

The Union Question in Industrial Relations Field: An Analysis of the Academic Literature.

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Abstract: Although industrial relations, as an academic field of research, is supposed to be in a self-defining crisis, the objective of this paper, after reviewing the arguments for the very changing nature of the field, is to describe the evolution of industrial relations publications between 1990 and 2008. Specifically, the paper addresses the evolution of academic interest for union question. This exploration is based on a computer aided text analysis (CATA) applied to 3,621 abstracts of articles published in eight leading journals.

(1) Contrary to expectations, a relative stability in the number of publications. is observed is observed. (2) A topical analysis identifies three major issues associated with union question: institutionnal issues, managerial issues and social issues. (3) A longitudinal observation of this corpus indicates that the field is globally moving toward the study of institutional issues.

Keywords: Industrial Relations, Employment Relations, Unionism, Content Analysis, Academic Literature, Computer Aided Text Analysis

INTRODUCTION

“What is industrial relations?” is a highly topical question, typified by the crisis at Keele University in early 2008, when management announced the closure of the internationally renowned Centre for Industrial Relations (see Clarke *et al.* 2008). An earlier sign of the supposed reconfiguration of this field of research was the transformation in 2005 of the famous Industrial Relations Research Association into the Labor and Employment Relations Association, in line with Kaufman’s call to rejuvenation, by substituting *Employment Relations* for *Industrial Relations*.

However, while the question is highly topical, it is not new. A brief scrutiny of the literature shows that there has always been debate about the definition of the field. In 1964, Derber noted that “*the intellectual health of the field of industrial relations continues to be a matter of concern among its students.*” Continuous self-examination was at the heart of some events:

“Questions about the functions and qualities of industrial relations research have been troubling scholars as well as some practitioners since the start of the “modern phase” in 1945. The subject was repeatedly discussed at meetings sponsored by the Labor Market Research Committee of the Social Science Research Council for a decade after its inception in 1946. The Industrial Relations Research Association has devoted sessions to it at ten of its sixteen annual meetings to date. During the 1960-1961 academic year, the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations of the University of Michigan and Wayne State University promoted a series of lectures on industrial relations research which emphasized methodological problems, and in 1962 the fourteenth annual conference of the Industrial Relations Centre at McGill University similarly explored “research frontiers in industrial relations today.” This listing is by no means exhaustive. That so much attention should be devoted to the “why and how” of industrial relations research as distinct from reports on research findings is perhaps indicative of a feeling of uncertainty as to where the field is going and whether the research is being conducted to best advantage.” (Derber, 1964)

In 1978, Kerr, offering a personal retrospective, observed new developments in the field since the 1960s. The same year, Strauss and Feuille’s history (1978) of the US field identified three main periods: the early years in the 1920s, the golden age (1933–59) and the doldrums since the 1960s. The authors optimistically predicted a renaissance period, starting in 1975. They also suspected that British industrial relations, in the late 1970s, were in their golden age. Other contributions testify to the intensity of the debate in this period (Dunlop, 1977; Winchester, 1983; Zieger, 1983). Its continuing relevance in the 1990s and the first decade of this century allows us to imagine highly changeable industrial relations, with equally diverse explanations offered for this dynamic.

A highly recurrent assertion about these changes deals with the union question decline. It is regularly argued that unionism is not any more a central concern for actual industrial relations. Surprisingly, rigorous empirical descriptions of the field only emerged post-2000 (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000; Mitchell, 2001; Frege, 2005; McMillan and Casey, 2007; Brandl, 2008) and, because of the emergent nature of this literature, it is difficult to have a clear and consolidated vision of the academic field. These studies are not based on a homogeneous methodology. Some concentrate on topics, others on methodology, and others on disciplinary contributions. Also, while the common objective of these studies is to describe academic publications about industrial relations, the periods and sources studied are quite different. Our contribution in this paper must be viewed within this dynamic. We undertake a topical description of the field using computer aided text analysis, applied to abstracts of articles published in eight leading journals between 1990 and 2008. Our objective is to evaluate the evolution of union question in industrial relations publications. We start by exploring the sources of change in the industrial relations field, then present a brief synthesis of available descriptions, and end by presenting our results.

THE HIGHLY CHANGEABLE NATURE OF THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS FIELD

In the literature, there are two main approaches to capturing the sources of change: a life cycle or a relevance-swing approach. To understand these approaches, we have to turn back to the birth of industrial relations. As an academic field, industrial relations emerged in the USA in the 1920s through the activism of institutional economists, who challenged neo-classical economic theory and took an interdisciplinary look at employment relations. These authors believed that the model of the perfectly competitive labor market was unable to integrate the human factor. For Kaufman (2007), "it is no coincidence that the field of industrial relations and the International Labor Organization were born at the same time for they sprang from the same intellectual roots and social concerns." In an attempt to consider the human factor and the role institutions play in the analysis of employment relations, the industrial relations ambition was to integrate disciplines such as economy, sociology, law, history, psychology, ethics and management (Kaufman, 2007). Divergent (but not exclusive) interpretations about the evolution of the field date from this period, traceable to the multidisciplinary nature of the initial topic.

The life-cycle approach

In stressing the ontological multidisciplinary nature of industrial relations, we could describe the evolution of the field as a life cycle. Indeed, the heterogeneity of industrial relations is a logical consequence of its original multidisciplinary approach. And, as the initial ambition was to cross from this multidisciplinary approach to interdisciplinarity, the history of industrial relations can be viewed as the continuous emergence of a specific discipline throughout the 20th century. The supposed convergence of industrial relations systems in the industrialized countries under economic globalization, and the internationalisation of academic activity, should contribute to the coherence of the field. In other words, the evolution of industrial relations research is considered a convergent process. However, some barriers to this process have been identified. Derber (1964) noted great difficulty in integrating the diverse elements of the field and more than 40 years later, Clarke *et al.* (2008) regret the continuing multidisciplinary orientation at the expense of interdisciplinarity. On the other hand, Frege (2007) shows that this field is still embedded in longstanding country-specific research traditions. US, British and continental European approaches remain diverse. Finally, it is difficult to come to clear conclusions about convergence, divergence, or continuing diversity at the heart of the field. Some empirical studies make a plea for convergence (Mitchell, 2001; Brandl, 2008) while others corroborate the path dependency thesis (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000; Frege, 2005, 2007).

The relevance-swing approach

Another type of explanation can be aggregated under the label "relevance-swing approach" (Brandl, 2008). According to this perspective, the topical evolution is better understood as an adaptation to academic or practical issues.

About academic issues, it has been argued that the scope of thematics studied is influenced by theories and methodologies. For example, Winchester (1983), describing industrial relations research in Britain, considers two important contributions that could modify the field's agenda. First, he estimates that Clegg's *Trade Unionism Under Collective Bargaining* (1976) "has been influential in stimulating research and theoretical argument." Second, Marxist critics like Hyman and Fox, "have raised important issues for industrial relations research and theory." For his part, Cappelli (1985) identifies another endogenous factor. According to him, US industrial relations research has largely adopted a deductive-individualist approach. By this, he means that studies are founded on a combination of

existing general law about individual behaviors, drawn from social science, and specific empirical observations in industrial relations. It follows that this research method cannot deal with certain topics “because they concern behavior above the individual level or because there are no existing social science theories which directly address them” (Cappelli, 1985). When we turn to practical issues, we accept that the shift in relevant topic is mainly a reaction to an exogenous variation. Strauss and Feuille (1978) explaining the lack of vitality in the field of industrial relations field in the 1960s stated that “*as many industrial relations problems became less urgent the field’s reason for existence became less clear.*” The US industrial relations system was already established, labor-management relationships were less conflictual and the rate of unionization began to fall, so union-centric research was less relevant for policy makers and practitioners. This argument illustrates the policy-dependent relevance identified by Dunlop (1977):

“Most theorists of social and economic affairs harbor the deep conviction, often expressed at the start or end of a work, that their favorite analysis and contribution provides the answers, or at least the policy guidance, to resolve the dilemmas of both harassed public officials and the actors in an industrial relations system, if they would only pay attention. [...] Social theorists of all shades seem to regard society and government as their special clients.” (Dunlop, 1977)

Dunlop regrets that the academic agenda is determined not by theory but by policy proposals. While his observation concerns the US, we probably can extend it to Great Britain, since, for example, many analyses of British industrial relations research cite Donovan’s report as a decisive event. This approach has been represented in the last few years by Bruce Kaufman in his famous book *The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations* (2004) and numerous publications since (notably Kaufman, 2006, 2007, 2008). Kaufman identifies two paradigms in industrial relations research to specify the evolution of the field. The first one, *original industrial relations*, is concerned with the study of employment relations and considers all forms of regulation, institutional or otherwise. This paradigm addresses, with equal interest, trade unions, human resources and other labor-management relationships. The second paradigm, *modern industrial relations*, developed in the second part of the 20th century, accepts trade-unionism as its main, if not exclusive, topic, insofar as this topic was clearly overrepresented, compared to the effective importance of unions as measured by union density (Mitchell, 2001). Recent evolutions in the field that are supposed to give increasing place to human resources management, and which are sometimes described as a crisis, are perceived by Kaufman (2007) as a return to original industrial relations. This readjustment of the literature would be linked to union and government failure toward the regulation of employment (Kaufman, 2007). Such a binary description is also adopted by Dunn (1990) who opposed the old and the new industrial relations. While academic industrial relations concentrated on militant unionism because of its supposed association with political crisis in postwar British society, he argued that “the outside world has changed.” Grand societal trends, such as postindustrialism, and Thatcherian activism modified industrial relations. It would notably have been shown that conflict is not inevitable and that human resource management, under the pressure of a new economic order, would have reconciled trade-unions to management. One can recognize the partnership thesis (Heery, 2003) according to which the firms’ economic performance, in postindustrialist era, depends on the capacity to capture employees’ loyalty. In this perspective, it is natural if academic interest for union question decrease to the benefit of managerial concepts.

PREVIOUS EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Our brief review of the literature reveals the changing nature of the industrial relations field and the predicted decline in academic interest for union. But, one can be surprised by the weakness of empirical descriptions of the field. Until early 2000s, empirical descriptions were founded on a narrative review with no explicit methodology (Kerr, 1978; Strauss and Feuille, 1978; Winchester, 1983; Cappelli, 1985; and others). The main problem is one of author

subjectivity. It is highly probable that changes in the field were overestimated. More rigorous analysis than these earlier efforts is needed. A series of recent empirical studies (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000; Mitchell, 2001; Frege, 2005; McMillan and Casey, 2007; Brandl, 2008) has attempted this. According to Winchester (1983), there are at least three different possible ways of classifying publications in the field: by subject matter, by disciplinary contributions, or by research orientations and perspectives. Whitfield and Strauss (2000) are concerned with methodologies, McMillan and Casey (2007) and Bandl (2008) with disciplines, and Mitchell (2001) and Frege (2005) with subjects. In the context of our topical analysis, we will comment briefly on the limits of the latter two contributions, whose results seem, in part, contradictory (see Table 1).

	Period	Academic journals	Number of articles	Methodology
Mitchell (2001)	1962-1963	<i>Industrial & Labor Relations Review</i>	196	Manual coding
	1997-1998	<i>Industrial Relations</i>		
Frege (2005)	1970-1973 1994-2000	<i>Industrial & Labor Relations Review</i>	1,309	Manual coding
		<i>Industrial Relations</i>		
		<i>British Journal of Industrial Relations</i>		
		<i>Industrial Relations Journal</i> <i>Industrielle Beziehungen</i>		

Table 1. Previous topical analysis of industrial relations literature.

The two studies are based on common methodological principles, and compare the literature between two periods. Each takes an extensive collection of articles published in academic journals and conducts manual analysis to specify the topics covered, using this method to observe evolution in the field. However, while the methodological principles of each are similar, there are some discrepancies that limit the comparability of the two studies. First, the periods observed are quite different. Mitchell describes the field in the 1960s while Frege describes it in the 1970s. Second, the scopes are also very different. Frege's objective is to capture variations in the field according to country-specific traditions, so she selects several journals representing the USA, Great Britain and Germany. Mitchell's analysis is limited to the USA and concentrates on two major US journals. Frege's "by journals" presentation allows comparable observations to be made about the US context. Third, and perhaps most important, there are great differences in the coding principles of the two authors. The *a priori* classification of industrial relations themes is not identical in the two studies. Moreover, Frege attributes only one theme, the main topic, for each article, while Mitchell attributes several themes to each article, accepting that topics are not isolated.

For all these reasons, the two studies are difficult to compare and deliver contradictory accounts for academic interest in union question. Mitchell observes a fall in content about this topic from 66.2% in the 1960s to 43.6% in the 1990s, while Frege observes an increase from 10.8% in the 1970s to 16.6% in the 1990s (see figure 1). More precisely the evolution noted by Frege is stable in US context (comparable to Mitchell's study) and growing in British context. A possible explanation to reconcile these opposite results could stand in a global decline and a change of nature. The union question may well be transformed from a peripheral preoccupation to a central one but this is merely conjecture and we are in trouble if we want information about the actual tendency.

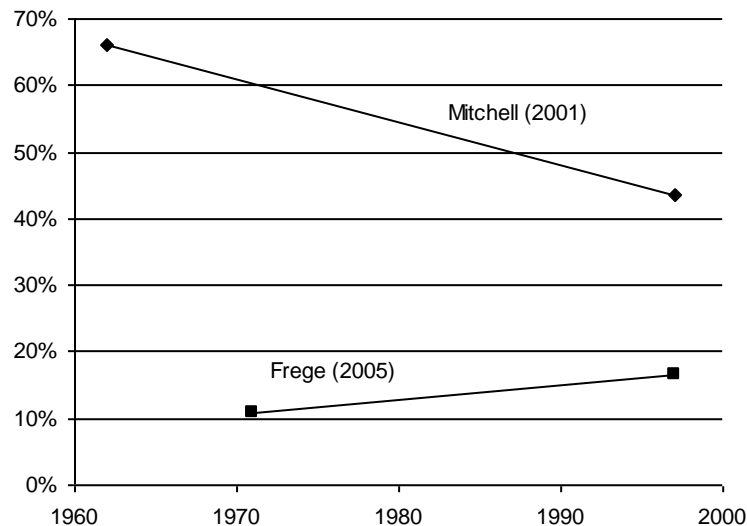


Figure 1. Union question in academic publications (Mitchell, 2001; Frege, 2005).

Our main objective here is to empirically clarify this question. We propose to describe the evolution of the field by means of a computer-aided text analysis applied to abstracts of articles published in eight leading journals between 1990 and 2008. The questions we address are: To what extent did the interest for union question decline? Have the treatment of union question changed over time?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Our contribution shares the same objective as Mitchell's (2001) and Frege's (2005) work in basing the description of the industrial relations field on an analysis of the academic literature—more precisely, specialist journals. Then the study is based on the idea that academic journals are an important vector for the spread of scientific research since peer-reviewed journals are more widely recognized than books (Mingers and Harzing, 2007) and frame an interesting way to apprehend a research field. The first step of the research is to constitute a corpus of articles.

Sample

Like Mitchell (2001) and Frege (2005), we were careful to circumscribe the field of research to assure a relative disciplinary homogeneity. We excluded journals that are more directly linked to the field of labor economy or history. Finally, we selected eight renowned journals: *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, *Industrial Relations Journal*, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Labour: Review of Labour Economics and Industrial Relations*.

The scope was also defined by the period of the study. Since the previous works compared two distinct periods of time, we adopted a longitudinal approach, conducting an exhaustive collection of articles published over 19 years (between 1990 and 2008). The starting time was chosen arbitrarily, but matches the generally admitted time of the beginning of the crisis in the industrial relations field. In the end, the bibliographic databases query based on these two criteria led us to collect 3,621 articles. On this corpus a sample was extracted corresponding to articles dealing with union question. In concrete terms, an article is supposed to deal with union question when the notion is citing at least one time in the title or the abstract. Finally, 1,410 articles fall into this category representing 39% of the corpus (see table 2).

Journal	Ticker	Origin	First publi	Total corpus		Articles dealing with union	
				Freq	%	Freq	%
British Journal of Industrial Relations	BJIR	Britain	1963	470	12,98	237	16,81
Economic and Industrial Democracy	EID	Sweden	1980	354	9,78	149	10,57
European Journal of Industrial Relations	EJIR	European	1995	226	6,24	138	9,79
Industrial & Labor Relations Review	ILRR	USA	1948	644	17,79	219	15,53
Industrial Relations Journal	IRJ	Britain	1970	520	14,36	188	13,33
Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society	IR	USA	1961	470	12,98	236	16,74
Journal of Industrial Relations	JIR	Australia	1959	395	10,91	166	11,77
Labour. Review of Labour Economics & Industrial Relations	LAB	Italy	1987	542	14,97	77	5,46
Total				3621	100	1410	100

Table 2. Sample of the study.

Content analysis

To analyse the content of the articles, we used SPAD software to run a computer aided text analysis (CATA). This methodology has several advantages. First, it allows the manipulation of huge volume of text, as in the present case. A manual analysis of 1,410 articles would have needed several codings and so introduced a risk of coding heterogeneity. Second, this technique limits the biases induced by a manual analysis, signalled by Frege (2005).

“Classifying topics proved difficult. Articles were classified according to their main topic, but frequently articles covered several topics and it was not always easy to decide on the most important one.”

In our case, the analysis does not deal with isolated themes but with automatic clusters of significant words, representing consistent semantic fields. The statistical analysis of relationships between words can translate a text meaning (Iker and Klein, 1974) and allow a typology of these texts. This is a quantitative statistical method applied to words for which the non-obstructive propriety is specially adapted to longitudinal studies (Kabanoff et al., 1995). Readers interested in a more detailed presentation of the methodology can refer to the work of Lesage and Wechtler (2009), who applied it to academic literature on auditing.

We replicated this methodology to the abstracts of the collected articles. Considering the size of the corpus, extraction of the full contents of every article was extremely difficult and our main objective was to analyze a representative extract. We preferred to analyze abstracts rather than titles or keywords because they seemed rich enough to detail potential thematic diversity and, in the same time, efficient enough for authors to identify the significant themes of their research. Titles and keywords were considered too restricting.

The average length of the 3,621 analysed abstracts was 113 words, homogenous for the different journals. Our starting dictionary contained 16,646 different words. To conduct statistical analysis, it was necessary to reduce the number of words to obtain a satisfactory ratio between the number of individuals (articles) and the number of variables (words). This operation required three steps: suppression of words with non-consistent meaning; regrouping of closely related words (same grammatical roots or synonyms); and suppression of low frequency words (used fewer than 15 times in the whole corpus). Finally, we obtain a consolidated dictionary of 753 root words. The validity of the individuals versus variables ratio is confirmed by a significant Chi squared test ($p < .001$).

RESULTS

We present our results in two main parts, first a quantitative description of the evolution of union question in the field, then an inductive typology to qualitatively describe this literature.

The global evolution of union question in IR literature

Table 3 reveals that, contrary to expectations, the literature dealing with union question is very stable over the period. About 40% of articles published in leading IR journals is concerned, primarily or not, by this topic. A by-journal observation indicates slight differences. The Swedish journal, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, gives more and more importance to union question, from 30% in the early 1990s to 52% in the most recent period. At the opposite, the US *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*, the British-based *Industrial Relations Journal* and the Italian *Labour. Review of Labour Economics & Industrial Relations* knew a decrease on the period. Note that in these three cases, the decrease is statistically significant only for the interperiod indicating a relative stability in the 2000s.

Journal	n	Ratios and Percentages								Significant changes between periods			
		1990-94		1995-99		2000-04		2005-08		I vs. II	II vs. III	III vs. IV	period
BJIR	470	$\frac{59}{118}$	50%	$\frac{61}{105}$	58%	$\frac{66}{133}$	50%	$\frac{51}{114}$	45%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.
EID	354	$\frac{26}{86}$	30%	$\frac{42}{89}$	47%	$\frac{34}{88}$	39%	$\frac{47}{91}$	52%	↑**	ns.	↑*	**
EJIR	226	-	-	$\frac{45}{78}$	58%	$\frac{53}{79}$	67%	$\frac{40}{69}$	58%	-	ns.	ns.	ns.
ILRR	644	$\frac{85}{210}$	41%	$\frac{52}{158}$	33%	$\frac{53}{164}$	32%	$\frac{29}{112}$	26%	↓*	ns.	ns.	*
IR	470	$\frac{55}{120}$	46%	$\frac{51}{109}$	47%	$\frac{63}{125}$	50%	$\frac{67}{116}$	58%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.
IRJ	520	$\frac{59}{129}$	46%	$\frac{36}{125}$	29%	$\frac{51}{146}$	35%	$\frac{42}{120}$	35%	↓***	ns.	ns.	**
JIR	395	$\frac{38}{91}$	42%	$\frac{42}{93}$	45%	$\frac{36}{93}$	39%	$\frac{50}{118}$	42%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.
LAB	542	$\frac{26}{119}$	22%	$\frac{19}{139}$	14%	$\frac{18}{154}$	12%	$\frac{14}{130}$	11%	↓*	ns.	ns.	*
Total	3621	$\frac{348}{873}$	40%	$\frac{348}{896}$	39%	$\frac{374}{982}$	38%	$\frac{340}{870}$	39%	ns.	ns.	ns.	ns.

Ratio is the number of articles related to union* to the total sample

* Chi square $p < .10$; ** Chi square $p < .05$; *** Chi square $p < .01$

Table 3. Interperiod comparison of union question in IR literature.

These results can be surprising. As noted above, the supposed decline of academic interest for union question is regularly attributed to the more and more pacified relationships at work. According to this perspective, unionism was an important issue when industrial relations were conflictual but it would not be the case any more in the service economy. However, a rise in union interest is noted only in the Swedish context, well known for its cooperative labor-management relationships. On this issue, the Global Competitiveness Report published in 2009 ranks Sweden at the 4th place on 133 countries while United Kingdom and United States of America were respectively at the 25th and 26th places.

Another interesting observation is given by a specific scrutiny of British and US journals. Each of these countries is represented by two journals what lets us question the hypothesized link between national context and academic focus. For the British context – *British Journal of Industrial Relations* and *Industrial Relations Journal* – as well as for the US

context – *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* and *Industrial Relations* – the related journals don't move in the same way since one is stable while the other is decreasing. This intra-national diversity shows that there is no systematic link between context and academic research.

Contributions on union question: an inductive typology

The quantitative approach of the literature must be completed by a qualitative approach. In this perspective, a hierarchical ascendant clustering has been conducted on a correspondence analysis's factors of words contingency table. This operation allows an inductive elaboration of a typology of the main research themes in articles dealing with union question. Each article is attributed to a single cluster, depending on its associations of vocabulary. Three clusters¹ emerged from this process (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Typology of topics in articles dealing with union question.

First cluster: institutional issues

The first cluster gathering 57% of the published articles between 1990 and 2008 is the more important. It deals with institutional issue at national or extranational levels. International and public policies questions appear to be closely associated. In the context of economic globalization, international governance is a major preoccupation, to the detriment of state-level regulations. According to Collings (2008), we can confidently anticipate strong stakes, like the effects of industrial relations systems on multinational location choices, or the creation of an international collective bargaining framework.

Second cluster: managerial issues

Focusing on employee, productivity, performance, profit and so on, the second cluster, representing 23% of the sample, describes a business orientation. This cluster is characterized by classic HRM themes like *employee*, *team*, *training*, *incentive* and *control*. We notice the weight of the internalist paradigm (Kaufman, 1993), explaining troubles related to *labor* in terms of management failures and highlighting organizations' endogenous factors.

Third cluster: social issues

Important societal problematics converge in a homogeneous third cluster (20% of the sample), which reveals not only gender, race and family questions but also concepts as

¹ In fact, four clusters emerged but the last one was neglected since it aggregated only 9 outliers.

youth and education. This category questions unions not as an economic actor but as an actor concerned by social issues.

The typology of these three clusters reveals two pieces of information. Firstly, it indicates that union and managerial issues may not be considered as strictly opposed. More than one-fifth of contributions deal simultaneously with union and managerial questions. Secondly, unionism cannot be reduced to its business function in the regulation of employment but can also be questioned in relation to social movements.

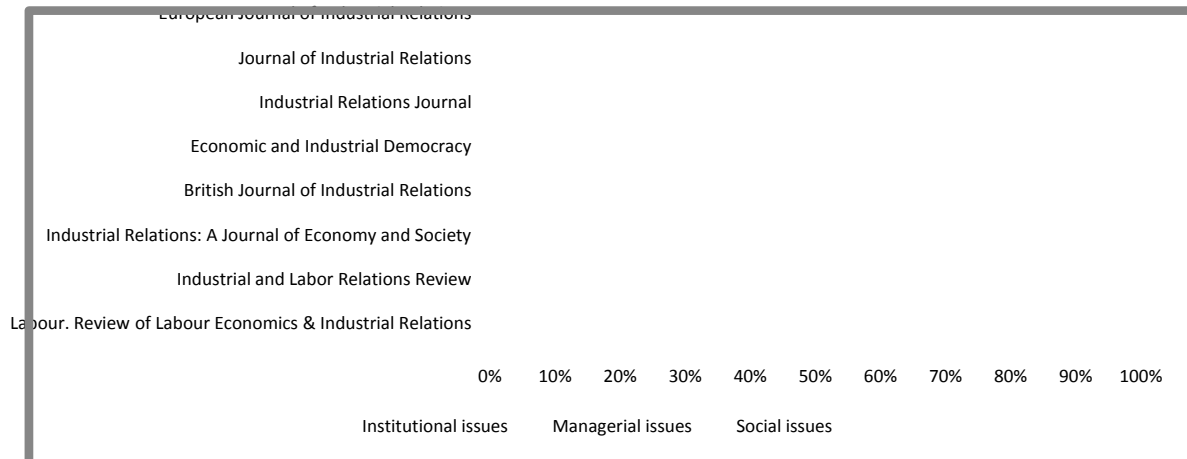


Figure 3. The topics representation by journals.

The figure 3 shows the place given to each of the three issues in the different journals. While some are in a very balanced situation, others are clearly dominated by one issue. For example, 90% of the publications concerned with union question in the *European Journal of Industrial Relations* are oriented towards institutional issues.

A longitudinal analysis of topics related to union question

We will attempt to deepen this analysis by capturing a dynamic description of this overview, using the longitudinal dimension to approve the evolution the contribution each thematic cluster makes to the industrial relations field.

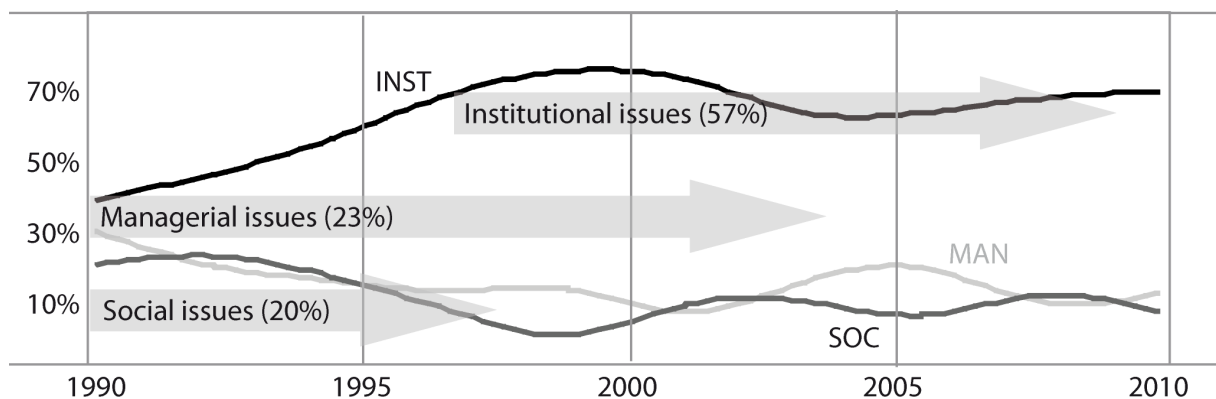


Figure 4. The evolution of clusters.

Figure 4 illustrates the major trends in research topics evolution in the 1990-2008 period. We can notice a substitution of institutional issues for managerial and social issues. While the three topics were balanced in the early 1990s, the last decade was characterized by a

significant raise of publications concerned with public policy problem. It can be the consequence of new problematics associated with the acceleration of globalization. The theme of governance – represented by such notions as *policy, legislation, government...* – is associated with extra-national level notably the European Union. It is particularly significant if the references to emergent economies such as central and eastern Europe or or China are overrepresented in this category.

DISCUSSION

As shown by a brief scrutiny to literature, industrial relations specialists regularly present the discipline in a crisis. The excessive attention given to unionism by scholars would not be a relevant issue any more. The transformations of economy over the last century are supposed to make collective institutions such as unionism or government obsolete. Instead a market-driven HRM should reconcile labor and management interests. As a consequence, industrial relations as an academic field should evolve from union study to HRM. Facing this abundant debate, the objective of this paper is to provide a rigorous description of industrial relations publications during the last 20 years.

In this perspective, a bibliographic database was constituted and explored both quantitatively and qualitatively. Finally, several results can be highlighted:

- The quantitative approach of publications concerned by union question illustrates a global stability of the field. About 40% of articles continue to deal with this topic while the total number of articles in industrial relations leading journals is growing.
- Regarding the specific union question, journals can have specific policies. In other words, the evolution of the field toward the minimisation of unionism is not a natural, context-dependent way. Further researches could be conducted to explore the academic agency in the choice of research topics.
- The qualitative approach indicates that the evolution of context is not ignored by scholars interested in unionism. At the opposite, they question it as a potential institution for a transnational governance.

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