems) destroy the uniqueness of the legal framework, and with it the specificity of the nation State as the realm of the people's capacity to act.¹¹

The existence of such defence mechanisms leads to cleavages between economic, social, and political classes regarding the acceptance or rejection of the social, political and economic consequences of globalisation. In Asia, however, industrial relations mechanisms either do not exist or, if they do, they have a young history and may be fragile. In Asia, the State is devoid of any institutionalisation because it is based on a neo-patrimonial conception and practice. Thus, in Asia globalisation cannot spread its wings for the reasons already mentioned, while the existing pressures call into question the form of power that emanates from that very specific State construct. The social consequences are therefore quite different from those caused by the impact of international neoliberalism on the countries having a European cultural basis.

To understand my point, let us look at what happens in Australia, a country of the Pacific area but sharing the European destiny. Elegant studies of the consequences of the advent of the mechanisms of globalisation and liberalisation on the fabric of industry and services and the related industrial relations have shown that, in the majority of cases, the mechanisms of negotiation and of conflict regulation are not innovative. Rather, they are largely structurally dependent upon the Fordist past of Australia's industrial relations, while the country has been fast moving onto a post-Fordist path (see for example Macdonald and Burgess 1998). Moreover I was surprised to learn that, both in the USA and in Australia, the forms of unions' resistance to neoliberalism have led to the re-emergence, as the enactment of anti-neoliberal social links, of networks of mobilisation and support between labour unions and local communities, which were thought to be by now defunct. According to these studies, neo-local communitarianism could replace communitarianism based on industrial firms, as the latter is deemed to be in an irreversible crisis (Thorntwaite 1997; Sadler 2004; Tattersall 2008). According to the scholars working in this field, these new communitarian relations will prevail in the future, especially since unions' veto power is fading and managerial tactics of disaggregating the mechanisms of industrial relations have been quite successful.

From Europe to the World: a novel type of trade unionism and a new institutional set up of the capital-labour relation are in the making between the State and the market. This is happening with the renewed role of the 'community'.

Notes

1. To mark his joining the Journal's Advisory Board, the Editors invited Professor Sapelli, a distinguished economic historian, to contribute a paper on a non-refereed basis. The Editors wish to thank Dr Joseph Halevi, Department of Political Economy, University of Sydney, for his generous work in translating the article. We emphasise that the Editors carried out further editorial and stylistic changes to Dr Halevi's translation, and accept full responsibility for any errors and omissions that have resulted from this further work. The views in the article do not necessarily represent those of Dr Halevi.
2. Many sources can be cited. The most emblematic is the special issue of the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 30(4) 1992, edited by Howard Gospel and tellingly titled 'The single European market and industrial-relations'.
3. Editors' comment — The Social Pact of 1983, based on a negotiated incomes policy.
4. These two publications are recommended for their bibliographies and conceptual structure.
5. Intersind was the a public sector employers' association, dissolved in 1998.
6. *Federmeccanica* is the Federation of Italian Metal Industry Employers.
7. For a comprehensive example, see the most significant work on the topic: Cohen and Arato (1992).
8. Translator — Italian 'storicità'.

9. Translator and editors — this was written in May 2009.
10. An excellent exception is provided by the works of Torcuato S. Di Tella, from among which I wish to cite a contribution with a marked comparative character and with important implications for the themes discussed in this essay: *Los partidos políticos. Teoria y analisis comparativo*, A-Z Editora, Buenos Aires, 1998.
11. On the use of this Hintzian concept see: G.Sapelli 1997.

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