

Introducing Workers' Embedded Agency: Insights from the Brazilian Subsidiaries of a Multinational Corporation
Introduction à l'action intégrée des travailleurs : aperçu de filiales brésiliennes d'une multinationale
Introducción a las agencias incorporadas y sus trabajadores: Esclarecimientos sobre las filiales brasileñas de una corporación multinacional

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Article abstract

The relevance of subsidiary embeddedness in a macro-institutional environment can in no way overshadow the importance of the micro-political agency of social actors. While some researchers focus on local management's "embedded agency," we focus on a less-developed aspect: workers' "embedded agency." In order to do so, we propose an analytical model that is based on the Varieties of Capitalism model and its subsequent developments, but that also includes the workers as an active agent. This model allows us to observe the institutional resources that workers can actively mobilize. We specifically focus on the characteristics of industrial relations and education institutional sub-systems. We apply the developed analytical model to the case of the Brazilian subsidiaries of a highly global multinational corporation (MNC). Brazil represents a context where institutional constraints (i.e. corporatist industrial relations and a dualist education system) make workers' actions the least favorable. Moreover, the highly integrated organizational environment of the MNC further reinforces this aspect. In turn, this makes it more compelling to discover how workers can nevertheless strategically activate some resources to improve their conditions. We conduct a case study and collect empirical data through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. More specifically, we discuss three examples of workers' "embedded agency" (i.e. election of a bilateral committee for the prevention of accidents; plant closure; and internship and training). These bring analytical attention to workers' collective and individual actions as well as intra- and extra-subsidary mobilization of institutional resources.

Introducing Workers' Embedded Agency: Insights from the Brazilian Subsidiaries of a Multinational Corporation

Lorenzo Frangi

The relevance of subsidiary embeddedness in a macro-institutional environment can in no way overshadow the importance of the micro-political agency of social actors. While some researchers focus on local management's "embedded agency," we focus on a less-developed aspect: workers' "embedded agency." In order to do so, we propose an analytical model that is based on the Varieties of Capitalism model and its subsequent developments, but that also includes the workers as an active agent. This model allows us to observe the institutional resources that workers can actively mobilize. We specifically focus on the characteristics of industrial relations and education institutional sub-systems. We apply the developed analytical model to the case of the Brazilian subsidiaries of a highly global multinational corporation (MNC). More specifically, we discuss three examples of workers' "embedded agency." These bring attention to workers' collective and individual actions as well as intra- and extra-subsidiary mobilization of institutional resources.

KEYWORDS: embedded agency, workers, multinational corporations, varieties of capitalism, Brazil.

Introduction

The relevance of the simultaneous multiple embeddedness of the subsidiaries of a multinational corporation (MNC) in different environments has been at the centre of an enduring and compelling debate (e.g., Brooke, 1984; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998; Ferner *et al.*, 2004; Edwards and Bélanger, 2009; Almond, 2011; Heidenreich *et al.*, 2012).

Yet the relevance of the macro-institutional embeddedness of subsidiaries remains central. However, more recently, analytical attention has been driven

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towards also including in this debate the micro-political action of social actors in the subsidiaries (Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2005; Morgan and Kristensen, 2006; Heidenreich, 2012). From this perspective, the MNC's internal organizational environment and, in particular, the external institutional environment that surrounds the subsidiaries are considered not a determinist element, but a pattern that constrains and empowers very agentic, autonomous, and purposive actors (Meyer, 2010: 3). In other words, as Garud, Hardy and Maguire *et al.* (2007) argue, the analytical attention is driven towards their "embedded agencies." The attention has been primarily focused on subsidiary management's "embedded actions" (e.g., Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2005; Morgan and Kristensen, 2006; Gepperet and Dörrenbächer, 2011). However, the debate about the "embedded agency" in subsidiaries does not properly take into consideration another fundamental actor: the worker. Our aim is thus to contribute towards filling this gap.

This article, through case-study evidence, attempts to provide two main theoretical contributions. First, we develop a model to observe the "embedded agency" of workers in the subsidiaries. Our focus is on workers' micro-political actions with local managers, oriented towards improving their conditions. More specifically, from a distributive perspective (Pontusson, 2005), our attention is concentrated on worker attempts at increasing their salary, collective representation, and skills and knowledge. Second, our empirical analysis allows us to shed some light on two strategic dimensions underpinning these micro-political actions of workers.

In order to achieve these aims, the first step is thus to focus on the characteristics of the macro-institutional environment where subsidiaries are placed so as to understand the resources that workers can mobilize through their actions. Even if the macro-institutional embeddedness can be studied at different levels (e.g., international, continental, national, regional), the national level is still considered largely prominent (e.g., Zeitlin, 2011; Heidenreich *et al.*, 2012). In order to focus on the specific characteristics of a national institutional environment, the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) approach (Hall and Soskice, 2001) provides important contributions, mainly because it underlines fundamental institutional resources and constraints through a focus on microeconomic dynamics. However, as underlined by many critics, the Hall and Soskice (2001) approach underestimates the agency perspective. Further developments in the VoC debate thus underline the necessity to devote broader relevance to agency and change (e.g., Crouch and Farrell, 2004; Crouch, 2005; Hall and Thelen, 2009). Within this framework, in the first section, we therefore develop an original analytical model that emphasizes workers as an active agent, so as to observe their micro-political actions in the subsidiaries.

We apply the developed model to the Brazilian subsidiaries of one "truly global" (Ferner, 1994) and "highly integrated" (Almond *et al.*, 2005) MNC (i.e., the in-

ternal organizational environment) for some notable reasons. As will be argued in the second section, Brazil represents a context where institutional constraints make workers' actions the least favorable. Moreover, the highly integrated organizational environment of the MNC further reinforces this aspect. In turn, this makes it more compelling to discover how workers can nevertheless strategically activate some resources to improve their conditions. Whilst the MNCs debated thus far have involved non-OECD countries, Latin America remains largely unexplored, and Brazil is the most important economy in this region. Lastly, our article can provide a different perspective from the one prevailing in the Brazilian labour literature. In fact, the latter is principally centered on workers' deprivation and largely ignores their ability to activate institutional resources (e.g., Antunes, 2007; Santana and Ramalho, 2003). Thus, our expansion on these aspects represents further contributions of the present study.

Section three sheds some light on methodological and field aspects of our research, and on the most relevant organizational characteristics of the MNC and its Brazilian subsidiaries. Lastly, we discuss empirical cases about how workers mobilize available institutional resources to improve their conditions. Thus, two strategic dimensions that structure the micro-political actions of workers are highlighted (i.e., individual versus collective, and based on internal versus external resources).

Inserting Workers' Embedded Agency into VoC

VoC Model, Two Ideal-types, and Critiques

In order to evaluate the institutional resources that workers can mobilize to improve their conditions, the VoC perspective has the advantage of focusing on microeconomic dynamics to understand the macroeconomic level. In fact, in VoC, micro regulation processes, in comparison to political ones, become central in distinguishing a specific productive system and, more broadly, a variety of capitalism.

The analytical relevance reserved for the microeconomic level is essentially linked to the firm's role. The firm is considered as the central social actor, and the focus is on its strategic way of coordinating with the institutional environment in which it is embedded. Analytically, the national institutional environment is divided into five complementary subsystems: industrial relations, coordination with employees, education and training system, inter-firm relations, and corporate governance.

In analyzing the firm's coordination with its institutional environment, VoC defines two opposite ideal-types of capitalism. In the Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs), the relations between the firm and the five institutional

subsystems is greatly characterized by coordination and collaboration, allowed for by an institutional environment that supports a cooperative game among economic actors and the achievement of the Pareto improvement. In intra-firm dynamics, CMEs are distinguished by nonunilateral management decision-making due to the presence of strong union influence and the influence of the most important shareholders (Hall and Soskice, 2001: 24-26). Conversely, the Liberal Market Economies (LMEs) have few such institutions that can support coordination. A systemic market logic prevails in the economic and productive dynamics, as does a free-riding attitude among economic actors. The coordination with employees is structured on market logic, and there is high managerial control over intra-organizational dynamics, partly due to a broad freedom to hire and fire (Hall and Soskice, 2001: 27-28).

The VoC debate is still alive in part due to the many references and critiques it has received. The strongest criticism of this model is that it overemphasizes institutional macro embeddedness and, moreover, it does not properly take into consideration micro-political agency. In fact, VoC traces two functionalist models of capitalism (i.e., the coordinated and the liberal) in which change is not centrally debated, due to the surrounding institutional complementarities (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). The subsequent debate about VoC underlines how the integration of the important dimension of institutional evolution (Regini, 2003), due to external dynamics (Crouch and Farrell, 2004; Hancké and Goyer, 2005), as well as the activation of internal resources for change by social actors (Boyer, 2005; Crouch, 2005), can substantially contribute to strengthening this perspective. Lastly, the VoC perspective, as argued by Pontusson (2005), could gain leverage by properly taking labour dynamics into consideration. In fact VoC, centrally assuming the firm's perspective and the institutional complementarities, "privileges considerations pertaining to efficiency and coordination at the expense of considerations pertaining to conflicts of interests" (Pontusson, 2005: 164). In particular, VoC needs to consider the distributive conflict between labour and capital as a central analytical dimension (Pontusson, 2005) and, moreover, how this is related to the wider characteristics of labour market regulations (Iversen, 2005).

Inserting Workers as Embedded Agents

Even if the VoC model allows us to pay attention to microeconomic dynamics and understanding the fundamental institutional limits and resources in one specific environment, it remains trapped in a prevalent deterministic macro-institutional perspective. We thus enrich this model to also allow for a micro-political perspective, with a specific focus on how workers at the subsidiary level can mobilize institutional resources to improve their conditions.

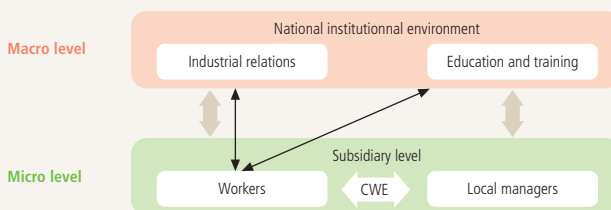
First, we introduce workers as an active agent into the VoC model. The model thus acquires a “double agency”: the local managers, the firm’s principal actors at the subsidiary level, on the one side, and, on the other, the workers. Through this double agency, we contribute to overcoming two critiques of VoC. Namely, taking more into consideration the labour dynamics inside the subsidiary, and overcoming the exclusively firm-centric perspective. Even if we can consider all the employees as workers, our focus is restricted to workers lower down in the organizational hierarchy in the subsidiaries (here, henceforth, we refer to them just as “workers”). This is primarily identified as the organizational level most susceptible to national macro-institutional embeddedness inside MNCs (e.g., Ferner et al., 2004; Kristensen and Zeitlin, 2005).

Afterwards, among the institutional subsystems identified by VoC, we focus on the most relevant subsystems for lower-level workers, namely industrial relations and education and training. The inter-firm relations and corporate governance institutional subsystems are excluded. The first because it is more concerned with business strategies and the firm’s extra-organizational actions, which is not the focus of our research. The second because it has a limited impact in our analysis. In fact, in MNCs, corporate governance is the *locus* of corporation global goals and human resource management planning, aspects that are not primarily relevant for interactions at the lower organizational level.

Subsequently, we place the “coordination with employees” (CWE) institutional subsystem centrally, because it is an important dimension in which management-worker interaction takes place in the subsidiary and in which workers can act to improve their conditions. The model is thus characterized by a double agency, and this allows for not just a top-down – i.e. manager-driven – but also a bottom-up – i.e. workers-driven – analysis of the micro-political actions in the subsidiaries. Finally, the workers interact with management on the basis of their ability to mobilize institutional resources – especially in the industrial relations and education and training subsystems – outside as well as inside the subsidiaries (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Proposed Analytical Model of the Research



Hierarchical Market Economies and Brazilian Specificities

The subsequent academic debate inside the VoC framework goes further than the dichotomy proposed by Hall and Soskice (2001) due to the substantial dissimilarities observed inside each ideal-type, as well as due to the application of the VoC analytical model to new regions.¹ Among others, scholars distinguish the ideal-types of the Hierarchical Market Economies (HMEs), to which Brazil belongs. The HMEs, even if similar to LMEs, represent a model of capitalism of their own and not simply a derived one. It is a model developed with reference to Latin American countries. The dynamics that take place between firms and the institutional environment are characterized by hierarchy, mainly due to: 1- big property concentration; 2- a labour market characterized by a high turnover and informality rate, and a generally low human capital stock, due to state underinvestment in public education; 3- a corporative structure of industrial relations collective actors: they are highly state-dependent, fragmented, and not organized at shop floor level; and 4- a prevailing tight managerial control over shop floors, partly due to the great freedom in hiring and firing (Schneider, 2008, 2009).

These institutional features largely characterize the Brazilian national case. However, some national specificities have to be observed in order to more deeply understand the resources that workers can mobilize to improve their conditions. Consistent with the model developed in section 1, we focus on industrial relations, with special attention to unions, and on the education system. The first subsystem is linked more to collective resources whereas the second has important implications for individual resources. In reality, we cannot disregard the fact that the characteristics of the education system are important features of society and social groups; at the same time, in analyzing the micro-political actions of the workers, skills and knowledge become a fundamental personal resource in their relations with management.

The present Brazilian industrial relations structure is still influenced by the “demiurgical and corporatist” state action during the 1940s, which was centrally inspired by Mussolini’s labour laws (French, 2001). They defined unions and employer associations as organizations with little state independence and industrial relations dynamics as highly corporative and almost completely defined by labour laws (mainly by the CLT – *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* – 1943). Conversely, there is little space left for negotiation. This model of Brazilian industrial relations is defined as “*legislado*” (legislated) (Noronha, 2000), in contrast to a model where the voluntarism of the parties, and not the law, is central to industrial relations dynamics (e.g., Italy – Regalia and Regini, 1995).²

In spite of this corporative framework, a big union mobilization – known as *novo sindicalismo* (new unionism: Rodrigues, 1999) – characterized the years between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, especially in the industrial

region around São Paulo. The rank-and-file mobilization played a determinant role in undermining the military regime and triggering the democratization of the country. Moreover, since this period, a tight double link has been established between the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), a left and radical party at the time, and the unions, especially with the ones linked to CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*). This political link has endured through time, and it has been further tightened since the Lula presidency (Sluyter-Beltrão, 2010).

In 1985, the military regime was overcome, but unions, once the momentum of the political mobilization had vanished, were not able to overcome the corporative structure of industrial relations. In 1988, a new constitution was promulgated, and the only considerable change in the legal dispositions about industrial relations was that the government no longer had a direct influence on the internal organizational life of unions, as it previously had during the military regime. Union organization and bargaining dynamics have remained through time fundamentally structured by the legal principles of *unicidade sindical* (union uniqueness) and *imposto sindical* (union tax) stated in the CLT.

The legal principle of *unicidade* establishes that the bodies of the Ministry of Labour recognize a union – *sindicato de base* – in a specific territory (generally a municipality or a set of a few municipalities) as the unique representative of the workers of a specific sector and profession. A consequence of these legal principles is multiple union representations inside the same firm. Moreover, the various *sindicatos de base* among them are generally poorly coordinated (Menezes-Filho et al., 2005). Furthermore, *imposto sindical* establishes the right for the recognized *sindicatos de base* to receive the revenues of the public tax applied to all workers, independent of their affiliation or lack thereof to unions. Therefore, there is a weak relationship between the economic resources available to unions and the number of their affiliates. The *sindicatos de base* can, but are not obligated to, join the super-territorial (*Federações*) and national union organizations (*Confederações/Centrais*). The latter have limited coordinative power over the “patchwork” of multiple *sindicatos de base*, in part due to their heavy financial dependence on the *sindicatos de base*, and they are not recognized as bargaining organizations by law (Cardoso and Gindin, 2009; Murillo and Schrank, 2010)³ (table 1).

Union action effectiveness is another fundamental resource for workers’ improvements. Two aspects are especially relevant: bargaining and mobilization. In order to analyse these two aspects, we have to consider that since 1995, when Fernando Enrique Cardoso entered into power, Brazil has been greatly influenced by the neo-liberal turn inspired by the Washington Consensus (Weyland, 2007). This economic turn had serious repercussions on unions, not only in terms of a substantial downturn in the affiliation rate (from 32% during

TABLE 1
Union Organizational Structure in Brazil

Organizational level	Type of representation	Representation	Type of funding	Main actions
<i>Centrall Confederação</i>	Voluntary; relevance of ideological stance	<i>Federações</i>	Contribution by <i>federações</i> and <i>sindicatos de base</i>	Lobbying (no bargaining)
<i>Federação</i>	Voluntary; relevance of ideological stance and sector	<i>Sindicatos de base</i>	Contribution by <i>sindicatos de base</i>	Lobbying (no bargaining)
<i>Sindicatos de base</i>	Compulsory (defined by law) and exclusive (<i>unicidade sindical</i>)	All the workers of a specific territory, sector, and (in some cases) profession	Public union tax compulsory for all workers (<i>imposto sindical</i>) and voluntary affiliation fees	Bargaining of collective agreements (<i>convenções coletivas</i>)

novo sindicalismo to around 10%–15% since the neoliberal turn, according to *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada* data), but also in terms of their engagement with their affiliated and with workers in general. Unions thus passed from being a fundamental actor of radical social change during the *novo sindicalismo* to assuming a defensive position after the neoliberal turn (Sluyter-Beltrão, 2010). This downturn further limited the already marginal room for negotiation left by labour law.

In fact, as defined by the law, the bargaining power of Brazilian trade unions is mostly limited to the *convenções coletivas* (collective agreements). They are the outcome of the interaction between each *sindicatos de base* and the local employer associations. Thus, not counting the few exceptions of ex-state-owned or ex-state-sustained companies (e.g., Banco do Brasil and PetroBras), there are no super-territorial or national collective agreements. This highly pulverized bargaining action matches the highly fragmented union organization. In addition, it is to be noted that the contents of the *convenções coletivas* are not effectively broader than those established by the labour laws. Moreover, the application of labour laws and *convenções coletivas* is historically widely neglected in Brazil (Noronha, 2000; Oliveira, 2003). However, we cannot disregard the fact that some Brazilian unions have tried to foster workers' rights through political bargaining and lobbying, especially towards the union-friendly ruling parties, such as the PT (Schneider and Karcher, 2010).

Even if a few signs of the recovery of union ability to mobilize were recently observed (Boito and Marcelino, 2011), this does not change the general tendency in Brazil since the 1990s. The possibility of workers' mobilization is broadly perceived as remote by unions as well as employers, and a low level of strike activity is generally the case. In spite of collective strikes that characterized the

unions' political opposition to the military regime between 1978 and 1984, since the neoliberal turn of the 1990s, Brazilian unions have progressively assumed a more defensive position. Strikes larger than firm-based ones become more and more difficult to carry out, and unions have increasingly undertaken legal proceedings, in spite of mobilization, to confront violated workers' rights (*conflito judicializado*) (Pochmann, 2007).

The scarce institutional resources provided to workers by the industrial relations subsystem are complemented by an education system demarcated by a deep dualism that affects individuals' educational trajectories from the outset. During the compulsory cycles (11 years) there is an evident opposition between the low quality of public schools and the high quality of the private ones for elites. Moreover, some geographic variables contribute to widening this gulf: the better educational structures of the South and Southeast regions (the most developed ones) versus the precarious ones of the North and Northeast regions (the less developed ones), and the better schools of capital cities versus the more unstructured ones of the countryside.

In addition, the dualism is reproduced at a tertiary level, because the access is not fluid. Few places are available in public universities (federal or state organized), which, in contrast to the compulsory education cycle, are the most highly ranked ones. However, access to public universities is restricted by a general culture exam (*vestibular*), which is principally passed by students proceeding from the good – and expensive – private schools of the compulsory cycles. The demand for academic training for the rest of the students – mainly belonging to the popular classes – is directed to private faculties (popularly called "*faculdades da esquina*" – faculties of the street corner), which generally offer lower human-capital training in comparison to the public faculties, and, in several cases, rather weak training (Frigotto and Gentili, 2006; Carvalho de Mello *et al.*, 2011).

Moreover, the Brazilian education system is characterized by a historically rooted national vocational training system (*Sistema S*), mainly managed by local employer associations without any broader national coordination of note.⁴ It offers regular courses for students to learn a profession after completing the compulsory education cycle (two- to three-year courses) as well as short courses to improve specific skills for a wider range of people, as a way to overcome the "low skill trap."⁵ The *Sistema S* generally proposes curricula related to the specific needs of local industry and frequently activates courses in collaboration with local employers. Apart from the courses that are completely sponsored by enterprises, the courses are subject to fee payment (Silva, 2010).

The logic that underlies the Brazilian education system causes student careers to be essentially defined by social characteristics, principally family social class, rather than individual characteristics such as intelligence and effort.

The institutional panorama thus seems to largely constrain workers' possibilities for improving their conditions based on institutional resources. Corporative unionism and a dual education system that does not favor the economically disadvantaged generally provide scarce resources for lower-organizational workers' agency to improve their conditions. However, despite these macro-institutional constraints, is there also room for workers' agency? What resources do workers count on? And how do they strategically mobilize them to improve their position?

Methodological and Field Aspects

In order to analyze the embedded agency of workers, we conducted a case study on the Brazilian subsidiaries of an MNC. We selected a "truly global" (Ferner, 1994) and "highly integrated" (Almond *et al.*, 2005) MNC as the organizational environment. According to these authors, global integration in an MNC is higher if the corporation has worldwide integrated production of universal products, its competition challenges are global, and other MNCs represent a large proportion of its customer base. These characteristics make an MNC more prone to be centrally organized by the headquarters, the subsidiaries located worldwide are more interwoven, and local management is more oriented towards applying top-down headquarter directives and towards restricting workers' bottom-up agency. This restrictive organizational context is another element that enhances the constraint of workers' agency in Brazil. In turn, we can observe if and how workers can strategically gain leeway for agency despite these conditions.

We specifically select a corporation in manufacturing, because this sector has been observed as being strongly related to national macro-institutional environments (Hall and Sockice, 2001; Blyth, 2003). The MNC is German-based and has an integrated worldwide production of chemical goods for domestic as well as industrial use. It has subsidiaries in more than 70 countries, and it is among the top five MNCs in its specific business sector facing global competition challenges. Moreover, the specific goods produced by its Brazilian subsidiaries are more than 85% the same as the goods produced in other subsidiaries of the MNC all over the world. Also, the technology used in production is similar to that used in other subsidiaries worldwide. This MNC has around 40,000 employees globally, and 1,100 of them are in Brazil. Brazilian employees are divided among eight subsidiaries concentrated in the São Paulo region (only one minor subsidiary is located in another region).

Some insights about the relations between workers and management help to better understand some aspects of the internal organizational environment. In general the union's relevance inside these subsidiaries has followed the path of the national downturn. Some union executives nostalgically remember the

novo sindicalismo militantism in these subsidiaries in contrast with a less evident mobilization and workers' engagement around union proposals in the last 15 years. The union affiliation rate among the subsidiaries achieved a level of between 8% and 10% in these years. There are no works councils, and just one strike has been reported in one subsidiary in the last 10 years. The relations between management and unions are considered from both sides as generally respectful. Managers state that "maintaining a non-contrasting relation with unions" is recommended by the German headquarter, as also observed in other Brazilian subsidiaries of German-based MNCs (Veiga and Martin, 2009). In any case, these respectful relations, as also underlined by union executives, are to be placed and understood inside the corporative structure of Brazilian industrial relations.

We collected empirical data through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The semi-structured interview is adaptable to different environments and allows for dialogic relations (Ghauri, 2004; Gobo, 2008) that – through "active listening" – can focus on the national institutional characteristics and the resources that workers can mobilize. In order to deeply understand it, we collected information on a double perspective: management and labour. We interviewed two Brazilian HR directors of the MNC and one representative of the employer association in São Paulo. On the labour side, we interviewed seven executives of trade unions affiliated with CUT, some of whom were directly linked to the MNC's subsidiaries and some of whom were former workers of the MNC.⁶ The union executives interviewed generally showed a quite similar perception of the union's role in the subsidiaries. Even though they did not renounce references to a radical values framework in their narrative, they underlined several times the union's difficulties following the neoliberal turn in organizing workers as well as the historical limits to union action inside the Brazilian system of industrial relations. A more conservative and "business unionism oriented" perception of the union role in the subsidiaries seemed to drive them; as one emblematically disenchanted union executive stated during the interviews: "we do as much as is possible" ("*a gente faz na medida do possível*").

Interviews were personally conducted in Portuguese by the author. The duration of the interviews varied between one and-a-half and two and-a-half hours. Interviews with management were shorter than those with union executives, in order to allow more time to deepen the understanding of the "embedded agency" of the workers. Almost all the interviews were recorded and transcribed (two union executives preferred not to be recorded, but a lot of field notes were taken in these cases). The data analysis is primarily geared towards demonstrating examples of the micro-political actions of workers as narrated by management as well as by union representatives. This double perspective allows

for having narrations with different nuances, overlaps, and complementarities that make the cases well characterized for research purposes. Once the cases were defined, the analysis was conducted to provide evidence of elements of the embeddedness of micro-political actions of workers in the Brazilian institutional environment and to identify the strategies underpinning their actions, essentially considering the activation of individual or collective actions, based on internal or external resources.

The data collected through interviews are further enriched by documentary analysis. We analyzed three firm and territorial working contracts as well as the national HRM handbooks of the multinational corporation. This allowed us to shed further light on worker agency. In fact, we had the opportunity to conduct some comparisons between what is defined in the working contracts and what is already defined by the law. Moreover, the analysis of the HRM handbook allowed us to differentiate the practices already established by the HQ versus the ones that are the outcome of worker agency. The time period covered by this study is 2003 to 2009, a period of substantial economic development in Brazil.

Three Cases of Workers' Micro-political Agency

Macro-institutional resources appear to be very scarce for workers' agency in Brazilian subsidiaries. Their agency is further limited in the organizational environment of the highly globally integrated MNC selected. However, workers' agency is not impossible despite these conditions. Workers creatively and skillfully activate the few available resources to improve their conditions. We specifically focus on three cases of micro-political agency. If we observe the macro resource framework provided by Brazilian unionism to workers for interacting with management, workers have very marginal room for improving their conditions through unions, especially at the firm level. At this organizational level, particularly, the CLT and the subsequent labour laws do not provide the possibility of organizing an internal works council. Unions are thus exclusively organized outside the firms. The union executives, who are in charge of monitoring labour relations in the subsidiaries studied, state that they are just allowed to come up to the subsidiary gates. They cannot pass them. As argued by a union executive: "When outside [the firm], we speak a lot about democracy...because now we are in a democratic regime... Unfortunately the democracy has arrived only at the gates of the firms; we [the union] can't pass them."

If they want to communicate with workers, they have to exploit shift-change time outside the plants. In those moments, they deliver information tracts about union activities once a month. They also explained that they once had an urgent

message for workers and their only solution had been to put a loudspeaker outside the entrance patio.

Factory gates remain a very clear barrier for unions. However, workers' micro-political agency opened a small breach. As established by the CLT (Articles 163 to 165), the subsidiaries of the selected MNC have to establish a CIPA (*Comissão Interna de Prevenção de Acidentes* – Internal committee for the prevention of accidents). This is a bilateral committee; half of the members are selected by the employer and half are elected by workers. However, in the biggest Brazilian subsidiary of the MNC, until 2004, many of the workers elected in the CIPA according to union executives were largely influenced by management, as explained by a union executive:

The CIPA was management-inclined, formally it was equal...but...you know...it was not the case. [...] we would like to have a different CIPA in a direct link with union to help in union issues and in solving union's problems. A sort of direct link between unions and workers, present in the everyday life of the enterprise...that can also go further than just taking care of health and safety.

A group of workers, in active collaboration with the *Sindicato dos químicos de Diadema* (Union of the chemical sector of Diadema, a city in the big metropolitan area of São Paulo), started an almost daily gate advertising campaign outside the firm, starting two months before the CIPA re-election period in 2005.

This was combined with a substantial activation of the informal colleague relational network inside the subsidiary by union militants and union-supporter workers (i.e., workers sensitive to union opinion and prone to joining union activities). Both strategies aimed to make subsidiary workers aware of the importance of having a union-inclined CIPA. The activation of these two strategic communication-channel resources allowed for electing as members worker representatives who were all union supporters.⁷ The significant efforts are explained by a union executive:

We went there every morning...we woke up really early to speak also with the first arriving workers to have a first contact with them. We gave information tracts, and we tried to make them aware of the importance of the CIPA election...just a couple of words sometimes. [...] We also told workers closer to unions to do as much as possible to convince their colleagues that the CIPA election was a really important event and that we could not let CIPA still be completely in the hands of managers...during work, during lunch time, every occasion must be a good one to convince them.

This election result had some important outcomes for the improvement of workers' conditions. First, unions gained some advances in credibility in the eyes of management. They showed that it was not possible to completely under-

estimate their organizational and mobilizational power. Second, more engaged workers' representatives in the CIPA allowed for a stronger enforcement of the health and safety labour laws in the subsidiary during the subsequent years. Moreover, the CIPA increased workers' collective representation *vis-à-vis* management on one hand, and the union's links with workers on the other. In fact, CIPA members have the legal right to take part in monthly meetings with management to discuss health and safety issues and to ask for extra meetings in the event of potential urgent risks. In these situations, they framework debates within the wider union banner, while trying at the same time to foster other strictly union issues. Moreover, as established by the law, CIPA members have the right to verify potential safety dangers inside the plants. The large exploitation of this right has increased the visibility and proximity of union-linked representatives to other workers in the subsidiary. And these opportunities for interaction have also been exploited by CIPA members to diffuse union activities and to reinforce the union-supporter network.

One of the most important outcomes of this reinforcement of the link between CIPA members and workers was that, in the course of the next few years, the members elected to CIPA were all union supporters. Thus, this case of workers' action seems to have become institutionalized through time, introducing a little shift in the management-worker equilibrium in favor of workers in the subsidiary.

Workers develop micro-political collective actions to improve their conditions not only through a strategic mobilization of resources inside the subsidiary (internal), but also through the mobilization of institutional resources beyond the subsidiary (external). And the latter has been demonstrated to be fundamental in the case of a big reorganization faced by one subsidiary of the MNC.

In effect, due to the concentration of production in a plant closer to São Paulo, management declared the imminent complete closure of a plant (different from the one discussed above) in 2005. Layoffs affected more than 150 workers, a large majority of whom were production workers with a weak strategic and competency profile. Management left workers the option of being transferred to the plant where production activities were concentrated, but the distance to commute was over 100 km: an option refused by all the workers.

In cases of reorganization, neither the labour laws nor the different *convenções coletivas* applied in subsidiaries recognize a formal role for unions. In any case, in this example, the different *sindicatos de base* inside the subsidiary (among the most important: chemical workers, administrative workers, truck drivers, and telephone assistants) tried to coordinate themselves to create a common front. However, there were no active inter-union links – as is typical in the Brazilian “union patchwork” – and some minor unions did not demonstrate interest in the collective mobilization option. The common union front failed, as witnessed by

an HR manager of the subsidiary: “Before, it seemed that all the unions wanted to stay together...then they held meetings among the different unions and I guess they spoke and fought a lot,...as usual, ...and then, ...as usual, they broke their unity; they can’t stay together!”

However, the most representative union of the subsidiary, i.e., *sindicato dos trabalhadores químicos*, from the city where the plant was located, tried to go ahead alone. They invited management to open a bargaining table to discuss the dismissal. Management declined the invitation and explained that the only thing they could do was to extend the payment of *cesta básica* (the food basket) for another three months.⁸ The evidence appeared clear to union executives: the plant closure decision was definitive and not negotiable. Workers would have the right to only regular unemployment welfare benefits, which are not very generous in Brazil.⁹

Counting on the possible solidarity of unions and workers in the other Brazilian subsidiaries of the MNC was considered too difficult and risky, due to the difficulties of organizing larger labour mobilizations. Moreover, the defeat of any possible larger mobilization campaign would completely jeopardize the possibility of union credibility in all the Brazilian subsidiaries of the MNC. Instead, the *sindicato dos trabalhadores químicos* in question, affiliated with CUT, exploited an important external resource. The union strategically shifted the bargaining target from the subsidiary’s management to the city hall. The ruling party was the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*), a labour-oriented party with a historically tight linkage with unions affiliated with CUT. Since there was some evident ideological overlap between the union and the ruling party, and especially some two-way membership links (i.e., union executives who were also active members of the party and party executives who were former union executives), the union had increased resources for mobilization through political bargaining. The union thus began to lobby the city’s mayor to propose some solutions to counterweigh the job loss of dismissed workers. The union used the local press, more than the union journal, to awaken public opinion. The effect on public opinion was so strong that union executives believed the mayor was fearful of future negative electoral consequences. After some meetings with the mayor, the latter proposed the financing of some extra courses at the closer *Sistema S* center to enable dismissed workers to enroll for free, especially in courses linked to professions that had higher demand in the local labour market. It is important to note that the implicated *Sistema S* establishments are located in the greater São Paulo metropolitan area. Thus, many of them are recognized as being among the most efficient establishments, at the national level, for vocational training.

Even though the institutional environment provided very few resources for workers’ agency and the productive conjuncture was very negative, workers

were still able to strategically activate some local resources external to the subsidiary. Finally, even though they were unable to change their job-loss destiny, they were still able to at least partially cushion the negative consequences of the plant closure and to improve their conditions, especially in terms of skills and knowledge capital.

If we look at the macro-institutional characteristics of the education system, Brazilians from the lower classes face many obstacles to achieving strategic human-capital resources. Their low level of compulsory schooling is a great disadvantage in gaining access to the best universities. Those among the lower classes who nevertheless gain access to tertiary education are generally driven toward the *faculdades da esquina*, where they acquire a non-competitive general-culture education and few specific skills. Therefore, the human-capital resources gap persists at the tertiary level between people who have access to the best universities and those who have access to *faculdades da esquina*.¹⁰

Nevertheless, many students in these lower-level faculties mobilize some opportunities inside the subsidiaries to try to limit this gap. The internship is one important example. In fact, Brazilian labour laws allow undergraduate students to work up to 30 hours per week and to receive a scholarship from the firm in which they are interning. Generally, they work during the day and they attend the university at night. In our MNC case study, interns represent 10% of the total workforce, and they receive 1.5-times the minimum wage. As reported by managers, request rates for internship admittance are very high. Also, as argued by trade union executives, there are two underlying reasons: first, the desire to have some revenue to cover university fees and to contribute to household income; and second, the desire to acquire some specific skills that can increase their resources in the labour market.

The guys [students of lower-level universities] generally search for an internship because they need money to pay their university fees and to help out the family...you know how the conditions of Brazilian popular classes are. Also, they have the opportunity to learn something more practical inside an enterprise, and many of them are hired by the company. In any case, they learn something that is applicable in other companies, and...I mean...they have on the CV their experience as an intern in a multinational corporation and it can make the difference in job searching.

In the subsidiaries studied, interns are assigned to low-level office tasks. Despite this, the internship allows them to have some opportunities to develop skills other than those acquired at university. In particular, they can increase their skills through on-the-job and off-the-job training activities. In the first case, interns can acquire some skills through learning-by-doing, being in the situation, and facing the challenging aspects of their assigned tasks. In the second case, the MNC in our case study activated several formal training courses that were open,

not exclusively, to regular employees but also to interns. The large majority of interns – as explained by Brazilian HR managers of the MNC – show interest in being involved in these courses. In this case, their supervisors implement and communicate to the HRM department a requirement for the inclusion of the interns in the training courses.

The content of the courses is primarily technical and basic. For example, as reported in the national handbook of training and development of the MNC, the goals of the “administrative writing” course for non-managerial administrative workers are to “learn verb concordance, the proper use of grammar, the internal consistency of sentences, and the right use of punctuation to write commercial letters and texts.” Another example is the “financial math” course. The course goal in this case is to learn how to calculate simple and compound interests and to use simple functions of the Microsoft Excel software program. At the same time, the MNC has activated some partnerships with language schools in order to allow its employees – interns included – to obtain a discount on the monthly fee (around 50%); as explained by one HR manager:

We also have the language support, we have a policy called “language help,” there is an internal policy that establishes who can access and who can’t, what the rules are, [...]. So if I established with my supervisor that I would like to learn Spanish or English and this is interesting for the firm, [...] the direct supervisor enters into contact with the HR department and we evaluate the request. [...] The workers choose the school but we carefully keep track of the attendance and advancements and we pay 50% of this course.

Many interns have exploited this opportunity by taking beginners’ classes in English and Spanish. The internship opportunity and the course participation do not, obviously, allow interns to simply overcome the gap between themselves and the students who have access to the best universities. However, many interns try to activate the subsidiary’s internal resources to achieve some enhancement in their competitiveness in the subsidiary as well as in the external labour market. This gives them more leverage in interactions with management and, at the same time, possibilities for better employment opportunities in the external labour market *vis-à-vis* other workers who have obtained tertiary degrees from the *faculdades da esquina* but not work experience in an MNC.

The three different cases discussed above, and analytically summarized in table 2, are evidence that worker actions are not completely institutionally defined and institutionally dependent. Workers are active even in a highly constraining macro institutional environment and in the subsidiaries of a highly integrated MNC. They try to enhance their conditions by opening up little breaches in the hierarchical complementarities that characterize the Brazil environment.

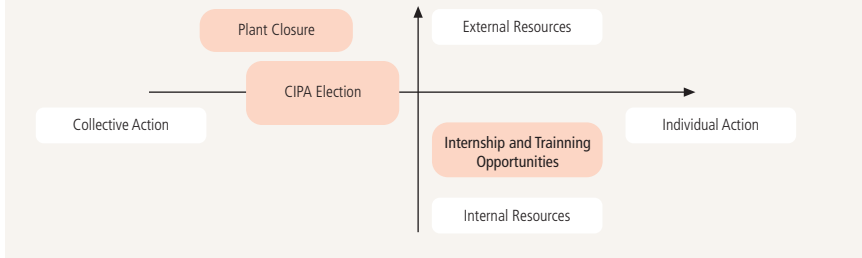
TABLE 2
The Most Relevant Analytical Dimensions of the Three Cases

Case	Worker interaction	Central resources mobilized	Changes
CIPA election	Collective - union	Union communications (external to firm) Informal colleague networks (internal to firm)	Enhancement of shop floor workers' representation in their relations with management (a new plant tradition)
Plant closure	Collective - union	Union political networks (external to firm)	Cushion against negative consequences, individual skills enhancement (<i>Sistema S</i> course)
Internship and training	Individual	Internship opportunity (internal to firm) Training opportunity (internal to firm)	Individual skills and knowledge enhancement, a more strategic skills profile in the firm's internal as well as external labor market

More specifically, in the first case study, workers mainly enhanced their collective representation. They pushed CIPA to become a body more similar to that of a works council, in spite of the latter not being endorsed by the law. Moreover, they changed the trajectory of worker representation at shop floor level, creating a new tradition. In the second and third case, workers increased their skills and knowledge. In the second case, the outcome of workers' agency not only partially cushioned the negative consequences of their plant's closure in a context marked by restrictive welfare-protection measures, but also fostered the opportunity to enhance workers' skills profiles, otherwise limited to the basic level provided by the public school compulsory cycle. Finally, the internship and training opportunities, in the third case, had influential and positive consequences for the workers' strategic profiles and their careers in the internal (firm) as well as external labour markets.

Through the analysis of these three examples of improvements in workers' conditions, two strategic dimensions underpinning the workers' embedded agency seem the most remarkable (figure 2). First, workers can act collectively through union organization, as in the case of the CIPA election or the imminent plant closure, or individually, as in the third example. Second, workers can strategically structure their action, mobilizing a set of intra- and/or extra-subsidary resources. The informal colleague network in the first example analyzed, and the internship and training opportunity in the third one, are cases of micro-political actions mainly based on resources internal to the subsidiary, whereas the communication space "outside the gates" that unions exploited for the CIPA election or the political linkage between unions and local politicians in the offensive launched by the unions in the plant closure are based on fundamental external resources (figure 2).

FIGURE 2
Two Strategic Dimensions Underpinning Worker's Embedded Agency



If the Hall and Soskice (2001) lens of a macro-institutional perspective would have been assumed, these workers' actions in the subsidiaries would not have been identified. First, we would have lost the opportunity to observe that workers were able to mobilize some institutional aspects that could have seemed irrelevant in a macro-analytical perspective. Second, we would have excluded important micro changes, such as the ones observed that had important consequences for workers and the firm. Lastly, the insertion of workers into the VoC model also allowed us to observe that workers are not just deprived by the institutional environment, as largely underlined by the Brazilian debate, but are able to also react to it.

Conclusion

The relevance of the embeddedness of subsidiaries in a macro-institutional environment cannot overshadow the micro-political actions carried out by their social actors. While several research studies have observed local management's "embedded agency" in the subsidiaries, the workers' agency has remained underdeveloped. In order to fill this gap we attempted to provide two theoretical contributions. Our main one was to propose an original analytical model that allows for evidencing workers' embedded agency. In order to do so, we introduced workers as an active agent, more so than the firm, inside the VoC analytical model, and we then focused on workers' bottom-up interaction with local management oriented towards improving their conditions. In line with the subsequent debate about the VoC perspective, the national institutional environment in which the subsidiaries are placed is not considered institutional "cage" for workers' actions. Rather, it is considered as a set of resources that workers can mobilize. Due to the focus of the present study, among the five institutional subsystems identified by VoC, attention was primarily directed towards the industrial relations and education system.

We applied this analytical model to the Brazilian subsidiaries of an MNC with a high level of global integration. Brazilian institutional environments provide

scarce resources for workers' agency. Unionism is highly corporative, and there is a wide gap in the educational level of lower classes compared to economic elites. Moreover, in a highly global MNC like the one selected, local management is highly pressured to apply corporation best practices and to not leave room for worker interaction. However, these substantial constraints did not impede the "embedded agency" of workers. They strategically mobilized different resources to improve their conditions.

The empirical analysis allowed us to put into evidence that micro-political actions of workers are structured on two main strategic dimensions: collective versus individual actions; actions based on resources internal to the subsidiary versus actions based on resources external to the subsidiary. This is our second theoretical contribution. Examples of collective actions are the election to CIPA (bilateral committee for health and safety) of union-inclined members, turning CIPA as much as possible into a channel for workers' voices in interactions with local management, and the workers' collective mobilization for the plant closure, obtaining some measures for cushioning their dismissals (i.e., free courses in the vocational system for the dismissed workers). Workers can also act individually. Interns, for example, actively exploited the internship opportunity as well as the internal training programs to achieve some enhancements to their skills profiles. The first strategic dimension is intersected by the second one, i.e., the mobilization of resources internal or external to the subsidiary. Workers, for example, counted on the internal informal communication channels to sustain the election of union-inclined members to CIPA, and interns exploited internal subsidiary training opportunities. Workers also strategically mobilized resources external to the subsidiary, as in the case of political and lobby pressure on the mayor in the face of a plant-closure decision, or "just outside the gate" campaigning for the CIPA election.

The proposed development of the VoC model and the two intersecting strategic dimensions of the micro-political actions of workers highlighted can find future application and theoretical development in analyses of workers' embedded agency in the subsidiaries of MNCs. They will be a useful analytical instrument for putting into evidence that, in situations of scarce macro-institutional resources, action and change are not alien: they are possible. Labour dynamics in subsidiaries are not static and are defined neither by unilateral macro-institutional embeddedness nor by exclusively top-down local management action. Further, workers are active agents who cannot be underestimated in analyses of subsidiary dynamics, not even in a highly hierarchical context such as that of Brazil.

Notes

- 1 Examples of further ideal-types developed in the VoC debate, beyond LMEs and CMEs, are: the Network Market Economies (NMEs) (Schneider, 2008), with Korea and Japan as reference countries; Mixed Market Economies (MMEs), for intermediate countries in the continuum between LMEs and CMEs (Hall and Gingerich, 2004); and the Emerging Market Economies (EMEs), as varieties of capitalism that include developing countries (Hancké, Rhodes and Thatcher, 2007). Moreover, the VoC perspective has been applied to Eastern Europe (Lane, 2005; Feldmann, 2007) and also to Africa (Vogel, 2009).
- 2 Traces of the labor movement were already present in Brazil from the beginning of the 20th century, due to mobilizations promoted by European immigrants in São Paulo's firms, mainly inspired by anarchism and socialism. However, these labor movements were poorly organized and spontaneous. The promulgation of CLT centrally controlled the unions, in contrast with their incipient self-organization (Kaufman, 2004; Toledo, 2004).
- 3 The most important national union organizations are organized along an ideological cleavage: CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*) is focused on progressive positions about questions of economic and social policies, and FS (*Força Sindical*) on more conservative ones. If this distinction is more remarkable at the national level, it assumes less relevance at the subsidiary level (Santana, 2000; Sluyter-Beltrão, 2010).
- 4 This decentralized structure has historically favored higher-level courses in the most developed areas of the country, especially in São Paulo.
- 5 "Low skill trap" happens when workers do not invest individually in acquiring skills because there is a low demand for high-skill and high-wage jobs; in turn, the firms are incentivized to invest in production processes that do not require skilled workers, because they are a scarce resource (Schneider and Karcher, 2010). In a low-skill trap condition, the labor market is characterized by low wages and low qualifications.
- 6 Even though some of the union executives were former workers of the MNC and assumed the executive role in different years, we had no possibility of accessing other workers of the subsidiaries — one of the limits of this study.
- 7 As established by the "Quadro I C-10," they had the right to elect four members.
- 8 "*Cestas básica*" (food baskets) is a firm benefit for workers, rewarded monthly together with salary. It consists of rice, beans, oil, and sugar. It is an important non-monetary benefit for shop floor workers in Brazil.
- 9 Unemployment benefits are not generous, especially in terms of duration. They span three to five months, depending on the number of months worked in the last three years. The financial amount ranges from minimum wage (that passed from 240 reais in 2003 to 465 reais in 2009) to almost twice the minimum wage (source: *Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego*). In order to better understand the incidence of unemployment benefits, we have to consider that the average monthly wage in the private sector in the São Paulo region was 1072.2 reais in 2003 (reference month: August) and 1406.4 reais in 2009 (reference month: August) (source: *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, IBGE*).
- 10 It is to be also noted that for young people, individual resources such as education are strategically important in a context where the young are less and less prone to collective action and to engagement in collective organizations. For example, since the great years of militant and relevant student movement in the 1970s against the military regime (Müller, 2011), in 2005 only 3% of students belonged to any student association and just 7.2% participated in social movements (data source: Ibase, *Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas*, and *Pólis*, *Instituto de Estudos, Formação e Assessoria em Políticas Sociais*).

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SUMMARY

Introducing Workers' Embedded Agency: Insights from the Brazilian Subsidiaries of a Multinational Corporation.

The relevance of subsidiary embeddedness in a macro-institutional environment can in no way overshadow the importance of the micro-political agency of social actors. While some researchers focus on local management's "embedded agency," we focus on a less-developed aspect: workers' "embedded agency." In order to do so, we propose an analytical model that is based on the Varieties of Capitalism model and its subsequent developments, but that also includes the workers as an active agent. This model allows us to observe the institutional resources that workers can actively mobilize. We specifically focus on the characteristics of industrial relations and education institutional sub-systems. We apply the developed analytical model to the case of the Brazilian subsidiaries of a highly global multinational corporation (MNC). Brazil represents a context where institutional constraints (i.e. corporatist industrial relations and a dualist education system) make workers' actions the least favorable. Moreover, the highly integrated organizational environment of the MNC

further reinforces this aspect. In turn, this makes it more compelling to discover how workers can nevertheless strategically activate some resources to improve their conditions. We conduct a case study and collect empirical data through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. More specifically, we discuss three examples of workers' "embedded agency" (i.e. election of a bilateral committee for the prevention of accidents; plant closure; and internship and training). These bring analytical attention to workers' collective and individual actions as well as intra- and extra-subsidiary mobilization of institutional resources.

KEYWORDS: embedded agency, workers, multinational corporations, varieties of capitalism, Brazil.

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction à l'action intégrée des travailleurs : aperçu de filiales brésiliennes d'une multinationale.

L'importance de l'intégration des filiales de multinationales dans le contexte institutionnel macro ne doit pas pour autant éclipser l'agence micro-politique des acteurs sociaux. Alors que des recherches se centrent sur l'action intégrée du management local, nous nous intéressons à un aspect moins développé : celui de l'action intégrée des travailleurs. À cette fin, nous proposons un modèle analytique, basé sur les variétés de capitalisme et ses développements subséquents, qui inclut aussi les travailleurs comme des agents actifs, ce qui nous permet d'observer les ressources institutionnelles que les travailleurs peuvent mobiliser. Nous nous penchons plus particulièrement sur les caractéristiques des sous-systèmes institutionnels de relations industrielles et du système éducatif. Le modèle a été appliqué à l'étude de filiales brésiliennes d'une entreprise multinationale très mondialisée. Le Brésil représente un contexte où les contraintes institutionnelles (i.e. des relations industrielles corporatistes et un système éducatif dualistique) limitent énormément l'action des travailleurs. Ceci est renforcé par l'environnement organisationnel hautement intégré de la multinationale. L'existence de cette double contrainte rend d'autant plus pertinente l'étude des actions entreprises par les travailleurs afin d'améliorer leurs conditions. Nous avons donc conduit une étude de cas et avons collecté nos données grâce à des entretiens semi-structurés et l'analyse de documents. Plus précisément, nous discutons de trois exemples d'actions intégrées des travailleurs (i.e. élection du comité bilatéral pour la prévention des accidents, fermeture d'une usine, stage et formation). Ces exemples mettent analytiquement en évidence les actions collectives et individuelles des travailleurs, ainsi que la mobilisation des ressources institutionnelles internes et externes aux filiales.

MOTS-CLÉS : action intégrée, travailleurs, entreprise multinationale, variétés de capitalisme, Brésil.

RESUMEN

Introducción a las agencias incorporadas y sus trabajadores: Esclarecimientos sobre las filiales brasileñas de una corporación multinacional

La importancia de las filiales incorporadas en el entorno macro-institucional no pueden, de ninguna manera, ensombrecer la importancia micro-política de los actores sociales de la agencia. Mientras algunos investigadores focalizan en la gestión local de la agencia incorporada, nosotros ponemos en énfasis en un aspecto menos desarrollado: los trabajadores de las agencias incorporadas. Para ello, proponemos un modelo analítico que se basa en el modelo de variedades del capitalismo y sus desarrollos subsecuentes, pero que incluye también los trabajadores como un agente activo. Este modelo nos permite observar los recursos institucionales que los trabajadores pueden movilizar activamente. Nos focalizamos específicamente en las características de relaciones industriales y de los subsistemas institucionales de educación. Aplicamos el modelo analítico desarrollado al estudio del caso de las filiales brasileñas de una corporación multinacional (CMN) de alto nivel de globalización. Brasil representa un contexto donde las restricciones institucionales (es decir, las relaciones industriales corporativistas y el sistema dualista de educación) son poco favorables a las acciones laborales. Más aún, el contexto organizacional altamente integrado de la CMN refuerza aún más este aspecto. A su turno, esto hace más imperativo de descubrir cómo los trabajadores pueden, a pesar de todo, movilizar algunos recursos para mejorar sus condiciones. Es así que llevamos a cabo un estudio de caso y una colecta de datos empíricos mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y análisis documentarios. Más específicamente, se discuten tres ejemplos de empresas incorporadas (esto es, elección de un comité bilateral de prevención de accidentes; cierre de fábrica; internado de práctica y formación). Estos ejemplos nos llevan a prestar una atención analítica a las acciones colectivas y a las acciones individuales de los trabajadores y, así mismo, a la movilización de recursos institucionales dentro y fuera del ámbito de la filial.

PALABRAS CLAVES: agencia incorporada, trabajadores, corporaciones multinacionales, variedades del capitalismo, Brasil.