

# Globalization: Consequences for Work and Employment in Advanced Capitalist Societies

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## Abstract

This essay considers the consequences of globalization for work and employment in advanced capitalist societies. It outlines the classic arguments of hyperglobalists, sceptics, and transformationalists. It first discusses the roles of multinational companies (MNCs) in both disseminating and differentiating distinctive models of work organization and employment relations across their international operations, emphasizing the micropolitical mediation of such processes and the interplay of “system,” “societal,” and “dominance” effects in the selection and hybridization of such models. It next considers the roles of corporate and state actors in recasting national institutional configurations, highlighting the contradictory and contested features of such configurations, and the scope for substantive remaking despite apparent institutional continuity. It then considers agendas for future research which build on these arguments but give fuller consideration to service MNCs and MNC operations beyond advanced capitalist societies. Finally, it notes the possible impact of other vectors of globalization on overall trends and variations in work and employment across societies.

## INTRODUCTION

Long-standing arguments about patterns of convergence or divergence in work and employment across advanced capitalist societies have focused primarily on the impact of common technical and organizational imperatives. Recently, however, attention has shifted to globalization (the increasingly rapid movement and interaction of people, objects, and images across the world), both as an explanation of convergence and of the recasting of differences across firms and states.

Analyses of the impact of globalization must recognize that it is a contested concept, with disagreements about the relative weight, scope, and impact of the processes involved. Furthermore, globalization is not simply an outcome of technical or market imperatives but is an organized project

involving active political processes that are themselves contested by different social actors, especially multinational companies (MNCs) and state and supra-state agencies, but also labor and social movements. Scholarly attention has focused on the actions and impacts of MNCs and on the policies and capacities of the states on whose territories they operate, but I also note other ways in which globalization may impinge on patterns of work and employment.

### CLASSIC ARGUMENTS

Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, and Perraton (1999) identified three classic positions on globalization. The *hyperglobalists* argued that market forces and the policies of global firms successfully marginalized nation states, which were no longer capable of implementing regulatory and social policies at odds with corporate priorities. Thus, MNCs treat the globe as a “borderless world,” readily moving operations across different localities to select attractive policy regimes and compliant workforces. Optimistic versions of this diagnosis project virtuous circles of growth and the spread of universal “best practices,” ultimately benefiting both employers and employees through shared enterprise and enhanced prosperity. Pessimistic versions forecast the growing vulnerability of workers to a footloose capital seeking fresh supplies of cheap and malleable labor.

The *sceptics* questioned both the nationless character of modern firms and the powerlessness of contemporary nation states. MNCs usually remain linked to home economies, especially if they have a substantial home market, and retain disproportionately home-based share-ownership, senior management, and R&D. Furthermore, MNCs adopt varied strategies and structures for internationalization, implying differences in their overseas operations. Meanwhile, nation states are constrained by their modes of insertion within the international economy, but nevertheless retain significant (although variable) leverage to pursue distinctive national or regional policies which sustain national patterns of work and employment. Such arguments referenced Japan’s distinctive political economy and contrasts between the state policies and work and employment relations of different European economies. This prompted distinctions between several “varieties of capitalism” or “national business systems” with distinctive clusters of complementary institutions (work systems, bargaining structures, training systems, welfare policies), specific bases for international competitiveness, and “path-dependent” trajectories of change. Such cross-national differences in work and employment patterns, rooted in distinctive relationships between state, capital, and organized labor, remain relatively resilient rather than eroded by the dynamics of globalization.

Some sceptics replaced the hyperglobalists' linear conception of intensifying globalization with a purely cyclical account of the ebb and flow of internationalization. The *transformationalists*, however, argue that the scope and speed of cross-national flows of contacts, information, and power are so unprecedented that they generate qualitatively new patterns of social relations on a global scale, not least in work and employment. They underline the major expansion *and* increasingly sophisticated internal coordination of MNCs, which also extend their reach through supplier networks or "production chains." Different phases of corporate activity may then be disaggregated and redistributed across operations located in distinctive settings, sometimes involving advanced technology R&D clusters but more often locating marketing or final assembly in high-wage metropolitan centers and initial manufacture or parts production in labor-intensive low-wage economies. The spread of such coordinated MNC operations across different national economies shifts the balance of power in favor of corporations, against workers, suppliers, localities, *and* states. But MNCs continue to juggle cross-cutting objectives that limit their scope to open and close operations in a truly "footloose" manner. Cost reduction is qualified by "sunk costs" of existing investments or efforts to access particular markets, employee skills, or "innovation clusters." The implications of these features are played out in distinctive ways across industrial sectors and global regions. MNCs still concentrate flows within the "triad" of Europe, North America, and Japan, but several tiers of East Asian newly industrialized countries, Eastern Europe, China, and now India and Brazil, play growing but distinctive roles.

Thus, the transformationalists accept some of the specific criticisms of hyperglobalism developed by the sceptics—recognizing the need for more differentiated accounts of the organization, leverage, and strategies of MNCs (and their production chains) and the capacities, priorities, and policy repertoires of nation states—but reject a merely cyclical interpretation of the consequences. A further reorientation of debate followed the financial and economic crises of the new millennium because they dramatized the contradictions and uncertainties besetting both firms and states. As a result, power relations, conflicts of interest, and contested alternatives are gaining renewed attention in discussions of MNCs, national states, and broader processes of globalization.

#### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Recent research on the role of MNCs in disseminating work systems and employment practices across their international operations has combined the empirical mapping of these features across different firms and societies

and the elaboration of fresh conceptual tools for understanding the complex patterns this research has documented. Indicative examples of such research include analyses of the management of employment relations by US multinationals across four European national destinations (Almond & Ferner, 2006); studies of the international transfer and hybridization of production models in the auto sector (Boyer, Charron, Jürgens, & Tolliday, 1998); survey comparisons of MNCs of varied national origins operating in four distinctive political economies (Edwards, Marginson, & Ferner, 2013; Edwards, Tregaskis, Collings, Jalette, & Susaeta, 2013); case studies of Japanese subsidiaries in different sectors and supply-chain positions in one UK labor market (Elger & Smith, 2005); comparisons of the Czech subsidiaries of German, Austrian, and US automotive and finance firms (Meardi, Strohmer, & Traxler, 2013); comparisons between white-goods factories operating in East Asia, Brazil, Turkey, and Southern Africa (Nichols & Cam, 2005); studies of major fast-food companies across a wide range of national economies (Royle & Towers, 2002; Royle, 2010); and comparisons of call centers in Britain and India providing similar services for UK financial service providers (Taylor & Bain, 2005). These studies, from which examples are drawn throughout this essay, underline the wide range of comparisons in play, by sector, national origins, and location, and the varied methodologies that have been deployed to analyze the international dissemination and adaptation of work practices and forms of employment.

One influential analytical starting point, rooted in sceptical analyses of globalization, highlights the obstacles to dissemination arising from the cultural and institutional distance between “home” and “host” countries. Such *societal effects* continue to be significant, but recent research also suggests these are often qualified or overridden by other processes. Corporations based in dominant economies may be in a position to push the adoption of their home practices across their international operations, despite the variety and distinctiveness of host institutions and practices: US firms, for example, have often pursued similar HR policies across their subsidiaries. Meanwhile, management consultants have also codified and disseminated the policy repertoires of such dominant firms and economies. Furthermore, such powerful models and recipes may eventually gain the status of pervasive international “best practices,” thus moving from *dominance effects* to *system effects* (Edwards *et al.*, 2013; Smith, 2008). For example, “lean production” has become an influential model beyond Japanese manufacturing, borrowed and adapted across many other firms and sectors.

The corporate managers at the locus of such *societal*, *dominance*, and *system effects* are, nevertheless, more likely to develop mixed and modified policy repertoires than simply transplant home practices in an unmodified manner.

In part, this is a response to the cross-pressures arising from societal and dominance effects, but “labor process theorists” also suggest that system effects are themselves characterized by contradictory features, not least in regard to the dynamics of work and employment relations. One way of addressing the development and implementation of the resultant organizational innovations is through the concept of *hybridization*, developed particularly in a sophisticated research program which dissects the evolution and fate of a spectrum of such hybrids (Boyer *et al.*, 1998; see also Maerdi & Tóth, 2006).

MNCs also remain heterogeneous, pursuing varied *logics of internationalization* and thus different priorities (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003). Some prioritize market access, with little interest in transferring distinctive work and employment practices; others emphasize financial returns across their operations, and seek to disseminate monitoring and investment procedures rather than details of work processes and industrial relations; while those committed to standardized and integrated production platforms seek to transfer their core production practices, but may be more selective about employment arrangements. Finally, fresh attention is now being paid to the distinctive mandates which various subsidiaries may have within an MNC, highlighting how firms may select different elements of their monitoring procedures, production, and HR repertoires for implementation in different subsidiaries. At the same time, such mandates may change, extending from, say, market access to design and development, or contracting through noninvestment or even closure (echoing the classic vulnerability of “branch plants”).

Together, these analytical resources help to explain processes of selective transfer and uneven hybridization of both work systems and employment relations across the international operations of MNCs. These processes clearly compromise any strong reproduction of societal effects but they also undermine any simple convergence in work and employment practices. Instead, MNCs as global actors contribute to both convergence and continuing differentiation, the latter influenced by differences of national origins, modes of internationalization, sectors, locations in corporate divisions of labor, and host political economies. In regard to dominant trajectories, it may be argued that the capacities of MNCs to coordinate and control their international operations, combined with intensified cross-border corporate rivalry, tend to expose workers to more stringent work routines, greater work intensity, increased job insecurity, and challenges to effective collective representation. But it is also evident that MNCs and their supplier chains continue to transfer and modify work systems and employment practices in quite varied, complex, and uneven ways, so that any such shared tendencies coexist with persistent differences of experience.

Two complementary strands of current research provide important resources for extending such arguments, namely, studies of the internal

dynamics of corporate policy making and analyses of the scope for MNCs to influence the reconstruction of specific national political economies. The first focuses on the *micropolitics of MNC decision making* through which work systems and employment relations are constructed and reconstructed across international operations (Ferner, Bélanger, Tregaskis, Morley, & Quintanilla, 2013; Ferner, Edwards, & Tempel, 2012; Geppert & Dörrenbächer, 2011; Morgan, 2005a). Particular attention is given to the relationships between headquarters and subsidiary managers, as they address cross-cutting pressures, uncertainties, and competing priorities in policy formation and implementation, and work through their implications for patterns of transfer, hybridization, superficial adoption, or even neutralization of corporate models and policy packages at these subsidiaries. Differences of priorities and resources among middle managers (say, between production and HR), the roles of different categories of workers, and possible alliances across these categories, add further complexity.

Headquarters managers clearly command key resources, which give them the dominant hand in policy making and allow them to “force and foster” change within subsidiaries. Their legal and organizational authority allows them to define corporate objectives and what counts as “best practice”; their decisions on flows of funding and expertise are crucial for subsidiary survival; and investment is usually conditional on various forms of audit, benchmarking, and performance measurement. They also influence the rewards and career prospects of individual managers and can develop cadres of experienced international managers whose primary commitment is to the center even when deployed into subsidiaries. Nevertheless, unresolved tensions between different priorities may persist, say, between immediate cost reductions, development of longer term production capabilities, or market access, while the lessons of audits and benchmarking exercises can be ambiguous and contested within management, especially when sites vary in multiple ways (size, product mix, equipment vintages, skill portfolios). Such uncertainties, together with “sunk costs,” may make the curtailment of investment, let alone site closure, an expensive option, while also risking concerted opposition, but investment bargaining still affords top management considerable leverage, while the threat of closure remains a powerful sanction of last resort.

Meanwhile, local managers may claim particular expertise in managing national institutional rules, distinctive features of local labor markets, or forms of collective representation, affording them significant scope to influence processes of transfer or hybridization (Elger & Smith, 2005). Furthermore, innovations in working practices or employment relations are usually *intended* to challenge existing arrangements and practices, but this needs active legitimation by subsidiary management, and this may

allow them to negotiate aspects of the proposed policy and potential bases of legitimacy, by invoking different motifs within the corporate culture or arguments about (in)appropriateness to local conditions. Ferner *et al.* (2012) discuss the reworking of both bonus payment systems and “workplace diversity policies” in these terms. Managers who make such arguments may embrace interests that diverge from those of headquarters (local HR managers may give greater priority to securing worker cooperation than HQ staff), and managers and workers may discover shared interests in securing subsidiary survival, but the leverage of local managers primarily hinges on performance in terms of objectives set from above. There may be scope for them to renegotiate the mandate of their plant, bidding for local design and development, for example, or gaining responsibility for different products or services, but such proposals are often rebuffed, underlining the ultimate power of top management. The arguments developed in micropolitical rivalry among middle managers do influence outcomes, but this is primarily because they provide significant resources for top corporate decision makers, both by identifying the dilemmas involved and promoting alternative possibilities among which top managers adjudicate.

So far, employees have figured only as problems or potential allies for subsidiary managers, but analyses of corporate micropolitics must also address their concerns and resources. As discussions of “high-performance work models” suggest, workplace innovations may enhance the skills and involvement of workers, although this may also involve reduced job security (Murray, Bélanger, Giles, & Lapointe, 2002). More often, quite mundane changes in work organization combine greater responsibility with work intensification but little scope for greater job control. Clearly there may be scope for workers to embrace benign versions of such innovation, while the “disciplined worker thesis” suggests that even modest improvements in organizational effectiveness may have attractions for employees. However, research on actually existing “lean production,” for example, suggests that gaps between rhetoric and practice often expose the costs incurred by workers and fuel scepticism or opposition, although different patterns of collective organization and activity (or their absence) inflect such outcomes. Differences in experience along gender and occupational or generational lines also influence how employees articulate their interests and act in relation to innovations in work and employment relations within both home and host workplaces (Durand & Hatzfeld, 2003). Overall, analyses of these micropolitical dynamics of subsidiary operations enrich our understandings of policy processes and outcomes, especially if they are embedded within a wider understanding of the interplay of societal, dominance, and system effects.

The other key strand of current research has begun to address the *macro-political role* of MNCs as significant actors in the modification and reconstruction of the national institutional frameworks across which they operate (Bélanger & Edwards, 2006). This highlights the extent to which particular institutional configurations represent contestable compromises between organized actors, where shifts in power relations, priorities, and alliances may be translated into demands for change or even the repudiation of historic settlements, emphasizing limitations to the coherence and stability of apparently resilient “national business systems” (Morgan, 2005b). For example, Sweden’s “historic compromise” dating from the 1930s was initially eroded by demands from the dominant union federation but then (more successfully) by strategies of the major employers’ association, while in Japan a new, more aggressive, stance by the employers’ association has substantially weakened “enterprise corporatism” (Imai, 2011). Meanwhile, state agencies and policies may be actively implicated in remaking such arrangements through new combinations of intervention and de/reregulation, often legitimized in terms of “enhancing competitiveness,” while dominant states may carry such initiatives into the international arena, bilaterally or through their influence in supra-state agencies.

Presumptions of institutional coherence at the national level have also been qualified by recognition of differences between regions, sectors, or enterprise networks, opening the scope for currently subordinate configurations to become alternative repertoires for evolving corporate and state policies. Thus, small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany embrace different strategies to the big corporations, and inward investors sometimes align themselves more with the former than the latter. This argument has particular leverage in relation to forms of organized capitalism that have an overtly dualist character, but as Morgan (2009) shows it can also be extended to address the internal heterogeneity of liberal market political economies. Thus, MNCs have contributed to the reconfiguration of several different variants of capitalist political economy, often in ways that have remade or extended significant institutional diversity, while the routes and agencies of change have varied too. Liberal market capitalisms have afforded scope for MNCs to cultivate regionally and/or sectorally distinctive corporate regimes, while in “business corporatist” Japan foreign MNCs have gained little leverage but change has been driven by domestic firms. Morgan also develops the distinctive argument that Germany’s “inclusive corporatism” has been modified more through the impact of financial MNCs providing financial and professional services to large firms, than by the actions of manufacturing inward investors.

Recent analyses of the complicated relationships between institutional arrangements and outcomes have also highlighted the scope for substantive

change within apparent institutional continuity, by stepwise modifications to the objectives of such institutions, adding new elements that reorient their operation, or allowing changing conditions on the ground to bias outcomes in new ways. The work of Streeck and Thelen (2005) has shown how powerful policy makers used these processes of “conversion,” “layering,” and “drift” to accomplish gradual but ultimately substantial changes in the organization and outcomes of collective bargaining in Germany. Thus, “national business systems” involve unevenly articulated and contested complexes of institutional arrangements which offer significant scope for both external and internal challenge, especially by powerful corporate actors and business associations, and such “systems” and their distinctive work and employment relations must always be located within broader processes of capitalist development and renewal (Streeck, 2009). Furthermore, challenges to existing state policy regimes and institutional settlements cannot simply be construed in terms of globalization processes, but must be analyzed in relation to other features of the international capitalist economy, including recurrent phases of growth, turbulence, and crisis.

#### AGENDAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The work reviewed earlier has generated important insights into the changing patterns of work and employment within advanced capitalist societies, but also suggests an extensive agenda for further research. The research on management micropolitics underlines the scope for fuller investigation and analysis of the distinctive interests and priorities of corporate managers, subsidiary managers, and employees, and the power resources they bring to bear in processes of decision making, negotiation, and contention about the selection, transfer, and/or hybridization of work systems and employment packages. It also suggests that detailed studies of corporate micropolitics must be explicitly located in wider economic and institutional contexts, as the society, system, and dominance framework seeks to do, if they are to offer a more adequate explanation of both dominant trends and contextually varied outcomes.

Although major MNCs operate in services, much research has concentrated on manufacturing, perhaps because the comparative immobility of face-to-face services encourages such firms to prioritize access to consumer markets rather than relocating to capitalize on cheaper labor or enhanced management prerogatives. Given the importance of service employment in the advanced capitalist economies, however, such MNCs deserve more systematic attention. Where there is no strongly defined “host” model of service provision, dominant firms may still seek to transfer their work organization and employment practices. In finance, this may involve reproducing team

and reward structures within white-collar hierarchies, while in fast food it commonly involves disseminating highly standardized work routines performed by low-paid and insecure workers. International service firms are also in the vanguard of transformations in both privatized and state services in many countries, both through consultancy activities and by participation in marketized reorganization. Furthermore, there *is* scope to “offshore” some service activities, especially back-office functions, and technical advances in digital communication have facilitated movement of call center service provision. The internationalization of such activities (within firms or through contracted service providers) often involves the relocation of tightly defined and monitored work routines and mundane forms of team working and quality assurance, which may yield substantial labor-cost savings even with improved pay and prospects for recruits. But significant problems include limited service delivery and erosion of worker commitment; hence, repatriation of such operations is not unknown. Meanwhile high-end financial and legal services companies may disseminate repertoires of corporate reorganization across contrasting national economies, with wider ramifications for employment practices in those economies.

Although my discussion has focused on MNC operations within advanced capitalist societies, analyses of the work and employment practices of MNCs must also address how different places and spaces across the globe may play particular roles in corporate reorganization over time (Herod, Rainnie, & McGrath-Champ, 2007), for the activities of MNCs beyond the most mature capitalist economies condition the scope and character of their operations within such economies. For example, both corporate and subsidiary managers may perceive “home” employment institutions and policies more as constraints than resources to be transferred, and use subsidiary operations to escape from those constraints, a feature exemplified by German car companies investing in Eastern Europe. Or innovations without a specific “home” inspiration may be widely adopted across international firms and subsidiaries, as with the rapid expansion of temporary and subcontract employment in white goods firms, to become codified as a generic “flexibilization” strategy even though modified in different firms and national settings. The scope and ramifications of such processes require urgent further research, not least because they suggest that in current circumstances the growing internationalization of manufacturing production increases scope for a broad erosion of employment conditions and marginalization of independent worker representation, although (as the geographers emphasize) this will remain both uneven and contested.

While analyses of MNCs are crucial to our contemporary understanding of the impacts of globalization, research should also address other ways in

which globalization impinges upon patterns of work and employment relations. International financial flows and credit ratings clearly impinge directly upon the activities of both private firms and state policy makers. The initiatives of supra-state agencies, such as the WTO, World Bank, and EU are also important. Finally, consumers, citizens, and workers may form organizations and alliances across national borders, both to respond to these dominant international actors and to pursue their own transnational forms of mobilization and leverage.

In addition to tracing the immediate implications of such processes for work organization and employment practices, it would be valuable to trace their wider ramifications in overall trends and patterns within and across national economies, but there are few systematic studies to underpin such wide-ranging societal comparisons. However, Gallie (2007, 2013) and colleagues have pioneered comparative surveys of the quality of work and employment, mapping changes in skills, job control, training, work intensity, job security, and work/life conflict across 19 European countries over a period of substantial economic turbulence. They show, for example, that work intensity increased across all countries but was also strongly linked to the differing severity of recessions between economies, while “high-stress” jobs (high intensity and low job control) only increased in the liberal market economies, Eastern Europe, and France. What emerges, then, is a complex mix of broadly shared trends and continuing societal distinctiveness, which invites interrogation in relation to globalization processes, although Gallie does not pursue this himself.

Such surveys, alongside arguments about the contested and evolving character of “national business systems” rehearsed earlier, also highlight the need for further research on the scope and limits of advanced capitalist states in mediating processes of globalization and influencing patterns of work and employment. They suggest there *are* still “societal effects,” as different configurations of institutional arrangements and state policies continue to influence such features as pay differentials, forms of employee involvement, and other aspects of job quality, but also that their persistence is not guaranteed in the context of an evolving and crisis-ridden international political economy. Furthermore, existing institutions may provide distinctive resources for the active recasting of work and employment relations, and dominant actors, especially major firms, employers’ associations, and state agencies may pursue new agendas which alter existing relationships between employers and workers. Such possibilities refocus the research agenda to examine how distinctive national work and employment patterns persistently represent terrains of policy contention and political contest, in which both home-based and inward-investing multinational firms are often influential players. They direct attention to the ways in which such

influences may bring about syncopated and incremental, but nevertheless cumulative changes in work and employment relations, rather than abrupt transformations. They also underline the importance of considering how real changes may be obscured by formal institutional continuities. And finally they point to the importance of investigating how the effects of such changes may be unevenly distributed across sectors and among categories of workers, often with growing inequalities in working conditions, pay, and insecurity within national political economies. For example, Baccaro and Howell's (2011) analysis of the remaking of industrial relations institutions and outcomes across a range of advanced capitalist societies suggests this has continued to involve varied institutional arrangements and pathways of change, but also a broadly shared trajectory of development, one they label neoliberal because it generally delivers increasing scope for employer discretion and reduced worker leverage across societies.

## CONCLUSION

This overview of current and prospective research on the impact of globalization on patterns of work and employment in advanced capitalist economies has concentrated particularly on studies of the dissemination and reconfiguration of work systems and employment relations across MNC subsidiaries, and analyses of the role of national states in sustaining or modifying distinctive institutional frameworks. It has emphasized that globalization is a contested project with complex implications, colored by cyclical features of crisis and recovery and producing fresh forms of differentiation as well as broadly common trends. Finally it has outlined several directions in which further research may both build upon and go beyond the core of existing research.

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