

# REPRESENTATION REGIMES and ACTORS' RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHANGES

looking at Germany and France

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# REPRESENTATION REGIMES and ACTORS' RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHANGES

## THE EXAMPLE OF FRANCE AND GERMANY

- We take the example of Germany and France to illustrate institutional and actors' responses to changing environments.
- Beyond structural differences, they share a series of characteristics

## REPRESENTATION REGIMES and ACTORS' RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHANGES

- Four common characteristics :
  - dualism (union+elected delegates)
  - multi level representation
  - strong institutionalisation
  - solid societal status of trade unions

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- Both systems adapt to changing contexts
  - France : since the Auroux laws (1982) successive adjustments (restructurations, negotiation and representation rights, mandating, vocational training...)
  - Germany : transplantation to the East of the Western system (1990) ; reform of workplace representation (2001, group level, vocational training, feminisation of representation)

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- Reinforced architectures
  - At plant level, delegates are well equipped to handle a large range of issues: wages, health/security, technological and economical changes
  - Possibility to intervene at different levels in complex enterprise structures (from workplace to corporate, national or international)

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- At industry level : negotiation (wages, working time, vocational training, representation rights...) with possible interferences on economical issues (competitiveness, industrial policies).
- At central level : requests from governments to social dialogue/consensus (employment, pensions, health, vocational training)
- Also on European level

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### **To sum up**

- In both countries, complex interrelated representative structures, constructed in the long-term.
- These multi-levels systems are not subject to frontal attacks, neither from political actors nor from employers.
- In the economical and financial crisis, these systems can be used as social shock absorbers.

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### **Yet weakened foundations**

- Loss of membership, although unequal between both countries ; selective non-unionisation.
- Less virtuous articulations between the different levels, especially industry/plant levels. Declining coverage of industrial agreements in Germany, optimal but often formal coverage in France.
- Loss of influence on social compromise: pensions, labor market reforms (Hartz laws).



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### **On the whole**

- Weaker integration in the social and political systems (distanciation from political parties).
- Difficulties to renew social alliances.
- Specialisation of unions in their core business in industrial relations.
- Strong institutionalisation makes the weakening less perceptible for unions and other players.

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### **A possible positive interpretation of union power in France and Germany**

- Both countries offer examples of solid, expert, flexible union teams, accustomed to different ways of dealing with the employer (bargaining, participation, conflict) and using the complex institutional system.
- They are able to deal with rough concessions (redundancies, wage freeze, subcontracting, competition between workplaces...).

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- These teams are comfy with the dual system of representation. So are most employers.
- They are the strongest parts of the unions, which consider their practices as the norm for representation.
- Institutionalisation facilitates the reproduction of representation structures both at workplace and industry levels.
- But is it equivalent to forceful union representation ?

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### **A more sceptical interpretation of the same situation**

- At plant level, difficulty to renew representation teams. Growing gap between leaderships teams and social characteristics in the constituencies.
- Workplace representatives make fewer requests to central unions.
- Signs of autonomisation of each level of representation.

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- Decentralisation : loss of normative strength of the Industry-level ; pressure from single enterprises to negotiate their own compromises.
  - In Germany, opening clauses and debate on a legal minimum wage.
  - In France, new regulation of « principe de faveur ».
- Unionised workplaces do no longer set the mark for non unionised plants and workforces. Widening gap between different categories of employees (precarisation, subcontracting, wage differences, working poor).
- These different signs suggest a transformation of unions' social status.

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## **Strategic options**

- Spontaneous tendency in both countries to modelize the practices of ancient strongholds.
- Temptation to sophisticate the institutional rights (at national and international level).
- Interpretation of unions difficulties as external constraints (globalisation, neoliberalism...).
- Uncertain tentatives to extend beyond traditional membership : « organising the non-organised ».

## REPRESENTATION REGIMES and ACTORS' RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHANGES

### Research questions

- Are the unions in these countries going to specialize in their industrial relations roles ?
  - *our hypothesis : the estrangement from the political parties leaves the unions in a vacuum as regards their societal role. It can be risky to not adress explicitly the underlying evolution.*

## REPRESENTATION REGIMES and ACTORS' RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHANGES

- Is the institutional sophistication an adequate answer to the challenges the unions are facing (representing the workforce as it is today)?
  - *our hypothesis : the sophistication, useful for strong representatives, is not central for union renewal. The challenge for them is less inside the core-forces as to the new (majoritory) non-unionised workforce. It is mostly an internal challenge for the unions.*