

**Studying work in theory and practice:**  
**Insights for a globalising academia from the IR trajectory in Italy**



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**ABSTRACT**

This article investigates the relevance of context to the study of industrial relations by analysing the trajectory of an under-researched case outside the Anglo-Saxon hotspots, Italy. Three phases are put under the spotlight revealing a trajectory anchored to the pluralist fulcrum, but with influence first from radical perspectives and then from unitarist ones.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Scholars in the field of industrial relations (IR) have long reflected on the relationship between theory and context, highlighting the lack of a strong encompassing theoretical framework (Hyman, 2004; Ackers, 2005; Edwards, 2005) and the presence of national styles of IR research (Hyman, 1995; Kaufman, 2004; Frege, 2005; Meardi, 2012). The risk of a vicious circle is evident: the ethnocentric trait of IR might turn into a form of theoretical nationalism that only a universal compass can prevent. To clarify this issue, this article adopts frames of reference (FoR) (Fox, 1974) to account for IR debates in different intellectual contexts. Each of the different FoR—unitarist, pluralist and radical—reflects a vision of employment relations based on the role assigned to their main actors (capital, labour and state) and, in doing so, expresses the

normative foundations of IR analysis (Budd and Bhawe, 2008: 107). The application of FoR by context mitigates the methodological and epistemological perils related to cross-national analysis (Hyman, 2009: 18) by providing a more ideational ground for comparing context-bound theories (Hyman, 2004). In fact, although IR research is highly context-sensitive (Edwards, 2005), the underlying dialectic between FoR presents some commonalities across the globe: after periods of pluralist dominance, pressures toward unitarism, as pushed by the marketisation of higher education systems (Budd and Bhawe, 2008: 108; Godard, 2014; Meardi, 2014a), and toward polarisation along unitarist and radical lines (Heery, 2016; Tapia et al., 2015) have been widely observed.

This article focuses on the dialectic between FoR outside the Anglo-Saxon IR core, in Italy, where IR displays three basic features: quite a long history, dating from the end of Second World War (WW2); a relatively small academic community and key contributions to scholarship, such as ‘political exchange’, ‘micro-corporatism’ and ‘new social pacts’, discussed further below. The article asks what explains the process of IR theory generation and reproduction, and search for a dominant pattern. Despite major subjective and objective changes, we demonstrate that pluralism has remained the dominant Italian IR theory and has evolved while rejecting competing paradigms. This intellectual history of Italian academic IR fills an important gap in our knowledge of the global evolution of academic IR and clarifies the current meaning, relevance and transformation of pluralism in light of broad challenges such as ‘disconnected capitalism’ (Thompson, 2003), ‘neo-liberalism’ (Heery, 2016), ‘post-democracy’ (Crouch, 2000) and ‘alienated politics’ (Friedman, 2014).

## **2. FRAMES OF REFERENCE IN CONTEXT**

Frames of reference constitute a valuable analytical classification for understanding IR theory in context. Fox described them as ways ‘through which men perceive and define social phenomena, and their perceptions and definitions determine their behaviour’ (1974: 271). Since then, FoR have been widely used in IR (Heery, 2016; Edwards, 2017; Seifert, 2017). A shared definition treats FoR as ‘packages of values and assumptions pertaining to the interests of parties to the employment relationship — that is, the needs, wants, and aspirations of employees, employers,

and the state — and the degree to which these interests are compatible’ (Budd and Bhawe, 2008: 93). Specifically, each of the three FoR—unitarist, pluralist and radical—reflects a peculiar perspective on the nature of employment relations. The unitarist frame assumes a common purpose and shared goals between employers and workers, where conflict is pathological. The pluralist frame assumes competing interests and tensions between the parties, where potential conflict is to be organised by effective institutions, to the benefit of all. Finally, the radical frame assumes that the employment relationship is symptomatic of structural contradictions underlying capitalism and argues for workers’ resistance against the resulting exploitation and coercion.

What makes FoR relevant to IR theory is their dialectic, which has always been integral to IR: at its foundation, when IR was ‘conceived by [the Webbs] and born out of the clash between radical Marxian political economy and unitarist neo-classical economics’ (Marsden, 1982: 236), and more recently, when radical and pluralist IR engage with the rise of unitarist perspectives such as human resource management (HRM). The presence of this dialectic does not mean that FoR are perfectly sealed folders into which IR scholars can be accordingly filed (Heery, 2016). Indeed, each frame displays a remarkable internal variety, as captured by further distinctions and qualifications, which all suggest a parsimonious use of FoR. For instance, Godard (1992: 242–245) identifies five perspectives along the unitarist–pluralist–radical spectrum, ranging from the neo-classical to the managerialist, the orthodox pluralist, the liberal-reformist and, finally, the radical. Within the dialectic between FoR, IR scholarship has typically deployed the accusation of ‘orthodoxy’ to contend/contest the pluralist ground (Fox, 1979; Godard and Delaney, 2000; Kochan, 2000; Ackers, 2014; Edwards, 2014). These controversies demonstrate that the more the debates amongst FoR intensify, the more important the context of IR becomes. As Hyman puts it, “if ‘pluralism’ is to be a useful component of the vocabulary of British IR, it must be regarded as a loose and incomplete set of ideas, beliefs and values which acquire coherence only when complemented by background assumptions which are rarely articulated explicitly by pluralist writers themselves” (Hyman, 1978: 16). Exploring these background assumptions, Hyman (2004) detects ‘ethnocentric’ traits in IR theory, mostly due to the fact that core social and economic policies as well as ‘intellectual traditions’ unfold at the national level. His focus goes beyond the leading Anglo-Saxon IR schools to include countries in Continental Europe like Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain (Hyman, 1995). In recognising IR peculiarities across nations, Hyman is able to reconcile differences, stimulating

further reflections on the contextual nature of IR theory.

Frege (2005) investigates whether economic globalisation and academic internationalisation have exerted pressure toward convergence across IR research centres and, if so, in which direction. She looks at IR developments in the USA, the UK and Germany and, through a bibliometric analysis of three journals, concludes that different ‘research styles’ persist and follow the heterogeneous intellectual roots present in Anglo-Saxon and Continental Europe. Meardi (2012: 101–104) further notes the presence of national research styles in Continental Europe, each style reflecting a state tradition in IR. His analysis points toward a more sensitive differentiation within clusters of countries, suggesting that there is more intra-variation in research styles within Continental Europe than in Anglo-Saxon countries. Other insights come from the work of Kaufman (2004). First, he focuses on the origin of IR in the USA, finding its intellectual roots not just in pluralist-oriented neo-institutional economics but also in unitarist perspectives such as personnel management and Welfare Capitalism. Then he details the evolution of IR around the world, in an encyclopaedic work particularly valuable for the historical description of key authors and institutions. Although most attention is paid to IR in the UK and in the USA, the two countries most central to the field, there are analyses of IR in Canada (Murray and Giles, 1988; Godard, 1992) and Australia (Dabscheck, 1994), while only a few scholars tackle the issue outside the Anglo-Saxon countries, and very rarely to an English-speaking audience, notable exceptions being Germany (Keller, 2005) and Japan (Suzuki, 2011).

### **3. IR THEORY IN PRACTICE: ACADEMIA IN ITALY**

This article focuses on IR in Italy, a context with a straightforward methodological advantage and disadvantage. The advantage is that the case allows for comprehensive analysis, given that the number of actors—scholars and academic institutions—relevant to IR in Italy is not as large as in Anglo-Saxon countries and that there is a history, traceable back to the early post-WW2 years, which is long enough to constitute a trajectory. The disadvantage relates to the limited options available for data collection about IR in Italy. Quantitative techniques, such as bibliometric analysis and surveys, which have been used in other countries to understand IR research styles (Frege, 2005; McMillan and Casey, 2010) and IR ideology (Godard, 1992;

Godard, 1995), are not available in Italy. In fact, Italy lacks a ‘pure’ IR journal on which to base a bibliometric analysis, since IR scholars publish in journals embracing perspectives such as labour law (*Giornale di Diritto del Lavoro e delle Relazioni Industriali*, *Rivista di Diritto del Lavoro*, *Rivista Giuridica del Lavoro*), sociology (*Sociologia del Lavoro*), labour economics (*Labour*, *Economia & Lavoro*) or a disciplinary miscellany with a policy-making focus (*Stato e Mercato*, *Il Mulino*) or closer to practitioners (*Quaderni di Rassegna Sindacale*; *Quaderni della Fondazione Giulio Pastore*; *e-International Journal of Comparative Labour Studies*). Surveys of IR scholarship are hardly feasible in Italy because determining the population of scholars to be surveyed is not straightforward. For IR in Canada, Godard used affiliation to an experts’ mailing list, and in the USA, he used affiliation to the Industrial Relations Research Association/Labor and Employment Relations Association as good proxies and distributed questionnaires accordingly. A similar operation in Italy would be misleading. The corresponding structure—AISRI (*Associazione Italiana di Studio delle Relazioni Industriali*)—manages an experts’ mailing list, but AISRI is organisationally weak (with fewer than 100 members and only providing information about a handful of conferences and workshops) and internally heterogeneous (past presidents have often been labour law scholars). Besides, affiliation is largely unpredictable, making AISRI hardly representative of the whole cohort of scholars interested in the field.

As an object of study, IR developments in Italy have so far received rather limited attention. Hyman (1995: 26–28) briefly discusses the state of IR in Italy in his introductory article for the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*. Kaufman (2004: Chapter 9, xx) mentions the Italian case rather cursorily and in the context of a single interview with an Italian scholar and former IIRA president, Treu. In addition, Italian IR scholars have seldom developed reflexive accounts of IR in Italy and have on only two occasions targeted an international audience, as appendices to the analysis of IR in practice (Giugni, 1981; Cella, 1995). The underlying reasons surfaced after British Universities Industrial Relations Association’s 2009 pamphlet in defence of IR in UK, which Cella and Treu discuss in light of the Italian experience, arguing that the limited theoretical introspection of IR in Italy is due to its subordinate position in relation to disciplines with highly developed theoretical backgrounds, such as labour law and sociology (Cella and Treu, 2009). They argue that this has prevented IR in Italy from becoming robust enough to withstand self-scrutiny, an assessment already deemed as too harsh (Hyman, 1995: 27–28).

Finally, this research cannot avoid a major limitation common to all historical studies: it cannot be exhaustive. Some scholars, theories and facts will have been overlooked or ignored, even if their role might have been worthy of consideration, whereas others have been chosen on the basis of a subjective judgement as to their relevance. Steps have been taken to mitigate this limitation by seeking to justify the choices made.

#### **4. THE THREE PHASES OF IR IN ITALY**

This article considers that there are three distinct phases of academic IR in Italy. As with any chronological phasing, several caveats apply: contrasting trends are present in each phase, especially during the transitions, even though some constitutive features remain evident. This part of the analysis sheds light on the characteristics of IR for each phase, looking at key theoretical developments and providing a brief historical contextualisation to clarify the connections between IR as a subject of study and the real world of IR. It is worth noting at the outset a peculiarity of the post-WW2 Italian political context, namely a strong ideological polarisation at the expense of the emergence of a more mainstream social democracy. In fact, between 1948 and 1992, Italy was ruled uninterruptedly by the centrist Christian Democracy (CD), often in conjunction with other minor parties and, in some cases, with the support of progressive forces. The Italian Communist Party (CP) was the largest CP in Western Europe and the main opposition force to the CD, followed by the Italian Socialist Party (SP). All these parties had strong ties with the three main union confederations (the CD with Cisl, the Italian CP with Cgil and the Italian SP with Uil), with heterodox intellectuals acting as mediators and influencers.

##### *4.1 The origin (1970s): political exchange and progressive pluralism*

Industrial relations in Italy developed in the three decades after WW2 and its characteristics largely reflected the pluralist frame, thanks to two key figures, the labour law scholar Giugni and the sociologist Pizzorno. Giugni (1960) adapted a core IR theory developed in the USA, the 'IR system' (Dunlop, 1958), to the Italian context through the concept of 'ordinamento intersindacale'. The key feature of the Italian IR system was its low level of

institutionalisation—it lacked the legal means to certify monopoly unionism, present in the USA. Instead it relied on the political role played by the unions, which until the early 1960s had been largely excluded from workplaces. Giugni borrowed from Anglo-Saxon IR theory on two other occasions: Pearlman’s ‘business unionism’, a controversial theory for ideologically divided unions such as in Italy, and Kahn-Freund’s ‘collective laissez-faire’, useful in supporting indirect state intervention in IR. Giugni put his theories into practice by drafting landmark reforms like the 1970 Workers’ Statute and, in the role of Secretary of Labour, the 1993 Social Pact. Giugni’s main legacy to IR is the strong legalistic approach he brought to the field, as well as the highly political role played by labour-law scholars. For all these reasons, ranging from theory to practice, Cella refers to Giugni as the ‘master of IR’ in Italy (Cella, 1995: 391).

Pizzorno tied his name to IR scholarship, thanks to a landmark comparative book about European IR (Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978). In this text, he theorised about the kinds of exchange that take place in the labour market, adding ‘political exchange’ to individual exchange and collective bargaining: ‘while in the atomistic market, more gains were obtained in exchange for more effort, and in the collective bargaining in exchange for continuity of work, in the political market, the resource given in exchange may be called consensus or support’ (Pizzorno, 1978: 279). Despite this analytical distinction, Pizzorno argued that in practice, the boundaries between these three systems of exchange are fluid and artificial, deeming as incomplete those IR theoretical frameworks which failed to integrate the economic with the political dimension (Pizzorno, 1978: 288). He developed his own theory of ‘rationality’, with the aim of overcoming biases diffused in mainstream Anglo-Saxon social theory such as the emphasis on ‘interest’ and ‘strategy’, alongside their delineation in terms of expectations, aspirations and other psychological concepts, at the expense of a focus on ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’, which Pizzorno considered more apposite for appreciating institutions and power relations (Pizzorno, 2007). As Sassatelli puts it, ‘it is identity seeking and not interest seeking that can explain collective action: there’s no interest without an agent calculating it, and the existence and persistence of that agent cannot be taken for granted, it is instead that which has to be explained at the beginning, that is, problematising the processes of identity creation through recognition’ (Sassatelli, 2006: 103).

Both Giugni and Pizzorno entrenched IR within the pluralist frame through theoretical concepts such as ‘ordinamento intersindacale’ and ‘political exchange’, and both favoured a cross-country

contamination of IR theory, at a time when the rest of the academic community was still poorly internationalised, thanks to their experiences as visiting scholars in the cradles of Anglo-Saxon IR (Wisconsin and Oxford) and as leading members of pioneering international research networks (e.g. Giugni and the Comparative Labour Law Group; Crouch and Pizzorno, 1978). However, Giugni and Pizzorno were by no means the only scholars interested in IR dynamics within the pluralist frame. Archibugi, for instance, appreciated IR both theoretically, identifying its potential as an alternative to the historicist and Marxist tradition present in Italy in the 1950s, and practically, applying Anglo-Saxon IR theories about technological progress to suggest that unions—especially Cisl—should engage with decentralised bargaining (1956: 13–19, 93–96). Also close to Cisl, Baglioni and his colleagues at the Catholic University in Milan (Manghi, Cella) contributed to the early diffusion of IR in Italy through the promotion of sociological functionalism under the influence of mainstream sociology in the USA (Pedersini and Cella, 2013: 570).

Contributions from the other two FoR were also present, even if a still embryonic IR overlooked them. The unitarist frame was well represented by the early works of Ferrarotti (2010: 112–113), the first full Chair in Sociology in Italy in 1960. Like Giugni, thanks to the Fulbright Program he became one of the first Italian visiting scholars in the USA, where he joined the International Labour Project along with Kerr, Dunlop, Myers and Harbinson and remained intellectually impressed by the Human Relations approach to industrial sociology. Once back in Italy he, like Pizzorno, collaborated with the philanthropic entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti. However, while Pizzorno's scepticism about Human Relations and opposition to a unitarist approach within the factory marked the end of his collaboration with Olivetti, Ferrarotti embraced Olivetti's communitarian ideals based on a decentralised state and the creation of a federation of company unions, autonomous from any political affiliation (Lopez, 2013: 55). During the 1950s and 1960s, Ferrarotti criticised American and Italian unionism for narrow economicism and ideologisation, respectively, exalting instead the potential of employees' participation within the company (Olivetti was a pioneering company in this respect). Ferrarotti's focus on concepts such as motivation and engagement links his early work to the 'psychological phase of industrial revolutions' (Lopez, 2013: 94–5). However, if we place him within the unitarist frame, we have to specify its 'humanist' form, which is very different from the managerialist one often associated with HRM.



Radical approaches to the study of work were present in this phase as well, though in open opposition to IR and its pluralist aim to accommodate class conflict. These radical approaches are known as ‘operaismo’ (‘workerism’) and ‘autonomia’ (‘autonomy’) and blossomed in the 1960s around underground journals (Quaderni Rossi/ ‘Red Notebooks’ and Classe Operaia/ ‘Working class’). The idea at the base of workerism, borrowed from Marxian theory, was that the large factory could provide a fertile ground for revolutionary projects. Since the 1960s, the workers’ rising importance in the policy arena, through confederal unions, pushed workerists along different paths. Some like Tronti engaged with institutional politics according to a strategy of ‘inside and against’ the Italian CP, also known as ‘entryism’. Others like Panzieri and Alquati privileged an intellectual profile, refining a ‘workerist’ methodology—‘conricerca’ or research-with—as a form of participant research characterised by mutual collaboration between researchers and workers, for the sake of investigations into the material conditions of the working-class as well as of the workers’ struggles. Finally, some workerists, like Negri, became more radicalised, creating extra-parliamentary groups like Potere Operaio (Workers’ Power) to promote class warfare within large factories in the industrial North (Negri, 2005). Over time and despite its divisions, in the 1970s, workerism developed into the ‘autonomist’ approach—autonomy at grass-roots level in defiance of the unions and the institutional Left—endeavouring to ‘extend the struggle from the factory to the city, to ground it to the daily life of the socialized worker’ (Lotringer and Marazzi, 1980: 9). Within the movement, tension existed over the use of political violence, embraced by one faction while condemned by others. Several workerists, most famously Negri, were arrested for conspiracy in the late 1970s to early 1980s.

The Italian context of the post-WW2 period helps to explain this first development of the IR trajectory. The American influence over Italian IR was substantial extending to research activities, for instance through the creation of schools in sociology, wrongly presumed to be an antidote to Marxism, and through American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations’ support for non-socialist unions’ training centres (like Cisl’s in Florence). At the same time, the unions, especially the Communist-inspired Cgil, saw the 1968–1973 wave of mobilisation as a chance to achieve legitimacy and recognition after the isolation it faced at the start of the Cold War. Indeed, union density grew from 25 per cent in the early 1960s to 50 per cent in the late 1970s, the sharpest increase in Western Europe. The Left gained momentum and, despite being nominally Marxist, favoured a class compromise, substantiating Gramsci’s legacy

in the emergence of so-called ‘Eurocommunism’. The Italian CP, whose leader Berlinguer was shocked by the reactionary coup in Chile, moved from exclusion to involvement, culminating in the search for an ‘historic compromise’ with the Christian Democrats from 1975 to 1978, when the attempt collapsed with the killing of its main promoter within the CD—the General Secretary Moro—by the extreme left terrorist group known as Red Brigades. Cgil moved in parallel with the Italian CP, joining the European Trade Union Confederation in 1973 and adopting an accommodating agenda in 1978, known as ‘EUR strategy’, expression of more moderate and social democratic positions while still pursuing egalitarian demands. To conclude, while the practice of IR steered from a ‘contestative system, with a small element of bargaining’, to an incipient one based on ‘general political exchange’ and ‘bargained corporatism’ (Crouch, 1993: 187, 53), IR emerged around the pivotal pluralist frame to explain and legitimise institutional solutions to mounting labour questions, sidelining the unitarist and radical FoR.

#### *4.2 The maturity (1980s–1990s): micro-corporatism and political pluralism*

The IR pluralist frame obtained fully fledged expression in the 1980s and 1990s, spreading throughout Italy. In some cases, IR emerged with the support of labour law scholars (Biagi, Ichino, Sciarra and Treu); in others, the initiative came from sociologists (Alacevich, Baglioni M., Carrieri, Della Rocca, Garibaldo and Negrelli) or economists (Dell’Aringa and Tarantelli). Many IR scholars developed close connections with policy makers—especially through the union-driven research centres Ires-Cgil and Cesos-Cisl—revealing a rather similar reformist orientation, though based on different ideological traditions, from Eurocommunism to Catholic social doctrine. For its relevance as a trend-setter, we focus on the unique and internationally well-connected IR group which some of Pizzorno’s assistants created in Milan, first within a union-related research centre (Ires-Cgil Lombardia) and then within an academic department (Department of Labour and Welfare Studies). Regini was the most influential figure, through his work on ‘political exchange’ dynamics (Regalia et al., 1978) and the elaboration of ‘micro-corporatism’, a concept expressing negotiated, rather than imposed, processes of economic modernisation taking place at the company and local level. On evidence from critical case studies (Regini and Sabel, 1989), Regini defined ‘micro-corporatism’ as a form of labour regulation ‘based on pragmatic acknowledgement by the unions that companies must restructure if they are to compete in more difficult and volatile international markets, and on the willingness

by managements to use the existing institutions of industrial relations for this purpose, rather than work against them' (Regini, 1995: 80). Because of its emphasis on cooperation between unions and management, 'micro-corporatism' is an alternative to company authoritarian unilateralism or individualised 'HRM', but also to collective bargaining and its underlying partisan interests to maximise. Moreover, unlike co-determination that is based on statutory provisions, 'micro-corporatism' requires only ad-hoc state interventions to provide incentives such as financial resources for early retirement and working hours reduction schemes.

Over time, the IR focus on micro-corporatism found increasing connections with a strand of research on Italian territorial diversity and 'industrial districts', inspiring ground-breaking analysis on post-Fordism (Piore and Sabel, 1984) and social capital (Putnam, 1993). This phase coincides with the 'golden age' of IR in Italy, with scholarly success translated into new academic structures and cutting-edge international research networks (Baglioni and Crouch, 1990; Regini, 1992). At the same time, selective attention to the advantages of consensus-based solutions gave rise to a 'political' pluralist reading of IR by Italian scholars, similar to the 'orthodox' version criticised by Hyman (1978: 32–33, 28) in the UK and Godard (1995: 131) in the USA. The notion of 'political pluralism' dominates when the normative side of IR overwhelms the analytical one, here resulting in the principle that unions should be reliable negotiating partners, because 'managerial culture has slowly regained a certain hegemony over the culture of collective defence, often rigid and standardized and indifferent to the needs of the firm' (Regini, 1995: 80, 83).

During this phase, IR in Italy affirmed itself as a rather uncontested academic endeavour, with a dominant frame and little internal debate, neglecting those scholars outside, yet close to the boundaries of IR, who expressed unitarist and radical FoR. IR overlooked the rise of HRM, which blossomed in the 1980s in the private business school Bocconi and in the Faculty of Economics at the University of Venice (Costa and Camuffo, 2014: 285). 'Post-workerist' scholars, now interested in capitalist transformation, restructuring and vulnerable workers with emancipatory potential (Bologna and Fumagalli, 1997), also remained marginal. Among those excluded, it is worth remembering two scholars whose critical outlooks established central themes for IR theory. The first one is the sociologist and clinical psychologist Melucci, who shed light on new social movements. Like Pizzorno, Melucci explored the concept of identity,

although he elaborated it around the individual existential dimension and the corporeal and affective spheres (Melucci, 1989). The second is Arrighi, who offered, through ‘world system theory’, a macro-sociological account of socio- economic transformations, adapting the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’ to the global scale (Arrighi, 1994). Such theory has become relevant to IR only in recent years, informing analyses on neoliberalism and globalisation (Baccaro and Howell, 2011: 556; Lakhani et al., 2013: 444).

Turning to context, the 1980s–1990s saw governments and employers regain the initiative of economic restructuring and institutional reform, resulting in collective dismissals and the dismantling of automatic wage indexation mechanisms (inflation was as high as 17 per cent in 1983). Against these measures, the Left resumed confrontational stances, receiving two ‘heroic’ defeats: the strike at Fiat in 1980, known as the ‘40.000 march’, where white collar workers crossed the picket line, and the referendum to restore wage indexation in 1985, which was lost 45.7 to 54.3 per cent. At the same time, small militant unions (Cobas) in the service sector rose up in open opposition to confederal unions. These defeats strengthened the reformist wing within the Left, beginning with the Italian SP led by Craxi, while the collapse of the Soviet bloc then marked the end of the Italian CP, which changed its name and embraced a social- democratic orientation. In the 1990s, centre-left coalitions approved market-friendly reforms such as privatisations, pension reforms and the liberalisation of labour markets. The majority of unions backed these reforms in the form of ‘new social pacts’, obtaining concessions on workplace representation and collective bargaining (Regalia and Regini, 2004).

In conclusion, in this phase, IR in Italy achieved a state of ‘maturity’, even though no internal debate emerged around alternative FoR to the predominant pluralist one. Dramatically, it was an external threat that united the IR community, as reformist scholars came under attack from extreme-left terrorism: the Red Brigades ‘knee- capped’ Giugni (1983) and shot dead Tarantelli (1984), D’Antona (1999) and Biagi (2002), while blackmailing others. While unitarist perspectives such as HRM emerged completely detached from IR and radical perspectives continued to be ignored, the pluralist frame became entrenched in IR in a ‘political’, to some extent ‘orthodox’, way, prioritising the accommodation of class relations over their expression and treating firms’ competitiveness as a common good and an end in itself. For some non-Italian scholars, this looked like the eve of neo-liberal employment relations (Turner, 1990: 394–401,

22–23; Streeck, 1993: 51). Vice versa, mainstream IR in Italy underlined the fact that amidst broad socio-economic transformations, work regulation was still based on procedures negotiated with the social partners. Rather normatively, this supported their aim (or illusion) of gaining strategic leverage while a new managerial hegemony replaced the culture of collective defence (Regini, 1995: 83).

#### *4.3 The crisis (2000s–): new social pacts and neo-pluralism*

In the third phase, IR in Italy experienced a state of crisis and transformation, as the following two cases demonstrate. The first case refers to the IR hotbed in Milan, where scholars remained focused on the virtues of cooperative IR, both at the local (Regalia, 2003) and central levels, thanks to the diffusion of national social pacts in the 1990s. Regini traces continuity and discontinuity between ‘political exchange’ and ‘new social pacts’, highlighting that in the latter, employers react to challenges posed by globalisation and European monetary integration by pushing flexibility-enhancing and cost reduction strategies. In this new environment, the challenge is to slow down employers’ demands for deregulation, something that unions can do only by engaging cooperatively, as past reforms of IR systems and labour markets in Europe would demonstrate (Esping Andersen and Regini, 2000: 339; Ferrera and Gualmini, 2004). However, social partnership translates into wage moderation and the liberalisation of labour markets, two factors that weaken unions, just as their difficulties—the decline of union density in the private sector and the representation gap amongst young workers—are most evident. Nevertheless, labour revitalisation strategies, beginning with ‘organising’, seen as possible alternatives to social partnership, were dismissed as ‘inappropriate to frame the discussion of the Italian case’ (Regalia, 2012: 404). Current IR in Milan, as in other traditional hotspots, suffers from a re-definition of academic boundaries. IR teaching has moved into the training of ‘personnel consultants’ (Consulenti del Lavoro), a profession booming with increasingly liberalised labour markets. The IR research agenda focuses insistently on the negotiation of company-level social benefits, popularised as ‘Secondo Welfare’ (Ferrera and Maino, 2014), and promoted in partnership with influential players in the finance, insurance and media industries, as well as employers’ associations and moderate unions affiliated to Cisl, boosted by tailored tax breaks. Many sociologists have shifted their attention from IR to education systems, and there are fewer and fewer PhD candidates focused on IR.

The second case is Adapt, a research centre created in Modena in 2000 by Marco Biagi. It has expanded to include a publishing house (Adapt University Press), an international journal (*e-Journal in Comparative Labour Studies*) and several connections with leading IR schools worldwide. Its activities proliferate in two basic directions. For its Italian audience, Adapt engages with policy making, particularly influencing centre-right parties. The resulting research agenda include controversial issues such as derogation and decentralisation of collective bargaining, alternative dispute resolution and bilateral agencies. For its international audience, Adapt presents a ‘de-politicised’, Euro-speak attitude, focusing on popular themes such as youth unemployment or digital media—often with the support of EU research funding—and including in its network scholars from any of the FoR. To fund its activities, Adapt has three main income streams: first, it provides services to companies, beginning with ‘certification’, a sort of preventative arbitration mechanism created in 2003; second, it receives fees from its associates (76 organisations comprised of companies, employers’ associations and unions affiliated to Cisl); third, it obtains public funding for scholarships and grants, which is matched by private funding. As a result, Adapt has become possibly the largest IR PhD school in the world, with 208 titles awarded and 108 candidates active in 2015/2016. In addition, Adapt campaigns for the creation of a new tier within the Italian higher education system, the ‘Industrial PhD’, the rationale for which lies in the production of applied knowledge, similar to consultancy (Tiraboschi, 2014a). Such academic entrepreneurship does not prevent Adapt from triggering controversial debates: on one level, by connecting IR with Catholic social doctrine (Tiraboschi, 2014b) and more concretely, by tailoring IR to HRM practitioners (Salta, 2014).

As in the previous two phases, this third phase of IR in Italy has nurtured no internal debate in terms of dialectic between FoR. Pluralism is still, officially, the only frame present in the field, although within a trend toward unitarism. The emphasis on integrative policies diluting the welfare state into HRM practices, as well as the reliance on philanthropy and social harmony, substantiates an Italian version of ‘neo-pluralism’ (Ackers, 2014). Contributions outside the emerging mainstream are still relevant providing, for instance, a critical outlook on public sector reforms (Bordogna and Pedersini, 2013) or EU policies (Burroni and Keune, 2011). Other critical voices come from Italian émigré scholars such as Baccaro (Baccaro and Howell, 2011), Meardi (2012: 117; 2014b) and Pulignano (2006), whose work is in line with a more radical pluralist perspective. Instead, IR in Italy remains closed to both unitarist approaches such as

HRM (Costa and Camuffo, 2014), and radical contributions, amongst which there are neo-workerist analyses on the global politics of production and migrant labour (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2014), as well as inquiries on under-researched issues such as employment relations in logistics (Curcio, 2014).

Looking at the context, Berlusconi's centre-right governments (2001–2006; 2008–2011) marked the end of 'cooperative' IR (Baccaro et al., 2003), exceptionally restored in occasion of the 2007 Social Pact. The liberalisation of labour markets in 2003 constituted the turning point, deepening union divisions (Baccaro and Howell, 2011). After the Euro crisis in 2011, governments supported by both centre-left and centre-right coalitions followed the EU dictum (as expressed in the letter of recommendations sent by the ECB in August 2011) and approved further liberalisations of labour markets and reforms of core IR institutions (Meardi, 2014b). Collective bargaining became the first target, with the government allowing a full derogation of company-level agreements from national ones in 2011. Employment protection legislation followed, with the weakening of the reinstatement principle in cases of unfair dismissal by Monti's and Renzi's governments. These reforms set a dirigist tone to IR, given that policy makers acted unilaterally, accepting only a ritualistic involvement of the social partners.

In conclusion, the third and current phase of the IR trajectory in Italy follows side by side the practice of IR moving, therefore, gradually toward the unitarist frame. IR in Italy is still a sound academic endeavour exerting a remarkable influence on policy making. However, some typical IR traits are beginning to fade away: rather than investigating the institutional opportunities to strike a balance of power between social actors, IR is increasingly concerned with firms' needs, welcoming solutions which, despite occasional and ritualistic consultations of social partners, are de facto imposed from above, by the EU and/or the government. Renowned IR hotspots, such as the one in Milan, lose ground and tend to follow the markets' priority (e.g. providing training for HR consultants and tying welfare measures to employee benefits). Rising IR centres, such as Adapt, explicitly endorse integrative employment relations, downplaying conflicting interests in practice as in theory. Again, IR in Italy sidelines not only the radical and unitarist FoR but also those pluralist approaches—developed by Italians at home or abroad—which are distant from a unitarist one.

## 5. THE TRAJECTORY OF IR IN ITALY

This review of IR scholarship in Italy allows us to map the field and its evolution (Table 1). Just as it does elsewhere, in Italy, the pluralist frame plays a pivotal role in IR, although in each phase a different version of pluralism emerges, with the two excluded FoR—radical and unitarist—acting as poles of attraction. In the first phase, it is a form of ‘progressive’ and rather ‘liberal-reformist’ pluralism, situated close to the radical frame for its tension toward workers’ emancipation. Here pioneering IR scholars theorise about the development of an autonomous system of IR (‘ordinamento intersindacale’) (Giugni) and the dynamics of ‘political exchange’ (Pizzorno), which both illustrate the striking institutional change from IR driven by employers’ unitarism to a pluralistic form of bargained corporatism (Crouch, 1993), in line with the concomitant affirmation of the literature on neo-corporatism in Continental Europe. Exclusions relate to both the unitarist (Ferrarotti’s humanistic unitarism) and the radical (workerism and autonomy) FoR. The second phase corresponds to a ‘political’ version of the pluralist frame, with research strands inspired by Regini’s ‘micro-corporatism’, Regalia’s ‘local level concertation’ and, eventually, ‘new social pacts’. Here, IR scholars tend to exalt the virtues of cooperative IR, though the emphasis slips from substantive to procedural issues, rationalising labour concessions in light of economic imperatives. This selective research agenda occurs at the expense of both unitarist (HRM) and radical perspectives (post-workerism), as well as of critical thinkers (Arrighi’s world system theory and Melucci’s new social movements). The third phase (since 2000s) sees the crisis of traditional IR and the rise of an Italian version of ‘neo-pluralism’, still appreciating links to the wider society as well as the formal inclusion of social partners in ‘new social pacts’, but at the same time accepting tenets of a ‘managerialist’ unitarism. Here a growing number of IR scholars make academia similar to consultancy and think-tanks in the way they justify and, sometimes, design employer-friendly policies (Secondo Welfare/2W, Adapt). Exclusions, as usual, relate to unitarist (HRM) and radical (neo-workerism) approaches but also to contributions from within the pluralist frame such as critical Italian IR scholars in Italy (Burroni and Pedersini) or abroad (Baccaro, Meardi and Pulignano).

*Table 1. The IR trajectory in Italy: inclusions and exclusions*

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### Frames of Reference



	<i>Radical</i>		<i>Pluralist</i>	<i>Unitarist</i>
<i>1. Origin (-1970s)</i>	workerism autonomy		<b>progressive pluralism (Pizzorno, Giugni)</b>	humanistic unitarism
<i>2. Maturity (1980s-1990s)</i>	post- workeris m	WST NSM	<b>political pluralism (Regini, Regalia)</b>	HRM
<i>3. Crisis (2000s-)</i>	neo- workerism		critical pluralism (Baccaro, Meardi, Pulignano)	<b>neo-pluralism (2W, Adapt)</b>  HRM

Once we have applied the FoR and traced a trajectory of academic IR in Italy, we can compare it to trajectories found elsewhere, in the Anglo-Saxon leading schools as well as in the rest of Europe. As mentioned, the debate about the evolution of IR has so far highlighted both signs of a unitarist drift (Budd and Bhave, 2008; Godard, 2014; Meardi, 2014a) and of a polarisation away from the pluralist fulcrum to the radical and unitarist fringes (Heery, 2016; Tapia et al., 2015). Broadly speaking, the evidence from the Italian case supports the former. In fact, IR in Italy has moved toward a neoliberal perspective, often advising governments on how to draft employer-friendly reforms. ‘Market without pluralism’ (Cella, 2013) is becoming the rule, in practice as well as theory. The comparison between IR in Italy and IR in the USA and the UK displays both similarities and differences. IR in the USA in recent years has experienced some revitalisation, thanks to an appreciation of more radical approaches and themes, often by scholars without an IR background but trained in disciplines such as political science (Turner, Fine) or sociology (Milkman). In contrast, IR in the UK continues to nurture a sophisticated internal debate, as recently demonstrated by the confrontation between radical pluralism (Edwards, 2014) and neo-pluralism (Ackers, 2014), as well as by the continuous investigation of this dialectic (Heery, 2016). IR in Italy can be said to combine something of both these approaches. As in the USA,

there is little theoretical introspection, but potentially at least, like the UK, there is an important internal conversation to be had. In fact, although there is no formal internal debate within IR in Italy, in substance, such a conversation does exist, thanks to the contributions of contrasting voices both within and outside IR and within and outside Italy. In this sense, Italian academic IR has been exploring innovative research avenues by combining a degree of intellectual autonomy from established IR intellectual traditions, autonomy typically present throughout Continental Europe (Hyman, 1995), with a rather unique engagement with the bulk of IR theory developed in the Anglo-Saxon context.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The dialectic between FoR helps us categorise and comprehend the theoretical development of IR not only in Anglo-Saxon countries but also in Italy. The intellectual history of Italian academic IR confirms that context matters to IR theoretical development (Hyman, 1995, Kaufman, 2004, Edwards, 2005; Frege, 2005, Meardi, 2012). In fact, although pluralism remains the fulcrum, we note in Italy a trajectory within the pluralist terrain itself, away from the radical pole and toward the unitarist. Specifically, there are three phases of pluralism ('progressive', 'political' and 'neo'), each matching a theory of neo-corporatism ('political exchange', 'micro-corporatism' and 'new social pacts'), all revealing the specificity of the Italian context: a state-political, rather than firm-centred, perspective on IR, with intellectuals engaged in tense ideological rivalry. At the same time, this article delivers three quite original messages. The first is that FoR can serve, if with some approximation, to map IR theory and its developments in different contexts, that is that the main underlying assumptions are comparable across industrialised countries. The second is that IR is far from being under-theorised, as often reported, though theorisation is often implicit or subtle (Ackers, 2005; Edwards, 2005). Finally,

the third message is about IR reflexivity, given that the deployment of FoR underlines that the academic community acts not just as a medium between facts and theories, but also as an arbiter between competing interpretations, in a ‘social constructionist’ way (Godard, 1993). Overall, if a general lesson is to be drawn from these pages, it is that IR theoretical debates may be often context-bound or underexplored, but are actually lively and deserve being clarified.

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