

Ambivalences of the Countermovement. A proposal on how to inquire international trade unionism

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970's globalization has become an unavoidable framework condition for the politics of labor. For several years, trade unions' strategic reorientations have been inquired by studies from the newly emerging field of Global Labor Studies (GLS). Generally, scholars from this field aspire to empirically verify that international trade unionism is not only a necessary precondition for a just economic order, but also a realistic political option. In this context, the works of the Austro-Hungarian historian Karl Polanyi have recently served as one important theoretical reference point.

In his main work which originally appeared in 1944 under the title of 'The Great Transformation' (TGT), Polanyi analyzed the dynamic relationship between two dimensions of economic action, its material basis as well as its ideological inspiration, from the late 18th century until World War II. From his perspective, societal modernization unfolds as a process of disembedding the market from its institutional setting, followed by the reaction of a countermovement which aims to protect society from the destructive powers of the market.

If we, as proposed by various contributions (Munck 2004), relate Polanyi's approach to the present situation, we can interpret the internationalization of economy and society since the 1970s as a new wave of market disembedding. From the perspective of the GLS, the particular challenge for trade unions lies in the maintenance and extension of political power in a globalizing market for labor.

As a point of departure this paper takes a diagnosis put forward by Cotton und Gumbrell-McCormick (2012: 1), who describe the literature of international trade unionism as being „undertheorized". From the perspective of GLS, Polanyi's concept of a countermovement provide as suitable heuristic to understand trade union internationalization as a systematic reaction of society to critics have termed 'neoliberal globalization' (Webster et al. 2008).

Accordingly, the question is posed, in how far the reception of Polanyi's work in the field of GLS can serve as a theoretical framework to understand international trade unionism. Drawing on two cases of international trade union cooperation directed at de-commodifying labor – namely the Charta of Labor Relations in the Volkswagen Company and the debate around a European minimum wage – I will develop a proposal on how to inquire international trade unionism on the basis of three epistemological premises: an action-theoretical focus, a constructivist framing and a multidimensional understanding of space.

2. Conceptual background: Polanyi and Globalizations' implications for Labor

2.1. Polanyi's 'The Great Transformation'

„Some books refuse to go away. They get shot out of the water by critics but surface again and remain afloat." In his review of TGT, Charles Kindlberger (1974: 45) die anticipated the impact of the book over four decades ago. Because, as recently pointed out by a number of scholars, the insights developed by Polanyi can fruitfully be related to current developments of economic globalization (Block/Somers 2014). At the intersection of Social Anthropology, Economic History and Political Economy, Polanyi discusses a question, that in previous

rounds has most prominently been addressed by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber: the question of the social embeddedness of markets.

Building on a critique of what Polanyi terms the ‘economic fallacy’ of neoliberal theories, Polanyi argues how society coordinates the production and distribution of goods and services are not only via the market, but under diverse institutional conditions.

From what today would be termed a research logic of ‘historical institutionalism’ (Skocpol 1979), Polanyi describes the central motive of capitalist modernization as a ‘double movement’. After in a first sequence of large scale transformation in societal structures, the market becomes gains an institutional dominance over similar instances of coordination (such as the state or networks of reciprocal exchange such as families or clans), this development is subsequently relativized in a second sequence.

As the object at stake in these developments, Polanyi identifies the social meaning of three objects he describes as ‘fictitious commodities’: Labor, Land and Money. Their specific character as commodities Polanyi views as fictitious, because, according to him, they have originally not been produced to be sold in the market. If men, however, begin coordinating the allocation of labor in society via the market, a danger arises that the labor will in the long run lose its use-value. Or, to put it more critically, a society that excessively privileges the market over other potentially complementary institutions runs the risk of gradually undermining its social foundations.

For this reason, the commodification of the fictitious commodities has in the history of capitalism repeatedly caused counterforces to enter the political arena. From his holistic perspective on economy and society, social order under capitalist conditions appears to Polanyi as a genuinely precarious relationship: As Beckert (2009: 51) puts it, the ongoing process of organizing the exchange of the fictitious commodities in specific market appears to him as “the unstable result of social and political struggles.” Since the 19th century, two waves of market-disembedding have been complemented by mechanisms of social protection, induced by a particular political subject or, in Polanyi’s terms, the countermovement.

In his magnificent historical analysis, Polanyi manages to show how the reform of the poor laws, the legislative institutionalization of minimum income to the price of bread, and the privatization of rural grounds have driven the workers of 18th century England to migrate into the cities. Under the political pressure of the industrialized working class, and especially against the background of the economic crisis of the 1870s, laws to regulate the market for labor were established. The commodification of the labor as a fictitious commodity had caused a countermovement to emerge on a regional scale. As Kocka (2015) describes, the original founding of trade unions results from the experiences of workers in their local milieus.

After the end of World War I, a second wave of disembedding results from the dissolution of the Gold standard. After the war, economic consequences of volatile exchange rates increased the pressure on labor. Different from the first wave of reembedding, the political reaction to the commodification of money followed on a national level. Accordingly, Polanyi identifies European Social Democracy, Roosevelt’s New Deal but also Stalinism and German Fascism as national varieties of a second countermovement.¹ From the fatal consequences of European fascism as a result of implementing liberal ideology, at the end of TGT Polanyi follows that in the future no such self-destructive forces can ever be mobilized again.

¹ By establishing the Bretton Woods-System subsequent to World War II, we can however notice some indicators for an international dimension.

But here, Polanyi was wrong: Initiated by the oil price shock of the early 1970s, a wave of marketization has affected the economic character of Polanyi's fictitious commodities all around the globe. What he had shown for the transition of English feudal society to Manchester Capitalism, had now been generalized to take effect on a global scale:

“The era of globalization in which the commodification of labor, money and nature – labor migration, finance capital as well as environmental degradation – for the first time takes on a truly transnational character that is often outside the control of the state” (Burawoy: 307).

With regards to the labor market, this development translates into a constellation, in which not only individuals, but also plants, companies, regions, countries and continents are being set into competition with each other. Additionally, trade unions are in many countries encountering an additional weakening which results from a general undermining of traditional corporatist structures especially in the Global North (Seccarecia 2012). Against the background of hits large-scale institutional change which Western industrialize societies have been undergoing over the last decades, Streeck (2009: 266) deduces the central motive of the TGT in order to formulate the following programmatic question:

“Will today's rising pressures to reorganize society in line with the ever more demanding requirements of continued capital accumulation after almost three centuries of Western capitalism not at some point have to provoke a new Polanyian countermovement, one that tries again to set a limit to the penetration of capitalist relations into the fabric of human life?”

The following section illustrates how this the question has been adapted and discussed in the field of GLS.

2.2. On the reception of TGT in GLS

International engagement of trade unions can be interpreted as a reaction to economic globalization. By understanding trade unions as „interest associations of workers in waged employment“ (Streeck 2015) we can identify their task in organizing all workers within a particular market for labor. If, in the course of globalization the extent of this market increases (e.g. through relocation or labor migration), trade unions' area of responsibility grows simultaneously. While international labor market institutions (as in the EU) up to this point provide little effective regulation (e.g. Schäfer/Streeck 2008), studies from the field of GLS programmatically choose an alternative approach: Instead of criticizing the impossible replication of corporatist patterns on a supranational level, particular focus is set „on agency, on labour as an active maker of spatial fixes“ (Webster 2010: 384).

As Fairbrother et al. (2013: 3) note, international trade unionism is facing what can be understood as a twofold challenge: its multilevel-character and the institutional heterogeneity between different macro-regions and countries:

„While ‚spatial extension‘ appears to be a defining feature of transnational trade unionism, it is also a place for cooperation between trade unions as well as a site of potential conflict and competition.“

Therefore, according to Evans (2010: 354), the particular quest of a global labor movement on the basis of international trade union cooperation lies in “linking together diverse organizations in ways that are strategically effective, building what might be called ‘strategically concatenated diversity’.”

So what's the beef with Polanyi, then? The argument, according to which the internationalizing of the labor market well be complemented by a countermovement in the sense of Karl Polanyi is, generally speaking, not a fundamentally new idea.

From the viewpoint of a political sociology of international trade unionism, the question arises how exactly research on a countermovement should be conceptualized (Dale 2010: 208). In this regard, over the last years a number of positions have been expressed by a range

of scholars. In his foreword to TGT, Nobel-Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz (2001: VII) perceives the riots at the WTO-Summits in Seattle and Prague around the turn of the Millennium as potential forerunners of a Polanyian countermovement. Similar interpretations were moreover directed at the political As an object of similar interpretation other scholars shed light on the arising political structure of the European Union (however, with ambivalent results): While Caporaso and Tarrow (2009) find evidence for a re-embedding of the European labor market, della Porta (2015) views recent protests against Troika's austerity policies as elements of a new countermovement.

Taking the globalization of the labor market as a programmatic point of departure, GLS pursue a research agenda of proving the point that international trade union cooperation is not only necessary but also possible. While scholars from the field of Comparative Political Economy (Höpner/Schäfer 2012) tend to emphasize institutional heterogeneity among countries preventing international trade union cooperation, GLS stand out through their focus on trade unions' political agency.²

In her appraisal of their epistemological approach, Caspersz (2010: 395) recognizes an „unconscious bias toward the positive in GLS“. As studies from this area often inquire positive cases of international trade union cooperation (Pries/Seeliger 2013), we can interpret this tendency as a result of a specific logic of inquiry: In order to analyze framework conditions which enable agency, most scholars select cases in which they could detect some sort of agency. Against this background, the particular epistemology of GLS can be described as one of *programmatically optimism*. In the sense, the echoes of Polanyi's thought in the field of GLS resonates from Polanyi's historical motive of the countermovement. This can be further illustrated by drawing on some examples:

From her perspective on the historical development of the automotive industry, Beverly Silver (2005) shows how geographical relocation of production, although causing wage pressure in the short term, in the long contributed a transformation in the power relations between classes in the countries of production. By interpreting this development from the viewpoint of TGT, Silver (2005: 36) concludes that we are encountering a new 'Swing of the Pendulum'. Similarly, Webster et al. (2008: VII), by analyzing three cases of local resistance against relocation of production, recognize a tendency towards the emergence of a countermovement. Similarly, in her inquiry on the cross-border cooperation among trade unions from Eastern and Western Europe, Gajewska (2009: 183) arrives at a conclusion, according to which “[g]rowing transnational solidarity among the trade unions can be conceptualized as a part of the counter-movement against the internationalization of market relations.” Similar implications can also be found in the writings of Fred Block (2001: XXXVIII), who – by referring to a “nascent movement” already implies the existence of a Polanyian countermovement operating at the global level (similarly, see Fraser 2015).

The emergence of a countermovement to neoliberal globalization as a third wave of market disembedding in the Polanyian sense constitutes a basic axiom of studies from the field of GLS. The next section will formulate a number of question to this reception of TGT.

² Particularly optimistic contributions can in this regard be found in Evans (2010: 354) and Gumbrell-McCormick/Hyman (2013), according to whom the internal diversity of international trade union cooperation holds the potential of broadening their repertoire for strategic choices.

2.3. Some conceptual questions about reception of TGT in the perspective in the field of Global Labor Studies

Based on a *programmatically optimistic* epistemology contributions from the field of GLS put forward an interpretation of Polanyi's main work TGT which seems questionable on at least three main accounts to be spelled out in the following.

A first point results from the retrospective view in Polanyi's reasoning. From a perspective that nowadays would mainly be assigned to the field of historical institutionalism (Skocpol 1979), Polanyi gains his insights about the dynamics of economy and society from the analysis of longitudinal developments. While his evidence holds true for the emergence of the two countermovements, the conclusion about a third one to follow based on his illustration should not, as Burawoy (2003: 244) highlights, not be turned "into an inexorable law." From the viewpoint of GLS, the emergence of a countermovement cannot be inquired as a historical sequence but, at best, as history in the making.

A second point of critique can be directed at the absence of a (micro-)sociological theory of class mobilization within TGT (Webster et al. 2008: X). As Burawoy (2003) notes, it can be assumed that this limitation in Polanyi's perspective derives from the theoretical context, in which it was written. While TGT appeared in the year of 1944, the first publication of a book that made the micro-dynamics of class mobilization the subject of scientific inquiry followed only over two decades later with E.P. Thompsons 'The Making of the English working class' (1987). Mostly based on the study of single positive cases of trade union mobilization, research designs in GLS are mostly focused on a more nuanced level of inquiry than the macro-analysis put forward by Polanyi.

A third point finally results from the spatial framing of the countermovement in TGT. The political ambitions to re-embed the market are explicitly described as pursuing a regional (first wave) or national (second wave) strategy (most notably in the case of German Fascism). Now, as current electoral successes of right-wing parties all over Europe (and perhaps most notably in the case of the Front National in the European elections of 2014 illustrate, one could well argue that the significant countermovement to economic globalization may again take effect as national projects. At the same time, GLS start their search for a new countermovement – by definition – not at the national level but at the intersection of the local, the national and the global (Pries/Seeliger 2012). The idea that differences between the national and (macro-)regional settings allow for a general political mobilization in the sense of an international working class can, however, by no means be treated as factual reality and instead – at least up to this point – constitutes no more than a programmatic hypothesis.³

The next section investigates whether international trade unionism can justifiably be thought of as a countermovement in the Polanyian sense. Based on these three points of critique the following section contains a proposal on how sufficiently operationalize such research.

³ Now, in defense of the argument put forward in TGT, it must be noted that the political ambivalences of the countermovement have not been highlighted more pronouncedly by no one but Polanyi himself. By explaining the rise of German fascism from the international disembedding of the market in between the World Wars, he places the potentially regressive forces unleashed by the countermovement at the heart of his theory (also see Thomasberger 2012: 23).

2.3. How to conduct research on the potential emergence of a global countermovement

If we assume that there is a global countermovement to the third wave of market disembedding, how should we conceptualize a research design to scientifically capture its emergence? The following proposal rests on three particular reference points: An approach sensitive to understand the emergence of a global countermovement not from a retrospective but as a sequence of history in the making requires an action-theoretical viewpoint, a constructivist framework as well as a multidimensional concept of space.

a) Action-theoretical perspective

In developing his analysis of the historical dynamics of commodification and re-embedding, Polanyi is taking a retrospective on one and a half centuries of societal development. While his retrospective (combined with the absence of a theory of class mobilization) enables Polanyi to establish a coherent understanding of the data he considers, an analysis of the (potential) emergence of a global countermovement requires a different logic of inquiry.

An action theoretical approach focusses the capacities of actors to influence their environment. From our understanding the emergence of an international countermovement as a necessary precondition for the implementation of international decommodification standards as a process of institution building, we can now deduce the necessity of an action theoretical approach. By focusing on the cross-border cooperation of workers' representatives, the two cases are framed as instances of class political mobilization.

b) Constructivist Framework

In his extensive reception discussion of TGT, Burawoy (2003: 230) points out how a shared perception of the market logic constitutes one major precondition for successful class mobilization. The emergence of a countermovement, according to him (ibid.), requires "the experience of the market that can appeal to all classes." In order to understand how different actor groups perceive the impact of market integration as a potential motive of collective mobilization, light must be shed on "the processes and conditions by which a particular spatially and historically embedded social field defines what counts as knowledge and truth" (Meyer 2008: 521f).

As political mobilization is genuinely directed at the future, in so far as a particular future state is framed as desirable, a constructivist perspective interested in the emergence of a countermovement needs to consider the consequences actors anticipate from the actions which they pursue. In line with Beckert (2016), the process of negotiating such expectations *in the present* can be understood as the politics of expectation: By jointly developing probable and/or desirable varieties of possible future scenarios, they can the political agency necessary to achieve them.

c) Multidimensional concept of space

Internationalization of the labor market as a third wave of disembedding does not only stand out through its global range, but also through the varieties in which it is taking effect depending on socio-economic particularities of different local settings. Consequently, this variety does not only appeal to modes of disembedding but also with regards to political projects aiming to re-embed the market. While measures of liberalization may vary from country to country (Höpner et al. 2011), so may cultures of trade unionism (Frege/Kelly 2013).

In order to understand the (non-)emergence of an international countermovement, a research design must comprise different spatial reference frames: While a comparative view (Hall/Soskice 2001) is meant to consider differences between countries, a more comprehensive perspective on the inclusion of countries into the capitalist world system is necessary to understand the relations of power and dependence in between these countries (Wallerstein 2004). The first two dimensions put a particular emphasis on the institutional level. Additionally, a third perspective finally focusses the *transnational constellations* within which actors from the countries pursue their particular political goals (Pries/Seeliger 2013).

The next section explicates how these three propositions have been translated into the research design.

3. Case selection and methodology

By drawing on the Charta of Labor Relations in Volkswagen and the debate around a European minimum wage, light will be shed on two cases in which trade unions have attempted to establish strategies of decommodification in a globalizing market for labor.

If, as assumed with reference to the contributions from the field of GLS, international competition increases the pressure on the national working classes, the emergence of a countermovement on the international level can be expected. By comparing the two cases, we can encounter different modes of decommodification. Firstly, in the case of the European minimum wage decommodification is aspired by implementing a legislative bottom-limit for wages to be traded in the labor market. In the case of the Charta, however, it is not the price of labor which is regulated, but it is the immediate control over the labor process through co-determination rights.

The selection of countries (Germany and South Africa in the case of the Charta and Sweden, Hungary and Poland in the debate on the minimum wage) mirrors the spectrum of institutional heterogeneity, both within the VW company network of 63 subsidiaries in 2010, as well as the 28 EU member states. In line with the considerations explicated above, different anticipations about the preconditions and political actions necessary to be taking in order to achieve decommodification arise against the particular national backgrounds.

The data used to construct the argument stem from two research projects, one on the cross-border transfer of worker participation measures in the Volkswagen company (16 interviews with trade unionists, shop-floor representatives and management in Germany and South Africa) and one on trade unions' role in European collective bargaining (88 interviews with trade unionists from various European countries and European level-federations from fall 2013 until fall 2014).

4. An emerging countermovement? Empirical findings

4.1. The Charta of Labor Relations – Worker participation between class struggle and social partnership

With its ‚Strategie 2018‘, announced in 2007, the German car manufacturer has certainly set off its most ambitious growth-project in its entire history. In the following decade, the company had aspired to increase sales to an annual amount of 11 million units as well as an umsatzrendite before taxes of ten per cent. In terms of technological development, the company aims to increase efficiency through a manufacturing model that enables VW to produce over 50 models on the basis of the same physical platform. Similarly ambitious, Volkswagen moreover aspires to develop its genuingely stakeholder oriented governance

model by introducing measures of worker participation similar to the German model on a global scale through an international framework agreement: The Charta of Labor Relations.⁴ This section describes the attempt of transferring this model to the South African subsidiary.

Based on a robust system of collective bargaining, as well as the legal framework of co-determination, the German production model can be described as a type of „stakeholder capitalism“ (Morgan/Quack 2000: 4),

„where obligations to employees, suppliers and customers are part of the context within which overall firms performance is judged.”

With regards to shop floor-level representation, the political role of German Works Council is institutionalized in the ‘Betriebsverfassungsgesetz’. As a “boundary institution” (Fürstenberg 1958), works councils are intermediary bodies, meant to moderate the relationship between trade unions, management and the workforce. Especially in the crisis of 2008ff, works councils have played a prominent role in dealing with the economic turbulences. As for example in the cases of the introduction of contract labor and object of such crisis management mainly lay in the maintenance of local competitiveness. Their company- (and therefore in relation to the union or, ultimately, the class in its entirety self-)centered focus in the crisis caused critics to point to the ‘shop-floor-egoism’ of works councils’ representative work (Deppe 2012).

Compared to German Social Partnership, South African labor relations can be described as primarily antagonistic. While the continent on one hand stands out as the most stable democracy of the African continent, a gini-coefficient of 0.68 in 2010 indicates the material foundations of more comprehensive social cleavage in the country.

Even two decades after the end of racial segregation by law, the relationship between capital and labor is still significantly shaped through a historical constellation which van Holdt (2003) has termed the ‘Apartheid Workplace Regime’. Under this regime, construction of black, white and colored identities worked as an interplay of public bureaucracy, labor market access and the labor process on the shop floor.⁵ As Webster et al. (2009: 19) not, persisting effects of this regime include “low trust, low levels of skill, a reluctance to identify with the goals of the enterprise and, above all, the persistence of the racial division of labour that characterised apartheid.”

Since the early 1990s, Buhlungu (1999: 111) recognizes the gradual introduction of participation-based styles of company management. Such trends, Buhlungu explicates, do not only correspond with a general tendency of democratization, but also are due to a strategic reorientation in the production model of multinationals in the country. With reference to the automotive industry, this development is also highlighted by Webster et al. (2009: 20):

„Employers adapted to this new environment by restructuring production, establishing new patterns of work organisation and relocating production units. These human resource management initiatives include quality circles, teamwork, productivity-linked wages, profit sharing and performance-based rewards.”

Compared to the situation in Germany, South African trade unions show a much more critical approach towards workers’ participation. Besides the strong socialist, party communist orientation of South African trade unions, the reason for this lies in the historical conflict between a largely black and colored working class and the mostly white capital.

⁴ The complete text can be found under http://www.imfmetal.org/files/09110418063266/BR-Charta_Arbeitsbeziehungen-13%2008-csc-engl2.pdf

⁵ At the same time, the centralist structure of South African trade unions dates back into the times of the Apartheid, as well. As resistance against the racist regime required the crafting of political coalitions across companies and economic sectors, South African trade unions are still known as reluctant towards transferring power down to local representatives and shop steward councils.

Especially among its German subsidiaries, the Volkswagen business model can be characterized as based on the principles of corporate governance. As Haipeter (2000: 387) notes, the proactive participation of VWs works council constitutes an important element not only in the field of Human Resources, but also with regards to cost management and innovation policies.

The cooperative relationship between German management and works council is illustrated by the following interview passage which Dauskart and Oberbeck (2009: 246) quote from their field interviews: “Well, we as works council have an interest in the economic management of the company, because we – as everyone else – know, if we do not think economically, we as a company do not have a future perspective” [translation M.S.]. With the Volkswagen Law, a particular legislative framework grants the workers particularly far reaching influence in the company’s corporate governance structure. Against this background, the Charta of Labor Relations constitutes a milestone in VWs history of extending worker participation on an international scale. As the founding of a European works council and a world works council as a platform to coordinate interest representation in a cross-border context as well as indicate, internationalization of production is accompanied internationalization of representative work.

Connected to the Charta, there are three goals, which from the view of the works council contribute to a decommodification of labor in the Polanyian sense: As a measure of participation, it grants the workers control over the labor process and thus firstly contributes to reduce alienation at work. It Moreover increases the political influence of the worker representatives in the company, not only as an official policy, but also in the form of hidden trade-offs.

At the same time, the works council also aims at mobilizing additional efficiency within the company. Above all, such potential capacities emerge against the background of recent internationalization, which has increased the need to coordinate production on a cross-border scale. If, therefore, the introduction of participatory elements could foster integration of workers into the production process (e.g. through a higher motivation and/or the reduction of strikes), application of the Charta could effectively complement the ‘Strategie 2018’.

Opened in 1948 and with a total production of 110.000 units and 5.000 employees in 2010, VWs Uitenhage plant holds a position at the periphery of the overall company network. At the same time, the working relationship between the South African labor representatives and the German works council and IG Metall date back until the late 1970s (Bolsmann 2007; Seeliger 2012; 2015a). With the introduction of the so-called “Fabrik-Komitee in 1982, the first transfer of participatory elements in South Africa happened not least to the initiative of the German representatives. Here, a body similar to the German works council was constituted by nine representatives (three black, three white and three colored). The actual rights to impact the company’s policy did not match the participation rights granted to the workforce in the German subsidiaries (Doleschal/Dombois 1982: 368).

Generally, South African worker representatives have accompanied the introduction of participation initiatives very critically. While measures such as quality circles have become more common since the 1980s, the idea of a co-managerial style of representation as pursued in Germany has been rejected, not only by the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA), but – as the following quote shows – also among the local Shop Steward Council: „Co-Determination“, as one delegate explains, from the viewpoint of the council means „to be sleeping in one bed with the enemy.“ This position is further explicated by a colleague from the NUMSA: „The official NUMSA policy is that we would not support co-determination in our plants. [...] Mainly, because we say, we can’t support the creation of too complicated structures at plant level.”

When asked about their opinion on the co-managerial style of representation pursued by their German colleagues, also the Shop Stewards expressed their fierce rejection: According to them, the task of a trade union does not lie in steering company activities but in constituting a structural counterforce to challenge management ambitions.

„But as NUMSA as a trade union, in our understanding is that a trade union is reactionary in nature. You will never have a trade union that is having programs that is in the forefront. Because as a trade union you always react to what has been given to us.”

For this reason, he goes on, he resigned from his position as a working group leader, after being elected a shop steward:

“My conscience told me that, it was not gonna be easy to serve two masters. It, it, it... To me, this was like to betray the union. Because, you see... You can't carry the agenda of the employer and at the same time you carry the mandate of the workers. It's two contradicting issues.”

At the same time, this political orientation is strongly criticized by a German works council representative:

“If you're asking, ‘how do I get a production order to Uitenhage?’, then you need to ask ‘how can I make the car cheaper? How can I organize production intelligently?’”

The co-management-approach pursued by the works council, he explains as follows:

“If I consider what kind of work we as works council and IG Metall are doing every day, it is entrepreneurial, managerial work. We're managing workers' interests, that's what we like to call it.”

From his point of view, NUMSA and the shop steward perceive local management “as the enemy”. And indeed, we find evidence for this ascription in the following critique of German co-management expressed by one South African trade unionist:

„And although with the works council representatives, we used to suspect that they are more looking at the interest of the company than of the union.”

By deriving input for local interest representation only from VWs local workforce (and thus not from all the automotive workers, or even the class in its entirety), the narrow focus of the works council causes rejection among their South African colleagues. On the contrary, the legitimate aim of political representative work is to pursue a general class interest (i.e. one that appeals to all workers as opposed to capital). In this line of thought, one of the NUMSA-representatives explains the trade unions authority over the local shop steward council:

„And we feel that it is important we push a progressive political line and we make sure that all the members, whether they like it or not, follow the political line.”

According to him, the fact that employees at the Original Equipment Manufacturers – due to their comparatively high level of skill – do not only enjoy higher wage standards but also various other participation rights and employment benefits, does not only hand cost pressure down the value chain. Moreover, the increasing heterogeneity among the workforce makes organizing class even more difficult.

As the perspective of representatives from both countries illustrate, effects of introducing participation-based patterns of work organization are interpreted very differently, depending on the national framework conditions. In the South African perspective, the task of efficiently allocating labor on the shop floor is thought of as a genuine management problem. From this point of view, worker participation does not cause a decommodification in the sense of Polanyi, but the opposite: By making the workers take part in formal decision making and thus increasing the identification with the company, management can achieve an even stronger integration of employees into the labor process and thus exploit workers more effectively. Under this circumstances, labor does not lose its specific character as a commodity, but, on the contrary, becomes even more marketable. While this idea does not

only derive from NUMSA's anti-capitalist stance, but also through her organizational structure and programmatics: a transfer of decision making capacities to the local level would here be perceived as a structural weakening of the headquarter and therefore also of the class itself. What constitutes a core element of the German system, from the South African perspective appears to be a fundamental thread to the political trade union power.

4.2. The debate around a European Minimum Wage

As a legal bottom-limit for the price of labor in a particular (i.e. regional, national and/or sectoral) labor market, minimum wages constitute a common instrument of labor market regulation. In 2014, 21 out of the 28 EU-member states had statutory minimum wages, while the other seven only had implemented sectoral regulations (mostly through collective bargaining agreements). Regarding the particular amount, three groups of countries can be distinguished: six western European states with rates from seven to eleven Euro, four southern and eastern European with rates between two and seven Euro, and thirdly a group of eleven countries with a limit lower than two Euro, mostly located in the Eastern part (Schulten 2014).

After proposals about a European minimum wage had been discussed since the 1980s, the current debate dates back until 2005, when Schulten et al. (2005) formulated their "Arguments for a European Minimum Wage Policy". In this document, the authors proposed to build a mandatory bottom-limit at 50 (and perspectivevely 60) per cent into the national legislation of the member states. As the EU (Art. 153, Section 5 of the Lisbon Treaty) holds no competence in the field of wage-setting, the demand is ultimately directed at the national arenas. Here, the idea is that national trade unions adapt the demand, in order to lobby their governments (Seeliger 2015).

From a trade union perspective, a number of arguments for a European minimum wage can be identified. Firstly, a reduction of the low-wage sector within the labor market could contribute to a general improvement of living standards and extenuate international competition (Rycx/Kampelmann 2012). As Vaughan-Whitehead (2010) notes, it could also lower the pressure on the national bargaining systems emerging from sinking membership and organization rates. Thirdly, a European bottom-limit could serve as a basis for bargaining coordination and moreover serve as an argument against future austerity measures. Finally, Vaughan-Whitehead (2010: 529) emphasizes how the common pursuit of a European minimum wage „would also represent an important symbolic move, giving substance to Social Europe.”

At the same time, the debate around a European minimum wage stands out through a „high degree of polarization” (Furaker/Selden 2013: 513) between various national representatives. Here, a clear divergence exists between trade unions from countries with statutory minimum wages and countries, where such bottom-limits are negotiated in the course of bargaining rounds.

In order to illustrate the particular constellation, the following reconstruction of the debate focusses on trade unions from Sweden, Poland and Hungary. The political position trade unions take towards such a regulation largely depends on the quality of their national bargaining systems. Here, on the one hand, in Central Easter Europea (CEE), “while bargaining institutions and mechanisms are formally in place, their actual impact is generally much more limited than in the West” (Bernaciak et al. 2014: 38). After Socialism collapsed, bargaining systems underwent a process of gradual fragmentation: While in Poland, despite a relatively low statutory bottom-limit, collective bargaining mostly takes place on the shop floor level (Polakowski 2013), the Hungarian system limits sectoral agreements to a small number of economic segments (Girndt 2013).

At the same time, the Swedish setting of collective bargaining – despite the absence of the state from concrete bargaining interactions – is widely known as a highly institutionalized system. In the so-called ‚Rhen-Meidner-Modell‘ bargaining outcomes from the strongly centralized bargaining rounds in export sector were subsequently generalized for the entire economy. Despite current trends of transferring bargaining capacity to trade unions responsible for the different sectors, contours of this model still significantly shape the Swedish labor market (Svensson 2013).

As significant framework conditions in the three countries, the following table shows the national bargaining coverage, organization rate as well as information about current minimum wage regulations.

	Bargaining Coverage	Organization Rate	Statutory Minimum Wage
Sweden	88%	70%	-
Poland	25%	12%	2.21 Euro
Hungary	33%	12%	1.95 Euro

Table 1: National Bargaining Systems

As the most comprehensive instance of employee-representation in the EU, the debate over a European minimum wage has mainly been taking place within the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). A first reference to the current discussion has been given by ETUC in ‘the Sevilla Manifesto’ (2007), which stated that European trade unions were to go “on the offensive” in terms of campaigns on higher minimum wages in the EU. On this basis, delegates at the next congress in Athens in 2011 achieved a compromise that was put into the following wording at an ETUC Winter School in Copenhagen in early 2012:

„The ETUC recommends that where it exists the effective national minimum wage should be at least equal to 50% of the average wage or 60% of the median wage. ETUC actively supports its affiliates in their actions to gradually reach this goal, in accordance with their national circumstances. Countries which have already achieved this goal should aim for a more ambitious target” (EGB 2012: 8).

Despite the rhetoric agreement, which can also be found in the documents of the congress in Paris (2015), the nominal goal of a joint campaign under the heading of ETUC has so far not been put into practice. In line with Dufresne (2014), this practical avoidance can be traced back to the constant blockade by the trade unions opposed to a minimum wage regulation within ETUC-structures. This constellation will be explicated in the following.

As a representative of Hungary’s largest trade union federation MSZOSZ describes, for his organization an EU wide bottom limit to wages constitutes a central political goal:

„Well, from our side, we stand for a European minimum wage. Or, I believe this to be more realistic, the principle of a European minimum wage.”

A similar position is also expressed by a colleague from Polish OPZZ. For him, the necessity of such a regulation derives from the relatively weak position of his trade union within the Polish setting of labor relations:

„In Poland, having such uncivilized labor relations or employers being very hostile to trade unions, not in a position to negotiate better wages. We are simply very much in a hostile situation, we wish to have a kind of umbrella minimum protection given by the law. That’s the general policy behind it.“

On the Swedish side, the three confederations LO, TCO and SACO express their rejection in a joint leaflet on the topic of the Swedish bargaining system:

“There is no statutory minimum wage. There is actually no legislation stipulating that wages should be paid at all. Collective agreements and individual contracts are the only ways to define how much a worker should be paid for the work performed” (TSTUC 2011).

This position is shared by the Swedish confederations for a number of reasons. Firstly, as a representative of Swedish LO indicates, state intervention always had a negative impact on wage development:

“The state was affecting the price in a negative way. The state was doing its best to lower the price. That was the whole idea of the state. When the state finally went out of it, we did not want it back.”

Another concern is expressed by a colleague from TCO, according to whom a statutory bottom-limit “would not solve the problems for the trade unions. Rather the opposite, it would make them redundant.” From this perspective, wage-setting conducted by the state diminishes the incentive for workers to organize.

A third objection finally results from the Swedish representatives attempting to maintain their national autonomy in the field of wage-setting:

“We are not telling the Germans how to do it. We are not telling the Greek or Spanish how to do it. Every country can do it in its own fashion. We are not against that. We are not even against a minimum wage.”

And a very similar concern is also expressed by a representative from LO Sweden:

„I think, it is to the heart of the labor movement, that we don't want legislation in Sweden and absolutely not in Brussels. That is the core-thing in our system. That wages is something for the organizations on the labor market. [...] You don't want Brussels to have too much power. We want to keep a lot of things to the Swedish”.

From a third perspective, a colleague from ETUC describes the problem of merging these different orientations into one coherent position: “The dilemma is to advance without endangering the good functioning collective bargaining systems.” As representative of Polish Buowlani explains, the role of CEE-trade unions take on in negotiations within ETUC structures is crucially limited to their lack of resources and foreign language capacities.

“So [...] our branch resources are under-resourced and understaffed. People don't speak foreign languages, they don't have any possibility to play any role in international structures.”

Against this background, particular interests of CEE-delegates, are harder to represent than goals of their Northern or Western European colleagues. As the case of the campaign for a European minimum wage illustrates, effective mobilization is effectively blocked by a coalition of opposing organizations. The role that the Swedes are taking on within this coalition describes a colleague from the LO as follows:

“The moment someone in a capacity as an ETUC official has a say that the ETUC supports the European minimum wage, we will do our best to sack that person. Because that person will work directly against our interest. We do not want intervention in our wage issues.”

The following section summarizes the empirical findings.

4.3. Summary of the empirical findings

As a point of departure, the article took the reception of Polanyi's TGT in the field of GLS. In aiming to point out the possibility and necessity of international trade unionism as a reaction to neoliberal globalization, from a GLS perspective the cases inquired appear as potential elements of an emerging countermovement in the Polanyian sense. Against this background, it could be shown how the adaptation of Polanyi's theory with reference to a countermovement to the global disembedding of the labor market bears three implications for the creation of research designs.

As the retrospective established in TGT is not directed at the emergence of a countermovement in the present, a transfer of the concept in the field of GLS requires an action theoretical turn of Polanyi's historical institutionalism. While both initiatives can – at least nominally – be interpreted as positive outcomes of international trade union cooperation, the action-theoretical perspective reveals deficits in their practical implementation: Neither

the transfer of VWs participation model, nor the launching of an actual campaign for a European minimum wage could – at least up to this point – be effectively realized.

A second point of critique aims at the absence of a theory on meso-level mobilization in TGT. While the emergence of the first two countermovements took place at the regional and national level, developing common political positions under conditions of globalizations puts trade unions to an even bigger challenge. Depending on the particular national framework conditions, the question in how far the Charta or the European minimum wage will actually contribute to the de-commodification of labor is answered very differently by the organizations from the two countries. In order to understand which barriers impede the development of common political positions, it is necessary to inquire class mobilization from a constructivist perspective as processes of joint sense-making.

In the light of institutional varieties such as differences in labor law or bargaining coverage, however, a constructivist perspective *alone* does not suffice to understand the actual barriers preventing such common positions. In order to understand the effects of such national framework conditions, I have thirdly argued for a multidimensional understanding of space. While an *international* comparison can shed light on the motives driving actors to build de-commodifying institutions within a *transnational* context, a perspective on *world systemic* inequalities can capture power discrepancies between actors from different macro-regional contexts. From a Polanyian viewpoint the internal dynamics of a countermovement to complement neoliberal globalization appear as ambivalent, however not fully contingent. Accordingly, decision-making processes in both cases inquired in this article show a clear center-periphery-motive with actors from the core countries calling the shots.

Instead of framing the Charta of Labor Relations and the European minimum wage as elements of a countermovement to neoliberal globalization *a priori*, the perspective in this article reveals the difficulty that arises from a reductionist reception of Polanyi. At the same time, the three proposals for an epistemological framework to inquire the (potential) emergence of a countermovement were meant to tackle this problem. The following section contains a number of conclusions and questions for future research.

5. Conclusion an Outlook

Especially since from the second half of the 20th century on, globalization of the labor market has constituted one central challenge for trade unions' representative work. In order to understand the effects of this development in the long run, social scientists have developed a range of macro-theories meant to interpret the relationship between economy and society from a longitudinal perspective. In the field of GLS, Karl Polanyi's TGT has served as this kind of reference point.

Since the second half of the 20th century, globalization of the labor market constitutes the central political challenge for trade unions. In order to understand the effects of this development in a long term perspective social science has brought about a range of macrotheoretical approaches in order to interpret the relationship between economy and society from a longitudinal perspective.

While, in a GLS-view, the emergence of a countermovement in the Polanyian sense cannot be expected as a plain consequence of a globalized labor market, it can neither be assumed that such a countermovement is generally impossible to emerge. Based on the analysis of the two cases, I have proposed three theoretical premises meant to enable research on a potentially emerging countermovement. With regards to the application of Polanyi's theory spelled out in TGT to the subject of international trade union cooperation, a number of potential research questions can be formulated:

A first question aims at the spatial reference frame of the countermovement: While GLS aspires to analyze its emergence on an international level, Polanyi perceives political mobilization – at least in the cases of the first to waves of re-embedding – within a regional and a national framework. Here, the case of the European minimum wage shows a tendency very similar to the national countermovements of the second wave. While the CEE-representatives aspire to strengthen the political arena on EU-level, the Swedish colleagues strongly reject such a relocation of capacity, in order to protect their national bargaining system from external interference. Along with the traditional insights, e.g. put forward by Logue (1980: 21), according to whom „[t]he degree of trade union control over its national environment the less likely it is to undertake international activity to achieve its members’ goals”, we can label this orientation as a strategy of “institutional nationalism” (Streeck 1995). Under the impression of increasing cross-border competition, a stronger focus (also, or even: especially, in GLS) should therefore be set on the emergence of countermovements as projects of a political re-nationalization.

The question, which trade unions are likely to pursue such strategies leads us to the second proposal for further research: The two cases show a strong dominance of organizations from the core countries over their counterparts from the periphery. From a trade union perspective, this constellation constitutes more than just a problem of justice: While trade unions from the core countries have for quite some time been able to pursue egocentric strategies of interest representation, the organization of a workforce within a global market for labor requires political goals in line with the preferences of local trade unions *around the globe*.

Against the background of the sometimes paternalistic attitude of the representatives from the core countries, the question of democracy in international trade unionism constitutes an important object for GLS. In how far does the agenda-setting in cross-border initiatives such as the European minimum wage, follow a deliberative pattern? And in how far would a model of cross-funding (e.g. in the form of an international strike fund) suffice to tackle such discrepancies in terms of resources? In order to address these questions, the multidimensional concept of space introduced above can serve as a heuristical framework.

A third bundle of future research question could aim at the absence of a micro- and/or meso-theory on class mobilization in TGT. If we understand Polanyi’s question about the emergence of a countermovement to global disembedding of the labor market as a problem of political mobilization in the present, an epistemological challenge arises: While Polanyi could analyze the effects of the countermovement retrospectively, to GLS the emergence of a third one appears, at best, as *history in the making*. Accordingly, focus is set not on real decommodifications, but on their particular anticipations. As these could only take effect in the future, the actors involved can – by definition – not be aware of the consequences. They are therefore taking on perspectives and pursuing strategies, which they know from their past experiences. Against the background of the national and macroregional differences between their political orientations, in order to pursue joint political positions trade unions need to establish common reference frames and perceptions. In order to focus on such mobilizations, focus could be set on symbolic framework and imagines futures, such as a European Social Model.

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