Trade union research: for what purpose?

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At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century labour scholars constantly pointed out the decline of trade unions in Europe which appeared to be irreversible. Figures seemed to prove them right (Ebbinghaus and Visser 1999): Union density rates were steadily decreasing in nearly all European countries (Visser 2015). Union members did no longer represent the average workers, as the proportion of elderly people and retirees was growing, while unions were having problems in attracting younger people (often working under precarious employment conditions, Pernicka and Aust 2007). Women and migrants who entered the labour markets since the 1970ies were also underrepresented within the union membership (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez 2010; Ledwith 2012; Munro 2001; see also the articles of Griesser/Sauer and Sorger in this volume). Beside the declining membership rates, the shrinking power of unions seemed evident as well when looking at the decreasing collective bargaining coverage in a lot of European countries (Visser 2015).

While the specific reasons for this gradual decline of trade unions in Europe may vary from country to country, labour scholars put forward some general explanations: In literature, the power shift towards capital as a consequence of neoliberal restructuring since the 1980ies is mentioned as one of the most central reasons for shrinking union power. Moreover, individualization and fragmentation processes within the workforce, growing competition between workers as well as nation states and internal, strategic and political errors and misjudgements within the union organizations are pointed out.

The title of this introduction is influenced by Oscar Negt, who wrote in 2005 the book “Trade Unions: For what purpose?”.

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Still, the “European Social Model” (ESM) which – according to Hyman (2005) – includes standards on employment protection, a priority of collective agreements over individual employment contracts and some forms of interest coordination (e. g. social partnership) – is far from dead yet. Unions remain important economic and political actors on the European as well as on the national level (Hofmann 2016; Pernicka 2015). Moreover, the general decline of European unions was temporally accompanied with (sometimes more, sometimes less) successful revitalization attempts from unions in the US and the Global South (Voss and Sherman 2000; Huzzard et al. 2004).

These revitalization processes show that the above-named decline is far from inevitable, because unions (like any other social actor) always have a scope of action (Brinkmann et al. 2008). As a consequence of their global networks and entanglements, some European unions even started to learn from the experiences of their colleagues in the US or in South Africa and adapted the revitalization strategies to their national contexts and challenges.

These are reasons enough for European social scientists to put unions back on the research agenda. The aim of this special issue is to make a contribution to the revitalization of trade union research in the European (especially the German-speaking) context: How can the European unions stop their steady decline (in terms of membership as well as in terms of power)? What role do internal opening processes (e. g. inclusion of women and migrants into the union work) play for their revitalization strategies? Which role could an engaged social research play for union revitalization processes? And: What enables and prevents unions to adapt themselves to new challenges (e. g. the ongoing Europeanization processes or the question of rising unemployment)? These and other question are brought up and answered by labour scholars within the following pages.

A special emphasis of this special issue lies in the promotion of research from young scholars. A workshop for young researchers – which took place in November 2014 in Vienna and was organized by John Evers (VHS Vienna), Jan Kreisky (University of Vienna), Lukas Neissl (ITH), Kathrin Niedermoser (University of Vienna) and myself – led the way to this special issue. Besides some participants of the workshop, several other distinguished researchers were willing to contribute their research results to the issue. Thus I’d like to thank all participants, authors and reviewers for the excellent cooperation within the last years, preceding this work.

The special issue starts with an article of *Klaus Dörre* who reflects his own research experience with trade unions from the perspective of public sociology. By taking the example of the Jena power resource approach, the article reflects upon the tense interrelation between empirical research, stakeholder publics and scientifically grounded social critique. In his article Klaus Dörre illuminates the difficulties of an organic public sociology within the trade union power field. The following article by *Kathrin Niedermoser* deals with the role trade unions play in current social-ecological debates. Niedermoser argues that although an independent trade union climate policy in Austria hardly exists, trade unions take up environmental and climate issues. Kathrin Niedermoser provides a historic outline of the conflictual relationship of the organised Austrian labour movement towards environmental questions and mentions unions’ strategies on recent challenges (e. g. climate change). The article

of Markus Griesser and Birgit Sauer deals with the question how organised labour in Austria has to change in order to successfully address migrant workers. Markus Griesser and Birgit Sauer identify strategies which are predominantly associated with the traditional service model. From the perspective of the power resource approach they argue that the supportive practices should also be seen as part of a broader strategy of union revitalization.

The representation of women in the structures of the Austrian trade unions has a long tradition. Claudia Sorger shows that despite this tradition, Austrian trade unions still show a deficit in gender equality, e. g. few women in leading positions. The article discusses in which way approaches and strategies for the advancement of gender equality have been implemented. The research work of Nele Dittmar deals with the question of Europeanization processes within national trade unions. By taking the example of the German union ver.di Nele Dittmar offers some suggestions on how to look at the organization of Europe-related work from a field theoretical perspective. The article describes which actors in ver.di are involved in European policy making and sketches the power relations between these actors. Last but not least, Stefanie Gerold takes up the question of the introduction of the leisure option (“Freizeitoption”) in several collective agreements in Austria. Based on a qualitative research, the author shows unions’ views on this novel instrument, as well as the motives of employees who were given the possibility to decide for the leisure option.

The special issue is complemented by two reviews of recently published books on trade union strategies: Vera Glassner read Markus Englers book “*Zur Entstehung europäischer Solidarität. Eine soziologische Analyse der Gewerkschaften bei Airbus im Konflikt*” and Ben Wodrich read the joint work of Sarah Bormann, Jenny Jungehülsing, Shuwen Bian, Martina Hartung and Florian Schubert called “*Last Call for Solidarity. Perspektiven grenzüberschreitenden Handelns von Gewerkschaften*”.

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