Transnational Governance of Workers' Rights:
Outlining a Research Agenda

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Abstract

In twentieth century Europe and the USA, industrial relations, labour, and workers' rights issues have been handled through collective bargaining and industrial agreements between firms and unions, with varying degrees of government intervention from country to country. This industrial relations landscape is currently undergoing fundamental change with the emergence of *transnational* industrial relations systems that complement existing *national* industrial relations systems. Despite the significance of this ongoing change, existing research has only started to explore the implications of this change for how workers' rights are governed around the globe. This paper addresses this gap by outlining an agenda for future research into the transnational governance of workers' rights. Fulfilling such a research agenda would be both challenging, as it requires combining the so far divergent industrial relations and business ethics research streams, and rewarding, as it provides ample scope for promising future research.

Introduction

In twentieth century Europe and the USA, industrial relations, labour, and workers' rights issues have been handled through collective bargaining and industrial agreements between firms and unions, with varying degrees of government intervention across different countries (e.g., Emery and Thorsrud, 1969; Hedlund and Otterbeck, 1977; Bamber and Lansbury, 1998). Several comparative studies of industrial relations systems have revealed that these three actors – firms, unions, and governments – are generally viewed as exclusive to the industrial relations and workers' rights arena (e.g., Dunlop, 1958; Bamber and Lansbury, 1998). As well, the most influential international labour institution – the ILO – is a tripartite institution based on these three actors. Systems of industrial relations have also predominantly been based on national legislation and thus differed between countries (e.g., IDE, 1981; Piazza, 2002). Hence, industrial relations systems have historically been embedded in a context of national, tripartite arrangements negotiated by actors engaged in ongoing relationships with each other.

This industrial relations landscape is currently undergoing fundamental change. First, the *arenas* in which industrial relations are enacted have broadened as *national* industrial relations systems have been complemented by emerging *transnational* industrial relations systems. Second, as these arenas have broadened, *new actors* have become involved in industrial relations, mainly in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) entering into transnational industrial relations systems. Third, these changes have meant the redistribution of actor *influence* in industrial relations, and, fourth, they have meant a shift from legally based to *voluntary* governance. Combined, these changes make it possible to argue that we have been and are witnessing the emergence of *transnational* industrial relations systems parallel to, and significantly different from, *national* industrial relations systems. The emergence of transnational industrial relations systems has been noted frequently in multiple academic disciplines, some researchers, for example, claiming it to be "one [of] if not *the* most important institutional innovations of our time" (Kochan, 2006, p. 12 – italics in original).

Despite the significance of these ongoing changes, existing research has only started to explore the implications of these changes in how workers' rights are governed around the globe. So far, research has missed the forest for the trees, focusing on only parts of the emerging transnational industrial relations systems or some of the links between the transnational and national industrial relations systems. Little, if any, research has systematically outlined the issues at stake in terms of workers' rights governance. Consequently, critical questions for understanding ongoing developments have been left unexamined. This paper addresses this gap by outlining an agenda for future research into the transnational governance of workers' rights. I will argue that fulfilling such a research agenda requires marrying two divergent research streams: industrial relations and business ethics.

Fulfilling this research agenda and developing an in-depth understanding of how workers' rights are governed, both nationally and transnationally, is essential for the progress of the business ethics field. This is so because workers' rights governance is a central, though unexplored, part of business ethics. Workers' rights are central because they comprise core human rights, lie at the heart of influential business ethics

standards, such as the UN Global Compact, and are integral to recent "sweatshop" debates. The business ethics literature could benefit greatly from a more in-depth understanding of workers' rights governance, which would in turn help place central business ethics topics, such as codes of conduct, in a broader context.

In the next section, the major changes leading to the emergence of transnational industrial relations systems are outlined, to provide needed background. I then discuss existing research into transnational industrial relations to illustrate the need for a more holistic research agenda. In the third section, I discuss research needs in four different categories: i) *micro* (i.e., the implications of the changes for the tools used to operationalise workers' rights governance and on an intra-organisational level), ii) *meso* (i.e., the implications of the changes on an inter-organisational level), iii) *macro* (i.e., how to understand what types of transnational industrial relations systems are emerging), and iv) *interaction* (i.e., the interaction between the emerging transnational and existing national industrial relations systems). Finally, I conclude the paper by discussing the importance of fulfilling the outlined research agenda.

A changing industrial relations landscape

Trend I: From national governments to transnational corporations

In recent years, it has been argued that a process of globalisation is underway, marking a profound shift in economic structures, institutional arrangements, and the organisation of work (e.g., Stiglitz, 2003; Bhagwati, 2005; Cohen, 2006). Evidence of this development usually includes increasing competitive pressure, global outsourcing, communications technology evolution, and a homogenisation of consumer tastes and branding (e.g., Klein, 2000). The transnational organisation of production started becoming prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s as European and American TNCs started to offshore much of their production to developing countries (e.g., Jones, 2005; Taylor, 2005). This trend was particularly evident in low-skill industries, such as the garment, footwear, and toy industries, in which TNCs largely pursue low-cost strategies (e.g., Christerson and Appelbaum, 1995; Hathcote and Nam, 1999).

Through this offshoring of production, workers' rights issues in low-skill and other industries began an ongoing geographic shift from a European and US setting to a predominantly Asian setting (cf. Frenkel, 2001; Schrage, 2004). In this process, the European and US national arenas, where workers' rights issues have traditionally been negotiated, have become less relevant and, consequently, the dominant actors in these settings, such as national European and US governments, have lost influence. In contrast, the national settings of predominantly Asian developing countries have increased in importance. Many of these countries have fairly stringent labour laws similar to those in Europe and the USA, and countries such as China and Vietnam have recently profoundly changed their labour laws (Warner, 1996; Chan, 1998; Ding and Warner, 1999; Cooney et al., 2002). However, there are large gaps between labour law and corporate practice in these countries, especially in those with recently changed labour laws (Zhu and Fahey, 1999; Lau, 2001; Liew, 2001; Cooney et al., 2002; Chen, 2003; Cooke, 2004; Frenkel and Kim, 2004).

In practice, this means that TNCs that are offshoring production to Asian countries are entering national settings with little labour law enforcement. Since transnational

institutions for workers' rights are not yet sufficiently developed to balance the offshoring trend and the weak enforcement of labour law in Asia, the workers' rights situation in Asia can be characterised as 'governance without government' with TNCs, unions, and NGOs governing industrial relations (Beck, 1992; Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992; Strange, 1996; Christmann and Taylor, 2002; Frenkel and Scott, 2002; Sullivan, 2003; Frenkel and Kim, 2004; Prieto and Quinteros, 2004). Paralleling this decreasing role of governments in industrial relations is an increase in the influence of transnational corporations in general (e.g., Anderson and Cavanagh, 1996; Korten, 2001) and with respect to industrial relations in particular (e.g., Deetz, 1992; Riisgaard, 2005). In this way, TNCs have gained and governments lost strength in industrial relations.

Trend II: A weakening state of unions

The trend towards TNC-centred industrial relations rather than state-centred national governance poses a considerable challenge to unions. A strategic response from unions has included the setting up of so-called European Works Councils, based on the 1994 EC directive, an ongoing process made possible by political strategies of labour movements seeking to pursue a legislative underpinning for transnational organising (Gregory and Nilsson, 2004). Even so, Hardt and Negri (2001) conclude that European Works Councils are unlikely to be sufficiently strong to balance TNC influence as the marketplace expands beyond the European setting. Unions' legal and political strategies are also made increasingly difficult by the neo-liberal political agenda that dominates Western politics, leading to a decline in unions' political influence (Wills, 1998; Connor, 2004; Eade, 2004).

Unions' roles and influence are also challenged by declining membership in Western countries (e.g., Wills, 1998, 2002) and by low or virtually non-existent membership in developing countries (e.g., Chan and Ross, 2003; Valor, 2005). A popular argument supporting this 'secular decline' thesis is that the collectivist ideology of unions has become outdated as work has become individualised (Allvin and Sverke, 2000), and as roles and identities are being recast around individual service production (Phelps Brown, 1990; Bassett and Cave, 1993) and shaped more by one's role as a consumer rather than as a producer (Giddens, 1991; Lyon, 1999). Statistics on union membership trends over the past twenty years also seem to support this thesis. For Western Europe as a whole, union membership has dropped from 44 per cent to 32 per cent between 1980 and 1998 (Beori et al., 2001). A sharper decline can be observed in the USA (Gregory and Nilsson, 2004). Some countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Belgium, have been able to maintain high union membership, mainly due to the unions' role in these countries in distributing state benefits (Huzzard et al., 2004). Whatever the reason for the membership decline, these developments negatively affect the ability of unions to exert influence politically as well as economically (SIPTU, 2000).

An additional challenge to unions resulting from the increasingly transnational organisation of production is the decentralisation of industrial relations (Gregory and Nilsson, 2004). Recent studies show that most of the EU's member states have experienced a decentralisation of their bargaining systems (Beori et al., 2001; Ferner and Hyman, 1998). Bamber and Lansbury (1998) concluded, in a review of industrial relations tendencies in ten industrial countries, that the enterprise level has become a more important locus of dialogue and bargaining between unions and management.

Evidence of this development has been found both in the US setting (e.g., Deutsch, 1994; Appelbaum and Batt, 1994) and in a European context, as seen in Sweden (Nilsson, 1999; Hammarström et al., 2004), Ireland (von Prondzynski, 1998), Austria (Traxler, 1998), Italy, and Spain (Elvander, 2002). All these trends have reinforced the move to TNC-centred, rather than state-centred, industrial relations systems, while also weakening the influence of labour unions in such systems.

Trend III: Rise of NGOs in industrial relations

While governments and labour unions have lost influence n a shift from a *national* to a *transnational* industrial relations setting, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are on the opposite trajectory. In the field of human and workers' rights, the number and role of NGOs have increased greatly in recent decades (e.g., Boli and Thomas, 1999; Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005). This is related to the fact that as TNCs, increasingly in search of lower labour costs, have offshored production to developing countries, they have indirectly brought about the emergence of NGOs in the area of industrial relations. Since working standards were lower in these developing countries than in Europe and the USA (Chan and Senser, 1997; Chan, 1998, 2000; Lee, 1998, 1999), NGOs (as well as unions) criticised the offshoring trend on the basis that while production could be offshored, corporate responsibility could not (van Tulder and Kolk, 2001; Roberts, 2003; Frenkel and Kim, 2004). This interaction between NGOs and TNCs is a relatively novel phenomenon, since NGOs have historically interacted with governmental rather than corporate counterparts regarding human and workers' rights (e.g., Hartman et al., 1999; Heap, 2000; Teegen et al., 2004; Ählström and Sjöström, 2005). In instances in which NGOs have previously targeted the corporate sector, they have been focusing their initiatives on the informal sector where unionisation is limited (Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2007). However, there has been a shift in NGO prioritisation, with an increasing number of NGOs choosing corporations, particularly TNCs, as their counterparts (e.g., Hamann and Acutt, 2004; Rondinelli and London, 2003; Spar and La Mure, 2003; Sullivan, 2003).

There are several reasons for this shift. First, NGOs are increasingly broadening the definition of human rights to include workers' rights. Second, as mentioned above, TNCs have become increasingly influential in the global economy, and consequently become a more relevant counterpart for many NGOs. Third, the governmental retreat from regulating international workers' rights has led NGOs to perceive gaps in governance they can fill. With NGOs shifting from governmental to corporate counterparts, they have emerged as a second type of representative of workers' rights alongside unions (e.g., Eade, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005; Spooner, 2004).

Trend IV: From legal to voluntary governance

In addition to changes in TNC, government, union, and NGO influence, there has also been a shift from legally based to voluntary industrial relations systems. The issue of transnational governance of workers' rights has a long history. As early as the 1970s, workers' rights representatives (from both labour unions and NGOs) demanded linkages between workers' rights and trade (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000). This was initially framed in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) system and then in the World Trade Organization (WTO) system. The negotiations surrounding this attempt are commonly known as the 'social clause' debate and well documented

in previous research (e.g., O'Brian et al., 2000; Van Roozendaal, 2002; Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005; Bartley, 2007).

In the 1990s, the limited success of campaigns linking workers' rights and trade prompted workers' rights representatives to explore alternative options, focusing attention on individual corporations and voluntary agreements (e.g., Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Compa, 2004; Fairbrother and Hammer, 2005). In this way, the issue of transnational governance of workers' rights came to coincide with the increasingly powerful CSR trend towards voluntary 'soft law' regulation (cf. Esbenshade, 2001; O'Rourke, 2003; Bartley, 2005; Kuruvilla and Verma, 2006). This linkage between the shift to voluntary governance of workers' rights on an individual corporate level and the CSR trend is frequently noted in the industrial relations literature (e.g., Miller, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005; Shanahan and Khagram, 2006; Waddington, 2006). The voluntary approach has been more successful than the workers' rights–trade approach, with workers' rights representatives managing to influence firms to adopt both codes of conduct (Schlegelmilch and Houston, 1989; Sethi, 1999; Guillén et al., 2002; Nijhof et al., 2003; Kaptein, 2004), and, although to a lesser extent, international framework agreements (Hammer, 2005; Riisgaard, 2005). Evidently, this shift from a legal to a voluntary governance approach has reinforced the move to 'governance without government' in industrial relations systems.

In this paper, I will assume that the emerging transnational industrial relations systems are based on voluntary governance tools, such as codes of conduct and international framework agreements. As Bartley (2005) demonstrates, this assumption is a simplification of the actually complex relationships between voluntary and legal governance tools. In practice, voluntary tools (such as codes of conduct) could sometimes be turned into legal accountability for firms (Bartley, 2005). If, how, when, and by whom this is done are important areas for future research if we are to improve our currently limited understanding of the link between voluntary and legal transnational governance of workers' rights. However, this topic will not be covered in this paper.

From a national towards a transnational setting

I have described a shift from traditional *national* systems of industrial relations towards emerging *transnational* systems. At the same time, we should be careful not to exaggerate this development. The fundamental change is *not* the collapse of national industrial relations systems, but rather the gradual emergence of a second alternate industrial system on the transnational level. There are four major differences between national and transnational systems. First, the *arenas* in which industrial relations are being enacted are the national versus the transnational arenas. This leads to the second difference, the difference in the *influence* of the involved actors. In national systems, unions and national governments occupy central positions in industrial relations, while in transnational systems the influence of both unions and national governments has diminished. Paralleling the decreases of union and national government influence is an increase in TNC influence. Third, in transnational systems a new *actor*, the NGO, has entered into industrial relations alongside unions as representatives of workers' rights. Fourth, while national systems build on legal governance, the transnational systems mainly build on *voluntary* governance. Combined, these shifts make it possible to argue on a general level that we have been and are witnessing the emergence of *transnational* industrial relations systems that in

many ways are significantly different from traditional *national* industrial relations systems.

Previous research into transnational workers' rights governance

Unlike the extensive research into *national* industrial relations systems, research into *transnational* industrial relations systems is sparse. Even more importantly, existing research into *transnational* industrial relations systems has focused on sub-questions, providing detailed knowledge about these while leaving many other relevant questions unanswered. The most notable and highly researched sub-question is codes of conduct. As reviews of research into codes of conduct indicate, there has been ample research into codes of conduct in recent decades (e.g., Egels-Zandén, 2007; Helin and Sandström, 2007; Kaptein and Schwartz, 2008), and this research has certainly provided valuable insight into how workers' rights are being governed transnationally. However, existing code of conduct research has had a narrow scope, rarely looking at the more general implications of codes of conduct for transnational workers' rights governance. For example, few code of conduct studies recognise, let alone analyse, one of the key tensions in the emerging transnational industrial relations systems, namely, that between codes of conduct and international framework agreements (IFAs).

Recent industrial relations research has shown that IFAs have emerged as a labour–union-driven industrial relations tool that competes with and/or complements codes of conduct in operationalising transnational workers' rights governance (e.g., Hammer, 2005; Sobczak, 2007). The main difference between codes of conduct and IFAs is that, while codes are unilaterally adopted by corporations, IFAs are negotiated and signed by both the corporation and representatives of the labour union movement. The problem, as shown in Egels-Zandén's (2008a) survey of existing IFA research, is that existing research into IFAs shares the same orientation as does research into codes of conduct, i.e., it is almost solely focused on the IFA tool and, hence, neglects to frame the discussion in more general terms concerning alternate ways of governing workers' rights transnationally.

The purpose here is not to discredit existing research into codes of conduct and IFAs. Rather, the purpose is to demonstrate that, to fully understand emerging transnational industrial relations systems, a complementary research approach is needed, focused on comparing alternative governance tools (such as codes of conduct and IFAs), and on analysing what different types of transnational workers' rights governance systems these tools represent. Hence, there is a need to complement the existing detail-focused research agenda with one that is more holistic.

Such a holistic research agenda would challenge researchers to combine the so far divergent industrial relations and business ethics research streams. To be able to discuss transnational workers' rights governance, researchers must, for example, be able to understand codes of conduct, NGOs, consumer pressure, and the CSR trend (mainly discussed in the business ethics literature), and IFAs, labour unions, industrial action, and national industrial relations systems (mainly discussed in the industrial relations literature). Today, discussions of labour unions and industrial relations are sparse in the business ethics literature (Michalos, 1997; Leahy, 2001; Riisgaard, 2005; Provis, 2006). Leahy (2001, pp. 34–35) phrases this nicely: "it seems odd that one could turn to these texts on managerial ethics for information on labour/management

and be left with the impression that unions did not exist, that managers did not have to negotiate with them". Similarly, industrial relations literature has so far only paid scant attention to the CSR trend, the role of NGOs in industrial relations, and similar matters (cf. Kaufman, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005; Heery and Frege, 2006; Seeber and Lipsky, 2006; Waddington, 2006; Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2007). In the next section, I outline a research agenda that combines these disparate research streams and outlines promising avenues for future research.

A research agenda for transnational workers' rights governance

Micro: Conflicting tools and intra-organisational aspects

Codes of conduct and IFAs: Conflicting tools?

In practice, the emerging transnational industrial relations systems have been operationalised and materialised in two competing governance tools: codes of conduct and IFAs. Hence, a logical starting point for future research into transnational industrial relations systems is to analyse the differences between these tools. Most researchers interested in IFAs touch on these differences by noting that codes of conduct are unilateral corporate policy documents, while IFAs are negotiated agreements (e.g., Hammer, 2005; Riisgaard, 2005; Sobczak, 2007). Egels-Zandén and Hyllman (2007) is one of the few studies that move beyond such general comparisons by analysing the differences between codes and IFAs in terms of workplace democracy, showing that IFAs include more processual aspects of worker representation than do codes of conduct. However, there are still ample opportunities for research featuring such code of conduct and IFA comparisons. A particularly fruitful avenue seems to be combining pre-existing thorough content reviews of IFAs (e.g., Hammer, 2005) and codes of conduct (e.g., van Tulder and Kolk, 2001; Carasco and Singh, 2003; Kaptein, 2004) as a basis for discussing the content differences between these two tools. Our pre-assessment of the results of such an analysis is that while there are some content differences between codes of conduct and IFAs, these are fairly marginal, i.e., on the content level, codes of conduct and IFAs are fairly similar. Despite this, codes and IFAs, as will be demonstrated below, represent significantly different approaches to workers' rights governance.

A second key question to analyse in future research is whether codes of conduct and IFAs are complementary or conflicting tools, i.e., will adopting codes of conduct (or IFAs) help or hinder the adoption of IFAs (or codes of conduct). Codes of conduct are sometimes presented as a first step towards unionisation and IFAs, since most codes include a clause allowing employees to organise themselves in local unions (cf. Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Connor, 2004; Frenkel and Kim, 2004; Hale, 2004). However, researchers have also argued that codes are merely TNC public relations tools, enabling TNCs to avoid unionisation and the signing of IFAs (e.g., Justice, 2003; Frundt, 2004; Roman, 2004; Lipschutz, 2004). These conflicting conceptions of the code of conduct–IFA relationship is worth exploring in empirical research to analyse whether it is possible to have transnational workers' rights governance systems founded on both codes of conduct and IFAs, or whether codes and IFAs manifest two competing underlying ideas of transnational governance. Egels-Zandén and Hyllman (2007) provide a first empirical analysis of this question, but more research is needed into this central question for the emerging transnational governance systems.

Intra-organisational aspects

In addition to research into the code of conduct and IFA tools themselves, research is also needed into: i) why TNCs, unions, and NGOs promote codes of conduct, IFAs, or both, ii) whether codes of conduct or IFAs are more effective in promoting workers' rights, and iii) whether there are differences between how codes and IFAs are implemented and transformed inside organisations. There is a need to understand how organisations choose, develop, and use the tools when actually implementing the transnational governance of workers' rights.

Regarding the first of these three research areas, there is ample research into why *firms* adopt codes of conduct (e.g., Weaver, 1993; Esbenshade, 2001; van Tulder and Kolk, 2001; Bondy et al., 2004; Graafland, 2004), and some emerging research into why firms adopt IFAs (Miller, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005; Egels-Zandén, 2008a). There is also some research into why *labour unions* prefer IFAs (Justice, 2003; Frundt, 2004; Miller, 2004; Lipschutz, 2004; Roman, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005); existing research, however, provides few answers as to why *NGOs* promote codes rather than IFAs. Given that codes of conduct and IFAs share the same purpose of improving workers' rights transnationally and that labour unions prefer IFAs, it is puzzling that existing research has found that NGOs (like TNCs) prefer codes of conduct (cf. Gallin, 2000; Riisgaard, 2005; Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006). This is especially so given that such preferences have been shown to induce conflicts between labour unions and NGOs (cf. Traub-Werner and Carvey, 2002; Justice, 2003; Anner and Evans, 2004; Eade, 2004; Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006).

Regarding the second of the three intra-organisational areas, there is ample research into the effectiveness of codes of conduct in both developed and developing countries (e.g., Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Egels-Zandén, 2007; Helin and Sandström, 2007; Kaptein and Schwartz, 2008). In sharp contrast, there are fewer than a handful of studies of the effectiveness of IFAs (Wills, 2002; Riisgaard, 2005), making this a promising avenue for future research. However, for the purpose of understanding the emerging transnational industrial relations systems, the most interesting studies will be those that compare the effectiveness of codes of conduct and IFAs, providing insights into the tools' comparative effectiveness. For example, it is reasonable to expect that IFAs might be more effective than codes of conduct in promoting union rights, given the influential role of unions in negotiating and implementing IFAs (cf. Wills, 2002; Riisgaard, 2005; Egels-Zandén, 2008a). Union rights is also an area in which codes of conduct have had limited success (Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2007). On the other hand, codes of conduct could potentially be more effective, for example, in improving gender-related issues, since labour unions are generally regarded as poor in addressing these issues (e.g., Huyer, 2004; Povey, 2004). In addition to comparing the effectiveness of codes of conduct and IFAs, there are also a few TNCs that have adopted both codes of conduct and IFAs, providing interesting empirical settings for studying the effectiveness of codes *and* IFAs. Hence, there is a need for more research into both the *comparative* effectiveness of codes of conduct and IFAs if independently implemented and the effectiveness of combined implementation.

The third intra-organisational area needing more research – differences between code of conduct and IFA implementation – would be useful for explaining the potentially different effectiveness of codes and IFAs. Hence, to understand outcome differences

(effectiveness) between codes and IFAs, we need to understand the processes yielding these outcomes. Helin and Sandström (2007) demonstrate that existing code of conduct research has largely neglected how codes are used and transformed in organisations, and a similar conclusion also holds for IFA research. Hence, there is ample opportunity for research from a process perspective into both codes and IFAs; again, to improve our understanding of the emerging transnational industrial relations systems, the most interesting studies will be those that compare how codes of conduct and IFAs are implemented. Interesting research areas include the differences in communication and auditing between codes and IFAs. For example, the involvement of unions in IFAs indicates that the dissemination of IFAs versus of codes of conduct will rely more on union channels and less on corporate channels than will codes of conduct. Wills (2002) and Riisgaard (2005) provide partial support for this hypothesis. Similarly, greater union involvement could be expected in the auditing of IFAs than of codes of conduct (cf. Riisgaard, 2005; Egels-Zandén, 2008a). Central questions then become: i) is greater union involvement linked to greater corporate involvement (higher union commitment leading to higher corporate commitment) or lower corporate involvement (higher union commitment leading to lower corporate commitment), and ii) how is greater union involvement linked to implementation effectiveness?

Meso: Inter-organisational relations

NGO–union relations: An unexplored field

As noted above, the emerging transnational industrial relations systems are dominated by TNCs, labour unions, and NGOs. So to understand the transnational systems, understanding is needed not only of tools and intra-organisational aspects (the micro level) but also of the relations between TNCs, unions, and NGOs (the meso level). TNC–union relations have already been extensively researched in the industrial relations literature (e.g., Piazza, 2002; Weston and Lucio, 1998; Wills, 2002), although mainly with respect to national industrial relations systems. Similarly, TNC–NGO relations have received increasing attention in the business ethics literature (e.g., Henriques, 2001; Rondinelli and London, 2003; Argenti, 2004; Hamann and Acutt, 2004; Teegen et al., 2004). Given this, it is surprising that NGO–union relations are so sparsely researched. While there are some practitioner and conceptual papers dealing with NGO–union relations (e.g., Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Hale, 2004; Ortez, 2004; Simpkins, 2004), only a handful of empirical papers consider NGO–union relations (Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006). This is problematic for our understanding of the emerging transnational industrial relations systems, since previous research has shown that NGO–union relations are filled with conflicts (e.g., Traub-Werner and Carvey, 2002; Justice, 2003; Anner and Evans, 2004; Eade, 2004). These conflicts exist despite the importance of constructive NGO–union relations for the successful improvement of workers' rights transnationally, as numerous researchers have highlighted (e.g., O'Rourke, 2003; Braun and Gearhart, 2004; Eade, 2004; Frenkel and Kim, 2004).

There are several potential explanations for NGO–union conflicts. First, as discussed in the previous section, unions and NGOs have chosen different preferred tools for operationalising workers' rights governance, with unions preferring IFAs and NGOs preferring codes of conduct. Second, as will be discussed in the next section, unions and NGOs operate on different macro-level conceptual bases. Third, as will be

discussed in this section, unions and NGOs *organise* in different ways and display differences in terms of *class* and *gender*.

Regarding differences in how unions and NGOs organise, Braun and Gearhart (2004) argue that there are three main differences: i) unions are interest driven and NGOs are ideal driven, ii) unions have members and NGOs usually do not, and iii) unions are political insiders while NGOs are political outsiders (watchdogs). Although thought-provoking, Braun and Gearhart's (2004) analysis of NGO–union differences is neither self-evident (for example, unions could be seen as ideal driven, NGOs could have members, and many NGOs are political insiders) nor the only possible view of the differences between how NGOs and unions organise (for example, another difference in organising could be that unions are financially self-sustained while NGOs are reliant on external donations and grants). Consequently, more research is needed into NGO–union differences in organising and how these differences influence the emerging transnational industrial relations systems.

Regarding the class- and gender-related differences between NGOs and unions, researchers have argued that NGO–union conflicts stem from class-based cultural differences between unions and NGOs (e.g., Gallin, 2000; Compa, 2004; Spooner, 2004; Yevgeniya, 2004) and/or gender-related differences between unions and NGOs (e.g., Huyer, 2004; Povey, 2004). Here, unions are presented as embracing: i) a culture of solidarity in a struggle for social change (representing a working class agenda) and ii) a masculine culture, while NGOs are presented as: i) being based on a philanthropy ideal with a welfare agenda (representing a middle and upper class agenda) and ii) a feminine culture. However, like most previous research into the NGO–union relationship, the papers identifying class and gender differences as central to NGO–union conflicts are rarely grounded in empirical research or in discussions relating these differences to the transnational governance of workers' rights. There is a need for future empirical research to test both these explanations of NGO–union conflicts.

Third-party effects and conflicts within actor types

The relations between two types of actors in the transnational industrial relations systems will have effects on other involved actors. For example, Egels-Zandén and Hyllman (2006) demonstrate that TNCs can use the conflict between NGOs and unions to their own advantage to escape expanded responsibilities. An interesting avenue for future research would be to continue studying such third-party effects, for example, by examining how the increasingly close and positive relations between NGOs and TNCs affect labour unions. In the same way as it is argued that codes of conduct could crowd out IFAs, it could be argued that positive NGO–TNC relations could crowd out unions in transnational industrial relations systems (cf. Justice, 2003; Frundt, 2004; Roman, 2004; Lipschutz, 2004). On the other hand, it is also possible that positive NGO–TNC relations could improve TNC willingness to address workers' rights issues transnationally and that this in turn could improve the possibilities of unions advancing their agenda via union–TNC relations. Similar studies of how union–TNC relations affect NGOs would also be interesting and would improve our understanding of union–NGO–TNC relations and the emerging transnational industrial relations system.

A final inter-organisational area in need of more research concerns the effect of inter-organisational relations *within* a specific type of actor on transnational industrial relations systems. For example, Egels-Zandén (2008b) demonstrates that conflicts between enterprise-, national-, and global-level unions greatly influenced the process and content of a recently signed IFA. Do similar conflicts exist between different NGOs and TNCs and, if so, how do such inter-organisational conflicts within actor groups affect the emerging transnational system?

Macro: Structures and underlying models

Structures: Who is an actor and who has influence?

In addition to the micro- and meso-level research gaps discussed above, there are also research gaps on a macro level. In 1958, John T. Dunlop published his seminal book popularising and elaborating the notion that industrial relations systems comprise three types of actors: i) "a hierarchy of managers and their representatives in supervision", ii) "a hierarchy of workers (non-managerial) and any spokesman", and iii) "specialized governmental agencies (and specialized private agencies created by the first two actors) concerned with workers, enterprise, and their relationships" (Dunlop, 1958, p. 7). Dunlop's work has been highly influential, and subsequent industrial relations research has almost exclusively focused on the relationships between these actors (e.g., Bamber and Lansbury, 1998; Emery and Thorsrud, 1969; Hedlund and Otterbeck, 1977; Tannenbaum, 1965). Consequently, the question of who the actors are in industrial relations has been neglected by most industrial relations scholars, as their research has been based on the a priori assumption that these are the only three actors in the industrial relations system (e.g., Abbott, 1998; Kaufman, 2004).

With the emergence of transnational industrial relations systems, there is a need to revisit Dunlop's (1958) definition of the actors in industrial relations. First, if it is correct that the recent changes in industrial relations indeed point in the direction of 'governance without government' systems, it is necessary to critically analyse whether or not governments should be regarded as actors in transnational industrial relations. Furthermore, if governments are actors, what *type* of actors are they? Comparing the roles of governmental organisations in the emergence of transnational workers' rights governance systems in the USA (Bartley, 2007) and Sweden (Ählström and Egels-Zandén, 2008) has been interesting. While governmental organisations have been highly involved in the process in the USA, indicating that governments should still count as actors, governmental organisations have rarely been involved in the Swedish setting, indicating that governments should not be treated as actors in transnational industrial relations systems. Hence, existing empirical evidence provides mixed results regarding the actor status of governments in transnational industrial relations, making both research explaining these divergent findings and additional empirical research interesting to pursue.

Just as the actor status of governmental organisations could be questioned, the status of labour unions could be questioned in transnational industrial relations systems based on codes of conduct (as most systems are today). The mere fact that a labour union perspective is almost completely lacking in the business ethics literature and that codes of conduct are usually presented as part of the CSR movement (as, for example, indicated in code of conduct research mainly being published in business

ethics journals) raises doubts about the role of labour unions in transnational industrial relations (cf. Nijhof et al., 2003; Bondy et al., 2004; Logsdon and Wood, 2006). While there is no doubt that labour unions are attempting to establish themselves as influential actors in transnational industrial relations, for example, by promoting IFAs (e.g., Muller-Camen et al., 2001; Wills, 2001; Chang and Wong, 2005; Royle, 2005; Andersen, 2006; Turnbull, 2006; Waddington, 2006; Doellgast and Greer, 2007), the limited success in terms of the corporate adoption of IFAs indicates that labour unions' aspirations to actor status may not have been realised.

Third, in Dunlop's (1958) framing of industrial relations, NGOs were not considered actors. However, existing studies of codes of conduct and IFAs indicate that NGOs play a key role in transnational workers' rights governance (e.g., Frenkel, 2001; van Tulder and Kolk, 2001; Sethi, 2002; O'Rourke, 2003; Roberts, 2003; Eade, 2004; Spooner, 2004; Riisgaard, 2005). Does this mean that NGOs now qualify as actors in industrial relations, and, if so, are they the same type of actors as TNCs, unions, and governments? Finally, if NGOs could be considered actors, what about the actor status of financial investors and other stakeholders that have been shown to be highly influential in terms of TNCs' CSR practices (e.g., Schueth, 2003; Guay et al., 2004; Sparkes and Cowton, 2004; Sobczak, 2007)?

Clearly, the question of who is an actor in industrial relations systems is linked to the more general question of the distribution of influence among actors in transnational industrial relations. Here, more research is needed analysing, for example, how the distribution of actor influence differs between systems based on codes of conduct and those based on IFAs. It seems reasonable to expect TNC–union–government actors to have the most influence in IFA-based systems, while NGOs and other stakeholders could be expected to have comparatively more influence in code of conduct-based systems. However, this must be empirically studied and systematically analysed.

So far, the discussion in this paper of actor status and influence has implicitly focused on actors in developed countries in Europe and the USA. What about the distribution of influence between actors in developed and in developing countries? Existing research indicates that transnational industrial relations systems are established because actors in developed countries are unsatisfied with existing national systems in developing countries (e.g., van Tulder and Kolk, 2001; Roberts, 2003; Bartley, 2007). Given this, it is reasonable to expect TNCs, unions, NGOs, and governments in developing countries to have only limited influence in the emerging transnational industrial relations systems. However, more research is needed to confirm this hypothesis and to analyse how actors in developing countries perceive and strategise vis-à-vis the emerging transnational systems.

Underlying ideas: Bargaining and supply vs. rules and demand
So far, conflicts in the emergent transnational industrial relations systems have been discussed on the micro and meso levels in terms of conflicting tools (codes of conduct versus IFAs) and conflicts between and within actors (TNCs, unions, and NGOs). Interpreted on a macro level, the existing conflicts between tools and actors can be understood as representations of more fundamental conflicts between divergent underlying ideas of how to govern workers' rights transnationally. An analysis of such clashes of underlying ideas is critical for understanding what ideas the emerging

transnational industrial relations systems embody and for understanding what is at stake in the ongoing development and conflicts in the transnational systems.

There are several potential analyses of what underlying ideas are competing for dominance in the emerging transnational systems, and to exemplify what such analyses could look like, I will briefly highlight two potential macro-level interpretations. First, there seems to be a conflict between a universal rules idea manifested in codes of conduct and supported by NGOs, and a bargaining idea manifested in IFAs and supported by unions. The code of conduct tool is based on the underlying idea that trust comes from *outcomes* in the form of pre-defined minimum requirements (cf. Mintzberg, 1983). As such, definitions of workers' rights are generally defined and universally determined. Consequently, trust is codified or, in other words, institutionalised as definitions of workers' rights are lifted from interpersonal relationships and networks into regulatory frameworks. This underlying idea has close links to the CSR movement with its focus on universal principles (for example, the ten UN Global Compact principles), as well as on a more general level to ideas of an "audit society" (Power, 1997). In contrast, the IFA tool is based on the idea of building trust from the *process* of (collective) bargaining rather than from outcomes per se (cf. Mintzberg, 1983). Hence, rather than trust residing in institutionalised codified rules, as in the universal rules idea, trust resides in interpersonal relations in the bargaining idea. In practice, such a bargaining idea would mean relatively few general workers' rights regulations, the specifics being determined through local negotiations by the parties involved.

Second, there also seems to be a conflict between consumer- (i.e., demand) driven ideas manifested in codes of conduct and supported by NGOs and labour- (i.e., supply) driven ideas manifested in IFAs and supported by unions. NGO pressure usually aims to influence TNC access to capital by challenging their legitimacy on financial and consumer markets (e.g., van Tulder and Kolk, 2001; Roberts, 2003; Frenkel and Kim, 2004), thereby having an adverse impact on the *demand* for (irresponsible) TNCs' shares and products. This influence is exerted through acts of 'political consumerism' of which the code of conduct tool is an integral part (cf. Micheletti et al., 2004). In contrast, union pressure aims at controlling the *supply* of labour by collectively representing workers (e.g., Tannenbaum, 1965). Unions employ this control through collective bargaining while exercising a credible threat of industrial action within and, occasionally, across sectors (e.g., IDE, 1981; Bamber and Lansbury, 1998). The major strengths of this approach are its ability to limit the supply of labour to TNCs and its built-in mechanisms for monitoring TNC behaviour through local bargaining. These underlying ideas of controlling supply are embodied in the IFA tool highly focused on improving union bargaining rights.

These two brief examples illustrate that micro-level conflicts between tools and meso-level conflicts between NGOs and unions could be interpreted as representations of fundamental macro-level conflicts between alternate ways of governing workers' rights transnationally. It also shows that to understand what is at stake in the emerging transnational governance systems, it is critical that future research systematically analyse these clashes between competing underlying ideas of how workers' rights should be governed.

Interaction: Relations between national and transnational systems

National systems influencing transnational systems

So far, I have outlined a research agenda for improving our understanding of the emerging transnational industrial relations systems in isolation from national industrial relations systems. However, to fully understand transnational industrial relations systems, research is also needed into how national systems influence the content of transnational systems. National industrial relations systems differ in their underlying ideas; for example, Anglo-Saxon countries such as the USA, the UK, and Canada are strongly based on rules and regulation with limited space for bargaining, while northern European countries such as Sweden, Norway, Germany, and the Netherlands are strongly based on bargaining with limited regulations (e.g., IDE, 1981; Bamber and Lansbury, 1998; Piazza, 2002). Given this, it is reasonable to expect US, British, and Canadian firms to be more likely to adopt codes of conduct (based on a universal rules idea) than Swedish, Norwegian, German, and Dutch firms, and conversely to expect Swedish, Norwegian, German, and Dutch firms to be more likely to adopt IFAs (based on a bargaining idea) than US, British, and Canadian firms. Preliminary support for these hypotheses is found in existing code of conduct and IFA research (cf. Hammer, 2005; Helin and Sandström, 2007), but more systematic research is needed to confirm them.

Another promising avenue for future research would be to study how actor influence in national industrial relations is translated into transnational industrial relations. For example, labour unions are more influential in the Nordic countries than in the USA. Does this mean that NGOs – as the second type of workers' representatives – have more opportunity to gain influence in transnational industrial relations systems initiated in the USA than in the Nordic countries? Furthermore, Nordic governments play only an indirect role in Nordic industrial relations systems (i.e., these systems are based on a TNC–union bargaining idea) as compared to the US government, which plays a more direct role (the US national system being based more on a universal rule idea). Does this explain why the US government has been involved in the emergent code of conduct-based transnational industrial relations systems (i.e., in systems based on a universal rule idea) (Bartley, 2007), while the Swedish government has not been involved in the emergent code of conduct-based systems (Ählström and Egels-Zandén, 2008)?

Third, how do the characteristics of national industrial relations systems in developing countries influence the emergent transnational industrial relations systems? If the characteristics of, for example, US, British, Nordic, and German national systems have influenced the emergent systems, will the characteristics of, for example, Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, and Brazilian national systems do the same? As noted above, the rise of transnational industrial relations systems has been driven by European and US actors, so it is reasonable to expect that national industrial relations systems in developing countries have less influence than national systems in developed countries. However, this conclusion has yet to be supported by empirical evidence.

Finally, by discussing the relations between national and transnational systems, it is possible to question how "transnational" the transnational industrial relations systems really are. For example, Egels-Zandén (2007) shows that the contents of codes of

conduct are strongly based on local law (in that case, Chinese labour law). This is most clearly seen when discussing minimum wages and the number of allowed overtime working hours (two common criteria in both codes of conduct and IFAs), since these two criteria are usually based on national labour law. What then makes the transnational industrial relations systems "transnational"? Is it the content of the system? The adding of TNC-led, rather than government-led, auditing of codes of conduct and indirectly national labour law? Or perhaps delegating responsibility for non-compliance to TNCs rather than to national governments? Reasonably, one would assume it is a combination of these aspects, but future research could provide much clarity by teasing out the arguments of what makes transnational systems "transnational". In doing this, researchers could also discuss whether or not it is reasonable to talk about *a* transnational industrial relations system or whether it more appropriate to talk about multiple transnational systems. For example, is there a Swedish–Chinese–IFA transnational system, a US–Vietnamese–code of conduct system, and so on?

Transnational systems influencing national systems

While there is limited research into how national industrial relations systems influence transnational systems, there has been more research into how transnational systems influence national systems. Specifically, researchers have been interested in whether or not the emerging transnational systems crowd out national systems. This research is often linked to the debate on 'governance without government' discussed above (e.g., Strange, 1996). However, despite extensive conceptual debate, there has been limited empirical research into the crowd-out effect, the recent study by Bartley (2005) being a notable exception. Bartley (2005) demonstrated that the relationship between transnational and national systems is complex and, while his results partially supported the crowd-out argument, they also identified instances in which the systems fed into each other. Since Bartley (2005) was solely focused on codes of conduct and there do not seem to be any similar studies of the potential crowd-out effects of IFAs, this would be a promising avenue for future research. Furthermore, Bartley (2005) was focused on crowd-out effects on national US systems, and it would be interesting to test whether his findings also apply to national systems in developing countries. Most likely, there will be more crowding-out effects on national systems in developing countries, since transnational systems are mainly formed to address issues in developing – not developed – countries, and existing national systems in developing countries are less stable than those in developed countries.

It is also possible that, rather than crowding out national systems, transnational industrial relations systems may alter national systems. For example, emerging transnational systems based on codes of conduct (i.e., based on a universal rule idea) could discredit national systems based on bargaining ideas (such as those in the Nordic countries). For example, critics could question why Swedish companies should enforce legal minimum wages in developing countries when legal minimum wages do not exist in Sweden (in Sweden the minimum wage is regulated through TNC–union collective agreements rather than through labour law)? Hence, interesting avenues for future research include how codes of conduct-based transnational systems influence bargaining-based national systems, and how IFA-based transnational systems influence rule-based national systems (such as the US national industrial relations system).

Beyond studying the translation of underlying ideas from transnational to national systems, it would also interesting to study whether, and if so, how, actor influence is translated from transnational to national systems. While it is clear that actor influence is at least partly translated from national to transnational systems, does translation work in the reverse direction as well? For example, can NGOs translate their influence from transnational to national systems and emerge as actors in national systems as well? Logically, it seems more likely that one would find such translation of influence in developing than developed countries with, for example, local NGOs involved in implementing codes of conduct or local unions involved in implementing IFAs being able to leverage these experiences and networks to advance their positions in national industrial relations systems. This is especially so, considering that the contents of the transnational systems – as discussed above – is strongly based on national labour law. Hence, a local NGO, by doing codes of conduct audits, could end up doing more auditing of local labour law than local governmental organisations, potentially allowing them to emerge as influential actors in national industrial relations systems as well.

Directions for empirical research

It is obviously impossible to outline here how researchers could examine all the above research areas, though some general directions and promising suggestions can be provided. First, at a *micro* (tools) level, the contents of codes of conduct and IFAs are readily available on TNC and labour union websites, making quantitative comparisons of their contents a relatively easy starting point for researchers interested in transnational workers' rights governance. To move beyond content comparisons and approach the question of whether codes of conduct and IFAs are complementary or conflicting tools, a more qualitative case study approach is probably necessary due to the complexity of the issue. Such an approach should focus both on whether adopting codes of conduct facilitates or hinders IFA adoption (and vice versa) and on whether adopting codes of conduct facilitates or hinders the formation of local unions (often a prerequisite for IFA adoption).

Second, at a *micro* (intra-organisational) level, researchers could use historical and current empirical data to analyse how the NGO preference for codes of conduct, rather than IFAs, has emerged. What, for example, were the key NGOs influencing this position, the key decision points, and the main arguments in favour of codes of conduct and against IFAs? Another promising approach would be to design a preferably cross-national survey of union, NGO, and TNC representatives, inquiring into their preferences for codes of conduct versus IFAs and the reasons for them. Regarding the implementation and effectiveness of codes of conduct versus IFAs, researchers need to make credible comparisons between TNCs with codes and those with IFAs, for example, comparing implementation processes and effectiveness in TNCs that differ in their chosen tools for operationalising workers' rights, while being similar in terms of industry, country of origin, size, etc.

Third, at a *meso* level, previous research provides numerous explanations of NGO–union conflicts related to differences in organisation (e.g., Braun and Gearhart, 2004), gender (e.g., Huyer, 2004), and class (e.g., Gallin, 2000). Future research could usefully operationalise these general explanations into hypotheses to be tested, for example, in multiple case studies or surveys of NGO and union representatives. By including TNC representatives in such surveys or multiple case studies, researchers

could simultaneously analyse the third-party effects of NGO–union, NGO–TNC, and union–TNC relations and conflicts within a specific type of actor.

Fourth, at a *macro* (actor status) level, hypotheses of whether or not governments, unions, and NGOs in developed and developing countries are actors in transnational industrial relations systems could be developed based on previous industrial relations research (e.g., Dunlop, 1958) and on re-readings of existing empirical descriptions of the emergence of transnational systems (e.g., Bartley, 2007; Ählström and Egels-Zandén, 2008). These hypotheses could then be tested and refined in further case studies or surveys, arriving at new insights into how to define an "actor" in transnational industrial relations systems.

Fifth, at a *macro* (underlying ideas) level, the underlying ideas – such as outcome versus process and demand versus supply focus – inducing conflicts between workers' rights tools and unions and NGOs need to be further theorized and operationalized. Linking research into the underlying ideas of the union movement (e.g., Dunlop, 1958) with the social movement literature (e.g., Kaldor, 2003) would be a promising starting point for such an endeavour. The usefulness of the developed theoretical distinctions could then be tested in interviews aimed at uncovering the underlying ideas of NGO and union representatives' visions of transnational industrial relations systems.

Sixth, at an *interaction* level, cross-national quantitative studies could shed light on the link between national and transnational industrial relations systems, for example, by testing how the national industrial relations system in the country in which a TNC's headquarters are located (cf. Marquis et al., 2007) influences the TNC's likelihood of adopting codes of conduct versus IFAs. Furthermore, future research could start to discern how national industrial relations systems in developing countries influence emergent transnational industrial relations systems, for example, by analysing differences between how transnational systems are implemented in countries with significantly different institutional structures, for example, China versus India.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have demonstrated that workers' rights governance has undergone fundamental change to the extent that *transnational* industrial relations systems have emerged, existing parallel to, while being significantly different from, *national* industrial relations systems. While previous research has extensively covered certain aspects of this change (most notably, the emergence of the code of conduct governance tool), the existing detail-focused research agenda needs to be complemented by a more holistic research agenda, in order to fully grasp the significance of this ongoing change. This paper has outlined such a holistic research agenda covering micro-, meso-, macro-, and interaction aspects of transnational workers' rights governance. Fulfilling this research agenda would be both challenging, as it requires combining the so far divergent industrial relations and business ethics research streams, and rewarding, as it provides ample scope for promising future research. Most importantly, fulfilling this research agenda is essential for advancing both business ethics and industrial relations research and for contributing to practitioners' understanding of the emergent workers' rights governance systems they are currently creating.

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