

Understanding Power Resources in Labour Relations

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The problem of measuring labour power

- Industrial relations attempts
 - Union density:
 - Members as a proportion of eligible workforce
 - Some association to welfare state development (expenditure) and working conditions (H&S), partly to Collective Bargaining coverage
 - Rarely an accurate indicator of union strength
 - Only formal institutions
 - Strikes:
 - Inverted U-curve?
 - Institutionalisation of conflict and changing forms
 - Union influence (Kuruvilla et al. 2002):
 - Centralization of Collective Bargaining (influence on the socio-economic system)
 - Coverage of Collective Bargaining (success in representing membership)
- ⇒ Underlying tension between ‘logic of membership’ and ‘logic of influence’

On all three accounts, union power is in decline

OECD since 1980s:

- Union density from 30% to 15%
- Collective bargaining coverage from 47% to 33%
- Strike volume from 400 to 20 days/1000workers

Power resource approach

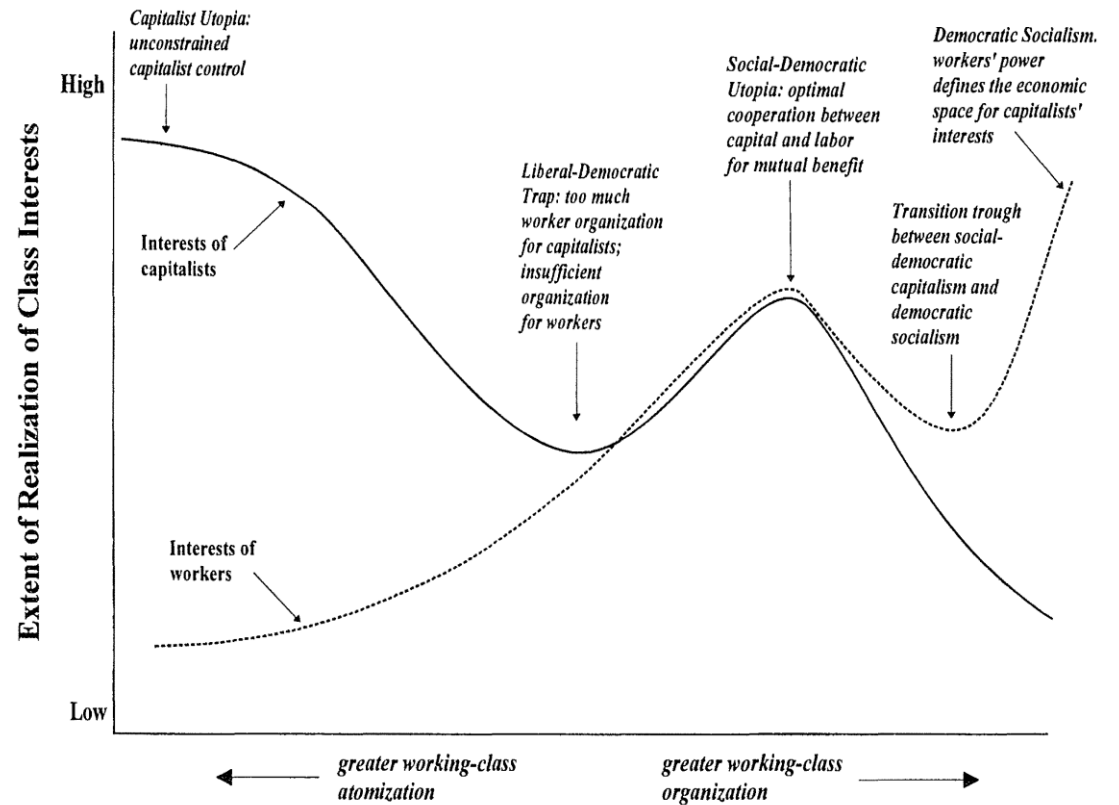
- Korpi (1978): asymmetric power relations counterbalanced by **collective power**, consolidated in **institutions** (Korpi 1985)
- Resources and preferences vary across space and time
- Power resources, rather than power exercise:
'attributes (capacities or means) of actors (individuals or collectivities), which enable them to reward or to punish other actors' (Korpi 1985)
- Power resources are 'multiplied' by mobilisation
- Focus on labour market (labour replaceability) and politics
- Empirically observable resources:
 - Electoral strength
 - Mobilisation power (strikes, strike funds)
 - Job vacancies/unemployed ratio
 - Skills/human capital

Broader implications

- Power resource theory: labour power as driver of welfare state and labour-decommodification (Korpi and Esping-Andersen)
- Labour power as main driver of democratisation (Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992)

EO Wright's neo-Marxist view of labour power

- Associational and structural power
- 3 spheres:
 - Politics
 - Market
 - Production
- Interests of capital and workers as *partially* compatible: explanation of class compromise (depending on systemic and institutional constraints)



Further elaborations

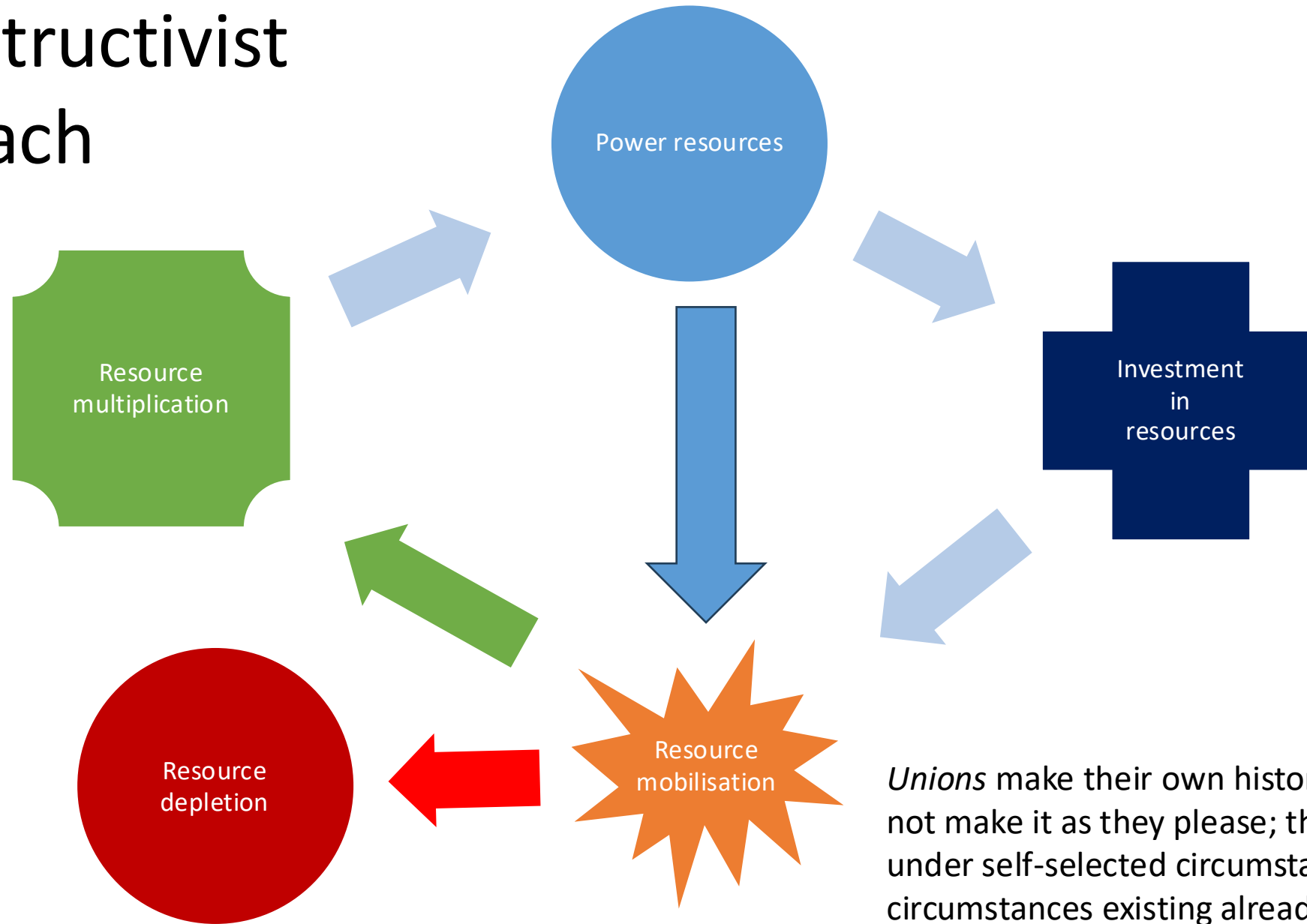
- Silver (2003):
 - Marxian vs Polanyian labour movements
 - Shift of structural labour power towards the South
- Search for further power resources (Schmalz & Dörre 2016, Lévesque & Murray 2010, Refslund and Arnholtz 2021, 2024)
 - Just an empiricist taxonomy exercise?
 - Search for good news? ('from Polanyi to Pollyanna')

Resources	Empirical types	Examples, references
Structural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marketplace (economic) - Workplace (organisational) 	Reserve army Mobility power Skills, ‘choke points’ Tacit knowledge
Associational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Membership - Organisational capacities 	Union density Activism Strike funds Horizontal organisations
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political - Legal - Collective goods 	Corporatism Workplace rights, works councils Welfare state, services
Societal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ideational (communicative) - Coalition 	Legitimacy, injustice (Kelly 1998) Ideologies (Lukes 1974) Social movements Communicative (Doellgast 2020)

Criticisms

- Nowak (2025): where's capitalism? All is structural!
 - ⇒ Power resources as approach to unions *within* capitalism
 - ⇒ Relational: need to include capital's power
- Atzeni (2021): only unions?
 - ⇒ Not necessarily – but importance of 'continuous associations' (S & W Webb)
- Mrozowicki (2025): social reproduction?
 - ⇒ As cause or effect?
 - ⇒ Women's agency, eg on working time

A constructivist approach



Unions make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past



Relations among resources

- does it matter which power resources employs?
 - Eg: 'curse' of institutional security (Hassel 2007)?
- Relations between different sources: synergy or substitution?
 - Eg 'exit' vs 'voice' (Meardi 2007)
- 3 research puzzles illustrations...

1. Labour market reforms and reform reversal, Italy and Spain

- 2010-12: structural reforms deeper in Spain than Italy, because labour has less associational (low membership) and structural (high unemployment) power in Spain
- But in 2019-22 more policy reversal in Spain, even if associational and structural power gap between Spain and Italy has not changed; why?

Different games, different resources

2010		
Associational - Union density (2010)	33%	16.7%
Structural - Unemployment (2010)	8.6%	20.7%
Institutional	Autonomous collective bargaining	Labour law
Societal - confidence in unions (EVS) - coalitions	30% weak	38,1% new movements

Resistance to anti-labour policies is defensive game that requires institutional resources (eg inertia)

Policy reversal is offensive game that requires societal and discursive power resources

2. Power resources for subsidiary workers' power in multinational corporations

- Central Eastern Europe: some evidence of subsidiary power resources (eg Meardi 2004, 2006)
- 12 Japanese-Indonesian joint ventures within Astra automotive holding (Soehardjo et al. 2023)
 - Why more resistance in lower-structural power 2nd and 3rd tier suppliers?
 - Role of societal and institutional power at meso-level (training agencies, associations), where employment practice transfer is conducted

⇒ Different power resources matter when issues are dealt with at different levels

3. Power resources & Covid19

Expected pandemic effects

- Structural + Constraints on the mobilisation of labour force
- Associational - Limitations to organising, strikes, demonstrations
- Institutional + Governments' need for social consensus
- Societal + Discursive power

Eg: meat industry collective agreement in Germany
(Ban et al. 2022)



Collective bargaining in Italy under Covid, 2020-21

<i>Power</i>	Metalworking	Public sector (health, central administration, local authorities)	Agroindustry	Food delivery
Structural	+	+	++	++
Associational	-	-	-	--
Institutional	+	+	+	--
Discursive	+	(+ not mobilised)	+	++
<i>CB outcome</i>	Success	Failure	Success	Countermobilisation



Broader questions

- Do unions still matter? decline vs change (eg strike behaviour and variety of power resources)
 - Crisis: rediscovery of unions and collective bargaining (Meardi and Tassinari 2022; EU Directive; OECD)
 - Roles in new forms of work: (remote: O'Brady et al 2025; platforms: atypical)
 - Have they changed their role in political economy? See distribution, dualization, environment
- ⇒ *Loss of monopolistic position, increasing variegation, but no marginalisation: eg pandemic policies, regulation of platforms and atypical work*