Parallels and intersections: Theory, institutional experimentation and change in labour/economic geography and industrial relations

TOD D. RUTHERFORD DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, SYRACUSE, NEW YORK, USA, 13244-1020
“the engagement between labour geographers and industrial relations practitioners is still an engagement largely waiting to happen” (Herod et al, 2003, 189).

Increasing parallels in debates and some engagement between economic/labour geographers and industrial relations

Both have quantitative streams but research is mostly qualitative

Most important shared characteristic is the analytic importance given to institutions.
Institutions as David (1994) ‘carriers of history’ and setting formal an informal ‘rules of the game that give effect to the employment relation’ (Sisson, 2007)

Critical in underwriting path dependencies

Economic geographers –institutions and the ‘new regionalism’ (1990s)

Labour geographers agency over institutions?

Recent emphasis on networks and institutions in shaping labour’s ‘constrained’ agency
Growing challenges to both the ‘centrality accorded institutions’ and path dependency (Streeck, 2009; Boccaro and Howell, 2011)

e.g. critiques of Varieties of Capitalism (V of C)

institutions as fluid, rather than fixed and subject alternatively to institutional entrepreneurs, experimentation, power and conflict (Campbell, 2004; Peck and Theodore, 2007; Kristensen and Morgan, 2014; Regini, 2014)

Both a ‘scaling up’ and ‘scaling down’ of explanations
Local scale experimentation Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2005; Kristensen and Morgan, 2012; Herrigel, 2014)

MNC investment/power as ‘translated’ by inward local investment regimes (Phelps and Woods, 2006; Almond et al 2014)

Union-management relations and innovation (Rutherford and Holmes, 2007)
In wake of 2008-09 crisis also a ‘scaling up’ increasing cross-national commonalities due to neo-liberal restructuring. (Boccaro and Howell, 2011; Wilkinson and Wood, 2012; Regini, 2014).

Not convergence but a common neoliberal trajectory

Formative change and hollowing out of institutions e.g. labour law (Arthurs, 2006; Rocha, 2009)

Renewed engagement with Marxian political economy and the valorization imperative (Vidal and Peck, 2012; Regini, 2014)
Institutions and path dependency still matter, but how they matter is changing

Institutions as sources of power, but also subject to it

From institutions to processes of institutionalization

Capitalist dynamics do not pre-exist institutions and social norms – but are constituted by them
Challenges

(i) How to develop explanatory frameworks that can account for both critical commonalities across different geographies yet explain continued important variegations at different scales?

(ii) How to recognize innovative experimentation by labour and other agents while avoiding selective ‘success story’ narratives?

(iii) How to think about the development of new institutions for workers and the renewal of older ones?

(iv) What are our project(s) or visions for workers and society?