

GERPISA 14th International Colloquium

Are automobile firms market-oriented organisations?

Myths and realities

Ministère de la Recherche, Paris, 12 and 13 June 2006

Call for papers

Our 14th International Colloquium will be an opportunity to present and discuss the initial findings of GERPISA's current research programme *Varieties of capitalism and diversity of productive models* and backed by a European Union-supported ESEM project (FP6, contract n° CIT2-CT-2004-506077). The emphasis here is on a particular approach, one that has been more or less neglected in our studies up until now but which occupies an important place in our scientific project and in firms' strategies: to wit, automobile systems' ability to adapt to markets.

Core themes

Most of the productive and organisational innovations to have occurred in the automobile systems over the past 15 to 20 years were if not motivated then at least justified by the need for better and quicker adaptation to increasingly cumbersome changes in the markets. Saturated in the developed countries, competition has been exacerbated in these markets, inducing carmakers to embark upon an innovation and differentiation race that has made demand even more uncertain. At the same time, the search for new outlets means that potentially emerging markets are being highlighted in a way that has profoundly redefined the geography of production. At a productive and organisational level, the main driver of restructuring has become the need for flexibility and more generally for a permanent adaptation of supply to the different kinds of demand. Similarly, carmakers and automobile systems' relative performances are being interpreted in such terms.

Above and beyond any presuppositions and generalisations, this discourse, one shared by actors and experts alike, deserves further analysis today. More specifically, we should be examining (instead of postulating) whether the changes that can be observed at the automobile systems' different organisational levels are capable of causing an improvement in the adjustment of supply to the different kinds of demand. Here we distinguish three main dimensions in automobile systems' lives: product design; production organisation; and distribution organisation. These are the three areas in which the idea that there is a greater need now to adapt to differentiated and shifting demand has played a major role in modifying the practices of carmakers and their "partners". Since GERPISA's different studies have already shown that these practices do differ from one automotive firm to the next (vehicles or components makers), the Colloquium hopes to receive papers that will help to elucidate the basic link between the productive and organisational practices being developed on these three levels, and "the market orientation" usually ascribed to them.

Indeed, since neither a tailor-made nor a permanent redefinition of product ranges is feasible, and given the continuous presence of age-old concerns like the search for profits or the reduction of costs, firms are being forced into certain arbitrages based on differentiated and even contradictory interpretations of what a better adjustment of automobile supply to demand really involves, an analysis that your contributions should help to update. It may be worth paying special attention to the practices being developed in the emerging countries, where demand issues are raised in different terms than they are in industrialised countries whose markets are saturated. The goal is to discover whether specific practices are developing at the three levels that are design, manufacturing and distribution.

It remains that examining these questions implies examining demand itself, as well as the determinants of its evolution over time, plus its differentiation from one country to another - in other words, analysing the social construction of the automobile market. As something that can be apprehended through the different wage-labour nexuses, this approach (which helps to identify how observable industrial configurations fit in with [and are explained by] a given macroeconomic context) should include a study of the role that the various collective actors (labour unions, trade organisations, State) play in the differentiation of contexts and in their translation into demand.

The questions or areas covered by the papers being submitted might be broken down thusly:

- Determinants of the different kinds of automobile demand, wage labour nexuses and collective actors: income distribution, inequalities and “customer requirements”, social and political regulations in the automobile industries.
- Product design and changes in demand: forms and qualities of the systems conceived in such a way as to ensure an adjustment between innovation and customers’ demands; design of specific models for emerging markets or adaptation of products designed for mature markets.
- Productive organisation: does modularisation increase flexibility? How do varying vertical organisations differ in terms of their ability to adjust to demand? How does the presence of the market or of customers within the automobile systems’ different components translate in terms of pressure on various employee categories?
- Organisation of distribution and automotive services: do changes initiated on the distribution side involve a need or a desire for a better customer relationship? If so, are they successful?

Studies should cover the world’s different regions, with special focus on EU countries. They might propose historical approaches enabling the integration of a long-term perspective.

Integrating this approach to revisit the 4th research programme’s other dimensions

Along these lines, analyses of other industries (notably aeronautics, pharmaceuticals, software, telecommunications equipment, agribusiness and public utilities) are welcome as a means of extending the intersectorial comparative analyse initiated in GERPISA’s new research programme and in the ESEMK project.

Questions of this ilk not only constitute the central focus of a working group entitled *Product policy and productive organisation* but also allow us to revisit the research programme’s other dimensions. The question here is whether the aforementioned changes have any impact on working organisations (e.g., to what extent do these new systems subject employees to lean pressures?) and more generally on a company’s employment relationship or financial environment (do analysts’ evaluations incorporate this orientation?). The programme’s two other working groups (*Employment relationship* and *Financialisation*) are invited to include such questions in their studies. The Colloquium will also be the occasion for a progress report on all of the studies carried out by the end of the programme’s second year.

These lines of questioning might also cover an analysis of the different forms of public intervention, with special attention being placed to the way in which automobile firms’ relationship with their market are influenced by the different levels of State intervention, by the interlinkage between these levels (notably on a EU scale or even within the WTO), by sectorial policies and by regulations.

Lastly, the diversity of configurations in terms of companies’ market relationship management systems might be compared with the competitive relations characterising the different types of capitalism.

Deadline for sending communications or session projects: **27 January 2006**

Response: **18 February 2006.**

Deadline for submitting papers: **16 April 2006**

Deadlines must be respected

GERPISA, Université d’Evry
Rue du Facteur Cheval, F-91025 Evry Cedex
(France)

E-mail: contact@gerpisa.univ-evry.fr

Website: www.gerpisa.univ-evry.fr