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# Ideas at Work

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of ideas in shaping the form, dynamics and products of the employment relationship. This article differentiates between different types of ideas, emphasizes the various types of agency that are involved in the creation, maintenance and defence of ideas and identifies a number of mechanisms that help to understand how actors promote ideas, how ideas gain broader prominence and how ideas change. Finally, we discuss the importance of context and resources in shaping ideational processes.

It is interests (...), and not ideas,  
which have directly governed the actions of human beings.  
Yet frequently the 'world views'  
that have been created by ideas, like switchmen,  
determined the tracks along which action  
has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.  
(Weber et al. 1946)

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of ideas in shaping the form, dynamics and products of the employment relationship and human resource management (HRM). Our guiding assumption is that ideas have causal properties that produce determinate and observable effects within the world of work. They help shape the content and experience of work, systems of management and the behaviour of managers, and the patterns of cooperation, compliance and resistance of workers and their representative organizations (Bendix 1959, Hyman 1974). Through ideologies and political and economic beliefs, moreover, ideas are a potent force guiding the regulation of the employment relationship.

A focus on ideas at work is timely, in part because some of the major traditions of writing about the employment relationship have neglected or denied the causal properties of ideas. This neglect is particularly apparent in the institutional tradition within Employment Relations. In this tradition, labour market institutions provide a series of constraints and incentives to which rational employment actors respond, developing business or representation strategies that allow goals to be realized within a specific institutional context (e.g. Marsden 1999). Employment relations are understood as an 'obstacle course' (Abdelal et al. 2010) and actors' strategic and rational choices guide them to pursue their interests and achieve the best possible outcomes. Values, convictions and affective beliefs are absent and play no part in this line of analysis. Very similar assumptions underpin writing on strategic

human resource management, with its core belief that rational managers can and do select HRM practices to secure both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ fit and thereby ensure a high level of business performance (Baird and Meshoulam 1988). In this special issue Phil Almond and Maria Gonzalez Menendez review and analyse the literature on comparative and cross-national HRM and reach the conclusion that role of ideas remain under-theorised in this field of study.

To be sure, other traditions of writing about work and employment do accord priority to the role of ideas. Much HRM scholarship, informed by occupational psychology, is concerned centrally with the role of attitudes, emotions and perceptions in shaping individual worker behaviour. Contemporary expressions of this tradition include work on the psychological contract, organizational citizenship and employee engagement (Guest 2007; Truss et al. 2014). Much critical HRM has a similar orientation. Here there is a preoccupation with the subjective experience of work and labour relations, coupled with a focus on questions of identity (Leidner 2006). Indeed, the latter concept has become pivotal to much recent scholarship on work and workers, with new or newly articulated identities, grounded in sexuality, age, faith, caring and the like, seen as providing a fresh impetus to resistance and collective action and new imperatives for management (Piore and Safford 2006). Much of the analysis in these traditions is confined to the immediate and the subjective and deals largely with the influence of ideas within the workplace. In contrast, the literature on culture in HRM examines how national traits and characteristics shape employee attitudes and the management of people (Hofstede 1980). In these accounts culture is presented as a stable and homogenous feature of different national contexts, and thus this literature is less concerned with examining the social and political process through which ideas change.

Our emphasis and focus is different to the above-sketched traditions. We also interrogate the link between ideas and Employment Relations and HRM, but this link is discussed within a broader political economy perspective (Hauptmeier and Vidal 2014) that considers actors, resources, instruments and socio-economic contexts that are crucial for the production, change and maintenance of ideas and beliefs. On the one hand, it necessitates recognition that the realm of ideas extends beyond attitudes and subjectivity and encompasses ideologies, sets of beliefs that operate at various levels of the society and economy, which might differ within national contexts but can also be similar across countries. On the other hand, this requires recognition that values, beliefs and ideologies are as important in directing behaviour as is rational calculation for instrumental advantage. In making this case, moreover, we do not seek to make a purely ideational argument. Victor Hugo once said that ‘one cannot resist an idea whose time has come’, which attributes a strong causal power to an idea in itself. However, throughout history many, seemingly persuasive ideas have left little or no practical residue in the form of new institutions or patterns of behaviour. Thus, it is crucial to specify under which conditions ideas matter and more importantly to spell out how ideas enter belief systems and how existing ideologies and identities change.

For ideas to matter they require carriers and agents, various types of resources and instruments and conducive socio-economic contexts. Collective actors such as trade unions, managers and employers’ organizations, political parties, and social movements seek to advance ideas. In doing so they need various types of resource, not least financial resources, but also dedicated individuals, networks of activists and skilful leadership and access to traditional and social media as well as to political actors. Different types of collective action such as lobbying, campaigns and strikes are important vehicles for promoting ideas. In addition, actors advance ideas through various types of ideological work such as framing,

bricolage, translation and identity work. And finally, socio-economic contexts leave an imprint on actor ideologies and shape the powers, resources and rights of actors to promote ideas. Thus, our approach differs from more radical constructivist approaches for which the social world is primarily constituted through ideas (Berger and Luckmann 1967). We recognise the influence of both ideas and material factors and we believe that both sets of factors can be meaningfully combined in research.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section distinguishes between different types of ideas, showing how ideas function in different ways and operate at different levels within society. The following section discusses indicative types of agency that are involved in the creation, maintenance and change of ideas. We then discuss a number of mechanisms and different types of ideological work that explain how ideas are created and change, how they diffuse within society and how they are adopted by actors. The next section highlights how context and resources shape ideas and influence the capacity to engineer ideological change. The conclusion summarises how ideas impinge on workplace relations and matter for HRM and employment relations research.

### **Types of Ideas**

Ideas inform actor behaviour and influence social and political processes in a variety of ways, and therefore it is meaningful to differentiate between distinct types of ideas (Campbell 2004; Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

*Table 1 about here*

Ideas can be differentiated by their primary purpose and function. On the one hand, ideas can be normative, helping actors to judge how the world ought to be and providing them with a moral compass. On the other hand, ideas are frames that help actors to understand, interpret and make sense of economic and social processes (see Ackers in this Special Issue). In addition, ideas can be differentiated between their locations in society. On the one hand, individual and collective actors have different beliefs that guide their behaviour and motivate action. On the other hand, ideas are part of public debates and matter in various forms in the political process. Combining these distinctions allows the identification of four types of ideas: *principled beliefs*, *causal beliefs*, *ideas in the foreground of debates* and *ideas in the background of debates* (Campbell 2004; Goldstein and Keohane 1993). These are ideal types and may overlap in real-world empirical situations, but the types help to flesh out analytical differences in how ideas shape employment relations and HRM.

Beyond the above-sketched distinctions, ideas perform two primary functions for actors. First, ideas help actors to understand and interpret the social and economic world, which can be based either on values and norms or 'rational' management models, frames and programmes. In addition, ideas can directly motivate actor behaviour or, alternatively guide actor behaviour when the latter face several (or limitless) choices or pathways of actions. A further distinction can be drawn between ideas that have firmly entered the belief system of individual and collective actors and ideas in the public domain. The former have a more permanent effect on economic and social life, while ideas in the public domain can be transient and in flux if they are not taken on by powerful actors or become institutionalized in policies and programmes.

*Principled beliefs* are based on the identities and world views of individual and collective actors (Goldstein and Keohane 1993); often they are shaped by ethnicity, sex, disability, class, craft/occupation and religion. Principled beliefs are part of the actors' moral and value system that help them to distinguish between right and wrong or legitimate and illegitimate behaviour. As the actors fundamentally believe in them, principled beliefs strongly spur and motivate collective action, e.g. actors might defend their beliefs and stand up for them. Principled beliefs are usually deeply ingrained in the belief systems of individual and collective actors, and therefore are less susceptible to change than other ideas.

An example of research that takes principled beliefs into account is Piore and Safford's (2006) analysis of changes in employment relations. They argue that changing identities and an accompanying shift in the axis of social mobilisation underpins the gradual change from the previous collective bargaining regime to the employment rights regime. The previous collective bargaining regime was primarily rooted in economic identities such as class, industry and occupation. Beliefs rooted in these economic identities often related to working class solidarity and values and prompted workers to organise labour unions that represented the interests of the working class through collective bargaining. The more recent employment rights regime is based on identities rooted in sex, race, ethnicity, age, disability, and sexual orientation; identities that underpin a different set of principled beliefs, which typically focuses on questions of discrimination, equal opportunities and the right to respect and recognition at work. Employees have organized identity groups at the workplace and national associations that represent their interests through mobilising equal opportunity legislation and this has given rise to the new employment rights regime.



Other research has focused on how principled beliefs in the area of labour rights shape changes in employment relations (Gross and Compa 2009; Gross 2010). For example, the International Labour Organization has promoted a number of key human rights through its core labour standards campaign (Singh and Zammit 2004). These core labour standards, such as the abolition of forced labour and child labour, have become widely shared principled beliefs, which have influenced working conditions and employment relations across countries. Another, rather different example is provided by Niall Cullinane and Tony Dundon in this Special Issue. Cullinane and Dundon examine the ideologies and convictions that motivate Irish employers to resist union recognition. A majority of the examined employers strongly believed in retaining absolute control over the company's operation and regarded unions as outsiders that intruded into private company affairs.

*Causal beliefs* refer to actors' ideas on means-end relationships (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). They provide actors with an understanding of how the social and economic world works. Causal beliefs help actors to make sense of and interpret the social and economic world. Social actors regularly act in situations of economic uncertainty, in which they cannot simply calculate the best course of action (Knight 1921). Causal ideas provide guidance and on how to overcome these situations of economic uncertainty and help actors to chart an actionable path. In this sense causal ideas have been described as roadmaps (Blyth 2002). Causal beliefs can be embedded in wider ideologies and worldviews.

An example from Employment Relations concerns different union ideologies, e.g. business unionism, anti-capitalist opposition and unions as a vehicle for social integration (Hyman 2001). These different trade union ideologies all include a normative dimension, but crucially they provide varying models of how to understand the world, how to interpret

economic situations and how to advance worker interests. First, anti-capitalist union ideologies come in different guises such as anarchism, communism or socialism, but they generally oppose management initiatives as they are regarded as attempts by capitalists to exploit workers. Second, other unions have an ideology that has been described as business unionism. This type of unionism is not concerned with an alternative vision of society and unions adhering to business unionism believe that workers' economic interests can be effectively advanced within the existing capitalist order. Third, another union ideology sees the main purpose of unions as to raise the status of workers and integrate them into society. These are key ideas in the ideologies of Social Democratic and Catholic unions, which seek to reform society by enhancing the social, democratic and economic rights of workers.

Other research has examined how the causal beliefs of management have developed. Guillen (1994) compares how and to what extent managers adopt various organisational paradigms across two liberal economies, the USA and Great Britain, and the two corporatist or coordinated economies, Spain and Germany. He focuses on three organisational paradigms: scientific management, human relations and 'structural analysis' (with respect to the latter he refers to the influential work of management scholars such as Drucker, Sloan, Dale and Chandler). Guillen conceptualises organisational paradigms as both a set of management techniques and organisational ideologies. Thus, organisational paradigms include prescriptions and guidelines for management on how to solve coordination problems and how to run companies effectively. Organisational paradigms or management models are regularly articulated as best practice models that are supposed to change management practices across the globe, but as Guillen's analysis shows the adoption of scientific management, the human relations approach and 'structural analysis' was highly uneven

across the four examined countries and conditioned by a range of structural and institutional factors.

*Foreground ideas* exist primarily in the public sphere (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Schmidt 2008). These ideas are voiced in public debates and they might be articulated in the political process or within social campaigns. Foreground ideas can function as ‘weapons’, forged with the aim of convincing other actors of certain policies or courses of action (Blyth 2002). The latter might include specific policy ideas, images and frames that shape and influence public opinion and debate. A notable example of a foreground idea that has begun to shape public policy and labour market practice is the notion of a ‘living wage’, the belief that paid employment should provide a minimum, decent standard of living and that employers have a moral obligation to pay such a wage. The idea of a living wage has served as a lightning conductor for widespread social concern about the growth of income inequality. In the USA it has been enacted in local statutes and through public procurement, while in the UK it has been propounded through a voluntary membership scheme for employers developed by an alliance of community and trade union organizations, Citizens UK (Holgate & Wills 2007; Luce 2004). Notably in the latter case, although the campaign for a living wage emerged outside the formal industrial relations systems it has won widespread support from established employment actors and across all main political parties.

Ideas articulated in public debate are often informed by *background ideas* (Campbell 2001), which provide the broader intellectual foundation, rationales and justifications for ideas voiced in the public sphere (Du Gay and Morgan 2013). Background ideas include broader political philosophies, political programmes, policy paradigms (Hall 1993) or economic doctrines, which structure and delineate the contours of public discourse. They fix

the assumptions which govern debate and thereby limit the range of possibilities deemed feasible.

For example, dominant economic doctrines such as Keynesianism and neo-liberalism have underpinned and informed economic discourse and economic policies and the broader governance of the economy. They matter for employment relations, because they ascribe contrasting roles to the collective actors in the functioning of economies. Labour unions and employers associations play an important part in the governing of the economy and the regulation of employment relations in Keynesian economics, while labour unions are believed to distort the functioning of markets and contribute to higher unemployment from a neoliberal vantage point.

However, there are also more specific paradigms that directly impinge on employment relations and HRM. Fligstein (1990) traces how conceptions of management control and of desirable organisational forms changed throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the century the standard paradigm was that managers could optimize the performance of their organizations by tightly supervising employees. More recently, the lean production programme has provided a rationale and justification for greater autonomy for employees and for the use of team work (Womack et al 1991). Later management models, such as the current vogue for employee engagement, share similar sets of assumptions (Truss et al. 2014). A contrasting example based on the Marxist worldview, analytical frame and categories is provided by Amanda Shantz, Kerstin Alfes and Catherine Truss in this special issue. In a penetrating quantitative analysis their research empirically explores the various dimensions of alienation at work in a UK manufacturing organization.

## **Actors**

Some literature on ideas ignores or downplays the role of agency. This charge can be levelled against early work in the tradition of sociological institutionalism, in which actors are primarily conceptualised as the followers of rules and norms. Actors are so thoroughly socialized within a field, according to this tradition, that there is little room for them to shape and influence the social and economic context they are inhabiting – what has been referred to as the ‘paradox of embedded agency’ (Battilana and D’aunno 2009; Seo and Creed 2002). In contrast to these accounts we emphasize the fact that actors play a crucial role in developing, promoting, advocating and altering ideas. This section provides indicative examples of various ideational agents or roles and elaborates the different ways in which actors influence and shape ideas and beliefs.

*Theorists and intellectuals* invent, develop and articulate new ideas, policy programmes or broader economic paradigms. In some instances these intellectuals are university academics who create new ideas and insights based on their research. Thus, William Kahn (1990) is widely credited with forming the notion that people can be ‘personally engaged’ in their work in his article in *Academy of Management Journal*, which led subsequently to the wider employee engagement movement (Truss et al. 2014: 1; see the article by Ackers in this volume for an account of how radical commentators have shaped the perception of the employment relationship within UK industrial relations). The ideas of other intellectuals are rooted in their experiences as practitioners within companies and social movements and have often played an important part in formulating notions of good practice with regard to the management of labour. From Frederick Taylor, through William Ouchi and on to Tom Peters and David Ulrich, management gurus have acted as the ‘organic intellectuals’ of business, developing key principles of management. On the labour side of the

fence, an equivalent tradition can be traced, stretching from classic Marxist and reformist theorists of the labour-movement to contemporary ‘labour-strategists’ who have formulated programmes for union renewal. The latter include scholar-activists, such as Lowell Turner, Kate Bronfenbrenner and Ruth Milkman, who have used research findings to chart an organizing path for union revitalization, while union practitioners such as Michael Crosby, Bill Fletcher and Fernando Gapasin have advanced very similar ideas from within the labour movement (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998; Fletcher and Gapasin 2008; Milkman 2006; Turner 2007).

Some of the most influential theorists have been economists who formulated economic paradigms such as Keynesianism and Neoliberalism. John Maynard Keynes’ economic programme became the economic blueprint that influenced policy makers between the 1930s and 1970s (Hall 1989; Keynes 1936), while Milton Friedman’s monetarist or neoliberal economic paradigm became the principal guide for re-organizing national economies from the 1980s (Friedman 1962; Peck 2010). Both paradigms devised a set of principles and prescriptions for understanding and running economies. They were particularly influential because they went beyond defining economic policies, but instead permeated a broad sphere of social and political life. For example, the neoliberal notion that markets are the most efficient organizing principle or governance mechanism has shaped public administration, social and employment relations reform.

While theorists of this stamp play an important role as producers and inventors of new ideas, it requires other types of agency to ensure that ideas diffuse and impact social and political processes. *Elites* are important transmitters, promoters and gatekeepers of ideas, including economic and political elites who have the power to advance a programmatic

agenda (Bottomore 2002; Mills 2000). Political elites in government can draw on state resources to advance a set of ideas. The above-discussed neoliberal economic ideas gained force because powerful governments such as those of Reagan and Thatcher in the USA and UK translated them into new economic and social policy programme that was subsequently executed and institutionalised. In the UK and the USA, the coercive power of the state was also deployed to implement these ideas by breaking trade union capacity for resistance.

In addition, economic elites can be an important supporter and advocate of ideas. Owners or CEOs of large corporations can use their resources and power to influence and lobby political elites. An example would be the Right to Work campaign in the USA – bankrolled by economic elites – which successfully helped to stall the labour law reform of the first Obama government. However, influential corporate leaders might also have an impact by developing certain policies and standards within their corporation, which are later mimicked and adopted by other companies. Equality and diversity policies have often diffused in this way, being championed by lead firms and then copied by other business organizations (Briscoe and Safford 2008).

Other agents are instrumental in transmitting ideas to a broader audience. They operate at the intersection of different spheres in society and might be part of wider networks and coalitions, which allows them to diffuse ideas across different sectors of society or across borders. This role has been described as that of *broker* (Campbell 2004) and is exemplified by the work of management consultants. The latter play a key role in diffusing new business fads and fashions through the corporate world (Abrahamson 1991). The current vogue for employee engagement, for example, has been advanced through consultancy reports, such as the MacLeod Report, commissioned by the UK government, and by consultancy firms, like

the Gallup Organization, which have developed questionnaires and other instruments to allow clients to measure and track workforce engagement levels (Schaufeli 2014). Engage for Success, a membership programme for UK businesses, supported by government, has reinforced this process, providing training, consultancy and advice on the practice of engagement for member companies.

Think tanks and policy institutes provide a similar brokerage function. They not only take part in the development of new ideas and programmes, but also communicate them through reports, working papers, newspapers and web pages, typically with the aim of influencing political and social actors. The OECD provides an example, which has effectively shaped the discourse and assumptions of economic policy on a global scale. Researchers examining this kind of process, have identified epistemic communities (Hass 1989), comprised of networks of experts, government bureaucrats, politicians and social and economic theorists. A prominent example of such a community was the Montpellerin Society, which included academics (Hayek and Milton Friedman), politicians (e.g. the latter German chancellor Ludwig Erhardt) and business leaders, and which proved instrumental in advancing neoliberal thinking (Peck 2010). An alternative epistemic community is the World Social Forum, which brings together social movements, unions and activists from across the world with the aim of advancing an alternative social and economic vision. Furthermore, the social movement literature has identified advocacy networks which span activists and social groups across borders (Keck and Sikkink 1998). These cross-border networks expose and communicate human rights abuses and their work has been important in forming norms of acceptable corporate behaviour, reflected in the codes of practice many large businesses now operate within their supply chains.



Another actor in the development of ideas and norms that has not received much attention are *courts*, including labour courts, and other regulatory bodies. Law and institutional rules are often ambiguous and need to be interpreted by judges and legal experts. Courts have the task of adapting laws to the changing realities of the workplace and to the wider social and economic context. New opinions, judgements and decisions are part of an evolving legal body that creates new norms and redefines existing ones. The work of James Gross (1985) has examined the evolving role of the USA's National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in making law. The statutory purpose of the NLRB is to uphold and defend existing labour law (most importantly the Wagner and Taft Hartley Acts), but over time it has interpreted existing laws in such a way as to create new norms and guiding principles. Thus under Frank W. McCulloch, an appointee of JF Kennedy, the NLRB emphasized notions of industrial democracy and sought to balance the power of workers (unions) and employers; while the NLRB under chairman Edward Miller, an appointee of Ronald Reagan, believed that "the age of the supremacy of the individual ... has come about" and employees would not want to cooperate with unions: instead they were most interested in their own individual rights and futures (cited in Gross 1985, p 16). Under Edward Miller collective bargaining norms and principles were developed in a less favourable manner for trade unions.

In Germany, Britta Rehder (2011) has examined the role of judges and legal experts in the evolution of an important labour law norm called 'the most favourable principle' (Günstigkeitsprinzip). This norm is more than one hundred years old and stipulates that collective agreements at the company level can only deviate from sectoral collective bargaining agreements if they are more favourable for employees. Judges in the post-war decades enforced a narrow interpretation of the norm and would only allow deviations at company level if wages or other conditions were improved. More recent interpretations,

however, have interpreted the norm more broadly. ‘Most favourable’ has come to include provisions that purportedly secure existing jobs for employees through lower working standards and wages. In effect the more recent interpretations by the courts have permitted a greater decentralisation of collective bargaining in Germany.

## **Mechanisms**

The previous section focused on various types of agents, while this section focuses on the various mechanisms and instruments that help actors to create, maintain and change ideas. Some of these mechanisms explain both how new ideas are created and how agents adopt them. Other mechanisms help to understand how ideas are maintained, which may occur through an attempt by actors to defend their identity. In addition, a focus on mechanisms can explain how ideas and ideologies alter through time and in this way contribute to a broader understanding of the process of change in the employment relationship. The different mechanisms identified below are not necessarily exclusive and, as we will see, researchers have on occasion drawn upon several to provide complex explanatory accounts of ideational processes.

*Framing* is a mechanism in the struggle over ideas, which has also been called the “politics of signification” (Hall 1982). This signifying work develops interpretative schema that enable actors “to locate, perceive, identify and label” social processes (Goffman 1986; Snow and Benford 1988). Framing is generally regarded as a dynamic concept and social groups play a central role in generating or challenging interpretative schemes. Framing is action oriented and the purpose is to inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of social organisations, but framing can also have the goal of delegitimizing the ideas of political opponents and demobilizing their members. An example of such action-oriented

framing is detailed in the article by Susan Ainsworth, Leanne Cutcher and Robyn Thomas in this Special Issue. They describe how Australian unions sought to mobilise against far-reaching neo-liberal labour market reforms that would have made it easier for employers to dismiss workers, removed other existing protections from workers and reduced minimum worker standards. The unions framed their opposition to these measures using a discourse of rights, which was a central element of their ‘Your Rights at Work’ campaigns. The framing of the political issue in a positive rights discourse was instrumental in mobilising rank and file union members and the wider public and contributed to the subsequent revocation of these labour market reforms. In a similar vein, activists (and researchers) in the US have sought to frame labour rights as human rights, in order to give changes of labour law a positive connotation (Gross and Compa 2009). A third example of framing can be seen in the field of equality and diversity, in which the notion of a ‘business case’ has been widely used to legitimate and secure approval for seemingly progressive forms of management that otherwise may not garner significant employer support (Noon 2007).

*Bricolage* is a mechanism that captures how actors creatively respond to new problems or opportunities. Initial formulation of this concept described how actors combine and recombine resources, practices and ideas that are already at hand (Lévi-Strauss 1966). Actors put together bits and pieces of existing and ideational and institutional legacies with the aim of engineering social and political change (Carstensen 2011). For instance, Katsuki Aoki, Rick Delbridge and Takahiro Endo in this special issue find in an analysis of eight Japanese auto companies that the examined organizations selectively picked aspects of the Anglo-American Model and combined them with traditional Japanese employment relations practices. Similarly, in Eastern Europe new enterprise structures were assembled from both Communist-era practice and notions of corporate governance taken from more developed

economies to the West (Stark 1996). The process of how actors recombine existing ideas and practices can also be observed on the individual level. Bruno Felix von Borell de Aaraujo, Maria Luisa Mendes Teixeira, Poliano Bastos da Cruz and Elise Malini in this special issue show in their analysis of expatriation in Brazil how expatriates draw upon existing local traits and cultural resources to help resolve problems they face and smooth the adaptation process.

While bricolage refers to the recombination of already existing repertoires and elements, *translation* refers to the spread of new ideas and practices from one setting to another (Campbell 2007). However, the introduction and adoption of new ideas does not take place in wholesale fashion and instead needs to be translated to the local context, in order to fit with already existing institutional arrangements. For example, research by GERPISA has examined the introduction of lean production in different countries and found that lean practices were adapted to local socio-economic contexts, thereby creating new hybrid models of lean (Boyer 1998). Other research has shown how neoliberal policy ideas have similarly been adapted to local context. In Denmark, for example, the import of neoliberal ideas led to a greater marketization in some spheres of the economy, while maintaining cooperative relationships between different stakeholders in other spheres (Campbell and Pedersen 2007).

The concept of *identity work* emphasizes the pro-active role of agents in forming ideas and wider identities. Central to the various definitions of identity is a sense of shared “we-ness” vis-a-vis other groups in society (Snow and McAdam 2000). Identity work commonly refers to the range of activities actors, ‘engage in to create, present and sustain personal identities’ (Snow and Leon 1987: 1348) to give meaning to themselves and others. Research has emphasized the importance of collective action and symbolic resources and rituals for forming identities (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 115). In employment

relations the concept of identity work has been used to examine transnational worker cooperation. The European Works Council of General Motors sustained transnational worker cooperation for more than a decade through a variety of activities and discursive initiatives that can be understood as ‘identity work’ (Greer and Hauptmeier 2008, 2012). The latter included framing the problems workers faced in a common way, the development of shared beliefs and common norms (e.g. they agreed to “share the pain”, by making concessions across all plants to avoid individual factory closure), the continuous nurturing of relationships that helped to build trust and common transnational work stoppages, in which more than 40,000 workers across Europe took part.

Other mechanisms focus on the *diffusion* of ideas and associated practices. In organizational sociology, mimicry has been used to explain diffusion (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), which can follow the logic either of appropriateness or of efficiency (March and Olsen 1989). It is argued that actors emulate practices and ideas that they perceive as legitimate; for example, many businesses have introduced same-sex partner benefits as part of the diversity programmes, reflecting the greater legitimacy of equality on the basis of sexual orientation within Western societies (Briscoe and Safford 2008). In other cases emulation may follow the logic of efficiency, with actors mimicking practices that they believe will generate superior performance. An example is provided by the spread of lean production, which has become an important template for changes in work organisation across countries and across business sectors (Womack et al. 1991). Of course, the superiority of templates of this kind may not be proven but they provide a recipe for action in a context of uncertainty with regard to means-end relationships. Mimicking practices and following prevailing ideas, which actors perceive as legitimate or efficient, are thus means of coping with uncertainty.

Other diffusion models presume more rational actors and emphasize experimentation and learning as mechanisms that explain the adaptation and spread of ideas (Hall 1993, Kristensen and Morgan 2012). Thus, actors experiment with new ideas and practices and in this process they learn which practices and ideas work and which do not. For example, General Motors experimented with different approaches to the reorganization of work and production in the 1980s. GM tried out the far-reaching automatization of production in some plants and experimented with lean production in others (Adler and Cole 1993; Rubinstein and Kochan 2001) and through a process of trial and error identified the greater relative advantages of the latter, which was subsequently diffused across the company's global operations.

A number of the mechanisms discussed above tend to play out across a relatively short time frame. In contrast, the mechanism of *generational change* seeks to grasp change in ideas and beliefs over longer periods of time. It starts from the notion that the ideas of a generation are rooted in common experiences: 'Individuals who belong to the same generation (...) are endowed (...) with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process' (Mannheim 1952). The shared experience of economic depressions or social struggles of a common generation, shape a similar consciousness, which informs actor behaviour. Put differently, 'As a new generation enters the stream of history, the lives of its members are marked by the imprint of social change and in turn leave their own imprint' (Riley 1978). The mechanism of generational change has been used to explain changes in employment relations in Spain (Hauptmeier 2012). The transition from a generation of union and management formed through their experiences during the Franco dictatorship to one whose experiences has been within a liberal democratic regime transformed the ideologies of

management and labour unions with implications for the substance and outcomes of employment relations.

### **Context and Resources**

The previous sections have discussed the relevance of context and resourcing only in passing; however, both play an important role in the development and spread of ideas. An example of how context shapes ideas at work can be taken from institutional analysis and the way in which national institutions of worker participation shape the beliefs and behaviours of worker representatives (Turner 1990; Hauptmeier and Morgan 2014; Morgan and Hauptmeier 2014). In Germany, codetermination legislation has endowed representatives with rights to participate in management decision-making at both workplace and board levels. These rights, over time, have bred a cooperative orientation on the part of German worker representatives, in which works councillors regard themselves and are regarded by many employers as co-managers in the running of the enterprise. As part of this orientation works councillors often seek to balance the sectional interests of their constituents with the wider needs of the business that they help manage. Worker representatives in the USA operate in a very different institutional context. Unions have no say in decision making processes at the strategic level and their role is narrowly confined to collective bargaining. As a consequence, worker representatives have a low-trust orientation to the employer and tend to respond to proposals for change in an adversarial and highly sectional manner. There are certainly differences of union ideology within countries, but such cross-national comparisons help us to understand broad difference across countries and indicate how institutions shape actors' ideas.

Another important aspect of the relationship between ideas and formal institutions is captured by the notion of *institutionalization*. Policy ideas are only likely to exert long-term influence over employment practice when they are inscribed within laws or other formal institutions that give them force. For example, the idea of industrial democracy was current across many Western countries in the mid-twentieth century but it has exerted most influence in those countries, like the Nordic countries, which embedded this normative principle in codetermination law (Hagen 2014). In these cases the idea of the democratic governance of corporations continues to shape practice. Another example is provided by equality law, which institutionalized the demands of the civil rights and other social movements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and which has subsequently exerted powerful influence over management behaviour. According to Dobbin (2009), much contemporary US human resource management can be traced to the institutionalization in US law of these core beliefs in sexual, racial and other forms of equality. A third, contrasting example is provided by the Occupy Movement, a loose network of protest that challenged prevailing business practice in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, but which has faded with minimal influence, essentially because its demands were not institutionalized.

Other research has examined the relationship between ideas and the economic context, with a particular focus on the impact of major economic crises and depressions (Kindleberger 2000). It has been observed that during and following major economic crises or economic depression a shift in economic paradigms can take place, with the transition to Keynesianism in the wake of the 1929 crash and the shift towards neoliberalism after the oil crisis of the 1970s being cases in point. Of course, transitions in hegemonic ideas of this kind do not occur of their own accord and require dedicated actors endowed with resources who can exploit the crisis and engineer ideological change: as President Obama's chief of staff,



Rahm Emmanuel, suggested: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste". Because of this crucial role of agency, it is by no means certain that the Great Recession and Euro crisis of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century will result in a similar ideological transition and the abandonment of the neoliberal ideas that form the background of much labour market regulation (Crouch 2011). While major economic crisis opens up the potential for ideological change, it is not in itself a sufficient condition. It also requires skilful and resourceful ideational entrepreneurs with the labour and other social movements, who can develop new ideas, garner support for them and win the battle for ideas (Hyman 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Keynes (1936) once said that, "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else". This article has stressed the importance of various types of ideas in shaping HRM and employment relations, but our approach differs from those who advance purely ideational arguments, which attribute strong causal power to ideas in themselves. In contrast, our synthesis has emphasized the various types of agency that are involved in the creation, maintenance and defence of ideas, including the role of theorists, elites, brokers and courts. In addition, we identified a number of mechanisms that help to understand how actors promote ideas, how ideas gain broader prominence and how ideas change. These mechanisms include identity work, diffusion, bricolage, translation and generational change. Finally, we have stressed the importance of context and resources in shaping ideational processes. Institutional contexts constitute actors and influence and shape their ideologies without fully determining them, while actors with greater power and resources, including financial resources, have more capacity to advance ideas. However,

while the battle for ideas is skewed towards the powerful, these obstacles can be overcome by creative and innovative ideational entrepreneurs.

Another feature of our discussion of ideas at work is that it has extended beyond the workplace and has adopted a broader political economy perspective. This is necessary, because it is in the wider arena of political economy in which many of the ideas are forged that shape HRM and the employment relationship. A wide array of political economy actors, including politicians, economic elites, intellectuals, consultants, think-tanks and social activists, take part in public debate, lobbying, political struggle and campaigning and through these activities seek to advance particular ideas. Moreover, it is within political economy that ideas can be inscribed within legislation and other public policy, thereby becoming institutionalized. It is when ideas are embedded within formal institutions that they become a more permanent and stable feature, exerting ongoing causal force over HRM and the conduct of employment relations.

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**Table 1: Different Types of Ideas**

	<b>Actor level</b>	<b>Public sphere</b>
	Ideas as elements of individual and collective belief systems	Ideas as part of public debates and in the political process
<b>Normative</b>	<p><i>Principled beliefs</i></p> <p>beliefs on how issues ought to be; moral principles, identity based beliefs</p>	<p><i>Foreground ideas</i></p> <p>policy ideas, ideas as weapons, societal discourse, frames</p>
<b>Understanding, Interpretation</b>	<p><i>Causal beliefs</i></p> <p>Beliefs on means-end relationships and on how the world works, roadmaps,</p>	<p><i>Background Ideas</i></p> <p>economic paradigms, public sentiments, culture, programmes</p>