

TWO LECTURES

**The Concept of Competence – an
Instrument of Social and Political Change**

**Centrally Coordinated Decentralization –
No Problem? Lessons from the Italian Case**

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Foreword

Ingrid Drexel has for almost thirty years been a prominent researcher associated to one of the most reputable research institutes in German social sciences; Institut für Sozialforschung (ISF) München. Her most valuable contributions has primarily focused on the concept of the societal structuring of occupations and skill formation. As a prominent expert i the field of comparative studies of technical education and occupations in Europe, she has made significant contributions to several important international research projects on the comparative analysis of relations between work and education in Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy.

Ingrid Drexel was invited as visiting research fellow at Department of Sociology and Department of Administration and Organisation Theory in August and September 2003, and she kindly accepted the invitation. During her stay she has participated in several seminars and project meetings organized at Stein Rokkan Centre for Social Studies, where she also had her office and daily work. During her stay, she has generously shared her vast research experience with Bergen reseachers, and for this we would like to express our sincere gratitude. The two papers printed here, were presented at two of these seminars. Their themes represent central research issues of Ingrid Drexel's latest work, the politics of competence in the EU-countries and the question of decentralisation of bargaining processes on performance and wages in industry.

Bergen, december 2003

Ole Johnny Olsen and Svein Michelsen

The Concept of Competence – an Instrument of Social and Political Change

Introduction¹

The concept of ‘competence’ has made, in the last 10 years, a remarkable career in many EU countries. It almost substituted the concept of ‘qualification’ in scientific and political debate – like the term ‘competence development’ marginalized that of ‘continuous training’. Huge quantities of related publications appeared, and a similarly huge number of research and development projects organised around this argument were funded. Though some forerunners had existed in the US and Canada, the emergence and rapid proliferation of this term is an astonishing phenomenon that needs explanation: Someone coming back from the Mars to Europe after 20 years of absence would be highly surprised discovering the new concept and the apparent consensus it had won in a short time.

What does the emergence of the concept of competence mean, how is it to be explained?

Based on research on early forms of institutionalised assessment of competences that I did in the mid 90s in France² and on continuous observation of the evolution of competence-centered debates and policies in France, the UK and Germany, I can and will present some central elements for an evaluation of this societal phenomenon³. And I will focus primarily on its genesis and its potentials for socio-political change that are very rarely discussed (and even more rarely in a coherent way).

In the first part of my contribution, I will question the content of the competence concept, in the second part I will show central elements of the strategy and the process of its implementation in national societies. Then, in the third part, I will analyse the main change targets which this concept is aiming for, i. e. the consequences of its realisation. The following part is dedicated to the success the concept has had up to now and to its possible future. And the last part briefly addresses the question of an adequate theoretical interpretation of the emergence and career of the competence-concept.

¹ Presentation at the Rokkan Centre on 11th September 2003.

² Ingrid Drexel: Die Bilans de Compétences – ein neues Instrument der Arbeits- und Bildungspolitik in Frankreich. In: QUEM (Hg.) Kompetenzentwicklung '97. Muenster u. a. 1997.

³ Ingrid Drexel: Das Konzept von Kompetenz und die Interessen der gesellschaftlichen Akteure – Erfahrungen aus dem europäeischen Ausland. In: P. Dehnpostel u. a. (Hg.): Vernetzte Kompetenzentwicklung, Berlin 2002

As proof and illustration I will mainly use the case of France, but not only – the UK and the German experiences are sometimes too interesting not to speak of. France and UK are relatively in the forefront of the discussion and implementation of competence-oriented policies; Germany is rather late, so I will refer to this country a little less than might be expected.

And I will not at all speak of Norway though I learned during the last weeks, that here too a competence act and corresponding policies do exist. But as far as I can judge, this is – apart from the term and some techniques – quite different from what is going on in the EU-countries that I am going to speak of.

The content of the competence-concept – some common elements despite a broad variety of interpretations

Let me start with one – at a first glance very surprising – observation that all authors comparing the use of this term agree on: A precise common definition of this term does not exist, neither within national contexts nor on an international level, – despite of the fact that much of competence-related publication work is explicitly dedicated to the definition of the content of this concept. Definitions thus produced show a great variety of accents according to the scientific or political background of the author. And the profiles of definition in the different countries seem to vary with problems in the education and vocational training systems existing in these countries (interpreted of course in a specific way by the author).

Despite of this variety, five central elements of the competence-concept can be identified:

- 1) In contrast to the qualification concept that is oriented towards societally organized and regulated learning processes (at the University, in apprenticeship etc), the competence-concept is *output-oriented*. That means: It is focussing on the results of any possible learning process, learning being defined in a very broad or even unlimited sense, with specific importance given to the results of informal learning («experience learning»). Questions of the organisation and quality of the learning process are irrelevant – what counts is the outcome.
- 2) As a consequence of this dissociation of qualification (or competence) and formal learning processes, the competence-concept asks for *procedures for identifying and assessing the results of learning processes* that can make them visible. Such procedures and their institutional and financial bases are either newly created or existing structures are elaborated for that purpose:
 - In the UK, the Thatcher-government has created the NVQ-system with a complex organisational structure for the assessment of about 800 officially recognized competences and for their classification according to their efficiency in work process at five levels.

- In Germany, actually many research and development projects try to define methods of assessment and certification of all kinds of competences.
 - In France, such procedures can build upon the fundamentals of the existing bilans de compétences which in the early 90s began to be used in some big companies for certain purposes of their Human Resource policy and for some social goals⁴. Later on, when the competence-concept was appropriated by the employers organisation and functionalised for an aggressive restructuration policy – we will come back to this in detail further on – , the system of bilans de compétences was elaborated according to these goals.
- 3) A third basic element of the competence-concept consists in the fact that it devaluates knowledge and formalized qualification in favour of *experience*, and that it attributes a central role to *immediate operability* of workforces competences.
 - 4) Almost as important is the fact that the concept includes not only formal and informal knowledge and skills but also *personal values, motivations and behaviour*.
 - 5) And last but not least, the concept aims at and implies the *individualisation and fragmentation of learning results* leading to an unlimited quantity of atomistic, very narrowly cut competences – a goal that replaces the holistic concept of qualification that was promoted since the 60ies and the 70ies. These atomistic competences can be combined in absolute flexibility: The vision is an unlimited variety of *patchwork profiles* that can substitute the traditional structure of workforce categories (technicians, engineers etc.) whose qualification profiles are roughly determined by formalized learning tracks regulated by society and by its dominant patterns of work organisation.

The implementation of the competence-concept in national societies and the actors of this process

The concept of competence did not fall from heaven, its implementation in the European discussions and policies had and has its actors. Of course I cannot give a complete and detailed description of the single moments of its emergence in every country and its evolution there. But I can and will present a rough picture of the main categories of actors, their implementation strategy and – as an example – of central elements of the implementation process in one country: France.

Important impulses for the concept and its diffusion came from the European Commission: Though the term «competence» and some practise of assessment of competences had pre-existed, it was the EC that defined much of the competence-philosophy and who gave central ideas and incentives for its implementation; research

⁴ For details see Drexel 1997 (note 1)

funding played an important role in that context. So I will start with the EC though there are other actors as you will see.

- 1) EC conceived a *strategy for implementing the competence-concept* in the national societies – a strategy that involved as many and different social actors as possible: not only employers and politicians, but also unions and company level labour representatives, intermediate institutions like consultants and professionals working in the fields of vocational training, Human resource policy and labour market, and last but not least research.

This strategy was masterly followed for example in France: Here, the idea of assessing and recognizing individual competences had, as I said before, been used already in the late 80s and the early 90s by some companies for various purposes of their Human Resource policies. In the beginnings of the 90s an act was passed providing everyone with the right to a leave of 24 hours for a ‘bilan de compétence’, i.e. for exploration, assessment and recognition of all her/his skills, knowledge and capacities, wherever they might have been acquired. These bilans de compétence were set up by public or semi-public institutions or by private balancing firms created for that purpose. The goal of the act was essentially to encourage people to engage in relevant continuous training activities and /or in inner- and inter-company mobility. However, this new possibility was soon mainly used by companies for sending their employees to an assessment of their competences in preparation of mass dismissals. So, the instrument quickly got heavily stigmatised; in the middle of the 90s, it had lost almost all credibility among employed workforce and was predominantly used for unemployed⁵.

After this «prehistory», towards the end of the 90s, the mighty employers organisation CNPF (later on renamed MEDEF) appropriated the competence-concept for a very firm strategy of multidimensional change and started an impressionating campaign of its implementation:

- with considerable media work and high level political debate in favour of the concept,
- with lots of multi-partite working groups, big conferences and travels to visit such companies and countries that seemed to prove the relevance and value of the competence-concept,
- and with hundreds of top company representatives, union representatives, politicians, consultants, researchers and media people participating in these activities, collective travels included.

Thus, after two or three years of campaign, the competence-concept had conquered a favourite place in the media and in a good deal of scientific debate about the future of education and training; and it had won an apparently broad societal consensus. Critical voices and dissensus were and are rare or limited to specific aspects.

⁵ For details see Drexel 1997

This is quite surprising given the fact that MEDEF from the very beginning was quite clear about the two main goals of the promoted «*démarche de la compétence*»:

- the devaluation of the school diplomas that in France are traditionally determining
- companies recruitment policies and to a certain degree also the systems of wage
- classifications; and
- the transfer of the recognition of relevant competences to the employer – and thereby a transfer of wage determination to the company-level.

Let me quote in this context the definition of competence that has been formally authorised by MEDEF⁶: «Professional competence is a combination of knowledge, skills, experiences and behaviour-related capacities (*savoir être*) that are put into practise in a specific context. It (the competence-I.D.) can be identified only in its application in a professional situation. On this base it can be recognized. Therefore it is up to the company to assess, to evaluate, to recognize and to develop the competence»⁷.

- 2) After this example for a creative and powerful realization of the EC's general strategy for the implementation of the competence-concept in EU societies, let me come to the EC and national strategies concerning *the role of social research* in this context: Huge European research programs were launched around the concept of competences and informal learning, followed later on by national programs in this line. They were dedicated mainly to the definition of competence – especially competences being the product of learning integrated in the work process – , to experiments with the implementation in companies and to the development of technical instruments for identifying, measuring and certifying competences.

These programs favoured firm-near types of research like Human Resource-research, business-management research and certain specialities of psychology and pedagogics as well as their interdisciplinary and international cooperation, but also involved sociological research. The funding conditions obliged the researchers to do a lot of work for the «dissemination» of the results, i. e. publications, conferences etc.. Due to parallel cuttings of other national research budgets, these programs and their conditions had great effects. This can explain a good deal of the inflation of corresponding publications and some of its characteristics: repetivity, the dominance of normative and/or technical aspects and the scarcity of critical empirical research. A certain type of questions

⁶ CNPF: Journées internationales de la Formation 1998 – Objectif Compétences. Tme 4: Identifier et decrire les compétences professionnelles. Paris 1998

⁷ In Germany, the implementation process was mainly driven by a little group of persons from the education ministry (in strong dissense with other parts of this institution) and consultants as well as professors of business management. Despite of this difference in the actors, the strategy of involving as many groups and people as possible in the implementation process is very similar to that followed in France, though with less success up to now.

prevail, like «What is competence ? How is competence produced? How can it be measured? How can it be utilized for specific problems?»⁶ Other questions, like «What are the advantages, what are the risks of a generalized competence-approach in society? What interests (interest-groups) promote it and to what ends?» are almost missing.

So, we can watch a remarkable change of a research field that before had been dominated by critical and methodologically ambitious empirical (often sociological) research. This change is partly due to the fact, at least in Germany, that the new targets and conditions of public research funding opened the door for researchers with less defined scientific and political positions and with more availability for this kind of research. Established research groups on the other hand that traditionally had been focussing on the existing VET-system had more and more difficulties finding public financing for this research. They could not always avoid acquiring projects from these competence-centered programs – either joining then the chorus of competence or using these funds for some critical observations, but nevertheless refraining from open attacks in view of future funding. This helps to explain the surprising scarcity of critical voices from research.

- 3) By and large, much of the research in this field thereby became part of the *growing new branch of competence-related activities*:
- activities of political and technical implementation of competence-procedures within companies on the one hand – these activities are mainly the field of private consultancy of all kinds but include also professors nobilizing it;
 - and company external services of identification, assessment and recognition of the results of prior learning on the other hand – these activities are the field of growing quantities of more or less specialized institutions.

These activities are sometimes very well paid and sometimes rather precarious – but anyway they constitute a new occupational branch that has an important role in the implementation of the competence-concept. Your co-national Jens Bjørnavold who analysed the reports of about 15 countries on identification and recognition of informal learning results summarizes this phenomenon with the words «solutions seeking problems and suppliers seeking customers»⁸. And he adds: «The development of measurement and assessment methodologies can only in a few cases be described as driven by demand or as a push from the bottom up. If we study the last half of the 1990s when this trend gained momentum and strength, the existence of programs like ADAPT and the LEONARDO DA VINCI at European and sector levels have contributed to the setting and changing of the ‘assessment agenda’. The availability of ‘fresh money’, linked to a limited set of specific priorities, inspired a high number of

⁸ Jens Bjørnavold: Making learning visible – Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formaal learning in Europe. Thessaloniki 2000

institutions to involve themselves in the development of instruments and tools. Although the results of these projects may be of varying quality, the long-term impacts on the agenda of the organisations and institutions involved should not be underestimated» (ibid, p. 185).

With this quotation I'll end this analysis of central elements of the implementation of the competence-concept – a rather detailed description because of its specific interest for researchers and because of its more general interest for democratic thinking that may question this stile of change policy.

The competence-concept and socio-political change – possible consequences for societies

Let me analyse now (briefly and rather summarily) the main explicit and implicit objectives of the competence-concept, i. e. the consequences it would have if becoming reality. I will focus on five dimensions of social and political change:

- 1) The *value of public or semi-public diplomas* would be marginalized or even substituted by the value of competences fixed by individual companies or by company-near institutions of competence assessment and recognition. In education and vocational training, this would very probably lead to a strong *decrease in the responsibility of state and companies for organized learning processes*: for their accessibility for everyone, for the regulation of a certain quality and last but not least for financing publicly organized learning processes. State and company money would then be needed for the installation and continuous support of the heavy apparatus of competence assessment and recognition and its complex procedures.
- 2) Workforce-categories with their societally defined broad qualification profiles would be replaced by narrowly cut competence profiles and competence combinations depending fully on the hazards of individual private and work biographies. This would destroy the prerequisites for horizontal mobility, and it would thereby *destroy professional labour markets*. The ties binding the worker to his or her company would become much stronger – unilaterally of course.
- 3) At the same time the disappearance of societal learning tracks and of corresponding workforce categories would *generalize the great risks* that individuals with only company-and job-specific qualifications always have:
 - high unemployment risks, and
 - a high degree of dependence from their company and, as a consequence, a weak base for the defense of their interests.
- 4) To such a *weakening of the worker's position in his/her relation to the employer* would contribute the fact that the competence concept includes, as I mentioned, not only skills and experiences, but also values, norms and motivations. It is obvious that this opens the door for worker recruitment according to political criteria and for covered forms of repression in case of «deviant» thinking and behaviour.

A lot of inner firm democracy and interest representation that was built up since the post-war period risks erosion and disappearance.

- 5) Last but not least, the devaluation of a society's diplomas would *undermine collective agreements* and substitute them by company-specific or individual wage bargaining. Even if, under favourable conditions like in big companies, work councils might be involved in fixing conditions of competence recognition and in fixing wages, this would mean the disappearance of unifying forces that up to now had guaranteed certain minimal basic incomes for all workers – also for those in small firms. And it would mean an extreme weakening of unions as the force that has to defend general workforce interests beyond the single company.

Such and comparable consequences are inherent in the competence-concept, whether the actors engaged in its implementation are fully aware of it and want it or not. But the core actors intend them, I think. For them, what I called «consequences» or «risks» are goals of a «restructuration sociale», as employers and conservative government in France say. The concept of competence and its diffusion is an important (though of course not the only) instrument to reach these objectives.

The success of the competence campaign and an outlook towards the future

But how realistic is this strategy?

To answer this question, I can give only some information about the success which the competence-campaign has enjoyed up to now in France and Germany – rather partial informations; they might nevertheless be useful for a realistic picture of the phenomenon and its possible future.

Up to now the results of the competence-campaign are rather ambiguous:

- 1) In *scientific and public debate*, the term competence is rapidly proliferating as I described before. But this does not always go together with the contents of this concept: The term 'competence' is more and more used just as a synonym for 'qualification' or for parts of it (especially for informally acquired capacities). Thus, water is poured into the red wine, but the red colour is nevertheless diffusing – very ambiguous!
- 2) As for the *unions*, in France, as far as I can see, MEDEF's integrative strategy as well as unions' temptations 'to be in the boat' have considerable success. In Germany, where the implementation of the concept in society is less advanced than in France, there are indications of similar temptations. The traditional political approach of German unions not to fight new risky phenomena but to try to co-manage them (*Gestaltungsansatz*) may have contributed to this. But the confrontation of unions with the competence-concept is rather new and (as far as I can see) involving until now only their vocational training departments, not the much more powerful and power-conscious wage-bargaining

departments. Thus, critical discussions and resistance have still good chances to come.

- 3) The positions of *companies and employers organisations* seem divided on this matter: Some companies are among the most eager promoters of the concept, especially those who profit from the numerous publicly funded pilot-projects on «competence-development» allowing them – with public money and scientific legitimation – experimentation and notable change of their Human Resource policy (often: the integration of training in the workplace and work process). But other firms are sceptical or negative – an interesting observation: In France, the companies of certain branches – like f. ex. chemical industry – want to stick to the diploma-system, not only because they are more or less satisfied with its efficiency, but also because they think diplomas necessary for the reproduction of branch identity and the branch-identification of their workforce. And in Germany, firms who follow a policy to invest in a broad modernisation of the Dual System of vocational training seem rather reluctant.

Employers organisations sometimes just reflect the position of the majority of their members, sometimes take own political initiatives pro – like the MEDEF-initiative I described before – or contra as the German top organisation of the metal and electricity industry did implicitly giving strong declarations to maintain the Dual System and investing in this policy.

Due to all these ambiguities, the future is rather uncertain.

One possible evolution is a roll back to classical qualification policy, due to the inner weaknesses of the concept of outcome orientation and the problematic long term effects it would have also for companies⁹; a roll back that might nevertheless include the integration of some elements of the competence-approach like greater importance of work-integrated learning and some forms of their recognition in the framework of formalized learning tracks.

The other alternative is a continuous erosion of the value of diplomas in favour of company-driven assessment and recognition of the capacities that are relevant for the specific job; a process of erosion that might well go along with some – more and more decreasing – recognition of diplomas for a certain time or other forms of compromise.

The future of Europe's qualificational space is open. It will be influenced not the least by affirmative or critical research on this matter.

Some remarks regarding an adequate theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon

How can we, how shall we interpret the complex empirical phenomenon of the emergence of the concept that I described?

⁹ For details see Drexel 2002 (note 2)

For many political scientists, sociologists, historians and political economists the answer is probably quite simple: The concept of competence is an element of neoliberalism, an instrument – among other instruments – of deregulation and of neoliberal re-regulation.

I agree with this general interpretation, but I think it is not sufficient.

Yes, it is correct to say that the concept aims at deregulation of existing knowledge- and labour market structures and at undermining collective agreements and existing political institutions and norms. And it is correct to say that by doing so it aims at creating space for new regulations, new institutions and new norms that are more favourable for companies.

But this interpretation is not sufficient. It does not take into account the specific character of the competence-concept – its character as an *ideology* – and the importance of this fact for the intended change process: Ideology defined in the sense of Marx as the «false true» (das falsche Wahre) is to be seen as a construction of ideas of its own quality: a construction of ideas that combines real facts and problems of the existing system with a specific interpretation that is functional for certain interest groups, but at the same time covers these ties to group interests under a specific way of arguing.

If we don't take into account this double-face character of the competence-concept that makes it an ideology, its surprising success could not be fully explained. Let me use the last 2 minutes to at least indicate this:

- 1) The list of facts and real problems to which the competence-concept refers explicitly or implicitly is long and heterogenous. There are facts/problems that are more or less common to all EU countries like
 - the traditional underevaluation of practical experience (due to the hegemony of knowledge dating from a time when formal knowledge, especially academic knowledge, was rare),
 - growing scarcity of experience within the companies workforce (due to mass dismissals of elder workforce in the last years and growing percentages of young workforce coming from schools/universities),
 - tendencies of erosion of existing workforce categories and of their classical biographies (due to accelerated technical and organisational change making traditional qualifications obsolete as well as to economic crisis creating growing employment problems),
 - and so on

To these more general problems nationally specific ones have to be added.

- 2) All these facts and problems have quite concrete causes. But the concept of competences does not address and analyse these causes directly. Existing problems are just implicitly appealed to and bundled – by a construction of ideas that define a well delineated *corridor for specific forms of problem-solving*: for solutions in favour of employers interests and – in a broader perspective – for the legitimization of new rules and regulations in society.

In the competence-concept – like in every ideology – this orientation of problem-interpretation and problem-solving-propositions to specific group interests is veiled – covered under a specific, rather unconcrete terminology that

is open to interpretation and to many connotations, including to connotations having a long tradition and an idealistic background. Such a veiling that is probably as necessary as appealing to real problems if existing education and training systems and existing labour market structures shall be deregulated though they are deeply rooted in the interests and norms of the national societies.

This fact certainly contributes to understand the strategy of the European Commission and national governments to involve on a large scale media and research in the implementation of the competence-concept. And it may underline my hypothesis that the future of this concept can be influenced by, among other things, critical research.

Centrally Coordinated Decentralization – No Problem? Lessons from the Italian Case

Introduction¹⁰

I will present the results of an empirical investigation¹¹ that I did between 1998 and 2001 on new processes of decentralisation of bargaining on performance and wages – a research project asking essentially for the consequences of these processes for Industrial Relations. The investigated processes were implemented in Germany and Italy in the 90s – two quite different forms of decentralisation that might be even seen as extremes on a broad scale of possible forms:

- one process transferring the bargaining on (parts of) performance and wage to the individual level – i.e. between the individual worker (or small worker groups) and the direct superior – the German case;
- the other process reducing collective agreements essentially to compensating for the inflation, transferring all the rest of bargaining to the company level (i. e. between employer and work council) – the Italian case.

These processes of decentralization show – despite of their great differences – many parallels in the processes of their implementation in companies and in their consequences for Industrial Relations. These parallels facilitate the understanding of the complex implications of such processes – as well as do the numerous differences both in implementation and in their consequences.

I will present a lot of – I hope interesting – concrete, but also some of the more general results of this research. For reasons of time and complexity I will present only one of the cases – Italy –, thus leaving the German case and the comparison to your individual reading.

I choose the Italian case

- first because this is a really dramatic case of restructuration of the institutional system of Industrial Relations that can be seen as a model for restructuring the Industrial Relations systems of other countries;

¹⁰ Presentation at the Rokkan Centre on 12th September 2003.

¹¹ See: Ingrid Drexel: Neue Leistungs- und Lohnpolitik zwischen Individualisierung und Tarifvertrag. Deutschland und Italien im Vergleich, Frankfurt/New York 2002. Ingrid Drexel: Ergebnisabhängige Entlohnung und Verbetrieblichung der Verhandlungen – Italiens neues Verhandlungssystem in der Praxis. In: WSI-Mitteilungen 2002/6

- second because it allows to question a central thesis of established Industrial Relations research: the thesis that so-called «centrally coordinated (or: controlled) decentralisation processes» – i. e. processes of transferring bargaining that are agreed between top level social partners and state and regulated in their general terms – are a good solution for unions;
- and last but not least because there seems to exist – if I understood correctly – some parallels between the new Italian system and some well established characteristics of the Norwegian system of Industrial Relations – a fact that might stimulate interest and the discussion following my presentation.

I will start my presentation describing the main elements of the new Italian system of Industrial Relations and giving some explanations for its emergence in 1993. A third part will be dedicated to the process of implementation of this system, a fourth part to consequences for workers' interest representation and defence. And I will end with some conclusions for research and political action of unions.

The new architecture of Italy's Industrial Relations and the Premio di Risultato

In 1993, the central organisations of employers (among which the most important is Confindustria), of the three main unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL) and the government (at that time a center/left-wing government) concluded a tripartite agreement – the famous Protocollo of July 1993 – which implemented a concerted income policy and restructured profoundly the Italian system of Industrial Relations:

The roles of central collective agreements and company-level agreements – up to then rather unregulated – were changed, regulated and separated clearly from each other. The rhythm of bargaining was strictly fixed (with 4-years periods for collective agreements on working conditions and 2-year periods for collective agreements on wages), and peace-keeping periods were strictly prescribed. All these new regulations made the old tradition of re-bargaining results of central agreements on company level – wherever the local power relations allowed this – illegal.

The task of collective agreements (in Italy negotiated on national branch level) was factually reduced to compensate the so-called «programmed» inflation, that is an inflation rate that is «concerted» between top employers organisations, unions and government before every round of central bargaining: Collective agreements shall «orient» themselves at the programmed inflation; differences between programmed and real inflation should be compensated in the next bargaining round. But also the economic situation of the branch, the labour market situation and even the inflation rates of other European countries should be taken into account (what normally means: reduce wage increases). Thus, though collective agreements continued to exist and autonomy of the social partners was formally respected, their factual bargaining autonomy was strongly undermined.

Bargaining on any wage increases beyond inflation rate was transferred to the company level; and it was linked strictly to improvements of the competitiveness of the

company in terms of productivity, quality and/or rentability. Fix wage increases were excluded, all company-level bargained increases have to be variable and take the form of a Premio di risultato (literally: prime of result-Pdr in what follows), thus depending on the degree to which defined and bargained indicators for economic development were attained. The declared aim was to stimulate the work-motivations of the labour force and its identification with the fate of the company and to utilize better potentials for productivity and innovation that were generally supposed to «sleep» in the workforce of most companies.

In this context, local labour representatives should get a central and new role: The employer, assisted possibly by a local representative of the employers' organisation, and the company work council, assisted possibly by a local union representative, should negotiate and agree on a 2-year-program for the economic development of the company and on the construction of appropriate indicators and prime-schemes for the next period. This negotiation should be based on data showing the economic situation of the company to be given by the company. Bargaining results have to be fixed in a contract. And the work-council has the right to continuous and ex post control of the evolution of the indicators in order to control the evolution of the primes. All these elements were presented as important steps towards more information for labour and more «participation».

The implementation of these regulations of the Protocollo was supported by their integration (with little modification) in the collective agreements of the branches and by public financial incentives for firms adopting the PdR and proving this by a PdR-contract.

Some remarks regarding the background of the new system

The Protocollo was the product of a big bundle of many and very diverse interests of the national top actors (state, employers and unions); interests that were put together to a historically original compromise – asymmetric, but nevertheless a compromise. The main frame conditions necessitating and at the same time allowing this compromise were

- the problematic situation of Italy's economy wanting to enter into the Common Market in the first round, but having enormous difficulties to fulfil the Maastricht criteria;
- the economic necessity to reduce the high inflation in view of the future impossibility to correct its negative effects for Italian export by devaluations of the Lira (as had been done up to then regularly);
- and the resulting risk – especially feared by the unions – that employers' answer to this situation would be a dumping strategy, with a shift to the low price sector and with marked reduction of wages and working conditions.

The stimulation of sleeping productivity-, quality- and innovation resources as well as some capital accumulation was seen as the better alternative to such a dumping strategy. This argument was of course central for the unions' acceptance of the Protocollo. A second main reason for them was that the Protocollo finally brought the formal recognition of central *and* decentralised bargaining levels, a recognition up to then inexistent, making bargaining dependent on local power relations.

The many other arguments for the Protocollo – less important or more partial like the employers' interests to increase wage differentiation according to individual and company performance etc etc – cannot be dealt with here: I have to spare time for the results of the empirical parts of my research asking for the implementation of the Protocollo in the companies and in local labour representation and for the consequences.

The implementation of the new system – resistances and dynamics

(a) One methodological remark ahead: In order to get a well profiled picture of the relations between decentralisation processes and Industrial Relations, I had opted in my research for an exemplary approach – doing fieldwork in a strong branch (the metal industry) in economically and politically «strong» regions – in Italy in the relatively wealthy and traditionally left-wing («red») Emilia Romagna. Therefore the more detailed results come from this region, which excludes a full generalisation for all Italy.

- 1) Nevertheless I can and will start with three pieces of information regarding the implementation of the PdR in *overall Italy* to give you a first impression:
 - The diffusion of PdR was quantitatively and qualitatively very different, with much more contracts concluded in northern companies, in bigger companies and in those with higher percentages of unionized workforce.
 - The PdR-contracts showed very often – especially in the first bargaining round after 1993 – marked deviances from the regulations of the Protocollo.
 - Despite of this very «incomplete» implementation of the PdR, its economic results were considerable: The inflation rate fell to 1,7% in the first 4 years after 1993, and this largely at the cost of wages: The real wages went down, for ex. in the metal industry: -1.2% in 1994, -3,7% in 1995 and -4.8% in 1996; and the wage quota was reduced from 67,2% in 1992 to 62,3% in 1997.
- 2) In the *Emilia Romagna*, the implementation of the PdR met much *resistance* – from part of the employers as well as from the majority of the labour force and their local representatives (work councils and local unions):

As for the *employers*, quite a lot of them found it to complicated to plan – together with the work council and local representatives of Confindustria and unions – the future economic development of the firm and to negotiate on that base corresponding indicator- systems and prime-schemes. Other employers

feared the political impacts of opening their books to the traditionally rather conflict-oriented work councils and local unions. But of course many other companies welcomed the new system.

Workforce and its local representatives on the other hand were mostly quite hostile towards the new bargaining system; this holds true especially for members and representatives of the mightiest union, the left-wing CGIL, but also for a good deal of rank and file of the more right-wing unions (CISL, UIL). This hostility was due to a widespread pragmatic scepticism as to the companies' willingness to give fair information and to pay fairly productivity increases, there was a strong hypothesis of manipulation. But this hostility was also and may be even more due to contradictions existing between the new system and some political principles firmly rooted in the Emilia Romagna workforce since the great conflicts of the 60s and 70s: especially

- the principle that wage claims should be determined according to workers' wage needs and independently from the companies' economic situation – a principle that of course excludes variability of wages and primes linked to profitability, which implies risk sharing;
- and the principle that workforce representatives have to maintain autonomy with respect to company interests – a principle that excludes any form of co-management («role-diffusion» as they say) and any form of their integration in the companies' competition strategies («firm sindacalismo»).

The consequence of such political principles were widespread problems of acceptance for the new system and much criticism – criticism that, according to most local unionists as well as managers I interviewed, continued to dominate still in the years of my fieldwork (1998–2001).

3) But despite of this hostility work-councils and local unionists *pushed the implementation* of the new system:

- necessarily because this was the only way to get the wage increases that were so much needed after a long period of wage stop – this made them fight for PdR-contracts;
- but also because of political loyalty towards their union – this made them argue in favour of the new system, of its necessity or even value in their discussions with colleagues and rank and file.

Thus by and by the traditional principles lost some weight in determining arguments and political action. And it was not without a moment of tragic that the logic of the new system forced very active and consequent labour representatives to participate in its implementation though they deeply disapproved it.

Nevertheless this situation – and the existing power relations including traditions of power utilisation – made the *implementation a very difficult and a very incomplete process*, much more so than in other regions of Italy: In the first bargaining rounds after 1993 work-councils and local unions insisted on a mix of traditional bargaining results and results in line with the Protocollo, and the companies had to accept this more or less (sometimes even anticipated the

necessity of such concessions). The bargaining results of the first two rounds therefore were complex compromises (often very tricky compromises); especially

- combinations of fix salary increases and variable ones,
- a relatively great weight for productivity- and quality-indicators (that workforce accepted) in the prime schemes, and little weight for indicators of profitability with their implications of risk-sharing;
- almost in no firm individualized performance-related prime-schemes (as intended by the Protocollo), but either the same prime for all employees or prime differentiation according to classification differentials fixed by the collective agreements,
- and on the other hand very modest results on information and «participation» issues.

To summarize the significance of these «deviances» from core regulations of the Protocollo (and Confindustrias claims), it may be interesting that a great percentage of the PdR-contracts in Emilia Romagna were not co-signed by the local Confindustria-representatives as should be done, but only by local union representatives (and of course by the respective employer and work council).

But: To evaluate the whole process only on the base of these observations would be an error: A comparison of contracts negotiated in the companies I investigated in the first two rounds showed that in the second round the balance of compromise elements changed in favour of the company, – a tendency confirmed also more generally by local actors involved in many bargaining processes. So it became clear that the line of compromise was about to be transformed by a step-by-step process and that it was just this gliding character of change that helped the PdR-system to root and to develop its inner logic.

Consequences for workers' interest representation

This brings me to the consequences for the Industrial Relations, – consequences that either were already visible during my research or can be concluded from its results.

I will focus on three complexes of negative consequences, but include also some counteracting facts:

1) *The issue of differentiation and unity:*

Inherent in the transfer of wage bargaining beyond inflation compensation to the company level is of course a tendency of growing differentiation between economically strong companies and regions on the one hand and weak companies and regions on the other. This seems a great risk. Homogenisation of pay conditions is certainly not in every historical situation a good solution – it can easily make political unity break down. But in the Italian case there is a high probability that the PdR's impulses for differentiation will make existing

differences between big and small companies as well as between northern and southern regions increase very strongly – even to a point of no return: With the economic function of the central collective agreement almost eliminated, there are no more mechanisms and instruments for homogenisation that could counterbalance these centrifugal tendencies.

2) *Problematic consequences concerning the local institutions of interest representation:*

The system of planning, negotiating and controlling economic indicators and primes certainly brings a lot of new competence and some new information for local labour representatives. But this implies for them the necessity to focus strongly on technical and economic issues – with the risk of losing their energy for classical political issues of interest representation which – in a country with weak institutional labour rights like Italy – is absolutely necessary for union power.

Besides, in consequence of the participation of local labour representatives in the new system, the profile of their roles is changed: Whether they want it or not, they have to adapt their bargaining goals and activities to (I quote a local union representative involved in many of these bargaining processes) «what can be economically justified for the company instead of what is politically justified for workers' needs».

These risks are aggravated by the fact that the local workforce representatives have to focus dominantly on the single company resp. on the two or three biggest local companies. Thereby, collective demands and action going beyond local company (or companies) can easily disappear from their strategies and agenda. This risk was much discussed within CGIL, and the unions try to fight it by elaborating and broadly diffusing regional and local guidelines for every round of company-level bargaining; guidelines that define common goals for company-level bargaining to be aimed at aside the company-specific goals. The question of how efficient these guidelines can be under centrifugal pressures must remain open.

Last but not least, labour representatives accepting variability of wages and risk sharing and/or their integration in the companies' competition policies apparently lose a good deal of the traditional confidence and support of their rank and file – often of the most active part of the workforce from whose loyalty and voluntary activities much of the strength of the unions in the Emilia Romagna depends.

3) *Consequences for workforce and their orientations*

First, even if the new system is mostly disapproved of it apparently makes its way into heads and behaviour: Interest for and orientation towards the firms' economic situation is said to grow, the evolution of the indicators is watched, firms' new philosophies are more listened to – in short: the mental integration of the workforce in the company and the identification with it seems to grow. And of course the ties between wage and the companies' annual economic results tend to reduce conflictuality.

Moreover, with central collective bargaining losing most of its objective economic function, there is a risk that central collective agreements and unions

also lose their subjective importance for workers. Nevertheless, the short-sightedness of employers and state help for some countervailing tendencies – I will come back to this later on.

And last but not least, part of the workforce – especially politically active union members – seem to be profoundly disappointed, they tend to be resigned and to take some distance to the unions. Of course I cannot evaluate the quantitative importance of such tendencies, but they should not be underestimated given the great role of these active groups for union power.

(4) *Erosion of political culture and changes in society*

To summarize these and other changes in local labour representation and in rank and file orientations that result from the Protocollo, Italian interview partners often spoke of an «erosion of the political culture» of the Emilia Romagna. But they almost always add – company-representatives as well as labour representatives, and often in the same terms – that this erosion is also a consequence of two societal changes of the last 10 years:

- on the one hand consequence of the fact that the population of the Emilia Romagna «lost the perspective of a transformation of the society» (the general circumscription of the breakdown of communism);
- and on the other hand consequence of the rupture between generations, i. e. of the massive entrance of young workers in the firms: workers with much higher formal qualifications and diplomas than their forerunners, but without the political socialisation the elder generation had acquired in the battles of the 60s and 70s.

These societal evolutions certainly contribute to the political impacts of the new bargaining system. And they will with some probability speed up the full implementation of the new system when the elder generation leaves companies and local union offices in the next years.

(5) *Inherent contradictions and countervailing tendencies*

Nevertheless the evolution is not without inner contradictions and does not go only in one direction. As I announced before, there are countervailing tendencies: not only the strength of political traditions that don't erode so quickly and under certain circumstances can even integrate young workers with a different background, – but also and may be even more the short-sighted and provocative policies of the opponent side. Such policies and their counteracting effects can be watched on three levels:

- On the *level of the individual company*, restrictive bargaining policies, unfair prime-schemes, data manipulation, and last but not least the factual execution of risk share schemes (that are contractually agreed, but whose execution is nevertheless seen as illegitimate) risk to provoke wildcat strikes or covert forms of demonstrating workers' discontent.
- On the *level of central bargaining*, repeated policies of employers' organizations and the state to underrate the difference between the programmed and the real inflation (a difference that according to the Protocollo has to be compensated in the following collective

agreements) lead to recurrent conflicts making workforce wait for a new collective agreement; a situation that has provoked several strikes.

- And last but not least on the *level of political institutions* attacks from Confindustria and the Berlusconi-government against the two bargaining levels that had been acknowledged in the 1993 system became louder and louder since the end of the 90ies. These attacks aim at the elimination of one of the levels (preferably the central one of course) or at its transformation into a loose framework leaving almost everything open to local bargaining or unilateral decision by the companies. Such attacks absurdly bring the unions in a situation to defend the Protocollo system; but they can also destroy remaining illusions about «concertation» and the reliability of guarantees such a trilateral competition pact brings for labour interests.

To summarize: Inherent in the historical situation that brought the Protocollo there are also forces that can countervail some of what I described as its negative consequences for labour, may be even revitalize some of its traditional strength in new form (if you think for ex. of the enormous support for general and branch strikes of last year). But whether this will be enough to neutralize the day-to-day effects of the PdR ?? – I doubt!

For me, in consequence of all these contradictory forces and tendencies, the future of Italian Industrial Relation is open.

Nevertheless I can draw some conclusions for future research on decentralisation processes and for future political strategies on decentralisation issues. Four of these conclusions will be presented to end my contribution, three conclusions for research and one for unions policy:

Conclusions for research and political action

- 1) The value of the concepts «centralisation/decentralisation» and «regulation/deregulation» for categorising national systems as well as for qualifying them with respect to their impacts for labour interests – as classical Industrial Relations research often does – this value has its limits: As the Italian case shows, decentralisation does not necessarily exclude parallel centralisation. And central regulation can have the same negative effects for the defence of workers' interests as in other countries' deregulation (destruction of existing regulations): a weakening of the workers possibilities to defend their interests – in this case by restricting desentralised bargaining by regulating it strictly in the described way.
- 2) The *institutional model* of a decentralisation process cannot be taken as the whole change process as many studies on changing Industrial Relations do. An approach restricting itself to the architecture of Industrial Relations is blind for the social processes that filter its concrete realisation as well as for the social processes that follow its implementation:

- It is blind for processes that transform the roles and attitudes of labor representatives of the different levels, blind for the reorientation of interests of bargaining actors and of the logics of their every day behaviour.
 - It is blind for the resulting transformation of the «spirit» with which institutions, regulations and roles are filled.
 - And it is blind for changes of the orientations of the workforce – changes in the «political culture» that in the long run might have the most important consequences.
- 3) Therefore the fact that a decentralisation process is *centrally coordinated* is by no means reassuring for unions' power as sometimes suggested by researchers and union representatives who recommend this form of giving space for more differentiation. Risks like firm syndicalism, integrating work councils in companies' competition strategies on the one hand and growing apathy of the workforce destroying conflictuality on the other hand can weaken unions' power considerably.
- (4) My *political conclusion for the unions* is therefore: Decentralisation can be a very dangerous strategy, – more dangerous than it seems at a first glance and in the short run.

But *if* unions cannot prevent it or even *do* want it – because of course unsatisfied impulses for more differentiation can also be very dangerous – than it is not enough just to coordinate and regulate its general framework at the beginning. Specific political answers to decentralization seem necessary to contain its inherent risks: answers that strengthen institutional and political ties and interactions between central and local processes. The most important answers are probably:

- a policy of strengthening the political and ideological coherence of decentral bargaining processes with central issues: political discussions and targets/procedures that revitalize in rank and file and in local labor representatives general political orientations that go beyond single firms, – against the erosion of comprehensive orientations to and solidarity with general workforce interests;
- and a policy to gain unions access to detailed information on the decentralised bargaining processes and their results – against the loss of all informational control of the evolution of the real incomes of the different fractions of the workforce – a control that seems absolutely necessary to conceptualize a realistic demand policy for remaining central bargaining and for a possible future policy of re-homogenisation.

As the Italian case study shows, the necessarily long process of implementation of a new decentralized system – a process with underdetermination, uncertainties and the distrust and resistance among rank and file – can give a lot of space and occasions for such a politisation of local processes and for gaining information access if unions utilize this process strategically.

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