Book Review

Carola Frege & John Kelly (eds.): Varieties of Unionism. Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Globalizing Economy

Reviewed by Catharina Schmalstieg

Strategies of union renewal and the politico-institutional circumstances under which unions operate are analyzed in a comparative cross-country study. Five countries were chosen to provide instances of each of the three Varieties of Capitalism as introduced by Hall & Soskice (2001). Adapting the concept of economical actors for labour research and integrating results of international labour research, approaches of unions in Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States are at the centre of this study on the Varieties of Unionism (VOU) (188f). The goal is to explain differences in the application of strategies as well as differences in their outcome. The choice of strategy and its varying degrees of success are attributed to three factors: “employer and state strategy, IR institutions, and union identities in each national setting” (42). Accordingly, labour unions face different opportunity structures that shape their decision-making and the strategies they choose and develop. At the centre of Labour Revitalization Studies (LRS), as presented by Lowell Turner, stands the idea that unions, though effected by globalization and neoliberal politics, still have the ability and power to forge their own strategies, a power often unused. This actor-centred research perspective feeds on a notion of unions as indispensable actors in civil society, claiming that unions “must take responsibility for both internal reforms and innovative external strategies necessary to promote revitalization in today’s extraordinarily difficult context” (5). This distinguishes
the LRS favourably not only from the (self-)pitying lament about moribund unions, but also from the neoliberal story book world in which unions are portrayed as atavisms from social systems long gone. At the same time the actor-focus launches the LRS ahead of contemporary labour research.

The research accounts for strategies of union revitalization in all of the countries in the sample. Strategies vary in quantity and quality, so do the experiences and the results. The variation is accounted to “path dependency”, and Kelly and Frege conclude: “[T]he same strategy is likely to produce different results in different countries” (182). In order to compare strategies and their results Martin Behrens, Kerstin Hamann, and Richard Hurd conceptualize revitalization as “(re)gaining power” (20) along the following four dimensions: membership (20f), economic power, especially bargaining power (21f), political power, i.e. influence and co-operation on all levels of the political arena, and institutional structure, i.e. reform and restructuring of the union itself (22f). The study identifies six key strategies of revitalization (32f). Edmund Heery and Lee Adler show that strategies of organizing, externally as well as internally, are on the agenda in all countries (45). But, due to the institutional context and rather weak labour laws, the importance of organizing is much bigger in the UK and the US than in countries where unions are much more institutionalized (63). Regarding coalition-building, compared to organizing a more secondary labour strategy, Frege, Heery, and Turner come to similar conclusions (137). Although having a bad name for paralyzing members, labour-management partnership is still found to get good results. Provided that three conditions are met, Michael Fichter and Ian Greer label this strategy as revitalizing if partnerships are “institutionally embedded, … integrated into a proactive union strategy, and … pursue a broader social agenda rather than focusing on narrow union-specific issues alone” (72).

Political action (Hamann & Kelly), international solidarity (Nathan Lillie / Miguel Martínez Lucio), and reform of union structures (Behrens, Hurd & Jeremy Waddington) play different roles. Internal reforms are of great importance for steering toward revitalization in all countries, even if the outcome is not always positive (117). The most frequently used strategies in all countries are political action, organizational reform, and social partnership, leaving coalition-building and international solidarity the least used but not
necessarily least effective (184). Regarding the dispute on militant versus co-operative strategies, two results are particularly interesting: Especially good results for revitalization were accomplished by the Spanish labour movement, combining social pacts and political strikes in their repertoire they could increase their political influence continuously. (187) In contrast, although having the biggest mix in strategies, the US labour movement did not succeed in reversing its decline.

The authors acknowledge diverging tendencies within the countries, and yet the perspective of country comparison bears the danger of levelling one country’s opposing political currents for the sake of achieving comparability. Nevertheless, to compare outcomes and not only strategies, and to provide the proper instruments to do so, raises the standards for future research on labour unions. Consistently, “to produce research and analysis that points towards policy implications for unions and their allies” (5), is the purpose sought after by the authors of the VOU. They prove the need for unions to broaden their political agenda, advise unions to choose their goals and actions strategically, and recommend strengthening “[the union’s] involvement in broader ideological debates about contemporary global capitalism … challenging the hegemony of neo-liberal values with alternative visions for the achievement of social justice and greater democracy” (194).

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