

Global Issues

Power Resources in Theory and Practice: Where to Go from Here

Marissa Brookes, University of California Riverside, United States

As we approach the end of another decade, it feels appropriate to pause and consider how the power resources approach (PRA) has evolved alongside labour's real-life evolution as a strategic actor across a range of economic, institutional and societal contexts. Just as the actual strategies and actions of workers have grown more sophisticated over time, so too has the PRA become more sophisticated, as scholars continue to refine the concepts comprising this influential theoretical framework (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster this issue). One of the PRA's great strengths is its emphasis on labour's agency, countering outmoded portrayals of workers and unions as passive victims of structural forces (Bieler, this issue). Another strength of the PRA is its utility for causal analysis, being broad enough to facilitate useful comparisons across multiple cases yet specific enough to explain why an individual case had the outcome it did. Most important is its practical utility: By defining distinct power resources – such as associational, structural, institutional and societal power – and illustrating how they play out through empirical examples – PRA scholars provide guidance to union leaders and labour activists that is specific enough to steer strategic action on a case-by-case basis yet broad enough to prevent reinvention of the wheel for each new dispute.

As this Special Issue's case studies show, unions and their allies are already well into implementing the PRA on the ground. Of course, workers have always exercised power and never needed any academic jargon to do so. What the PRA offers, however, is insight on how to be more conscious of strategy and more precise in the deployment of diverse tactics. Nevertheless, if labour leaders and activists are to further secure workers' rights in an ever more complex global economy, they will need much clearer predictions of when and why specific power resources are effective in any given situation. What scholars can do now is provide such predictions by further developing the PRA.

Enhancing the PRA should start with a deeper discussion of the concept at its very core – power. Too often scholarship on workers' power proceeds without a theory of power itself. This matters, because a close examination of what power *is* reveals two aspects worthy of further inspection: power is relational, and power is a capacity. Greater attention to the relational aspects of power would allow us to map out the specific mechanisms through which workers' actions directly affect the behaviour of employers or other actors, while deeper consideration of power as a capacity helps highlight the conditions under which workers are able to exercise power in the first place. I argue these points below.

Power – defined as the capacity of an actor to compel another actor to do something the latter otherwise would not do – is inherently relational (Dahl, 1961; Lukes, 1974, 2005; Gaventa, 1980; Knight, 1992; Piven, 2008). Therefore, it is only meaningful to discuss workers' power with reference to the other actors they are attempting to influence. Most PRA scholars acknowledge this yet rarely go on to systematically theorise the power resources of those with whom workers are in conflict.

Since the target actor is often (though not always) an employer, a more thorough conceptualisation of *employers'* power resources would be a useful next step in developing the PRA. One way to proceed would be to theorise, as scholars have done for labour, the actions employers take at each of the several levels on which conflicts with workers play out: the workplace, the sectoral level, and the political system (Wright, 2000). Another possibility is to identify parallels between workers' distinct power resources and the specific strategies and actions employers use to counter them.

That said, it is not enough to simply sort employers' power resources into discrete categories or types. Understanding the relational nature of power ultimately requires an analysis of interdependencies (Piven and Cloward, 2000; Piven, 2008). All labour conflicts unfold in the context of complex interdependencies produced by a combination of actors' core interests and the external environment in which those actors are embedded. Employers are therefore vulnerable to workers' structural, institutional and societal power to the extent that they depend on particular configurations of economic production, employment relations institutions and various actors who purchase from, invest in or shape the image of the company in question. Likewise, workers and their organisations are vulnerable to the actions a given employer takes to the extent that those actions directly threaten the economic structures, institutions or social settings on which those workers depend to fulfil their core interests (Brookes, 2015). Hence, no theory of workers' power is complete without a full consideration of *employers'* interests, strategies, resources and vulnerabilities – and vice versa. Integrating these elements into the PRA would therefore strengthen both its analytical and practical utility.

The second aspect of power to consider more closely is its existence as a capacity. While the term “power resources” is not problematic as such, at times PRA scholars use the terms “power” and “power resources” interchangeably and without defining the concept of resources. This can cause confusion over whether power is embodied in external “resources” like money or information, or whether power is in fact a capacity to act that is embodied in workers themselves. The latter view is actually compatible with the former since part of a worker's or union's capacity to act depends to some extent on material or organisational resources. Conceiving of power as a capacity is also compatible with the notion, argued above, that power is the product of actors' relationships of interdependence, conditioned by their embeddedness in the economic, institutional and social structures comprising their external environment. The crucial point, however, is that understanding power as a capacity goes beyond the identification of resources possessed and even beyond the analysis of actors' relationships and environments. Power as a capacity begs the question, “capacity to do what to whom”?

For three of the four power resources focused on in this Special Issue – structural, institutional, and societal power – the question of “power over” (Lukes, 1974), that is, who is doing what to whom, has a clear answer: Workers are exercising power vis-à-vis employers. Hence, for these three power resources, the “capacity to do what to whom” exists, respectively, in the form of workers' capacities to destabilise the production or delivery of goods and services; to force employers to abide by laws, rules and regulations; and to gain support from non-labour stakeholders such as customers or shareholders on whom employers depend. Hence, the concept of “power over” is straightforward for structural, institutional and societal power since scholarly analyses of these power resources nearly always posit the “other actor” to be an employer. It becomes more complicated, however, when we consider more closely the fourth power resource, associational power.

Associational power is different. Defined first by Wright (2000: 962) as “the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organisations of workers”, the concept has since been developed by PRA scholars who recognise that associational power means more than the mere existence of a union or other labour organisation. As detailed in this Special Issue’s Introduction, indicators of associational power include not only member numbers but also infrastructural resources, organisational efficiency, member participation and internal cohesion. Yet while scholars have made great strides in detailing where associational power comes from, rarely is it clear what associational power actually enables workers to *do*. Over whom do workers exercise associational power? And what exactly does the exercise of associational power look like in action?

Since associational power is a type of power, and power is a capacity to act, I argue that associational power is most usefully conceptualised as the capacity of workers to mobilise themselves and to act collectively (Brookes, 2015). Hence, the “power” in associational power is not exercised by workers over employers but rather by workers over other workers. That is, associational power is the ability of union leaders, shop stewards, labour activists or rank-and-file union members to compel the other members of their organisation to do something they otherwise would not do – in this case, to behave as a collective actor. Therefore, like the other power resources, associational power is a capacity embodied not in external resources like office space, funding or research staff – though these things do enhance its effectiveness – but in the workers themselves and how they relate to one another.

Conceptualising associational power in this way has implications for our understanding of how this power resource relates to the others. If associational power is seen as the capacity of workers to mobilise themselves to act collectively, then it is easy to see how this particular power resource directly enhances workers’ structural, institutional and societal power by backing the actions that these other power types entail with the weight of a collective actor. Surely structural, institutional and societal power can manifest in actions taken by a solitary worker or by several unorganised individuals acting independently from each other. Realistically, however, structural, institutional and societal power tend to be most effective when workers act in concert – whether walking off worksites, maintaining picket lines, marching in rallies, meeting with managers, taking cases to court or bringing corporate practices to the attention of the public. The conceptualisation of associational power as workers’ capacity to behave as a collective actor therefore serves a practical purpose, as associational power might be considered as a precondition for magnifying the impact of the other power resources or, in some instances, a necessary condition for even exercising those power types in the first place.

In sum, the practical and analytical utility of the PRA rests on its further development, which should start with a basic consideration of what power actually *is*. PRA scholars sometimes get caught in the tangle of labelling and relabelling the various power resources, parsing them into subtypes such as marketplace bargaining, workplace bargaining, logistical, disruptive, coalitional, discursive and symbolic (Silver, 2003; Turner, 2006; Chun, 2009; Brookes, 2013; Webster, 2015). But at some point we need to resist the proliferation of neologisms and make sure we are not confusing the map for the territory. Grasping the essence of power itself – and, in turn, what is actually happening when labour takes action – will help PRA scholars make more precise predictions about processes of conflict and cooperation unfolding in the empirical world. In other words, ontology informs causality: Once we understand what power is – a capacity embodied in actors with agency that hinges

on relationships of interdependence – we will have better insight into where workers’ power comes from, how to obtain and increase it, and how to use power resources most effectively.

REFERENCES

- Brookes, M. (2013) Varieties of Power in Transnational Labour Alliances: An Analysis of Workers’ Structural, Institutional, and Coalitional Power in the Global Economy. *Labour Studies Journal*, 38(3): 181–200.
- Brookes, M. (2015) Power, Labour, and Globalisation: How Context-Appropriate Strategies Help Transnational Labour Alliances Succeed. In *Labour and Transnational Action in Times of Crisis*, edited by A. Bieler, R. Erne, D. Golden, I. Helle, K. Kjeldstadli, T. Matos and S. Stan. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Chun, J.J. (2009) *Organizing at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Dahl, R. (1961) *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gaventa, J. (1980) *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Knight, J. (1992) *Institutions and Social Conflict*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lukes, S. (1974) Power: A Radical View. *Power: Critical Concepts*, 2: 233–68.
- Lukes, S. (2005) *Power: A Radical View*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Piven, F.F. (2008) Can Power from Below Change the World? *American Sociological Review*, 73(1): 1–14.
- Piven, F.F. and R.A. Cloward (2000) Power Repertoires and Globalization. *Politics & Society*, 28(3): 413–30.
- Silver, B.J. (2003) *Forces of Labour: Workers’ Movements and Globalisation Since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, L. (2006) Globalization and the Logic of Participation: Unions the Politics of Coalition Building. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48: 83–97.
- Webster, E. (2015) Labour after Globalization: Old and New Sources of Power. In *Labour and Transnational Action in Times of Crisis*, edited by A. Bieler, R. Erne, D. Golden, I. Helle, K. Kjeldstadli, T. Matos and S. Stan. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Wright, E.O. (2000) Working-class Power, Capitalist-class Interests and Class Compromise. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105(4): 957–1002.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MARISSA BROOKES is assistant professor of Political Science at the University of California, Riverside. She is the author of *Transnational Labor Alliances: Power, Coordination, and Why Some Succeed* (Cornell University and ILR Press, forthcoming 2019). Her work also appears in *Comparative Political Studies*, *Development and Change*, the *Labour Studies Journal*, and *PS: Political Science and Politics*. [Email: mbrookes@ucr.edu]