

# **Varieties of Workplace Union Autonomy: Making Space between Institutional Prescription and Organizational Constraint**

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# **Actors & Institutions: Understanding Diversity**

- Common pressures but diversity of results
- Our thesis: actors create space, it is not simply an institutional artefact
- Research question: in workplaces increasingly subject to transnational pressures, how do local unions create, act upon their institutional space ?
- Our core hypothesis: independent of institutional context, this requires strong union capacity

# Local Union Rule-takers v. Rule-shapers

- **Rule-takers:** operate primarily inside the bounds of inscriptional prescription; local leaders take institutionally bounded rules as given, seek to apply them and operate within them; they believe in the logic of rules, define themselves in relation to those rules, and do not question them.
- **Rule-shapers:** play with the rules, either to change or maintain them, seeking to take into account prevailing circumstances in order to discriminate between the rules and to prioritize them in a different manner or to introduce new ways and forums, opening up new spaces, often informal, that are not institutionally prescribed.

# **Connecting Institutional Domains**

**Non-Boundary-Spanning:** union works with institutionally prescribed boundaries for collective representation

**Boundary-Spanning:** union seeks to work beyond institutionally prescribed boundaries, connecting domains.

<b>Union Autonomy viz-à-viz Institutional Prescription</b>			<b>Connecting Institutional Domains</b>			
			<b>Non Boundary-Spanning</b>		<b>Boundary-Spanning (Multi-level, multi-domain)</b>	
			-- --	-	+	++
<b>Institutional Rule-Making</b>	<b>Rule-takers</b>	-- --				
		-				
	<b>Rule-shapers</b>	+				
		++				

# Possible Explanations

1. **Institutional** = reflection of union rights and diversity of representative mechanisms
2. **Organizational** = nature of MNC: centralization, inter-site competition, short- or long-term strategies
3. **Contingent** = Situation of site: product market niche & type of competition, value-chain integration, location autonomy, competitive capabilities
4. **Management**: degree of autonomy & MNC strategies, stability of managers, HR sophistication, IR strategies, flexibility objectives
5. **Union Capacity**: representative and strategic capacity

# 1. Institutional Configurations

- **Union Rights: weak v. wrong**
- **Diversity of representative mechanisms: thin v. thick**

Institutional Configurations		Diversity of representative mechanisms	
		Thin	Thick
Union Rights	Weak	ex. US	ex. Germany
	Strong	ex. Canada	ex. France, Belgium

## 5. Union Capacity

**Representative:** the nature of the links between the representatives and the represented; the dynamic process of constructing collective identities, whereby leaders prioritize some interests over others, construct collective cohesion or community and mobilize; this dynamic can change over time (for example, intergenerationally or in relation to diversity)

**Strategic:** capabilities involve interpreting, expressing and acting upon current situations; three dimensions : a) framing; b) arbitrating between actions, space and time; and c) learning and knowledge transfer within unions

# Methodology

- **Cross-national workplace union comparisons:** observation over time (where possible), diversity of actors (where possible), bi-national team present at all interviews, extensive face-to-face
- **Eight manufacturing sites:** three different MNCs (4 sites, 3 sites, 1 site); 5 different institutional contexts (France, Germany, Belgium, Canada and US)

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			-- --	-	+	++
<b>Institutional Rule-Making</b>	<b>Rule-takers</b>	-- --	Can-A-T1 Can-A-T3	Can-A-T2 US-A-T1	US-A-T2	
		-	Fr-B-T1 Fr-B-T3	CanBT1 Bel-A-T1	Fr-A-T1 Fr-A-T2	
	<b>Rule-shapers</b>	+	Fr-B-T2	Ger-A-T1	Bel-A-T2 US-B-T1	Can-B-T2
		++				Ger-A-T2 US-B-T2

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	Rule-shapers	+	Fr-B-T2	Ger-A-T1	Bel-A-T2 US-B-T1	Can-B-T2
		++				Ger-A-T2 US-B-T2

# Ex. 1: Rule-taking non boundary-spanners

(high degree of stability over time: Can-A & US-A)

- 1. Institutional:** variations in union rights (weak & strong) but thin on representative mechanisms
- 2. Organizational:** centralization, increasing inter-site competition, short-termism when contracts not assured
- 3. Site contingencies:** vulnerability to contract fluctuations but production differentiation
- 4. Management:** aggressive local management subject to MNC directives
- 5. Union Capacity:** Can-A = weak in both representative & strategic; US-A = strong representative but weak strategic (with signs of movement)

Note: US-A in early phases of boundary-spanning but various factors could push it back, as in Can-A

## Ex. 2: Rule-taking boundary-spanners

(high degree of stability over time = Fr-A)

1. **Institutional:** strong union rights, thick diversity
2. **Organizational:** centralization, increasing inter-site competition, short-termism when contracts not assured
3. **Site contingencies:** privileged access to national markets means lack of location autonomy
4. **Management:** high turnover and resulting lack of strategic coherence & autonomy
5. **Union Capacity:** good representative capacity (but “clientalist” and monopolist (crushing other unions); occupies the space in ways that block other developments); good strategic capacity (framing, arbitrating) but weak in terms of learning

# Ex. 3: From rule-taking non boundary-spanners to rule-shaping boundary spanners

(change over time = trajectories of Bel-A & Can-B)

1. **Institutional:** strong union rights, thin & thick diversity
2. **Organizational:** centralization, increasing inter-site competition, short-termism when contracts not assured
3. **Site contingencies:** privileged access to national markets means certain lack of location autonomy (less the case for Bel-A)
4. **Management:** high turnover and resulting lack of strategic coherence & autonomy
5. **Union Capacity:** strong representative capacity in each site ( “clientalist” in Bel-A; good strategic capacity (framing, arbitrating and learning)

## Ex. 4: Defending rule-shaping (Ger-A, US-B)

- 1. Institutional:** weak union rights and thick and thin diversity
- 2. Organizational:** increasing centralization (bean-counting), inter-site competition and whip-sawing,
- 3. Site contingencies:** historic sites with strong local capabilities that ensure a degree of security, despite threats
- 4. Management:** Managements increasingly under pressure from corporate but local management rely on relationship with union to manage the site
- 5. Union Capacity:** strongly representative and very strategic

# Analytical Observations I: locating autonomy

- Institutional factors are interesting, structuring some possibilities, but do not appear determinant = too much variety.
- Organizational factors are increasingly similar, exerting huge pressures but are not discriminating in our sites because they are omnipresent.
- Site contingencies are important variables, especially in opening up or shutting down options, permitting stability or displacement in strategic options.
- Local management strategies open or close space, but appear to have reduced space under MNC pressures
- Union capacity appears to be a critical variable, particularly in terms of the combined effects of representative and strategic capabilities.

# **Analytical Observations II: understanding movement**

- In the presence of favourable and unfavourable circumstances, possibility of strategic stability
- Some local unions pursue displacement in an effort to be rule shapers, but return to be rule takers (because of some combination of contingency and lack of capacity)
- Some local unions seek to displace their strategies, but this is difficult to pursue in the absence of both key union capabilities.
- The possibility of strategic displacement relies not on institutional configurations but rather on union capacity