

Looking Outwards, Looking Inwards: Industrial Relations Research between Politics and Organizations

Report on the 2nd Spring School of the German Industrial Relations Association (GIRA)

In the last week of March 2013, the Freie Universität Berlin – in cooperation with Hertie School of Governance and the Industrial and Labor Relations School of Cornell University – hosted the 2nd Spring School of the German Industrial Relations Association (GIRA)¹. Based on a competitive application process, seventeen PhD students from several European countries as well as from the United States were accepted not only to participate, but also to present and discuss their dissertation projects. In order to provide additional training in theory and methods for doctoral students and young researchers, professors from industrial relations, business studies, economics, sociology, political science, and labor law gave lectures and led discussions, focusing in particular on multi-disciplinary and international issues.

After a short round of introductions, *Michael Fichter* (FU Berlin) opened the Spring School with his presentation on *Implementing International Labor Standards*. Arguing that the matter of standard-setting in terms of employment relationships is becoming more and more a global question, Fichter introduced and evaluated three different forms of transnational voluntary regulation concerning employment relations. He concluded that these instruments lead to a general improvement in employment relations on a global scale, but nevertheless have considerable limitations in terms of enforcement. The first day was completed with a session about *How to Get Published*. *Gregory Jackson* and *Jörg Sydow* (both FU Berlin) provided the participants with important insights into publishing in leading international journals. Beyond the practical issues involved, the session also dealt with more fundamental questions such as “what is interesting research?”

The second day started with a methods section, in which *Gregory Jackson* (FU Berlin) spoke about the *Promise and Pitfalls of Cross-National Comparison*. Beside general advice on what methodological issues are pertinent when making cross-national comparisons, Jackson presented different approaches and pointed out their strengths and weaknesses. In her presentation on *The Politics of Crossborder Labour Rights*, *Anke Hassel* (Hertie School of Governance) shed light on the emergence of Global Labor Governance by comparing traditional labor regulation with new forms and discussing the (changing) roles of the actors involved in this process. A role-playing game enlivened the session allowing each of the participants to act out a role (NGO-activist, unionist, manager, local or moderator) and to defend his or her position in answering such

¹ Funding for the Spring School was generously provided by the GIRA, by the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, and the Center for International Cooperation of the Freie Universität Berlin.

questions as “What are universal labor standards?”, “What is the role of the ILO?” and “What is the responsibility of a global firm?”

A strong emphasis on methodology characterized the opening session on the third day of the Spring School. In his presentation on *Bridging Law and Social Sciences in the Study of Labor*, Alex Colvin (Cornell University) illustrated the relationship between the disciplines of law and social sciences, offering different examples from his own research to demonstrate an integrative approach toward linking both of these disciplines. Claudia Schubert (FU Berlin) followed in the next session with a presentation on the *Right of Collective Bargaining and Action in a Multi-level Legal System*. Schubert highlighted the complications in enforcing labor rights resulting from multi-level legislation. Using three different examples (ban on strikes by public officials in Germany, the Viking case, and the Palacio de la Villa case), she demonstrated the interaction of legal guarantees. The third day was concluded with a second session on scientific publishing in which Carola Frege (LSE), Sarosh Kuruvilla and Alex Colvin (both Cornell University), and Gregory Jackson and Jörg Sydow (both FU Berlin), reported on their experiences as editors of various journals in the field of industrial relations research. This background provided a starting point for a wide-ranging discussion of how to decide on which journal to approach with a particular manuscript.

The motto of the fourth day was *Doing Field Research on MNCs and Global Value Chains*. Using a mixture of theoretical and methodical questions, Sarosh Kuruvilla (Cornell University) argued that there is a need for new theoretical lenses to cope with the fundamental changes in terms of employment relations resulting from globalization. In this vein, he introduced the theoretical potential of Global Production Networks as well as Global Value Chains and illustrated their influences on HR-practices with diverse examples. In a second part Kuruvilla offered insights into the first results of a study about the transformation of labor markets for lawyers in the US, UK and India. Kuruvilla argued that the legal profession is being fundamentally changed by offshoring and the increasing fragmentation of activities due to the recent economic crisis. In the evening a roundtable-discussion with two practitioners was arranged at the Hertie School of Governance. Miriam Saage-Maafß from the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) discussed global working conditions – especially in the apparel industry – and her organization’s campaigns and law suits against multinationals. Philipp Schwertmann, formerly with the Berlin office of the Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), used the example of a large construction project in Berlin to provide some insights into his organization’s struggle against human trafficking and precarious work.

The week concluded with a final session on *Studying Work in Temporary Organizations*. By combining studies of labor, organizations, networks and fields, Jörg Sydow (FU Berlin) offered an over-arching perspective on industrial relations. Based on a presentation of an empirical study (TV production), Sydow illustrated the implications of project work for the employment relationship. As a supplement to this part of the session, the participants also discussed a paper by Susan Christophson (Cornell University), who had to cancel her participation on short notice. Using the example of “Hol-

lywood” in the crisis the paper dealt with the critical role of the labor force in project-based industries.

All in all, the Spring-School provided participants with an opportunity to “look inwards” and view different (new) issues through the lens of their own discipline as well as to move beyond the borders of their “own” discipline and “look outwards” by viewing familiar issues through the lens of other disciplines.

Berlin-Dahlem, April 2013

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