

## Book reviews

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**Tony Huzzard, Denis Gregory and Regan Scott (eds.)**

*Strategic Unionism and Partnership: Boxing or Dancing?*

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004, 362 pages. ISBN 1-4039-1756-6

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This publication is the major output of one of the many projects being carried out within the framework of the SALTSA research programme. SALTSA is a joint undertaking of the three main Swedish confederations of employees – the Swedish Federation of Trade Unions (Landsorganisationen i Sverige), the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation) and the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation) – and the National Institute for Working Life. The research programme focuses on various aspects of working life covering the areas of ‘work environment’, ‘labour market’ and ‘work organisation’. In 1998, a project entitled ‘The New Trade Union – Boxing and Dancing’ started within the area of ‘work organisation’. The main objective of the project, at both the theoretical and policy level, was to test the assumption that effective social partnership approaches can be devised and deployed within the European Union (EU) that will confer mutual gains on the enterprises and workforces concerned.

As elaborated by Denis Gregory and Tommy Nilsson in their introductory chapter, the project found its inspiration in two sources. First of all, the trend towards decentralised industrial relations that has been observed from the 1980s led the authors to focus on the enterprise level. Although the decentralisation trend is neither straightforward nor simple, they argue that this level has become more important

‘as the critical locus for HRM strategies aimed at promoting cooperation between employees (team working) or between unions and management (social dialogue)’ (p. 10). Moreover, the authors remark that there is also evidence of a widening of the scope of cooperation at the enterprise level that has moved beyond the traditional focus on wage bargaining and job-saving activities.

The European Commission Green Paper *Partnership for a New Organisation of Work* is a second source of inspiration. Published in 1997, the Green Paper promotes the development of more efficient forms of work organisation through greater dialogue and participation at the workplace between employers and worker representatives (whether through trade unions or works councils) in order to improve competitiveness in the EU and to increase employment. In other words, it was assumed that a social partnership approach at the micro level could, if sufficiently diffused, generate significant macroeconomic benefits at national and EU level. The authors ask themselves whether this new discourse on work organisation, as set out in the Green Paper, is also a new discourse for underpinning trade union innovation.

### ‘Boxing’ and ‘dancing’ as metaphors

The authors are aware of the troublesome nature of the concept ‘social partnership’, a somewhat ambiguous term because of its

country-specific meanings. To make a distinction between the shifting patterns of adversarial and cooperative industrial relations, they use the terms 'boxing' and 'dancing' respectively. 'Boxing' is associated with the process of collective bargaining (including industrial action) and 'dancing' is linked to comprehensive partnership between organised labour and capital, especially at the enterprise level. The authors use these metaphors 'because of their simplicity and their capacity to relate our experiences to what we already believe' (p. 5). For this reviewer, applying these linguistic artefacts is rather a plus point than a weakness for international research. As the authors themselves claim, the 'boxing' and 'dancing' metaphors 'contain representations of phenomena that are known yet at the same time they open up possibilities for innovation as they also give shape and meaning to the unknown' (p. 5). Provided that the reader is familiar with an industrial relations system, the use of the metaphors could prove very appealing. Since the publication is intended for both practitioners and researchers, the use of the 'boxing' and 'dancing' metaphors should not cause great difficulties.

Although acknowledging the divergent and conflicting interests between employer and employee representatives, the term 'social partnership' also stresses that there are areas where interests may overlap. Academics and practitioners inspired by Marxist positions are likely to contest this pluralist view and to emphasise the inherently unequal nature of such partnership. Yet, the authors' aim is 'neither to embrace partnership as a union strategy nor to debunk it' (p. 3) and leave it open for practitioners to evaluate social partnership as a possible strategy for trade union revitalisation. Nevertheless, the choice of the metaphors for referring to adversarial and

cooperative industrial relations is in itself a kind of ideological position. Thus, most people will associate negative feelings, such as aggression, more with boxing than with dancing. So, although the authors claim repeatedly that they refuse to make judgments on boxing versus dancing, they cannot avoid an implicit bias.

### Strategic choices as to the employment relationship

In addition to the above-mentioned first chapter, which presents the publication in terms of the project, there are two other introductory chapters. As a whole, the three introductory chapters are at times repetitive with regard to certain aspects. Tony Huzzard's chapter two on the theoretical foundation of this book is by far the most interesting. Against the (post-modern) view of trade unions in terminal decline, as shown by union membership trends in most countries, the author emphasises that unions can nevertheless shape their own destiny to a certain extent. This voluntarism is applied theoretically with the aid of the concept of strategic choice. Of course, this theoretical tool has some limitations, not least in losing sight of the power dimension. However, Huzzard is aware of this criticism and succeeds in elaborating the concept by identifying union strategic choices at different levels.

Given that the authors try to explore the issue of social partnership as a trade union strategy, the concept of strategic choice is at the core of the publication. Taking as it does a theoretical lead, chapter two is therefore the most important chapter. Moreover, to my knowledge, this is one of the first attempts to apply the concept of strategic choice to the analysis and explanation of industrial relations within non-Anglo-Saxon countries. So, from an

international perspective, this publication explores the strategic choices of regulating the employment relationship through configurations of 'boxing and dancing' by using the concept of 'social partnership' as a possible strategic choice for trade union renewal – hence the title of the book. Although this is a very relevant research topic, a weak point is that the authors never define clearly what they understand by a revived interest in the trade union. Even though they make reference to gains in union membership, this is still a rather one-dimensional indicator of union renewal.

The third introductory chapter, written by Regan Scott, concerns the recent developments at the European level, like the Green Paper, in which the evaluation of social partnership and trade union modernisation is embedded. Not surprisingly, Scott concludes that 'a re-activation of the best of classical boxing' (p. 62), i.e. a more forceful trade union politics, will be needed to counterbalance the commitments of the EU to a neoliberal political economy.

### Varieties of the dance

The book continues with the familiar country overview chapters, presenting the basic storylines of 'boxing' and 'dancing' at different levels of union-employer interaction, thus going beyond the enterprise level. Seen through the metaphors, there is a danger that the union-employer interaction could become detached from reality, but that is never the case. All country chapters are well written and based upon a rich set of case studies. However, taken together, the country chapters appear rather unbalanced, especially in terms of the depth of analysis, as is illustrated by the only sporadic use of elucidatory models. Written by academic researchers as well as practising trade unionists, all varieties of capitalism

are included: Sweden as a social-democratic form, the Netherlands and Germany as continental European forms, Italy as a Mediterranean form, Romania (which replaced Hungary as the original choice) as an ex-communist country and, finally, Ireland and the United Kingdom as Anglo-Saxon forms. The United States compensates for the otherwise entirely euro-centric view of the future of unions. The authors are respectively Denis Gregory for the UK, Tony Huzzard and Tommy Nilsson for Sweden, Maarten van Klaveren and Wim Sprenger for the Netherlands, Martin Kuhlmann for Germany, Mirella Baglioni for Italy, Kevin P. O'Kelly for Ireland, Aurora Trif and Karl Koch for Romania and Steven Deutsch for the USA. Reference is made to an extensive appendix with case studies from various countries, which are selected as being illustrative of certain aspects of the country storylines. The value of these case studies for academic use is rather limited: they are more interesting to practitioners from both unions and management quarters.

Here, I will focus on Tony Huzzard's well thought-out chapter which compares the country chapters and discusses the different choreographies. First of all, he concludes that union strategic choices can only be made within a policy space; this is a certain space of action, which is highly dependant on the power base of each union movement within each country. Apart from the Swedish case, most union decisions to dance appear to have been made in contexts where unions have a relatively weak power base. Thus, they are an attempt to regain legitimacy or even presence at a workplace, but this is no guarantee for union renewal. Secondly, most social partnerships are restricted to a single issue and within the definite timescale of a project.

Thirdly, partnership arrangements are not always codified, because ‘employers may be prepared to withhold from exerting some of their power and thereby grant the local union a high degree of influence’ (p. 222). Yet, this informal partnership can hardly be used to reinforce workers’ positions. Fourthly, Huzzard infers that partnerships can operate at different levels of industrial relations processes and are sometimes connected, but there may be also ‘tension between a harmonious dance at one level and a vigorous boxing match at others’ (p. 223). Fifthly, whether the union or the employer is leading the dance can change over time. Finally, Huzzard ends with the remark that the mutual gains of partnership can vary from soft to hard aspects of workplace development. In conclusion, social partnership is highly context dependent, not least because influenced by long traditions in industrial relations, and has ‘a better chance of enduring in contexts where there is statutory underpinning’ (p. 224). Nevertheless, as one would expect, there is no evidence from any of the country chapters that social partnership is superseding collective bargaining. Therefore, the dynamics of strategic choices to ‘box’ or to ‘dance’ are more like the two ends of a continuum, interrelated and with a ‘cyclical tendency’ (p. 218) in the long term.

### The interrelatedness of ‘dancing’ and ‘boxing’

That neither ‘boxing’ nor ‘dancing’ offer an exclusive trajectory for union development is hardly a surprising conclusion. To my mind, the real value of this book lies elsewhere, namely, sociologically speaking, in

its approach to foreground agency over structure. This more optimistic outlook is a welcome antidote to those who attribute all dynamism to capitalism and who consider trade unions as a merely static anachronism.

In the final chapter, Denis Gregory, Tony Huzzard, Regan Scott and Steven Deutsch make the necessary differentiations with regard to social partnership. They stress that social partnership is ‘no automatic route to union renewal’ (p. 241), but at the same time that ‘the strategic choice to dance can be seen as a way for unions to create new legitimacy or even power to enter new boxing rings’ (p. 239). This is a very profound conclusion: those who believe that social partnership is simply an employers’ device for legitimising restructuring efforts are thus wrong. In fact, they especially should acknowledge that capitalism is a system full of contradictions and that social partnership therefore can be used as a lever for union renewal. However, as mutual trust is a prerequisite for social partnership, the contexts of rationalisation and restructuring make trust building difficult. It is hardly surprising then that the authors believe that ‘boxing will continue as a core union activity’ (p. 239). The style of the great boxer Muhammad Ali was once described by himself as ‘floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee’. Could it be that Ali’s boxing style is also a kind of dancing?

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