Chapter 10
Unhinging social dialogue: a review of the politics of pacts and the diverse uses and transformations of the concept of social dialogue

Miguel Martínez Lucio

1.   Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to consider some of the more political and ideological challenges facing social dialogue in the European Union (EU). While the concept of social dialogue is quite broad and used in a variety of ways, its importance to the practice and identity of labour and employment relations within the EU cannot be underestimated as it is seen as a differentiating characteristic when for instance comparing the EU and the US. However, the definitional basis of the concept is open and, in many respects, the way it is evolving – and perhaps fragmenting – as a concept and a series of organisational and institutional practices is a matter of concern, as it is an important part of the influence organised labour and workers may have in relation to employers. This may even be the case for the role of human resource managers and related constituencies. The problem is that we are seeing changes that suggest that we are witnessing weaker forms of worker influence (although not a definitive and terminal decline) and more importantly, within the EU, a fundamental shift in its purpose and ideological grounding.

The chapter will argue that structural social and economic factors that have weakened the role of organised and coordinated dialogue within the EU since the 1970s have been joined by political and ideological factors which have shifted the meaning and orientation of social dialogue, attaching it to a more neo-liberal and employer-driven agenda. The chapter will also avoid the episodic and heroic mythologizing of change and decline partly because workers and many worker organisations and representatives have been proactive in the way they have responded to a hostile set of economic, social and political environments. However, the subtle – and sometimes not too subtle – shifts in the way social dialogue has been linked to neo-liberal and more market-facing agendas are, in part, the outcome of a lack of political will to sustain and enhance worker engagement and participation: especially as social dialogue, and labour

and employment relations more generally, have in many cases been redefined around business agendas and a particular view of productivity and efficiency.

These latter factors have led to the development of what the chapter refers to as a relatively *vacuous social dialogue*, where the movements and articulations within the relations between management and labour – and the perceptions from policy circles about these relations – are based on a lack of political intensity, social purpose and longer-term visions of humane labour and employment relations. It is, instead, based on a vision that labour and employment relations can be enhanced by ignoring the reality of difference, dialogue and conflict, and by reducing these to the needs of the 'economic'/'business' community. This shift frames and begins to limit the impact of even those more interesting developments in EU labour and employment relations that the EU has – under worker pressure – developed in terms of worker involvement at national and transnational levels in the past. This chapter will look at these curious shifts.

It will also argue that the consequences of such political and organi-sational shifts potentially dismantle a set of relations and interactions based on complex sets of interactions and structures between capital and labour established over time: the failure within policy circles to comprehend the nature of such exchanges within labour and employment relations illustrates the declining understanding of this area of practice and theory, as well as a failure to comprehend the importance of multi-level political *commitment* and reciprocity to economic development and change: something even employers in some cases are suggesting play a role in social and economic terms. This is a broad and multi-disciplinary subject area and the chapter presents a view informed by a series of academic interventions and personal reflections based on experience of engaging with the EU and its social organisations. The focus is on general developments with an eye to local level changes and outcomes, and their political context.

2.   The context and meanings of social dialogue

One of the problems of writing about social dialogue is that the use of this term has become somewhat obscured – and the author is not exactly convinced that this chapter will extend the meaning and clarity related to it, given its slightly different purpose. On the one hand, the term is

normally conflated with questions of top-level tripartite relations and consultations between the state, capital and labour. It tends to dovetail with the question of corporatism – or neo-corporatism, especially in the form of its societal, as opposed to state/authoritarian, variants (Schmitter 1974). This is seen as being a fundamental feature of decision-making within specific systems, having a stronger emphasis on regulation, labour rights and socially oriented economic policy, although even during the post-World War II period such relations varied in scope and intensity within developed countries (Lehmbruch 1984). To this extent, social dialogue has been very much associated in some approaches with the elite framing of employment and socio-economic policy. Hyman (2010) argued that such forms of corporatism have evolved into focusing on, and being as much about, responses to economic crisis (he cites the work of Avdagic *et al.* 2005, amongst others): thus, it is a move away from a much longer term, proactive corporatism. Such approaches may vary, covering a range of issues such as wage containment or initiatives to support restructuring. So, there has always been a question mark over the imperatives driving these forms of decision-making in terms of their being more reactive in many cases, rather than proactive. Nevertheless, these elite-level relations and processes form a key part of the work of political scientists on the subject (Compston 2003).

On the other hand, social dialogue has been increasingly used to emphasise the importance of consultation and/or collective bargaining (and joint problem-solving between management and trade unions) at sector, company and workplace levels. It has evolved into a broader concept – although when this shift actually happened is a matter for discussion and sincere empirical investigation in its own right. Within the Varieties of Capitalism literature (Hall and Soskice 2003) reference to relations and dialogue at various levels between the social partners, and between them and the state, are seen to be a key feature of coordinated market economies, with their emphasis on social, regulated and more collaborative forms of economic decision-making. What is more, social dialogue has begun to represent some of the supposedly democratic values and commitments to conciliation which are seen as central to specific regions of the European Union. It has steadily taken on a mythical feature: the counterpoint to the harder and market-oriented aspects of the new global economy.

This, in turn, has led to increasing interest in the way different activities in relation to social dialogue are combined across the different levels, and

the way the stronger systems seem to be the outcome of greater coordination between these levels (Crouch 1993; Pulignano 2011). Keune and Marginson (2013) have argued that we need to widen our analysis of the conduct of labour and employment relations in terms of levels and players (including a greater sensitivity to the transnational, as well), as social dialogue is constructed in a variety of ways and means. Furthermore, many factors contribute to the effectiveness and role of social dialogue and, especially, to forms of trade union engagement and collective bargaining across countries, which suggests that we need to be careful when generalising. For example, Pulignano *et al.* (2016) have argued that various local and contextual factors continue to frame the nature of trade union activity and responses to change in multinational companies; for example, subsidiary-level contextual factors in the form of competition, technology, and product alongside inter-subsidiary dependencies or integration. Furthermore, the nature of collective bargaining arrange-ments influences the ability of organised labour to balance or choose between security and flexibility approaches to restructuring (ibid.). Hence, we cannot ignore the complex construction and context of social dialogue broadly speaking, as we will discuss in more detail later.

Nevertheless, social dialogue is not without its critics and should not be seen as some universally accepted norm or activity. Those on the political right point to the way it can limit managerial prerogative and undermine the role of the market as an allocator of resources: it is seen as providing trade unions – and, presumably, radical elements within them – with political resources and access to institutions that further their particular interests. Alternatively, critics from the left – very broadly speaking – argue that any 'consensus' based on some form of social dialogue is not so much a product of social dialogue per se but that, instead, it could be argued that social dialogue is a product or outcome of political and social worker initiatives which challenge capital (see Ramsay 1977, for a related argument on worker participation more generally and how it responds to the changing balance of power between capital and labour). Social dialogue is not something that employer classes and the political right *inherently* support. Even in the case of Sweden, the systematic approach to social dialogue was based on the fact that in the earlier periods in the 20th Century the emerging power of workers and their trade unions had contributed to employers having to accept the embryonic new social democratic order (Fulcher 1988). Engagement with 'social dialogue' is therefore not clearly motivated by altruistic or social agendas. Furthermore, Panitch (1981) argued that social dialogue – although that

may not be the precise term that he utilised – is sometimes used to incorporate trade union leaders within more conciliatory and less militant economic and social agendas. There is thus a set of concerns about the nature of social dialogue and its rationales from such critical perspectives. Nevertheless, the current Great Recession - together with the steady move to the neo-liberal right and new xenophobic (and anti-trade union) politics - are leading to a more compromising and positive view of the importance of social dialogue amongst the more critical traditions of the left (although one cannot conceal the fact that there remains concern about its limited roles and somewhat reactive nature within such constituencies).

Thus, any discussion of social dialogue has to be mindful of the way it has evolved and the way it varies as a real practice. It has evolved into a concept representing a multi-level set of relations which include harder forms, such as bargaining, and softer forms, such as consultation thus creating a range of tensions and political differences in relation to it.

3. Embedded pressures on social dialogue (from the 1970s to 2008)

It is ironic that, when we discuss the pressure on social dialogue, we have to compartmentalise the different phases and factors that have been undermining the nature of social dialogue since the 1970s, when the first major economic crisis challenged the social-democratic consensus of the post-World War II European context. Aware of the diversity of this period, the pressures on social dialogue are not something recent – although one could argue that their current intensity is. There are many ways of conceptualising such changes and their consequences but we can point to some that have a very specific effect on labour and employment relations in terms of the nature of its social and spatial dimensions (see Martínez Lucio 2006 and 2016).

Within the workplace and employing organisations, there is an ongoing 'decentralisation' of, and in, production: central to this is the issue of outsourcing and the greater use of agency-based and indirect labour (MacKenzie and Forde 2006). These can not only undermine the regulatory scope of trade unions, but also challenge the ability of management to coordinate the organization of work and employment. Second, the way management subsequently evokes the market and links

workers' interests to those of the customer, in terms of the need to placate customer demands, has become more visible. The marketised focus on the customer and greater performance management (Garrahan and Stewart 1992) is an important development which aims to swerve loyalties away from unions and the collective and which creates new interests within the workforce (although outcomes vary, to say the least). Third, many of these changes occurred alongside profound social transformations in the workforce in the form of their greater diversity and a greater degree of individualisation and change, challenging the legitimacy and effectiveness of trade unions. (One could argue that the emergence of the private service sectors and the relative decline in various national contexts of the manufacturing and public sectors has undermined a more collective and coordinated pattern of labour relations and regulation. The presence of certain North American multinationals in the range of service sectors in the European context may also weaken the role of trade unions and more coordinated forms of collective bargaining.) Fourth, at the level of the state there has been a decline in its formal role in economic and employment terms, which means that unions cannot readily rely on it. This increasingly neo-liberal turn has made it more difficult for the unions to influence employment and social policy. Fifth, employers have turned their gaze away from the national space towards a strategy of greater mobility between national spaces, thus questioning alliances made with organised labour in the past. Sixth, within the communicative sphere there are broader spaces which focus on a more individualised set of communications and media activities. That is not to say that trade unions have not responded to these different changes and explored opportunities (Martínez Lucio 2005; 2016) but, rather, that the nature of 'traditional' social dialogue may be challenged by such developments. Sarfati (2003) points to the role of changing labour market demographics and the persistence of unemployment, and new forms of social exclusion, in creating challenges for the state: such challenges may be exacerbated by the adoption of neo-liberal responses that in turn further accentuate the state's problems of capacity due to having to cope with ever wider social problems (Rubery 2011). Social and economic change can reduce – in such a neo-liberal context – the ambit of trade union influence. Even in the context of a system lauded for its approach to social dialogue such as that in Germany, with its forms of coordination in terms of labour and industrial issues, there are concerns that, while 'coordinating institutions help the German manufacturing sector to remain competitive, they do little to preserve the previously egalitarian nature of the German model' (Hassel 2007: 272). In the 1990s, a seminal reflection by Wolfgang

Streeck (1994) argued that, within the EU, business was becoming a major obstacle to the social narratives and aspirations of the state and labour in a post-Maastricht context. He posited that there was a part of the European capitalist class that was increasingly less interested in implementing social dialogue and was increasingly encouraging policies aimed at labour adaptability and effectiveness. Crouch (2013: 123-126) notes how from the mid-1990s onwards the question of labour market policy shifted from a social welfare perspective to one which emphasised greater flexibility in labour and cost-conscious approaches. This replaced the idea of avoiding the social race to the bottom with encouraging policies aimed at labour adaptability and effectiveness in market terms. Yet, it could be argued that the outline of the factors discussed plays an even more discreet – and, sometimes, not so discreet – role in undermining social dialogue per se. The consequences of this are discussed in the following section.

4. The consequence of the erosion of the structure and form of social dialogue

We can argue about the meaning of social dialogue and the nature of the crisis that has led to its weakening or transformations, but the problem is simply that employers and management have the upper hand and that the prevailing political winds seem to blow us away from social dialogue as once perceived. As we saw in the previous section, there are many factors weakening the form and content of labour and employment relations.

However, of importance in relation to social dialogue, generally speaking, and to the nature of discussion and exchanges within labour and employment relations, is that social dialogue is premised on ongoing and reciprocal exchanges. Sustainable dialogue assumes that those entering into discussion have a relatively *stable position*, that their *legitimacy is respected and systematically sustained*, and that their *resourcing is respected, and even supported*.

Second, in terms of engagements between players, these have to be clear and played out across a longer timeframe in order for questions of reciprocity and gains/sacrifices to be understood, recalled and sustained (and responded to): i.e. sequentially and as far as possible, dialogue has to have a clear timeframe allowing for the consequences and further phases of dialogue to be understood and informed.

Third, there has to be a general framework of understanding as to the role of players and the nature of the democratic underpinnings of these relations. So, if we were to use the liberal-democratic assumptions which presumably underpin the EU, then these relations and exchanges require a political framework as well as an appreciation of questions of capacity (see MacKenzie and Martínez Lucio 2005). Indeed, we require a comprehension of the spatial and temporal factors determining the way dialogue and exchanges occur. The construction of social dialogue is not always a deliberate and clear outcome of specific policies and strategies but, rather, it evolves steadily over time under the influence of a range of factors. Moreover, their embedding over time involves a range of informal and social relations (see Oxenbridge and Brown 2002; see also Stuart and Martínez Lucio 2005). What is more, there are specific economic, technological and institutional contexts and factors that need to be appreciated – social relations and institutional interactions do not emerge in some simple economic exchange but, rather, depend on many factors (see Pulignano *et al.* 2016).

If one adopts a transaction cost approach to institutional change, then systems of social pacts, for example, emerge for a broad range of reasons: for instance the fact that, over time, a social pact provides gains visible and tangible to specific players, allowing them to learn over the longer term and to derive information from their previous experiences (see the discussion of North [1990] in Avdagic 2011: 59-51). Avdagic (2011: 52-54), in turn, argues that the emergence of social pacts between the state and social partners (or between the latter), put very generally, are determined by specific decision-making processes influenced by a contextually based and bounded rationality, and by historically derived identities and goals. Furthermore, the extent of intra-group cohesion within the social partners and perceptions of shifts in power relations between players is also a factor (ibid). In effect, the nature of relations and interdependence between players are therefore important factors that emerge over time and lead to specific approaches to social dialogue.

Hence, the dismantling and undermining of social dialogue has implications which cannot be easily reversed. In the first instance, the core nodal points in the exchange relation become less clear when, for example, fragmentation creates a greater number of negotiating partners at different economic and organisational levels. This creates a greater challenge in terms of establishing clear benchmarks and points of reference. Even in systems with a more de-centralised approach to

collective bargaining, the shifts towards further decentralisation and internal fragmentation – along with the emergence of more individualistic approaches to issues such as pay – can create further challenges and undermine the social coordination of dialogue. Second, further fragmentation can also undermine the capacity and resources of organisations (trade unions but, in some cases, even firms) in their ability to arrive at agreements across a range of employment issues. Third, the nature of discussion and the pre-requisite knowledge required for such discussions on a range of issues can be undermined. It could be argued that these changes can present possibilities for renewal and change – and can undermine hierarchical and closed systems of representation and negotiations.[1] However, when occurring in a context of labour market fragmentation, greater individualisation and increasing employer power (broadly speaking), then the impact on trade unionism is much more detrimental. In the case of extreme examples, such as in the USA and the UK – and more generally in liberal market economies – where these developments are at a much more advanced stage, there is evidence in terms of new forms of organisational practices, management culture and negotiating strategies that suggests major difficulty in reconstituting collective approaches. In effect, social dialogue is becoming a declining feature of labour and employment relations and, in many ways, any desire to revert to it becomes increasingly difficult, especially in its more articulated and dense forms. In turn, the decline of such structures is increasingly seen to have detrimental effects in terms of greater inequality, greater wage dispersal, and growing informality and social exclusion within the economy.

5. The reinvention of social dialogue for our troubled times: new forms of collaboration versus deliberate forms of exclusion

Partly in response to this, there is a greater interest in those new forms of decision-making and consultation within the EU which have tried to sustain an element of dialogue and social sensitivity. There is a wide ranging discussion about the way the changes in the new economic, social

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1. See the work of Fairbrother (1994) on the way collective bargaining decentralisation in a highly unionised context can enable and empower trade unionists locally as they directly interact with labour and employment relations processes.

and industrial context mentioned above are viewed as leading to a need to develop a new understanding and logic of social dialogue. The debate and discussion on the need for networking, and especially new forms of relations around more flexible policy- and decision-making, has become a vital part of the parlance of the EU (see Kooiman's 2003 work on governance, for example). Falkner (2000), on the one hand, in a paper that looked at the post-Maastricht phase of social policy and collective bargaining in the EU, pointed to the steady re-engineering of social dialogue around different policy institutions within the EU and their subtle engagement with social partners. A form of complex corporatism with different tiers and arrangements emerges which includes the social partners – but at specific points and not always focused on central levels of decision-making. Though there are issues in terms of the fabric of negotiations, Falkner argued that within the EU discreet influences from social partners are evident, although it is conceded that the acceptance of complexity and a perceived need for strategic compromises are important features mediating the nature of dialogue.

Building on this general approach, Vandenberg and Hundt (2012) argue that corporatism is not something that has run its course but, rather, that it has gone through a process of reinvention in some cases. In their national case studies of South Korea and Sweden, Vandenberg and Hundt show the importance of new forms of broader alliances and points of cooperation of a more flexible and focused manner. In fact, even Sarfati's (2003) discussion of new frameworks of social dialogue, which emphasises the fundamental challenges social dialogue is facing, points to the need for patient and realistic longer-term planning and positioning as a way of maintaining collective bargaining and social cohesion. The reality is seen to be that social partners must accept the challenges of the new competitive pressures facing them and society as a whole, and manoeuvre dialogue around these challenges and their resolution. Questions of innovation and change must not just be the focus of dialogue but, rather, part of the reinvention and renewal of that dialogue itself.

There are many studies on the new terrains at both the top level of the EU and at the lower levels of dialogue and bargaining; these point to the emergence of a new, flexible form of governance which retains many of the features of more organised models but which is exercised across a wider set of decision-making levels and temporal frames (Keune and Marginson 2013). The emergence of the European Trade Union Congress as a voice for organised labour, and its perceived legitimacy and support

from the European Commission, has allowed a new set of interests to be articulated. Even so, social dialogue remains fragmented and uneven at this level. Arguably, this is due to the complexity of decision-making at such levels, the opaque balancing of specific national interests and their use to stymie or reframe the social dimension, the ambivalent position of European employer organisations as part of a complex and ever more organised lobby that questions the fundamental extension of worker voice. Finally, added to all this is the under-resourced nature of the transnational trade union movement. Moreover, there is very little supervision and monitoring of social initiatives (de la Porte and Heins 2015), mirroring debates about the extent of the social dimension and the way it has been introduced in a piecemeal manner only after extensive discussion and political positioning.

Keller and Sörries (1999) argue that social policy intervention and coordination remain limited in terms of the governance roles of the EU. In effect, it is also separated from – or, at best, indirectly linked to – the labour relations ambit of dialogue within the EU's governance systems, creating a fractured system of decision-making, although one could argue that this is the norm in most European national states. Even in areas such as training, where the EU has dedicated funds and permitted trade union roles in terms of executing new forms of workplace and workforce learning (Stuart 2007), there are uncertainties and unevenness in terms of the development of this feature of labour and employment relations (Heyes 2007). Social dialogue is therefore a complex and uneven terrain at the top level of EU decision-making, with variable levels of commitment from the state and capital.

That is not to say that EU policy outputs from its political spheres have not been utilised by many workers and their organisations to enhance their ability to participate within their companies (the European Works Council Directive and information and consultation rights are examples). Many of the more negative and cynical arguments about developments, such as European Works Councils – and their limited scope in terms of influencing corporate decision-making – ignore the way workers throughout Europe have been inventive and imaginative in the way they use these institutional spaces (Martínez Lucio and Weston 2000; Pulignano 2009). However, these have typically been stronger where there is already an embedded trade union with strong traditions of organisation and innovative approaches to workplace change.

One could argue that there have been quite large communities of trade unionists extending their negotiations and dialogue processes within and across companies through the organisational spaces provided by the EU since the early 1990s. However, it is interesting to note the extent to which the more systematic and more effective end of these cases is normally due to the ability of worker representatives in more organised environments, in union terms, to extend the remit of EU directives and their national legal consolidation. Many initiatives have socially 'worked' in cases where the local partners have been more systematic and resourced – or supported – in enacting them. This is, in part, due to the way the framework of EU regulation is less focused on the question of how labour and employment relations frameworks can be generally and universally upgraded or enhanced to enact and enforce the specific rights developed. The emphasis has increasingly focused on the importance of the market and the enhancing of the competitive environment, especially since 2008.[2] Moreover, since the late 2000s there has been a significant shift in the character and tone of the EU's executive and bureaucratic structures. These changes suggest the lack of a systematic and strong commitment to a proactive or deeper social dialogue. This shift is identifiable at four levels.

First, Visser (2000) argues that there has been a perceptible shift from traditional social policy, with its focus on equality or outcomes, to employment policies based on equality of opportunity. This move to a 'third way', where individual rights appear to predominate over collective ones, was seen clearly in the UK during the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (see Howell, 2005 for a reflection). In effect, the basic architecture and focus of the social are shifting towards a more individualised approach, and Visser (2000) is clear about the challenges this would bring due to the declining capacity and roles of the traditional social state. Hence, there is a process of re-focusing at best, or fragmentation at worse, underpinning the orientation of EU social and employment policy.

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2. A commentator could argue that the EU is limited and constrained by these national differences and the challenge of balancing distinct national economic and political interests in its quasi-legislative and executive structures. It also has a bureaucratic system through the Commission that assumes a peculiarly influential role in internalising and managing these types of tensions and diverse perspectives. In this respect, the position of social partners at this trans-national level within the European Union can only play a secondary and subsidiary role.

Second, there is the disconnected nature of new discourses on the social, as seen in the case of corporate social responsibility (CSR). There is no doubt that greater attention is being paid to more regulated and substantive approaches to CSR in the EU (Tschopp 2005). Compared with the USA, the EU is considered to be more committed and progressive[3] in such aspects, although mandatory CSR reporting structures are unevenly developed. In many respects, CSR in the EU is seen very much to be the basis for ensuring that foreign trade is not disadvantaging the EU (Breitbarth *et al.* 2009). Yet, the linking of the EU's CSR agenda to the labour and employment relations agenda and the role of trade unions is unclear and not always systematic. Where we do see a stronger commitment to CSR and a more articulated policy approach in relation to labour and employment relations is in those contexts with a stronger corporatist tradition – especially where trade unions are strategically involved (Preuss *et al.* 2006). So, once more, there is no concerted attempt to *push up* the level of worker voice in the EU but, rather, to allow different national traditions and contexts to frame developments. Hence, a major development in business ethics and corporate behaviour is not systematically unified and underpinned in the EU.

Third, in structural terms we have seen a tendency to manoeuvre social dialogue activities into a subsidiary role. Within the current Great Recession, we are seeing the dominance of a more austere and neo-liberal approach to economic and social policy. The role of the Troika and the EU components within it has been explicit in the need to curtail or redefine social dialogue of a collective nature, as has been seen in southern Europe (see Fernández Rodríguez *et al.* 2016). Regardless of one's views of the causes within the European Commission, there has been a systematic narrative developed that sees the way out of such a context as being based on increasing the competitiveness of these economies through lowering labour costs and deregulating collective bargaining (Koukiadaki *et al.* 2016a, 2016b). More recently in 2016 this has started influencing some core European economies, with deregulation becoming part of social-democratic labour policy as in France (Lefebvre 2016) In effect, social dialogue, broadly speaking, and collective bargaining in particular, are increasingly viewed by key EU bodies as marginally related to economic development. This has led to systematic reforms being overseen in terms of lowering the costs of dismissing workers, restricting the role of collective agreements, and the development of restrictive

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3. Much may depend on your definition of CSR.

approaches to labour and employment relations (ibid.). Whilst Broughton and Welz (2013) state that such changes have not led to an overall decline in regulation and collective negotiation, Marginson (2014) is more pessimistic and concerned with the changes in collective regulation, especially at multi-employer and sector levels. These changes are seen to further the fragmentation of social dialogue. For example, in Greece, Lavdas argued (2005) that, even before the current wave of deregulation-based policies driven by the EU, European policy was creating a disjointed approach to corporatism and its articulation around neo-liberal agendas.

Fourth, it has not gone unnoticed that a large proportion of the EU's learning and research arm has become increasingly interested in focusing on social dialogue in more individualistic ways. There is growing interest in the development of research agendas which are less academic in nature; are linked more directly to organisations, and especially the firm; and are focused on individual and informal interactions in terms of 'conflict resolution'. The narrative is based on workers and managers 'resolving' and 'overcoming' differences, and recognising the importance of responding to common threats of an economic nature and the significance of 'moderating' their expectations and behaviours.[4] It has been noted how research on social dialogue is being pulled into the economic and finance dimensions of the European Commission, with social and political approaches being marginalised in favour of more employer-related and individualistic approaches to the subject that operate within a more neo-liberal consensual framework.

Hence, we are seeing a steady shift towards a more deliberate and explicit questioning of the role of social dialogue, redefining its form and its purpose. The shift is, in part, working 'under the cover' of the problem of sovereign debt and the economic crisis; it is also clear, however, that even prior to 2008 there was a move towards a competitive and market-based approach to collective and individual rights that facilitated neo-liberal change.

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4. The author is referencing a series of terms and concepts that are emerging within many EU texts and projects that emphasise the importance of the individual and the psychological over the collective and sociological.

6. Conclusion

The orientation and meaning of social dialogue has been redefined and steadily re-crafted around the notion of the market and the individual. It has worked in a context that has been uneven and ambivalent in its commitment to workers and trade unions, and with an even greater obsession with the *managerial* and the praxis of the private corporation as a panacea for economic and social problems. To this extent, we are seeing the congruence of trends and developments into a more systematic questioning of social dialogue, and the emergence of a more submissive and less purposeful and social form of social dialogue: a relatively *vacuous social dialogue*. Or at best it is becoming unhinged and decentred. Much may be due to the way consensus is generated within the EU's formal institutional spaces and the competing political interests and ideologies balanced within them. The uneven and contradictory projects and internal differentiation within the state – and within the EU institutional apparatus, in particular – are major factors. Yet, since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, a more concerted and more explicit unease with the democratic logic of social dialogue and its collective nature has begun to be discussed amongst EU elites. We are seeing a more explicit questioning of collective approaches to social dialogue and a steady expansion of interest in its more individualistic, obscure and less transparent forms. Much of this is legitimated by the ongoing fascination with, and fetish for, neo-liberal business models and business cultures within the political and organisational spaces of EU polity (irrespective of any signs of growing concern with neo-liberalism in some elite policy circles.)

However, social dialogue in its more meaningful forms requires not only political commitment, but also long-term engagement and investment. It calls for a complex form of accommodation and change over time, necessitating a fundamental recognition of the importance of organised labour within the economy (Martínez Lucio and Stuart 2004). The position of workers needs to be acknowledged as more than just a means of production, as does the significance of the democratic principles within the space of work and employment, as well as the broader economy. Instead, what we have seen is an attempt to ensure the collective dimension is constrained and, in some cases, even reduced within the European context. The problem is that social dialogue in its most elaborate and effective manner – in its collective and broader-reaching forms – evolves through a series of diverse historical and institutional processes: it is not a system that simply 'reboots' when you 'turn it off and on'.

In fact, the impact on employers themselves needs to be acknowledged (Koukiadaki *et al.* 2016a, 2016b). There may emerge an employer led wage cost obsession with regards to labour – as opposed to a focus on the quality of labour and its ability to add to the value of an organization or the economy – due to the increasing labour relations fragmentation and the importance attributed to short-term economic gains through wage cuts. Amongst employers a culture of engagement with social dialogue and the knowledge associated with long term social dialogue and engagement through human resource managers and trade unions may thus be undermined (Fernández Rodríguez *et al.* 2016) which, ironically, may lead to negative long term effects for all including employers – something some employer organisations have acknowledged to be worrying (ibid).

If we are to reclaim ground in terms of social dialogue, then it will not just mean defending the very models of social dialogue that have been steadily opposed or eroded. A project of renewal is needed that goes beyond making the simple business case for its relevance, or beyond focusing on proving the economic and profit-oriented worth of social dialogue. Commentators also have to remove themselves from the obsession of counting down to the final days of social dialogue or fixating on the negative effects of its demise for the workforce as this, curiously, tends to reinforce the sense of (heroic) fatalism that surrounds discussions on work and employment today – where some academics even make careers discussing declining structures and not their re-imagination and evolution.

Instead, any reclaiming of social dialogue and any attempt to halt its erosion requires a more imaginative and emancipatory response. It needs to look back to the debates on worker control and genuine social dialogue between industry and society (see Martínez Lucio 2010). It must look to the importance of providing a firmer democratic underpinning of the role of organised labour and the collective dimensions of regulation, if dialogue is to work in a broader democratic and social sense (see Martínez Lucio and Stuart 2004 on debates in the UK in relation to social partnership). An imaginative and emancipatory response must focus on the multi-level nature of social dialogue and the need for its transnational, national and macro level framing, if we are to avoid fragmentation. It must also emphasise the importance of dialogue within organisations and the role of workers in relation to their leadership inside trade unions, as well, so as to ensure that agendas emerge from real concerns. Finally, the

missing link in the project of the European state has to be addressed in the form of questions of ownership and control through a return to the overarching debate on industrial democracy and common ownership, as Hyman (2016) has reminded us. Though these debates were a crucial part of deliberations of the left and the labour movement during the 1960s and 1970s, they never weaved their way into the narratives of the EU beyond tokenistic gestures around information and consultation rights. In many ways, one may see these as naïve or somewhat optimistic views: yet, it is simply that social dialogue is a political narrative which has many trajectories and traditions, rather than the current prevailing one of desiring to individualise and decentralise it around managerial concerns. We therefore need to remember what some governments and trade unions were proposing in the real time and space of the 1970s, if we are to realise that questions of, or control over, ownership were meant to be part of the future of social dialogue. In effect, social dialogue has to be located in a counter-imagination and narrative on workplace and organisational democracy along the lines suggested by Hyman (2016). Defending extant collective bargaining alone and its economic contribution may not be enough.

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