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Theoretical and Empirical Links between Trade Unions and Democracy

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Pre-print version. Please refer to the article published in *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. August 2018. Online first.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0143831X18781714>

Introduction

The brutal kidnapping, torturing and killing of Giulio Regeni in early 2016 while conducting field research in Egypt and the subsequent cover-up by the el-Sisi regime have raised concerns not only with regard to the state of human rights in Egypt, but also with regard to the risks involved in research on labour movements. Regeni, a promising researcher at the intersection of development and labour studies, was studying the role of independent trade unions in the (non)democratization process in Egypt. After a first-class degree for his BA in Arabic and Politics at the University of Leeds, a Master's degree in Development Studies at the University of Cambridge, and work in Cairo for the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), he had undertaken a PhD at the University of Cambridge, in collaboration with the American University in Cairo.

In dark times, scholars are killed for their search for truth. This has happened also in the politically sensitive field of labour studies, but fortunately very rarely. David Webster, labour ethnographer, and Ruth First, a labour reporter, scholar and political activist, were both killed by the apartheid regime in the Eighties. Students and researchers on labour rights disappeared during the dictatorships of Argentina, Chile and other countries, and more were detained across Latin America, Africa, and communist-bloc countries. The state has not been the only perpetrator of such violence: as Italians, the authors of this introduction remember well the killing of colleagues Ezio Tarantelli, Massimo D'Antona and Marco Biagi at the hands of the Red Brigades. Yet in the 21st century, many of us had come to assume that these things could not happen again. We were obviously wrong and a thorough reflection is needed.

Regeni's research interests in democracy and labour coincided with the mission of *Economic and Industrial Democracy* and this special issue in his honour wants to pursue his research questions on trade unions, democratization, union democracy, and inclusion of peripheral workers. In this essay, we frame the theoretical, empirical and methodological questions at the core of Regeni's budding research agenda and, in the process, introduce the articles of this special issue.

1. Trade unions and democratisation: an interrupted cycle?

The link between trade unions and democracy has been of paramount importance since the emergence of the 'labour problem', as reflected by the concept of 'Industrial Democracy' (Webb and Webb 1897). This concept systematically linked the workplace to the broader political context in which it is embedded. Recently, however, research has focused on employee voice and representation within the workplace only (Wilkinson et al. 2014), paying less attention to the political sphere and broader

society. Yet the link between labour organisations and democracy remains critical across emerging and advanced economies.

Following the so-called 'third wave of democratisation' in the 1980s, political scientists Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) compared 37 historical cases of democratisation to conclude that across the XIX and XX Centuries the working class most frequently promoted the full extension of democratic rights. This argument challenged the mainstream view that formal democracy is the business of the bourgeoisie and that the middle class is the primary promoter of democracy, while the upper and especially the lower classes are inclined to authoritarianism (Lipset 1959). By 'working class', Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens meant 'organised working class' hence the trade unions, although never in isolation: it was the organizational skills, alongside numerical force, that gave workers the capacity to benefit from democracy. This argument was corroborated by Valenzuela's research on Latin America (1989) which pointed out the importance of labour organizational capacity, its ability to disrupt the economy, and impossibility of total repression for democratisation.

Today, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens' argument deserves re-examination. The geographical distribution of their cases was uneven, with no consideration of Africa and Eastern Europe and, for the whole of Asia, only a rapid discussion of South Korea. Theoretically, other scholars argued that labour mobilisation are a product rather than a prerequisite of democracy (Schmitter 1993) and that capitalism is at odd with democracy (Przeworski 1992) and, as a result, trade union contribution to democracy is conditional on its development into corporatist actors (Schmitter 1993).

On one side, their argument appeared vindicated by important cases of democratisation with a strong input by labour organisations received particular attention by scholars, and especially Poland (Ost 1990) and South Africa (Adler and Webster 2000), as well as by further reflections on the South Korean path (Kwon and O'Donnell 1999). On the other side, the contribution of labour to many other cases of democratisation is ambiguous or even not apparent. The recent democratisation attempts in Asia and Africa, were mostly presented as spontaneous upheavals of the civil society against military regimes, religious fundamentalism and post-colonial ideologies (Dabashi 2012, Howard and Hussain 2013, Stepan and Linz 2013) rather than as expression of class struggle. While there is evidence of labour activism, from Malaysia (Croucher and Miles 2016) to the Arab Spring (Alexander 2010), its role in the democratisation process is still difficult to interpret - as Regeni's pioneering research was trying to do. At the same time, China challenged theories of labour and democracy, as labour conflicts in a country so enthusiastically embracing capitalism have been so far insulated from the political sphere (Pringle and Clarke 2011).

Even worse, in Romania in 1990 and 1991, and in Yugoslavia in 1991, the working class was mobilised against democracy and over time more subtle forms of 'illiberal democracy' emerged (Greskovits 2015). Furthermore, in Mexico and Argentina trade unions with an authoritarian past have been considered political allies of neo-populist parties and of corrupt elites also in the neoliberal context (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2008, Brysk 2000). Even in Poland – the country where democratisation was most clearly led by a trade union, and where Solidarity's legacies had the potential to contribute to a vital democracy (Meardi 2005) – subsequent developments led observers to speak of a 'defeat of Solidarity' and of labour illiberalism (Ost 2005), and Solidarity's open support after 2015 for an illiberal government shows the extent of working class' disaffection towards democracy (Bernaciak 2017). The post-transition experience of Poland tells that trade union inclusion in corporatist policy making of democratising countries may have different functions than in established democratic and corporatist countries (Meardi et al. 2015): As a result of the legitimacy function prevailing on the regulatory and expressive ones, the autonomy of class organisation, and in long term their contribution to democracy, are damaged (ibidem).

Importantly, the complex relationship between labour and democracy in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America cannot be written off as a side-effect of the weakening of labour: in fact, a shift of labour activism from post-industrial to late-industrial countries, or from 'North' to 'South', has been

convincingly identified (Silver 2003). Yet the democratic traction of organised labour appears less clear than in the past. In this special issue, Feltrin (2018) provides a strong insight from North Africa to help understand why the labour roles and effects are so different, by pointing at the differences of labour power between the cases of Tunisia and Morocco. If his line of argument is correct, the broader difficulty of democracy stems less from the fact that labour is becoming less democratic, and more from the fact that it is becoming weaker. In their contribution, Sil and Hartshorn (2018) focus on the *how* unions affect democracy rather than the *why*, and through the comparison of Poland, South Africa and Tunisia they point at strong union-party relations (more than corporatist inclusion) as dysfunctional for unions' contribution to democratisation.

2. Trade unions and the crisis of political democracy

The weakening of trade unions is not unrelated to a perceived crisis of democracy in established democratic countries as it has corroded a pillar of capitalism's democratic legitimation and hampered the potential of 'associational democracy' (Baccaro 2006). Past arguments had stressed the positive roles of unions, and industrial democracy, for political democracy (Verba et al. 1995), and were confirmed by recent evidence about the mutually reinforcing relationship between voice at work and in politics, and indirect effects through improvements in work quality and social security (Bryson et al. 2013, Adman 2008, Godard 2007), even though the positive effect of workplace voice on democratic participation is only confirmed in old democracy and new post-fascist ones, but not in new post-communist countries (Budd et al 2018) – a qualitative difference which might explain cases like Poland, as mentioned above.

And yet, even in old democracies, the positive effects of unions on the quality of democracy cannot be taken for granted. A large literature documents on the one hand the shifting allegiance of the working class, increasingly attracted by new, populist or even right-wing parties, and on the other hand the repositioning of mainstream social democratic parties away from their traditional working-class constituencies towards new social groups (e.g. the so-called "socio-cultural professionals") characterized by higher education and more cosmopolitan and less nationalistic cultural attitudes (Afonso and Rennwald 2018, Oesch and Rennwald 2018, Gingrich and Häusermann 2015, Betz and Meret 2013, Kriesi et al. 2006). Until the 1990s, only a selected number of politicians and political entrepreneurs – e.g. Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Pat Buchanan in the USA and Umberto Bossi in Italy – benefited from the shift in working-class vote. However, the phenomenon has gained momentum in the last two years with the Brexit vote in the UK, the election of Donald Trump in the US, and the remarkable electoral performance of Marine Le Pen's Front National, all of which have been described as expressions of 'white-working class' reaction to immigration and multiculturalism (Gest 2016).

The disaffection of the working class for trade unions and democratic institutions has found different explanations. In what Crouch (2004) calls 'post-democracy' formal democratic institutions seem to have lost their decisional powers, and industrial democracy institutions in particular: if, under increased competitive pressure, negotiations become consultations, bargaining becomes concession bargaining, and voice becomes mere expression, workers may be justified for wondering what trade unions are still for. In particular, the weakening of trade unions' roles in wage setting and their inability to redistribute companies' gains from globalisation to workers have contributed to rising inequality, which threaten the legitimacy of democracy (Baccaro 2011) and might contribute to the rise of populism among the working class as a reaction to globalisation (Dancyger and Walter 2015).

Furthermore, the fall of unionisation may contribute to the declining quality of democracy because unions have been found to affect individual electoral participation and electoral choice (Rennwald 2013). The literature on the political effects of union membership generally finds that union membership is associated with greater voter turnout and greater support for left or labour parties (Ahlquist 2017, Freeman 2003, Kerrissey and Schofer 2013). Other literature argues that union membership favours the emergence of a sense of solidarity among workers. Discursive interactions

within trade unions lead workers to develop a better sense of the commonality of their interests (Ahlquist and Levi 2013). Moreover, union membership have been argued to promote the emergence of both more enlightened (among low-paid workers who would benefit from redistribution) and more solidaristic (among high-paid workers) preferences (Mosimann and Pontusson 2017).

The main problem with this literature is that we often cannot tell whether unions mostly produce these outcomes (e.g. through preference-transformation), or mostly select workers who are ex ante more likely to have them before joining (Hadziabdic and Baccaro 2018). There are of course other possibilities: unions as organizations may lead workers to act on their dormant preferences (for example, through "get-out-the-vote" campaigns), or may influence the public policy framework in ways that are more favourable to the electoral mobilization of the poor (e.g. by pushing for less restrictive voting registration rules).

Recent research is sceptical about the effectiveness of union attempts to create forms of democratic control of the global economy have encountered scepticism (Streeck 2016; Rodrik 2012). At the same time, the current threat of anti-system politics highlights unexpected opportunities for unions to gain a political role on a sensitive issue that governments can hardly tackle alone (Meardi 2018).

In their contribution to this issue, Mosimann et al. (2018) suggest that trade unions may act as a barrier to the spreading of right-wing populist attitudes within the working class through a combination of selection and preference-shaping effects. In other words, membership in trade unions could make workers more aware that their interests are better served by traditional labour-oriented parties than by the anti-immigrant and welfare-chauvinist rhetoric of new right parties.

The difficulties of trade unions with political democracy discussed above immediately raise the issue of the difficulties of democracy *within* trade unions. In the following two sections we discuss the linkages between internal democracy and industrial democracy from two perspectives: On the one hand, the ability of unions to listen to their members, aggregate their interests and represent them; on the other hand, their capacity to include and unify an increasingly diverse and precarious workforce.

3. Union democracy and its effects

Beginning with Lipset et al.'s seminal *Union Democracy* (1956), scholars have investigated under what conditions democratic procedures can be sustained within unions. As unions become institutionally embedded in the economic and political system, they fall prey to the "iron law of oligarchy" (Michels 1966), i.e. develop an autocratic leadership increasingly detached from the rank-and-file even though formal democratic procedures exist, and pursue the primary goal of organisational survival rather than working class interests (Piven and Cloward 1979).

Lipset et al. (1956) thought that democratic governance could only survive in a deviant case like the International Typographical Union (ITU), in which the presence of an unusually cohesive and segregated occupational community promoted a high degree of rank-and-file involvement and participation in union affairs, a condition that "[could] not be met most of the time in most unions or other voluntary groups" (Lipset et al., 1956: 403).

Different authors adopt different definitions of union democracy. Lipset et al. (1956) defined union democracy as competitive elections between opposing internal factions, i.e. as representative democracy. Other literature links union democracy to direct democratic procedures and specifically to the practice of workplace referenda for the ratification of bargaining agreements (Baccaro 2001).

Views about the effects of union democracy are similarly varied. While Gumbrell and Hyman in this issue (2018) consider that a democratic union is better able to organize workers than a non-democratic one, an older literature, especially American, regards union democracy as detrimental to union effectiveness because of its tendency to reduce the autonomy of union leaders (Ross 1956).

This literature argued that union democracy would lead union officials to bow to the myopic demands of their members and to overlook the long-term interests of the organization, the legitimate rights of minorities, and broader societal interests (Lipset 1962: 431-2). Bok and Dunlop (1970: 86) reviewed the record of the ITU, the union that Lipset et al. (1956) had studied, and argued that union democracy had led this union to tramp on minority rights and take a dubious stance vis-à-vis groups outside the unions' traditional constituency. Walton and McKersie (1991: 287) argued that union democracy led to an escalation of bargaining demands, since union members tended to be more myopic and impulsive than their leaders. Finally, Jack Barbash (1967: 129) argued that union leaders needed to distance themselves from the grass-root level in order to be effective in bargaining.

These views assume that members have systematically more 'extreme' preferences than their leaders, and that rank-and-file influence over organizational policy (through procedures like ratification of collective agreements or frequent reelection of union representatives) leads to militancy and/or unwillingness to compromise, which, in turn, may produce undesirable outcomes like higher inflation and/or unemployment rates, and higher levels of industrial conflict than in comparable circumstances. However, the opposite state of affairs is conceivable, namely one in which leaders have systematically more extreme preferences than their members and in which the introduction of democratic decision-making produces opposite consequences from those stated above. This opposite line of thinking seems to have motivated the union governance reforms of the Thatcher and Major's era in the UK (e.g. compulsory balloting prior to strikes), whereby the government sought to weaken trade unions by empowering members at the expense of leaders (Undy et al. 1996, Undy and Martin 1984).

A particularly controversial theme is the relationship between union democracy and the 'general interest' as opposed to group interests. The literature, again going back to Lipset, suggests that union democracy may have adverse effects on third parties and/or society as a whole. There may be a conflict between democracy in a 'partial society' such as a trade union, and the interests, views, and goals of the public at large. Members of the body politic do not participate in the internal democratic process of trade unions and thus have no influence on it but are nonetheless affected by its outcomes.

These themes featured prominently in the European neo-corporatist literature of the 1970s and 1980. Neo-corporatist theory (and practice) emerged as a response to the spectacular labor mobilizations of the late 1960s-early 1970s and the ensuing problem of stagflation. To increase the governability of advanced industrialized countries, neo-corporatist scholars looked at the European corporatist societies of the 1920s and 1930s as a source of inspiration. In these societies, interests were not allowed to organize freely. They were channeled, instead, into functionally differentiated and compulsory organizations – true and proper administrative branches of the state – in which a (forced) synthesis of societal interests was accomplished.

The leading idea of neo-corporatist theory was that it was possible even for the non-authoritarian regimes of the post-war period to replicate certain traits of the old corporatist regimes without blatant infringements of liberal rights and liberties (Schmitter 1979, 1981). This required the state to take an active role by selecting from the universe of groups those with greater capacity for 'encompassing' representation (Olson 1965), and by helping the leaders of these organizations to gain autonomy from the members through measures like legal recognition, compulsory membership, automatic collection of dues, and direct access to public funds (Offe 1981). Neo-corporatist scholars shared the American industrial relations scholars' general distrust of members and appreciation for the responsibility and clairvoyance of leaders. Wolfgang Streeck summarized this literature as follows: "Too much' democracy – or, if one wanted to fudge the issue, the 'wrong kind' of democracy – was shown to be detrimental to the collective interest" (Streeck 1988: 313).

However, these views about the negative effects of union democracy have not gone unchallenged. Research has shown that there are situations in which union democracy may have a directly beneficial impact on the reconciliation between group interests and societal interests and that non-democratic

union organizations are not necessarily better suited to the equitable representation of worker interests within the economic system as a whole (Baccaro 2014, 2003).

For example, absent electoral mechanisms for registering worker preferences, leaders may not know exactly what these preferences are and may therefore base their choices on the preferences of a sub-sample of the entire working population, e.g. those workers who participate in strikes, whose preferences are not representative of the workers at large (Pizzorno 1978). Thus, union democracy may have an *informational* role.

Democratic decision-making procedures may also have a *moderating* role (in the sense of favoring more moderate decisions). Adoption of democratic procedures levels out the different degrees of intensity in the members' preferences (Dahl 1956). The vote of workers who are ready to engage in collective action counts as much as that of more quiescent workers in determining collective decisions. Furthermore, the minority's claim to truly represent the workers' will is dispelled.

Moreover, union democracy may have a *preference-shaping* effect. Democracy is more than just aggregation of pre-existing preferences. It often shapes or changes preferences, as often argued in the literature on deliberation (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, Habermas 1996). In several circumstances workers do not have well-defined, let alone fixed, preferences about alternative policy options. They rely on leaders as well as interactions with coworkers to evaluate the alternatives they are faced with (especially when this evaluation requires expert, technical knowledge). The communicative processes associated with union democracy give union leaders ample opportunities to influence the members' process of preference formation.

The above examples suggest that the dichotomy between strong leaders vs. weak workers (and vice versa) is overly simplified. Union democracy may strengthen some leaders at the expense of other leaders depending on the type of union, its encompassingness, and the diversity of internal constituency. It may lead to internalization of third party interests in some cases, and to the emergence of group egoism in others. The effects of union democracy on the functioning of industrial democracy seem highly contingent and difficult to generalize.

4. Democracy and inclusion: virtuous or vicious relationship?

Union democracy, and the abovementioned ability of unions to shape preferences and aggregate interests, are also crucial for the inclusion and representation of the working class as a whole. While trade unionism, as the term itself indicates, stresses working class *unity*, differences *within* the working class were apparent since the very beginning of trade unions, as witnessed by Engels' idea of a reserve army of labour, by the disputes between Marx and Bakunin on the 'labour aristocracy', and by Marx's historical writings on class struggles in France (Bakunin 1872/1971, Engels 1845/1987; Marx 1850/1964). The existence of different constituencies with potentially conflicting interests draws attention to the *political* processes through which a synthesis is accomplished (or not). From the late 20th century, despite Marxist theories of deskilling leading to homogenisation and the "interchangeability of persons and functions" (Braverman 1974: 359), attention to working class internal diversity has increased (Hyman, 1997; Offe & Wiesenthal, 1985; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, & Stephens, 1992: 53-55). The process of working-class unification is regarded as fundamental not just for furthering workers' interests, but also for the emancipation of subordinated groups, e.g. peasantry and rural workers (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992; see also Feltrin's and Hartshorn and Sil's contributions to this special issue).

Yet, the claim that unions can effectively represent the whole working class has been challenged from different perspectives. The literature on insiders and outsiders has forcefully argued that unions exclusively represent the interests of labour market insiders (permanent workers in full-time employment) at the expense of labour market outsiders such as young workers, unemployed and

precarious workers (Häusermann 2010; Lindbeck and Snower 1986). An older literature has documented how unions introduce barriers to access internal labour markets, restrict skill supply, and protect the core workforce from market pressure (Goldthorpe 1984; Rubery 1978). Research evidence from South Korea (Yang 2006) and Germany (Hassel 2014) appears to buttress the claim that unions contribute to workforce segmentation.

However, other literature suggests otherwise. The segmentation effect is contingent on the institutional context (Pulignano et al. 2015). In countries with high dismissal protection unions do not support provisions to the benefit of marginal workers (e.g. active labour market policies) because insiders are protected from labour market risks (Rueda 2007). In contrast, in countries characterised by the Ghent system union strategies are more inclusive because marginal workers are part of the union constituencies and therefore influence bargaining priorities (Lindvall and Rueda 2014). Other research has found that encompassing collective bargaining institutions and class- or society-orientated union identities (Hyman, 2001) lead unions to extend wage and working standards negotiated for their members to peripheral workers as well (Benassi and Vlandas 2016; Marino 2015).

Nonetheless, specific workforce segments such as women, migrants and other minority groups, do tend to be excluded from unions, independently from the institutional context. Some scholars have argued that discrimination against minority groups is driven by racism and machismo among core union members and activists (Gilroy 2013; Cockburn 1991). Others have showed that unions routinely adopt strategies preventing them from diversifying the membership pool (Hassel 2007). More recently, scholars have pointed at unions' attempts to organise workers around class identity as one of the obstacles to representing women, migrants and other minority workforce groups. By so doing, unions do not recognise the specific challenges faced by these groups in the labour market and, consequently, are unable to address them (Tapia et al. 2017). This problem is exacerbated by unions' "oligarchy" of male, high-status and native-born employees (Colgan and Ledwith 2002).

Unions' inability to include new and/or marginal workforce segments is seen as one of the main causes of their decline (Ackers 2015). The decline of bargaining coverage and its growing fragmentation (Baccaro and Howell 2017) prevents, it has been argued, the extension of negotiated protections to new and peripheral worker groups (Benassi et al. 2016).

How can unions regain their representativeness and become more inclusive? Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman argue in this special issue that reviving employees' direct and active participation - *internal democracy* - is crucial to *industrial democracy*. As documented by the revitalisation literature, unions have adopted an organising approach for activating employees in unionised workplaces and for recruiting new and peripheral workforce segments (Frege and Kelly 2003). Organising strategies often include aggregating the interests of employees around issues which affect them directly, often framing them as a matter of justice or dignity (Heery 2002). Even though organising is crucial for unions with limited institutional support, like those in Anglo-Saxon countries (Baccaro et al. 2003), more institutionally-embedded unions have also embraced the organising approach. For example, Dutch and German unions have tried to organise fixed-term workers, agency workers and low-end service workers (Benassi and Dorigatti 2015; Vandaele and Leschke 2010). Recently, Tapia et al. (2017) have argued that the adoption of an intersectional organising approach contributes to the recruitment, mobilisation and integration of minority groups.

However, scholars agree that, in order for inclusive representation to be sustained in the long term, it is not enough to reach out to new constituencies, they need to be able to directly participate in the decision-making processes of the union. This may include the necessity to "open up" union oligarchy and to have a more politically-engaged and diverse union leadership, e.g. by introducing representation quotas (Colgan and Ledwith 2002). Some have argued that the creation of self-organised groups (e.g. for women, black workers, LGBT workers) within the union is even more effective for workforce inclusion as long as mechanisms of democratic participation and appropriate resources are in place (Humphrey 2017; Marino 2015). In their comparison between Italian and Polish

unions for this special issue, Marino et al. (2018) explore this issue and argue that decentralised union structures and working-class ideology enable the inclusion of atypical workers.

5. Decline of fieldwork research?

The violent death of Giulio Regeni also raises questions about data collection and dangerous fieldwork. Investigating the relationship between unionism and democracy is long, challenging and, in certain circumstances, risky. While research in this field is methodologically pluralist (as this Special Issue is), in-depth fieldwork has often proven essential for advancing knowledge, especially when the topic is labour resistance to authoritarian management and autocratic regimes, which, almost by definition, make official data and information unreliable.

Fieldwork allows uncovering “the power relationships which are masked and exposed in complex ways in most societies” (Brown and Wright 1994: 163) and, in particular, the power dynamics between labour, capital and the state, which are dependent on the local context. Fieldwork also allows investigating stories which do not make it to the official record and the often informal side of labour relations, workers’ organising and collective action (Thompson and Hartley 2007; Brown and Wright 1994). As argued by William Brown in this special issue, exactly for these reasons fieldwork has been a central feature of industrial relations research since its origins. Yet, the context is not propitious to conducting fieldwork, especially in non-democratic contexts. We emphasize two trends which have the potential to undermine this research tradition: the increasing pressure to publish, particularly in leading journals, and the increasing securitization of research.

Over the last twenty years, academics have been experiencing a growing pressure to publish a large number of articles in top (often US-based) journals, which emphasise rigorous research designs and have a bias towards standard deductive approaches and quantitative methods (Godard 2014; Whitfield and Strauss 2000). As research evidence in industrial relations research typically consisted of detailed descriptions from the workplace, this new publishing trend has presented industrial relations researchers with great challenges. As the article by Tse et al. in this special issue clearly shows, research design in industrial relations research is often due to pragmatic choices and lucky coincidences related to access; furthermore, the process of entering the field is characterised by high uncertainty and risk of failure and can be as long (and even longer) than the data collection itself.

Therefore, trends in academic publishing penalize the fieldwork tradition of industrial relations research while they favour related but also competing disciplines like economics, human resource management and organisational behaviour. As a consequence, in the last twenty years industrial relations research, too, has experienced a shift towards greater application of a deductive approach and increasing use of surveys and quantitative methods (Godard 2014; Strauss and Whitfield 2008). While the research output reflecting these trends may have gained in methodological rigour and external validity, what is lost is the insight coming from direct observation as well as the “colourful, even arresting, descriptions that once were common in the industrial relations literature” (Strauss and Whitfield 1998: 20). From this perspective, the research Giulio Regeni was conducting in Egypt is of great significance, and as guest editors we are delighted to host in this special issue articles written by early career scholars like him who have been conducting fieldwork on labour-related themes in China, Morocco and Tunisia.

But how to consider the specific risks of fieldwork research in non-democratic settings, that have been so violently brought to the fore by the torture and assassination of Giulio Regeni? Fieldwork research used to be seen as the adventure of intrepid researchers on their journey of discovery, and the responsibility for conducting rigorous and ethical research and for their health and safety was exclusively their own (Tapscott and Desai 2015). Times have changed and research institutions are increasingly aware of potential risks for researchers and for research participants. They have been investing in training, developing ethics and safety standards, and setting up ethics and safety

committees in charge of judging the risks and feasibility of research proposals on the basis of standardised protocols (Mateja and Strazzari 2017).

This trend towards securitization has positive and negative features. On the positive side, it might increase the researchers' safety. On the negative side, it may favour more mainstream methodologies to the detriment of the diversity and innovativeness of research approaches, as projects need to be approved by research institutions and funders, which follow de-contextualised and relatively rigid standards (Mateja and Strazzari 2017). A case in point is the exclusion of covert participant observation by the Academy of Management (Roulet et al. 2017).

Furthermore, as researchers are now required to provide detailed fieldwork and data management plans to research institutions and funders, they are forced to weigh in advance the cost and benefits of conducting research in risky and uncertain environments. As Anderson (2016) argues, researchers might feel they are compromising on academic freedom as they cannot follow their research wherever it takes them. In order to circumvent these bureaucratic hurdles and continue their research, scholars – mainly based in North American and European universities – have started subcontracting their data collection to local researchers, thus losing control over a critical stage like the fieldwork phase. However, this strategy raises further ethical questions as it implies shifting the risk onto unexperienced local researchers who work in uncertain conditions and are not covered by minimum safety standards (Mateja and Strazzari 2017).

The debate on securitization we have briefly highlighted here is very much open and ongoing. It is clear that researchers and their institutions must take their duty of care most seriously, and rigorous prior expert assessment of the risks involved in research is required. At the same time, it is important to have an open debate about the consequences of standardised ethics and safety procedures for academic freedom and to monitor their impact on research in the years to come.

Conclusion

Democracy and trade unions have developed along parallel tracks, largely, if not always, as bedfellows. In the process, union democracy has sometimes been regarded as an indispensable prerequisite of democratisation, at other times as a detraction from effective and responsible unionism. Unions, in turn, have not always lived up to the mission of unifying the interests of the working-class as a whole and have in some cases, in less favourable socio-political circumstances, fought rear-guard battles aimed at defending their core constituents only.

Currently, there are worrisome signs that unions and democracy may jointly be on a descending path. As workers shift their electoral allegiance from social democratic to new populist parties with nationalist and welfare-chauvinistic agendas, unions decline in organizational terms and their influence shrinks. Yet exactly the current difficulties of democratic polities offer trade unions an opportunity to reinvent themselves by filling widening gaps of representation, participation and legitimacy.

These new developments may occur first and foremost in countries struggling for democratisation and in poorly organised sectors, i.e. in places outside the main focus of industrial relations research. Giulio Regeni was working on these themes when he was kidnapped, tortured and killed. Producing research on these frontier topics is a way of honouring his memory and advancing social science.

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