

Work & Workers in International Markets

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Four “problems” drive the IPE literature on work and workers in a globalized world: the economic determinants of workers’ political orientations; the role and future of labor unions; the regulation and governance of international supply chains; and migration. There remain walled gardens in the IPE literature on labor that inhibit productive exchange but the literature on supply chain governance and labor standards stands out for its policy relevance and active collaboration among scholars from different IPE traditions. I conclude with reflections on how the implicit definition of “problems”, as opposed to explicit normative claims might not be “first best.”

In their introduction to this volume, [Pevehouse and Seabrook \(forthcoming\)](#) argue that we can best understand international political economy (IPE) as “problem-driven,” as opposed to a field organized around grand theoretical or methodological fights. When it comes to the interdisciplinary literature on labor in the international economy, I concur. At first glance this seems remarkable. After all, the political economy of work and workers has a longstanding association with major “-isms”, specifically offshoots of Marxist thought¹ and Weberian notions of occupation and class. Early work was also noteworthy in its explicitly critical view of “neo-liberalism” and “Washington Consensus” policies. But concern with “world historical” theorizing has largely receded and, as I will attempt to show in this essay, a “problem-driven” orientation can help us collate existing scholarship and identify lacunae.

“Globalization” frames the IPE purview on labor questions. Inside this frame, we can arrange the literature on work and workers around four sets of ostensible problems:

1. The nature of (paid) work and its connection with workers’ political orientations
2. The role and resilience of labor unions
3. Labor market standards and regulation
4. Migration

This list is heuristic and there are, of course, connections across all these problem areas. For example, does in-migration weaken labor unions ([Finseraas, ed and I Schø ne](#),

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¹Specifically neo- and analytical Marxism, world systems theory, and dependency theory.

2018)? When do unions in rich, industrialized countries advocate for or against more liberal immigration policies (Peters, 2017)? There are also a variety of issues implicating all four, including climate change, development, and technological change. Fortunately, Menz (forthcoming) provides an extensive discussion of migration in this volume,² so I will focus on the first three as sufficient to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the current literature. Among the strengths are explicit study of particular policy interventions and expanded interest in the politics and structure of workers' organizations. Indeed, the IPE literature on work and workers has made significant contributions to both organizational theory and the design and evaluation of public policy.

I disagree with Pevehouse and Seabrook's claim that the current state of affairs is "first best." Identifying a set of organizing "problems" is not the same thing as intellectual coherence or knowledge accumulation. In the IPE literature on work and workers there remain walled gardens. For example, work on voter behavior and policy preferences tends to employ quantitative tools and emerge from the open economy politics (OEP) perspective (Lake, 2009) whereas scholars of transnational cooperation among labor groups tend to emerge from a qualitative, industrial sociology or contentious politics traditions. We can certainly do better as a field, especially if we care deeply about specific problems. The literature on labor standards in global supply chains is one area where many of these barriers are lower and a variety of research traditions and approaches converge explicitly and productively.

Nor does a problem-driven approach mean that fundamental normative and conceptual issues have vanished. In the concluding section of this essay I reflect on how decisions around what constitutes appropriate "problems" reflect researchers' normative perspectives in ways familiar to our intellectual ancestors. The IPE literature on work and workers largely reflects concerns with distributional conflict, equity, and justice in the context of dynamic economic relations characterized by private property ownership. But the identification of worthwhile "problems" is largely implicit, making any apparent consensus unstable. It also limits interest in the field, as those who do not view a particular issue as a self-evident "problem" may end up ignoring important scholarship that has broader contributions.

1. WORK, WORKERS, AND POLITICAL PREFERENCES

By far the largest IPE literature touching on labor issues is the study of political preferences, specifically whether and how someone's position as a "worker" is sufficient to characterize her political orientation toward major international economic issues. This contemporary "factor-based" study of mass political preferences is most closely associated with the OEP perspective. But we are also seeing a re-imagining of an older sociological literature on work experience and occupational identity (Kitschelt and Rhem, 2014; Ahlquist and Levi, 2013). This revival is likely the confluence of at least two trends: controversy as to the explanatory power of "material interests" and rapid upheaval in the structure of production, the boundaries of the firm, and the nature of employment in both rich and developing countries.

We can trace IPE interest in mass political opinion to three connected "problems": (i) theories of comparative advantage showing that, with the right political exchanges,

²Also see Mosley and Singer (2015).

free trade can be welfare-enhancing for all; (ii) the self-defeating collapse of trade during the Great Depression, especially among democracies; and (iii) normative concerns with democratic representation. Initially, scholars focused on preferences over trade openness, in part because the Hecksher-Ohlin and Ricardo-Viner trade models offered up clear and contrasting predictions about liberalization's distributional consequences that depend how easily workers and capital can move between industries (Alt et al., 1996).

The literature has since expanded the ways in which analysts specify workers' material interests. It is now common to differentiate among workers based on "skill"—usually operationalized as formal educational attainment. The awkwardly-named "new new trade theory" has reinvigorated the study of workers' connections to specific firms. There is increasing recognition that switching industries or sectors is difficult, even in the allegedly flexible US labor market (McLaren, 2017). And IPE scholars have looked at workers' opinions around all areas of economic relations, including exchange rate policy (Bearce and Tuxhorn, 2017), foreign direct investment (Scheve and Slaughter, 2004; Pandya, 2016, FDI), migration (Hainmueller, Hiscox and Margalit, 2015, e.g.) and economic shocks more generally (Margalit, 2011).

All this has left us in an ongoing debate about the relative explanatory power of the "pocketbook" versus "sociotropic" and ideational concerns, in the shadow of demonstrable ignorance and apathy among voters. In the broader political science literature, some go so far as to argue that mass preferences are essentially irrelevant for understanding policy (Achen and Bartels, 2016). This debate is far too expansive to review here, but it highlights the fact that first-generation theories and measurement around "work" and material interests have proven insufficient. Survey experiments demonstrate that informational stimuli can evoke different conceptions of "interest" among respondents (Rho and Tomz, 2017). On this basis, newer research has looked into specific industries and policy contexts to show how workers acquire credible information about economic policy (Ahlquist, Clayton and Levi, 2014; Kim and Margalit, 2017). There is renewed interest in how globalization interacts with the spatial distribution of work and production (Moretti, 2012; Autor, Dorn and Hanson, 2016), with political consequences (Colatone and Stanig, 2018). The field appears to be searching for richer behavioral models and more nuanced understandings of "interest" while paying greater attention to local context.

In the mean time, the structure of work and employment is changing along with technology. In the developed world, internal labor markets are breaking down and employment is polarizing (Autor, 2015; Kalleberg, 2011). The boundaries of the firm are shifting, with employees reclassified or re-hired into supplier-like relationships, while performing the same tasks (Weil, 2014; Goldschmidt and Schmieder, 2017). Some proclaim the rise of the "precariate" (Standing, 2011). The political economy (and regulation) of "data labor" is just beginning to receive sustained attention (Arrieta Ibarra et al., 2018; Fourcade and Healy, 2017).

Theoretical labor economics is reorienting toward "tasks" (Autor, 2013; Grossman and Rossi-Hansberg, 2008). A "job" is now a (perhaps incomplete) contract that defines the bundle of tasks a worker will do and the terms under which she agrees to do them while an "occupation" is a task that someone believes she will be able to perform for a roughly stable wage for an extended period of time (Ahlquist, 2018). By this definition, an occupation is a cognitive construct that may depend on both formal institutions around labor contracting and informal conventions about what constitutes

“good” and “valuable” work, echoing the earlier sociology of work and class. Technological changes and the imperatives of global competition and opportunity alter the incentives for firms to unbundle jobs into smaller sets of tasks and adjust their contracting decisions accordingly. Occupations appear to be less stable and returns to training harder to predict.

In an ironic twist, this unbundling of jobs and the regulatory gray zone of new labor contracting in rich countries bears similarity to the contingent and frequently informal employment seen across the developing world (Bacchetta, Ernst and Bustamante, 2009; Lee and Kofman, 2012). In China, the work unit was not just the site of (state-controlled) employment, but also housing, education, etc. As China’s political economy has transformed so too have these old relationships, with varied and incomplete replacements (Hurst, 2009; Friedman and Lee, 2010). There are both conceptual (Milner and Rudra, 2015) and empirical (Lee, 2016; Pham, 2017; Freeman, 2009) reasons to believe that globalization—especially integration into international supply chains—will amplify the level of informal employment in much of the developing world.³ Workers in developing countries are already involved in platform-mediated “ghost work” alongside their counterparts in the developed world (Gray and Suri, 2019). One important finding from this new literature: households and even individuals frequently work in *both* formal and informal or “gig” employment, so scholars must take a more holistic view of the household’s employment portfolio and risks when considering political orientations (Baker and Velasco-Guachalla, 2018; Ahlquist, Hamman and Jones, 2017). This will require a more explicit consideration of questions of gender, unpaid labor, and intrahousehold bargaining that we have seen to date in IPE.⁴

In IPE, these changes in the nature work and the structure of labor contracting have received relatively limited attention, notwithstanding some initial work on “off-shorability” (Owen and Johnston, 2017; Rommel and Walter, 2018) and supply chains (below). This is due, in part, to serious data and measurement limitations. Our existing survey and administrative data reflect a mid-20th Century understanding of what it means to “go to work” or “have a job.” As a result, we cannot reliably describe the scale and trajectory of things like “gig” and “platform” work (Abraham et al., 2018), much less how households cobble together a living over time. Informal employment is notoriously difficult to detect. Anthropologists and industrial sociologists are doing the hard descriptive work (Barley and Kunda, 2006; Gray and Suri, 2019; Lee, 2006; Neff, 2012, e.g.), much of which has yet to filter into IPE.

“The job” is a critical site of political socialization and preference formation, perhaps second only to the immediate family. Given changes in the nature of work and our growing appreciation for the nuances of both globalization and human cognition, I find the inconclusiveness of the IPE literature on labor and political orientations unsurprising. Reinterpreting the cognitive, social and contractual nature of employment will be key to improving both our data infrastructure and our theoretical claims.

2. THE PRESENT & FUTURE OF ORGANIZED LABOR

The relationship between globalization and organized labor is the second class of problems attracting attention in IPE. Interest in unions stems from normative concerns with

³But see Gallagher et al. (2015) on enforcement of China’s 2008 Labor Law.

⁴See Iversen and Rosenbluth (2011) for a notable exception.

equality, theoretical debates about the role of unions in the evolution of capitalism, and the historical fact that unions are the most effective organizations yet devised for sustaining worker mobilization around economic concerns.

Can workers build and sustain their bargaining power in a world of trade openness, mobile capital, and increased migration (Schulze-Cleven, 2017)? And do unions alter the local impact of international economic forces (Garrett, 1998; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Ahlquist, 2017)? The answer to the first question is contested. The answer to the second is a qualified “yes”, but with anxiety about unions’ medium term prospects.

2.1. globalization → unions

The incentives for firms to shift production to locations where labor is cheaper and more compliant is preoccupation in the IPE literature (Silver, 2003). Similarly, the long-term, secular decline in union membership in rich countries, especially the United States, has produced a large literature (Wallerstein and Western, 2000; Hirsch, 2008). Some have argued that globalization—whether in the form of increased North-South trade, capital mobility (Slaughter, 2007) or migration (Lee, 2005; Briggs, 2001)—is responsible either due to accelerated deindustrialization or because firms can more credibly threaten to exit in the face of aggressive union demands or industrial action (Wood, 1994).

More systematic empirical work has turned up little evidence that directly links globalization to the erosion of union membership. Early work focusing on the period from the mid 1970s to the late 1990s consistently found weak or null relationships between immigration (Burgoon et al., 2010) or trade and unionization (Baldwin, 2003; Slaughter, 2007; Scruggs and Lange, 2002), although there is some evidence that FDI is associated with declining unionization (Slaughter, 2007) and increasing worker anxiety in developed economies (Scheve and Slaughter, 2004). But this first wave of work lacked clear identification strategies and focused on the “pre-China” era. Ahlquist and Downey (2019) find that the so-called “China shock” (Autor, Dorn and Hanson, 2016) did cause deunionization to accelerate modestly among US manufacturing workers, but also resulted in an increase in unionization outside manufacturing. The net effect is that the Chinese trade shock caused deunionization to slow. Although recent migrants are less likely to join unions (Gorodzeisky and Richards, 2013), Finseraas, ed and I Schø ne (2018) find that new immigration into the Norwegian construction sector had a negligible effect on unionization rates among native Norwegians, contrary to some expectations.

In the developing world, Silver (2003) shows that worker unrest has followed the shifting sites of production in the auto and textile industries. Outsourcing may undermine unions in “middle-wage” Latin America (Anner, 2011), but unions in Indonesia have made notable policy gains, even if divided and representing a small proportion of workers (Caraway and Ford, 2017). Some have noted the apparent uptick in worker protest in China (Gallagher, 2014), although others urge skepticism (Lee, 2016; Chen, 2009) and it appears that worker action in China is taking a novel form, distinct from both traditional unionism and the state-sanctioned All China Federation of Trade Unions (Fu, 2018). More generally, the structure and legacy of authoritarian politics helps understand the divergent paths of organized labor in global South (Caraway, Cook and Crowley, 2015).

Claims that globalization killed the labor movement are incorrect, but that does

not mean that globalization has not put pressure on unions and their members. Based on the decline in the labor share of income across a variety of countries ([International Monetary Fund, 2017](#), ch. 3), workers' "structural power" appears to be on the wane. Understanding these pressures and unions' responses is an ongoing area of research.

2.2. unions → globalization

Have unions—and the broader wage bargaining institutions—altered the contours and local impact of globalization? The preponderance of evidence indicates that yes, unions ([Farber et al., 2018](#); [Ahlquist, 2017](#)) and institutions ([Beramendi and Rueda, 2014](#)) matter for politics and, ultimately, distributional outcomes. Unions can affect workers' political opinions about trade ([Ahlquist, Clayton and Levi, 2014](#); [Kim and Margalit, 2017](#)) as well voting behavior ([Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez and Williamson, 2019](#)). The "power resources" approach claims that strong labor unions combined with Leftist political parties produced the the modern welfare state ([Korpi, 2006](#)). Meanwhile, the compromise of "embedded liberalism" enabled post-War globalization by respecting the same domestic welfare state ([Ruggie, 1982](#)). Where unions remained strong, Left-leaning governments better compensated globalization's economic losers in the 1980s-90s ([Kwon and Pontusson, 2010](#)). More unionized countries ([Owen, 2015](#)) and industries ([Owen, 2013](#)) maintain more restrictions on inward FDI and were less affected by the China trade shock ([Ahlquist and Downey, 2019](#); [Pierce and Schott, 2016](#)). And unions in the developed West were often successful in their opposition to immigration ([Briggs, 2001](#); [Peters, 2017](#)).

Unions and domestic institutions interact. The Ghent system of unemployment insurance sustains union membership ([Western, 1997](#)), including among recent migrants ([Gorodzeisky and Richards, 2013](#)). The presence of coordinated wage bargaining institutions can induce unions to side with employers around trade policy ([Dean, 2016](#)) and make unionized countries more export-competitive, while the need to maintain export competitiveness can affect the emergence of coordinated bargaining in the first place ([Swenson, 1991](#)). More concentrated union membership sustains "strategic capacity" ([Ahlquist, 2010](#)) and the ability to affect policy, including around FDI ([Owen, 2015](#)). [Iversen and Soskice \(2015\)](#) argue that electoral institutions mediate whether lower-income workers see their purported interests represented in redistributive welfare policy in a "knowledge economy."

In the developing world, unions—where they exist—are often agents of labor control or concentrated in the formal and public/state-owned sectors. In this context, unions' defense of their members' privileges can exacerbate insider/outsider divisions. Protections for labor market insiders may affect the extent to which globalization exacerbates informal employment ([Goldberg and Pavcnik, 2003](#)). And the structure of the labor movement—and connection with political parties—shapes how unions responded to liberalizing reforms in Latin America ([Murillo, 2001](#)).

Although domestic institutions and labor organizations managed to shape globalization in the past, there is concern about whether this will continue. Macroeconomic imbalances and export performance within the Eurozone may be exacerbated by weakly coordinated wage bargaining in Southern Europe ([Johnston, Hancké and Pant, 2014](#)). Which industrial relations systems have enabled the most egalitarian adaptation to new technology and production processes? How will organized labor and wage bargaining institutions affect domestic responses to climate change ([Milden-](#)

berger, forthcoming)?

Progress in this area encounters a common challenge in IPE: interdependence. Standard analyses—both statistical and qualitative—looking at globalization’s putative effects on domestic outcomes proceed under the assumption that one country’s institutional arrangements, union actions, or policy responses are (conditionally) independent of those elsewhere. But spillovers, diffusion, learning, strategic reaction, evolutionary adaptation, and asynchronous shocks are key features of a globalized economy. For example, [Acemoglu, Robinson and Verdier \(2012\)](#) describe a model in which the innovative but polarized and deunionized American economy in fact subsidizes Sweden’s egalitarian one. Whether this occurs remains to be established, but research designs relying on conventional cross-national regressions are unlikely to either resolve the issue or point the way forward.

One area of IPE research putting interdependence front-and-center is the literature on transnational labor organizations. Early work in this area focused on documenting the existence of various forms of transnational cooperation, in the hope that, by demonstrating the possibility of cooperation, traditional unions might start looking beyond their own borders more aggressively ([Gordon and Turner, 2000](#)). Subsequent work has examined how existing political relationships between parties and unions can condition whether and how unions look abroad for allies, including exploiting the timing of trade agreement negotiations ([Kay, 2011](#); [Murillo and Schrank, 2005](#)).

An open question is whether and when existing unions and other social movements are allies or rivals. In Southern Europe, for example, protest movements emerging out of the global financial crisis and Eurozone debt crisis often viewed legacy unions as part of the problem ([Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017](#)). [Brookes \(2019\)](#) uses a systematic comparison of both successful and failed transnational labor campaigns to present the most articulated model of transnational worker movements. She highlights the interplay between both domestic and international coordination mechanisms as well as how unions derive power from a variety of sources: position in the global supply chain, existing domestic labor market institutions, and connections with other stakeholders (e.g., customers, shareholders).

The IPE literature on globalization and organized labor is strongly oriented around discovering whether and how existing unions (and industrial relations systems) can survive and adapt in a changing economic environment. The cross-disciplinary literature has arrived at some basic conclusions, namely that globalization, on its own, has not destroyed organized labor and that unions have shaped the evolution of global capitalism thus far. How unions have been able to shape the local experience with global markets varies in numerous ways and interacts with both domestic institutions and outcomes in other countries. Nevertheless, divisions remain. Scholars looking at domestic institutions and unions maintain a limited dialog with those studying transnational labor campaigns. More problematically, scholars in sociology and parts of industrial relations continue to see “globalization” as a cause of labor’s purported weakness whereas those emerging from other disciplines look to technological changes and worker demand. This may be due to different ideas of what “power” means and how it might be exercised in a global economy. A “problem-oriented” approach is unlikely to clarify the situation.

3. LABOR MARKET STANDARDS AND REGULATION IN GLOBAL PRODUCTION

For goods ranging from t-shirts to jetliners, production now takes place through transnational webs of suppliers and subcontractors known as global supply (or value) chains (Gereffi, 2014). Motivated in part by a concern that global production will engender a “race to the bottom” in labor and environmental standards, there is a substantial literature on the governance of global supply chains and the consequences for workers. I do not review that literature here⁵ but I do note that the most extreme fears about a race to the bottom have not come to pass. Workers from Bangladesh to Vietnam have higher incomes and access to better opportunities than in the past, although conditions lag far behind the norm in the developed world and horror stories still abound. Here I highlight several aspects of this literature that make it exemplary for other areas of IPE: explicit focus on interdependence and diffusion; policy relevance; and communication and collaboration among scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds.

Supply chains by their very nature connect workers, finance, managers, and policymakers across the globe, even if they never see or even become aware of one another. The anti-sweatshop and ethical consumption campaigns of the 1990s showed that activists and consumers—often in the developed world—could put pressure on certain global brands to improve labor and environmental standards throughout their supply chains. There is now substantial evidence of positive but incomplete diffusion of labor standards; countries and firms trading with high-standards countries tended to improve their respect for labor rights rather than the other way around (Greenhill, Mosely and Prakash, 2009). FDI seems more likely to improve worker rights than arm’s-length subcontracting and trade (Mosley, 2010; Mosley and Singer, 2015). Subsequent work has identified mechanisms involved, including improved labor relations due to “lean production” requirements (Distelhorst, Hainmueller and Locke, 2016) and improved industry codes of conduct (Distelhorst and Locke, 2018). Suppliers in developing countries are more willing to invest in improved labor standards when their customers consider labor issues important (Malesky and Mosley, 2018).

Policymaking around labor standards now takes place in the context of “private governance”—industry codes of conduct, multi-stakeholder initiatives, certification efforts and accreditation schemes (Locke, 2013). These initiatives vary in numerous ways, including governance structure, legal form, duration, and financial commitments (Bartley, 2018). Many of these initiatives arise in the wake of major disasters, publicized through global media, implicating international brands, and attracting activist pressure (Berliner, Greenleaf, Lake, Levi and Noveck, 2015). Private governance can be effective at limiting some of the most egregious abuses around working hours and wages, but gains are fragile and uneven (Locke, 2013). Private governance initiatives appear to work best in the context of stronger domestic bureaucratic and legal institutions (Vogel, 2010). And even when supporting other remediation programs, both firms and local governments appear hostile to independent workers’ organizations and attempts to bargain collectively.

The IPE literature on supply chains and labor standards explicitly focuses on transnational economic and political spillovers in ways that have affected the design and implementation of everything from activist campaigns to private governance initiatives.

⁵See Berliner, Levi, Greenleaf, Lake and Noveck (2015); Mosley (2017).

Much of this work emerged from research teams composed of scholars with different methodological approaches and disciplinary backgrounds working in collaboration with firms, governments, NGOs, and workers' organizations. The vibrant literature on supply chains and private governance attracts an even more diverse set of participants across numerous general interest journals as well as specialist outlets in industrial relations. This literature is a good example of what Pevehouse and Seabrook's "problem-driven" approach can accomplish in IPE.

4. CONCLUSION

I argued that we can view the IPE literature on work and workers as framed by globalization and structured around four interlocking problems. A problem-driven approach has produced knowledge accumulation and policy experimentation and evaluation. I pointed to the literature on governance in global supply chains as exemplary in these regards.

The problem-driven approach is a remarkable shift from some of the older "world-historical" theoretical arguments. Nevertheless many of the same normative concerns with distributional equity as well as a generally critical disposition toward the "neo-liberal" approach remain just below the surface. In allowing normative commitments to remain submerged, we have certainly avoided a variety of sterile theoretical debates. But there are also costs. As [Burgin \(2012\)](#) shows in the context of the Mont Pelerin Society, a shared set of loosely articulated normative commitments attracted the funding and produced the research foundational to the later "neo-liberal" approach. Without clear normative positions justifying the study of a particular "problem", work comes across as largely technocratic. It may also fail to attract otherwise interested audiences who do not share—or are simply unaware—of the normative assumptions motivating interest in a topic. Any normative framework necessarily has blindspots. It is hard to identify these blindspots without first articulating the framework.

None of this is to say that we should go back to the days when the first ten pages and any article consisted of theoretical throat clearing. Nor is there any reason to think that there is only one or two normative perspectives at work. But we will never know without developing clear normative positions that can then be referenced, debated, and revised as new problems come in to view and problem-driven research continues. As one example, [Gourevitch \(2018\)](#) recently elaborated a normative view justifying coercion as part of the right to strike. Such work can help frame interest in various approaches to labor rights, private governance initiatives, and labor market institutions.

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