Infra-Political Dimensions of Resistance to International Business: 
A Neo-Gramscian Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to critical understandings of how international business is resisted. It develops a Neo-Gramscian approach that emphasizes the importance of informal or ‘infra-political’ processes. Current conceptualizations demonstrate how international business is challenged via formal and organized political strategies in the firm, the state and civil society. The infra-political dimension is understated. This paper develops a theory of ‘articulation’ that broadens our understandings of how international business is resisted in both formal and informal ways.

Keywords: Resistance, Articulation, Gramsci, Infra-politics, International Business, Hegemony
PREAMBLE

Two protestors distribute leaflets outside a McDonalds restaurant in London. The McDonalds Corporation takes the protestors to court. Following a well-publicized two-year trial and numerous judicial reviews, many of the protestor’s claims about the environmental, health, animal rights and labour misdemeanours of McDonalds are upheld. The two protestors are now credited with initiating a global backlash against multinational fast-food chains (Vidal, 1997).

Hundreds of students across the United States organize boycotts of apparel produced under dubious labour conditions. Through their ‘no sweat’ campaign they call attention to the labour conditions in factories making popular foot-ware and clothing brands. This forces many large fashion companies to rethink their procurement policies (Ross, 1997).

Thousands of citizens protest against the policies of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle. Their actions close the conference. It is followed by many similar protests at meetings of international financial agencies across the globe and gives birth to the so-called anti-globalization movement. International financial institutions now back away from overly strict neo-liberal policies (Notes from Nowhere, 2003).

INTRODUCTION

International business has been a contested terrain ever since the Europeans set their feet on the American continent, unleashing a long and violent history of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle. Above we have given three well-known examples of contemporary actors articulating their discontent about the way increasingly powerful multinational firms affect the lives of people across the world. While protests against the WTO, IMF, World Bank and
the so called ‘Washington Consensus’ more generally do not necessarily implicate particular multinational companies directly, they are part of a wider discursive assault on an emerging global order that is seen to be dominated by global business interests (Klein, 2000; Starr, 2001). Hence, the three examples of our Preamble are part of a far larger set of challenges to multinational firms, articulated by a wide range of groups in different international contexts (Danaher and Marks, 2003). These significant and ongoing challenges have caught the eye of social scientists (Starr, 2001), journalists (Klein, 2000), and policy makers (Rodrik, 1997). Indeed, the activities of international business organizations have become one of the central political issues of our time (Crouch, 2004).

Given the pressing importance of understanding these struggles and conflicts, and given that there have been numerous engagements with issues of power, politics and resistance in the wider realms of management studies (e.g. Diamond, 1986; Hyman, 1989; Jermier et al., 1994); Thomas and Davis, 2005; Willmott, 1993), it is curious to find that the specific field of international business (IB) studies has had very limited discussions about how multinational companies are resisted in manifold ways. As Rodriguez et al. argue, “historically much of the research on IB and politics has focused on MNE-host government negotiations at the time of initial entry into a country” (2006: 735). Here, politics is associated with formal institutions, such as governments – while it is worth noting that the importance of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has recently been highlighted (Teegen et al., 2004). Yet, the political dimension of IB research seems to clearly focus on the formal bargaining with governmental and non-governmental actors in order to ultimately win them over (Boddewyn and Brewer, 1994), while informal and clandestine actions against IB practices are not considered.
In this paper we focus on a small but growing stream of research in international business studies that is concerned with critical interpretations of resistance to IB. Taking its cue from labour process theory (e.g., Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Knights and Willmott, 1989) and critical management studies (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003), this scholarship is informed by the assumption that IB involves asymmetrical power relations, struggles for resources and often unjust social outcomes. Our starting point is based on an understanding that IB practices are part of a wider discursive field of power relations involving companies, governments, NGOs and other civil society actors. Resistance to IB practices can occur in any part of this asymmetrical field of power relations. We therefore challenge the optimistic image of pluralist bargaining presented in much international business research.

Of particular interest in our paper is the popular application of the Gramscian notions of ‘hegemony’ and the ‘war of position’ to describe this resistance (Levy and Newell, 2002; Levy and Egan, 2003; Levy, 2007; Levy and Scully, 2007). Research using a Neo-Gramscian analysis has proved insightful for clarifying how groups resist multinational corporations, state policies associated with globalization and so forth. However, this scholarship does tend to conceptualize resistance as largely formal mechanisms, and thus understates the important role of informal ‘infra-politics’ (J. Scott, 1990). Emphasis is placed on the formal spheres of professionally and hierarchically organized labour groups, NGOs¹ (Teegen et al., 2004) and

¹ As one of the reviewers pointed out, there can sometimes be confusion about the term non-governmental organization or NGO. NGOs are often seen to refer to almost any type of organization outside the business and state sectors. On the other hand, the term ‘social movement’ tends to be used to refer to a network comprising many NGOs pursuing a similar (if not common) agenda. However, for us, an NGO is distinct from a social movement because of its more formal, professional and hierarchical organization. In this paper we argue that social movements tend to be more grassroots-based, non-hierarchical networks, as opposed to more formally and professionally organized NGOs.
organizational bargaining rather than the infra-political activities associated with decentralized, non-hierarchical, grassroots-based social movements.

The examples given in the above preamble all show how resistance against international business is often articulated in informal ways using ‘direct action’ and other clandestine resistance strategies. This paper points to the importance of understanding these informal, infra-political dimensions of resistance against international business. The aim of this paper is to develop a framework that supplements Gramscian analyses of resistance to international business by examining the importance of infra-politics. In particular, we introduce Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) concept of articulation in order to make sense of the ways in which a) the very boundary between oft-cited spheres of action (the firm, state and civil society) are socially constructed and b) informal political activities are crucial aspects of both organized and unorganized resistance processes. Towards this end, we identify three types of infra-politics that we feel will further our knowledge of resistance to international business from a Neo-Gramscian perspective: informal organizational resistance (e.g., workplace misbehaviour), informal state resistance (e.g., guerrilla groups) and informal civil society resistance (e.g., new social movements). However, building on our previous work (Spicer and Böhm, 2007), the key contribution of this paper is to show how different informal as well as formal ways of resistance against international business combine and interconnect in order to articulate counter-hegemonic discourses.

POWER AND RESISTANCE IN MANAGEMENT AND INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS STUDIES

It is now acknowledged that the management of international business involves both economic and political activities (Boddweyn, 1998; Boddweyn and Brewer, 1994). This has
led international business and management researchers to consider the political dynamic of multinational firms. There have been at least four broad approaches to the understanding of political struggles in the management of international business. It is seen as a dynamic of bargaining between the management of multinationals and ‘non-economic’ agents; a product of institutions that constrain what the firm and resistance groups can do; an expression of workplace antagonisms produced in the labour process; and an attempt to challenge deeply embedded hegemonic structures that limit what actors can achieve. In what follows we will argue that underlying each of these approaches are different theories of power and resistance *apropos* multinational firms and management processes in international business (see Table 1). In what follows we unpack these perspectives in more detail.

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*Insert Table 1 about here*

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**Political Bargaining**

International business studies has largely approached multinational enterprises as economic entities (Hennart, 2001). From this perspective, the multinational firm is a structure that co-ordinates interdependencies and rationally allocates economic resources across international boundaries. The co-ordination and allocation of resources is explained by the organizational advantages of a firm, the locational advantages of specific places where firms invest, and the firm’s propensity to engage in foreign direct investment or alliances rather than trade as a means of internationalizing foreign economic activity (Dunning, 1995). One important aspect of the ‘locational’ factors are the political limitations that states place on international business (Dunning, 1998; Rugman and Verbeke, 2001). Some approach these limitations as relatively uncontrollable ‘political risks’ (Kobrin, 1982). Others have argued that political
factors are the target of intense bargaining by managers of international businesses (Boddewyn, 1988). According to Boddewyn and Brewer (1994), political bargaining involves non-market actors such as states attempting to advance their self-interest. They do this through conflict and partnership, as well as non-bargaining behaviour such as compliance, avoidance or circumvention. This bargaining largely takes place between the multinational and host country governments (Vernon, 1971; Doz and Prahalad, 1980; Fagre and Wells, 1982; Kobrin, 1987; Lecraw, 1989; Murtha and Lenway, 1994). Resistance to international business is part of the firm’s bargaining process with nation states as each side seeks to preserve their self-interest.

One of the central insights of studies of political bargaining is that international business attempts to accumulate power as well as profit. According to this approach, power is “the capacity of social actors to overcome the resistance of other actors” (Bodwwyn and Brewer, 1994, p. 120). Relying on Weber (1978) and Dahl (1957), studies of political bargaining assume that: power is a possession of an individual or collective social actor; this actor is more or less rational in their exercise of power; their capacity to exercise power is quantifiable and measurable; and power can be observed in actual, concrete behaviours. According to this approach, a multinational firm has power to the extent that it is able to undertake an activity, such as instituting favourable regulations, despite the resistance of others. Resistance is therefore conceptualized as an obstacle that must be overcome during attempts to exercise power. Groups will resist the management activities of international business when their egotistical interests are under threat. The ability of a group to resist the managerial initiatives of international business would be tempered by the amount of power held by resistance groups in comparison to the amount of power held by the managers of the multinational firm. The ‘amount’ of power held by a resistant group would be tempered by
factors such as the authority given by their official position (Weber, 1947), their control over scare resources (Salanick and Pfeffer, 1974), and their position at strategic points in a social network (Burt, 1992).

**Institutional Approaches**

Studies of political bargaining conceptualize resistance as opposition to activities of multinational business that violate a resistance group’s egotistical interests. This misses how different parties do not ruthlessly pursue their self-interest in all situations. Rather, political bargaining is often channelled and constrained by mutually accepted institutions (Kohane, 1984). These are regularized, supra-individual patterns of social life that may take the form of externally imposed rules and norms as well as internalized cognitive frameworks (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). A vital target of the political activities around the multinational is the legitimacy of the firm. This is constructed through compliance with local institutions as expressed in rules, norms and cognitive schemas (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999). Building and maintaining legitimacy is a particularly difficult task for the management of international business as each nation state typically has a very different configuration of institutions (Kogut, 1991; Gulliën, 2001; Harzing and Sorge, 2004). Firms therefore need to develop radically different patterns of legitimation in each nation. In some cases there are multinational ‘regimes’ that regulate and constrain the management activities of international business (Kohane, 1984). These include environmental regimes (Hass, Keohane & Levy, 1993), trade regimes (Ostry, 2001), and accountancy regimes (Strange, 1996). Regimes result from a process of ‘triangular diplomacy’ (Stopford & Strange, 1991) where negotiations take place between states and firms, states and states, and firms and firms. At the core of this process is the attempt to establish the rules of the game under which firms and states engage
in political bargaining. These rules constrain and shape what each political stakeholder can legitimately ask for.

Institutionalist interpretations of the politics of multinational enterprises are underpinned by a different theory of power. Instead of focusing on how power is manifest through immediate political bargaining, institutionalists show how power also works through a set of institutions that limit what can and cannot be discussed and exactly how these issues can be discussed. This corresponds with Bachrach and Baratz’s (1962, 1963) ‘second face of power’ which functions through rendering some issues ‘non-decisions’. Institutions act to prevent “potentially dangerous issues from being raised” (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, p. 952) by developing a set of mutually agreed upon rules, norms and cognitive schemas that limit the scope of issues which are up for debate. Power is not necessarily a characteristic of individual or collective actors, but is moulded to existing institutions. This view is echoed by recent work that sees institutions as discursive regimes that construct legitimate behaviours and identities through norms, symbols and routines (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004). Because these institutional norms and routines are mutually agreed upon, resistance would arise when a multinational violates an established institutional order. Here, the ability to resist is not just the result of the immediate power of an actor, but also a characteristic of established institutions which render some actions illegitimate and others as legitimate. This would lead us to expect significant resistance to international business in cases when the activities of the multinational do not match the local institutions.

**Labour Process Theory**

Institutional approaches represent a significant advance on political bargaining conceptions of resistance to international business. Instead of seeing resistance as a process of political
bargaining between self-interested actors, institutional perspectives recognize that power and resistance are often constrained by mutually agreed upon regimes. However, the institutional view still assumes that international business organizations and resistance groups can in fact create mutually agreed upon institutions which, if managed well, make it possible to fairly mediate between the demands made by conflicting groups. However, some researchers taking a more critical stance have challenged this view. Korten (2001) and Jones & Fleming (2003) argue that the multinational firm is embedded in antagonistic power relations, which cannot be resolved through developing mutually beneficial institutions. Multinational firms should therefore be understood as a vehicle of domination (Hymer, 1979) and imperialism (Cowling & Sugden, 1987; Radice, 1985; Jenkins, 1987). The critical approach to international business can be related to the work of a growing number of researchers who work within the field of Critical Management Studies (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Zald, 2002).

There are many different conceptions of critique that are used by critical management scholars (Fournier & Grey, 2000). One of the most influential approaches to understanding power and resistance in relation to management has been labour process theory (LPT). The starting point for LPT is that resistance against management is the product of structural class antagonisms between capital and labour, which can first and foremost be observed in the workplace, as this is the prime location for the struggle over economic resources (Thompson, 1990; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Thompson and Smith, 2001). Labour process theorists have studied a range of resistance strategies in the workplace, such as luddite protests (Thompson, 1967), official strikes (Hyman, 1989) and wildcat strikes (Gouldner, 1954). Besides these more formal or semi-formal resistances, there is a voluminous literature that highlights the informal resistances in the workplace. Going back to the pioneering work of
Burawoy (1979), Ditton (1972) and Roy (1958), contemporary labour process theorists, such as Ackroyd and Thompson (1999), provide an account of a whole range of informal resistance activities in the workplace – which they name ‘organizational misbehaviour’ – including, rule bending, cynicism, time-wasting, sabotage and theft of products. For these labour process theorists resistance against management is primarily expressed in the workplace, as this is the prime location for the structural antagonisms that international business is embedded in.

There have been a range of critiques of such understandings of power and resistance from within labour process theory. Authors who have taken their inspiration from Foucault (e.g., Knights and Willmott, 1989; Knights and MacCabe, 2003; Thomas and Davis, 2005) argue that power and resistance is not only the expression of structural class antagonisms but indeed involves a range of ‘micro-political’ strategies aiming at the subversion of dominant discourses of management and the construction of alternative subject positions. The focus of these Foucauldian studies is to explore the possibilities for resisting managerially imposed identities through a range of identity politics and other informal strategies in the workplace (e.g., Knights and MacCabe, 2003; Thomas and Davis, 2005; Collinson, 1992). While Foucauldian labour process theorists stress the need to broaden LPT’s focus on the restricted concerns of economic class antagonisms in the workplace, Foucauldian studies of resistance still concentrate their predominant theoretical and empirical energies on the workplace (Böhm, 2006).

We do recognize that within LPT attempts have been made to go beyond the narrow domain of the workplace, considering the wider economic and market relations within which changes in the labour process occur (e.g. Ezzamel et al, 2001, 2004; McCabe, 2007). We also recognize the valuable research on gender (e.g. Collinson, 1992) and other social issues that
clearly point to the wider inequalities in society. Whilst we acknowledge this work of some labour process theorists, we would maintain that, by and large, the starting point for these LPT discussions is still predominantly the workplace. This is to say that for LPT the social relations of the workplace still remain a certain kernel on which most analyses are centred. What we would like to problematize in this paper are the wider contested social relations of the state and civil society that sit side by side with workplace relations.

**Neo-Gramscian Approaches**

The contribution of labour process theory to the study of resistance to international business is to recognize the antagonistic relations of power, ideology and subjectivity in the capitalist workplace as well as point to the often informal resistance strategies used by members of organizations. However, because of their predominant focus on the complexities of power and resistance in the workplace, labour process theorists are often unable to account for the growing influence of international business organizations in the wider spheres of society and the processes of legitimation and consent that hold multinationals in their place. Accounts that look beyond the processes of power and resistance in the workplace are interested in how multinational companies attempt to use their often immense power to shape the institutions and rules in which they are embedded (Kobrin, 1998; Monbiot, 2000; Spar, 2001; Levy & Egan, 2003). It seems multinationals are often able to dis-embed themselves from nation state institutions and thereby circumvent obligations to particular states (Vernon, 1971; Sikka, 2003). Additionally, international business organizations attempt to not only shape formal state structures but also wider cultural, social and other consent structures that legitimize international business practices (Gill, 2003).
The view that international business organizations not only exercise power because of their dominant economic position but also because of the way they are able to shape structures of legitimation and consent in culture and society is based on the ideas developed by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1971). While his ideas are notoriously open to multiple interpretations, Gramsci argued that dominant groups in society rule through force and consent. The formal mechanism of rule relies upon the state, legal structure and other means of coercion associated with open control. But ruling groups also engendered consent through a variety of methods – from straightforward ideological indoctrination (e.g., taking the principles of the market economy for granted), to moral leadership (the values of the day), to tactical negotiation and compromise. A ruling order that blends both force and consent Gramsci called ‘hegemony’ (see also Mumby, 1997). Hegemony is sustained in three spheres: the economy (or, for our purposes, the firm), the state and civil society. That is, international business is economically produced within the firm, bureaucratically controlled and governed by the state and legitimatized by civil society (Bertramsen, Thomsen & Torfing, 1991). All three of these spheres interact with each other to produce what Gramsci (1971) calls a ‘hegemonic bloc’. Hegemony is a contingent and unstable social order that has achieved a momentary level of dominance, despite the antagonisms between superordinate and subordinate groups and between various ruling factions. Importantly, because of its contingency and unstable configuration a hegemonic regime will always give rise to resistance and counter-hegemonic forces, “which may or may not be progressive” (Gill, 2003, p. 37).

While generally underexposed in the field of management studies, the Gramscian notion of hegemony has recently been taken up by a number of management scholars – and for further introductions to Gramsci’s work and his usage of the concept of hegemony we refer the
reader to the useful contributions of Contu and Willmott (2003, 2005), Brown and Coupland (2005), Elliott (2003), Ogbor (2001), Jones and Spicer (2005), Böhm (2006), Humphreys and Brown (2002), Brown and Humphreys (2006), and Haworth and Hughes (2003). Within the context of understanding resistance against international business, some of the most prominent engagements have been the neo-Gramscian analyses provided by David Levy and colleagues (Levy and Newell, 2002; Levy and Egan, 2003; Levy, 2005). In their study of a political strategy driving international pressures to curb carbon emissions, Levy and Egan (2003) argue, “historical blocs rest on insecure foundations creating the potential for instability and change to arise endogenously as well as from external shocks” (Levy and Egan, 2003, p. 807). The concept of a ‘war of position’ is especially highlighted as a way that the hegemony of international business can be undermined. As Levy and Newell (2002) put it in relation to environmental governance:

The concept of “war of position” employed a military metaphor to suggest how subordinate groups might avoid a futile frontal assault against entrenched adversaries; rather, the war of position constitutes a longer term strategy, co-ordinated across multiple bases of power to gain influence in the cultural institutions of civil society, develop organizational capacity, and win new allies (Levy and Newell, 2002, p. 88).

The use of the ‘war of position’ image to understand how resistant groups may confound the more inimical policies of a ‘transnational historical bloc’ (i.e., multinational enterprises and compliant states) has been very useful for providing international business studies with a more critical theory of resistance. However, this literature tends to over-emphasize formal organizational practices. In their analysis of environmental politics in the US, for example, Levy and Egan (2002) flag the importance of the agency and strategy associated with formal
structures of counter-veiling force (also see Levy, Alvesson and Willmott, 2003). Gramsci’s ‘Modern Prince’ or political party is the archetypical resistant agent. As such, “actors seek to build coalitions of firms, governmental agencies, NGO’s, and intellectuals who can establish policies, norms and institutions” (Levy and Egan (2002, p. 810). The main purpose of our paper is to argue that an analysis of resistance to international business from a neo-Gramscian perspective requires attention to what James C. Scott (1990) calls ‘infra-politics’. By this we mean the informal elements of resistance associated with micro-level subversions, extra-governmental politics and civil society protest movements. By attending to the infra-political dimensions of resistance against international business, we are able to understand better the current wave of counter-hegemonic struggles articulated in the spheres of the economy, state and civil society.

INFRA-POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF RESISTANCE

As we outlined above, Gramsci’s (1971) understanding of the concept of hegemony highlights that the domination of one social group over another is not only produced through coercion in the realms of the economy – as many labour process theorists seem to suggest. Instead, for Gramsci, “coercion has…to be ingeniously combined with persuasion and consent” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 310) in all three spheres: the economy, state and civil society. Gramsci (1971, p. 12-13) argues that intellectuals play a vital role in the way this consent is established across these three spheres, and it is through building sustained consent structures that, what he calls, a ‘social hegemony’ can be organized. This understanding of hegemony as something ‘social’ (ibid.) is of great importance, as it highlights the need to establish consent structures throughout society, not just in the workplace. This involves, for example, cultural forms of domination. As Gill argues, “problems of hegemony involve not only questions of power, authority, credibility and the prestige of a system of rule; they also involve the
political economy and aesthetics of its representation in culture and its media.” (2003, p. 61). This representation of a hegemonic system in the sphere of culture has to be understood as a process of struggle and contestation over signs, signification and meaning.

Today, this process of representation clearly involves formal, corporate structures, such as billboard and TV advertising by multinational companies and Hollywood movie productions, as we are dealing with a well-organized cultural industry that represents and communicates a social hegemony (Herman and Chomsky, 1994). What is perhaps not emphasized enough in Herman and Chomsky’s (1994) so-called ‘propaganda model’ is that the hegemony of international media companies, such as Murdoch’s News Corporation, is also sustained and reproduced informally in the wider spheres of society. For example, there are probably hundreds of fan-clubs of the American TV series *Friends* and many other popular TV shows. These clubs are not coerced into existence and they are not formal civil society organizations; instead, they are informal gatherings of people who have their identities tied up with these TV shows. This is to give a simple example of Gramsci’s (1971) point that a hegemonic regime is vitally dependent on cultural and social consent structures that are of both formal and informal nature. If the construction of a social hegemony not only involves formal but also informal organizational processes, then resistance to this hegemony will also have both formal and informal aspects.

As mentioned above, a good deal of the Gramscian analyses of resistance to international business focuses on formal and organized politics. By formally organized we mean the extent that resistance to international business displays characteristics central to formal organization. These include the degree to which its policies and operational mechanisms are publicly declared and accountable; it also involves a cadre of professional elites and formally recorded
activities via written records (Weber, 1947). Attending to the level of organization allows us to identify two distinct types of resistance (J. Scott, 1990). The first is ‘political’ resistance against international business, identified by Levy and Egan (2003), Levy and Newell (2002) among others. This entails publicly declared and accountable action, a cadre of full-time professional specialists whose task it is to exercise instrumental reason, and a bureau of formal record keeping. This is the zone of all activities we usually associate with politics such as trade unions orchestrating a strike (Hyman, 1989), governments attempting to legislate multinationals, and non-government organizations, such as Greenpeace, engaging in a campaign against international business operations (Tsoukas, 1999).

In contrast, infra-politics is the dimension of resistance that takes on an informal dimension and occurs outside official politics (J. Scott, 1990). This informal dimension spans from spontaneous non-organized actions to collectively organized protest events. The latter can nevertheless be regarded as an informal form of resistance, as many social movement groups involve non-professional actors who use a variety of techniques often handed down through oral traditions, and often keep no detailed record of their movement (Morrill, Zald & Rao, 2003). This second type of resistance can therefore be both non-organized and organized, involving everything from spontaneous resistances to groups using non-hierarchical, participatory principles in order to organize their protest. What distinguishes these informal types of resistance from the more formal forms is that the former involve decentralized, non-hierarchical, grassroots-based organizational networks, while the latter are often centralized, membership-based, formally incorporated organizations with clear reporting structures and a hierarchical chain of command. Informal forms of resistance include a vast hinterland of political activities including workplace pilferage (Mars, 1981), ‘culture jamming’ (Dery, 1993), guerrilla action (Holloway & Pelaez, 1998), and ‘direct action’ protests (Plows, 2006).
As Melucci argues, these informal resistances can be seen as a move from the sphere of formal politics to the sphere of culture:

Social movements…seem to shift their focus from class, race, and other more traditional political issues towards the cultural ground. In the last thirty years emerging social conflicts in complex societies have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices…. The action of movements deliberately differentiates itself from the model of political organization and assumes increasing autonomy from political systems; it becomes intimately interweaved with everyday life and individual experience. (1996, p. 8-9)

This move from the realm of traditional political organizing to the realm of cultural infra-politics is seen by Melucci (1996) as a recent historical development that is connected to the new social movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. However, from a Gramscian perspective one could suggest that these informal, cultural resistances have always played a vital role in the way capitalist hegemony is resisted. In fact, following Blaug (1998), who has used the example of disorganized, anarchic German hordes defeating a hierarchically organized army of Roman soldiers in the 9th century, we could argue that informal resistance movements have played a role throughout history. Nevertheless, what many commentators have highlighted is that “in the places of our everyday lives, a new anti-institutional orientation is in evidence” (Blaug, 1998, p. 34). That is, informal forms of resistance, which cannot only be seen as resistances against capitalist hegemony as such, but also as resistances against hierarchical, non-democratic and non-participatory organizing principles, have gained in popularity in recent decades (Fournier, 2002).
One factor that has supported the emergence of new informal resistance movements against international business is technology. New information and communication technologies, such as the mobile phone and the Internet, have aided the recent rise of informal, decentralized network forms of protest organization (Diani, 1995; Juris, 2005). Protest events against specific multinational companies or meetings of the World Economic Forum, IMF or the G8, are partly made possible because of mobile phone and Internet technologies enabling the horizontal organizing of vast resistance networks that are not led by a central organizing committee or leader. This is what Juris calls a ‘cultural logic of networking’, which, for him, has “given rise to what grassroots activists call a new way of doing politics. While the command-oriented logic of parties and unions is based on recruiting new members, building unified strategies, political representation, and the struggle for hegemony, network politics involve the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse movements and collectives converge around common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and specificity” (Juris, 2005, p. 256-257). This ‘new way of doing politics’ therefore involves a range of infra-political and informal forms of organization, which, we argue, play a vital role in the resistance against international business today.

**POLITICAL AND INFRA-POLITICAL FORMS OF RESISTANCE**

By highlighting the informal, infra-political resistances against international business, we do not mean to devalue formal resistance strategies. In fact, what now needs to be examined more closely are the different ways informal as well as formal resistances can be articulated against international business. As the framework below reveals, formal resistance strategies are always accompanied and supplemented by informal, infra-political forms of resistance. This means that in reality formal and informal resistances are part of the same continuum.
This is often downplayed in international business and management studies more generally, and Neo-Gramscian approaches specifically. Following Gramsci’s (1971) analysis of the spheres in which hegemony is constructed, each form described below relates to resistance in the spheres of the economy, state, and civil society. These are: formal and informal firm resistance, formal and informal state resistance, and formal and informal civil society resistance. While our intention is to develop an adequate account of the infra-political practices of resistance to international business from a neo-Gramscian perspective, we do so via comparisons with formalized modes of protest. We do this in order to maintain categorical integrity *apropos* the two dimensions, and also to make clear the significance of our contribution regarding the distinctive importance of infra-politics.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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*Formal and Informal Firm Resistance*

These forms of resistance, which have been explored by labour process theorists extensively, take place in the sphere of the economy, particularly within the firm. Formal resistance strategies in the firm, which are normally articulated through different forms of union organizing, have been well documented (e.g., Hyman, 1989; Haworth and Hughes, 2003). Unions have traditionally targeted material resources such as wages, working hours and additional benefits using strategies such as strikes, go-slows, or demands for increased salaries. Collinson (1992) provides a germane example. He studied a UK automobile manufacturing plant that was taken over by a US multinational conglomeration. The plant’s union took issue with new labour intensifying HRM practices and the forced redundancies that followed. Strikes and anti-corporate newsletters aimed to draw the company onto a
politically tenuous terrain, highlighting the hardship and degradation of workers who might lose their livelihoods.

In recent years, labour process theorists have also documented the manifold informal forms of resistance that aim to subvert or undermine managerial practices in firms, for example, sabotage, theft, cynicism, and absenteeism (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Edwards, 1986; May, 1999). Informal firm resistance often involves clandestine actions that cannot be controlled by firms or even unions. Given their subversive and ‘extra-legitimate’ nature, many organizations would rather eliminate than accommodate this type of informal resistance (J. Scott, 1985). Pena’s (1997) account of factory politics in the Maquiladora on the US/Mexico border provides a good example. In this free-trade-zone, US owned companies exploit a large reserve of cheap manual labour. Many who work in these exceedingly unpleasant conditions are women who reside in nearby dormitories. Pena (1997) challenges the myth of passive feminine comportment by identifying the everyday informal resistances that disrupt the rhythms of production. Un-coordinated slow-downs (or tortuguismo, working at a turtles pace), failing to repair machines that could be repaired and simple absenteeism are frequent forms of resistance. As Ong’s (1985) study of similar workers in Malaysia also demonstrates, such infra-political resistance does not change the power relations supporting international business, but does provide a space of respite from its more intolerable rhythms.

**Formal and Informal State Resistance**

While some have heralded the emasculation of the state in the face of globalization and the ever-permeability of national borders (Ohmae, 1990; Hardt & Negri, 2000), others have pointed to the state’s continuing importance as a space in which international business activities are regulated and contested (Sassen, 1996). While state institutions are instrumental
for providing the regulatory framework for international business activities, states should not
be seen as homogeneous entities that are subsumed by international business interests. In fact,
recent developments in Latin America show that state politics is still an important tool to
resist the hegemonic power of multinational companies. In both Venezuela and Bolivia, for
example, governments have been elected with a mandate to renationalize energy industries in
order for these countries to exploit the wealth of their natural resources instead of handing
them over to the profit interests of international business (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2005).

The sphere of the state may also be used as a forum for informal resistance to international
business. The participants of this type of resistance are those associated with non-
bureaucratized political groups that attempt to influence state policy through various acts of
insurgency. In terms of our framework, they attempt to impose clandestine regulation on
international business activities, especially those that threaten local control of key resources.
Because their activities are underground, they do not have nor seek the level of official
accessibility to the state that mainstream political parties enjoy. The Zapatistas in Mexico are
an exemplary case of informal state resistance to international business. Led by the enigmatic
Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas are a diffuse network of disenfranchised indigenous
groups in the Chiapas district (including the Tzeltal, Mam, Chol, Zoque and Tojolobal
peoples). While they have had considerable influence over certain governmental polices
associated with international business, their revolutionary philosophy displays little interest in
seizing formal state power (Burbach, Robinson & Jefferies, 2001). The Mexican state and
various dominant parties have been consistently frustrated by the Zapatistas’ unwillingness to
be subsumed into the formal institutions of the state. They are more concerned with creating
what they call ‘democratic room’ in order to facilitate struggles against land privatization,
transnational agribusiness and the machinations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (The Zapatistas, 2002).

**Formal and Informal Civil Society Resistance**

Resistance to international business in the spheres of civil society has typically received little attention in international business studies (Teegan, Doh & Vanchani, 2004), as it challenges questions of legitimacy rather than the distribution of material resources or regulation of firms. Formal types of resistance in civil society usually consist of various bureaucratized associations that have formed to provide a particular service and politicize the more problematic practices of international business (Tsoukas, 1999; Stonich & Bailey, 2000). For example, the UK-based information network, OneWorld, functions as an interface for hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are concerned with poverty and human rights violations caused by transnational business activities. Its prime objective is to publicize injustices and transform public consciousness in civil society by harnessing the “democratic potential of the Internet to promote sustainable development and human rights” (Warkentin, 2001, p. 157). McGuire, Hardy and Lawrence (2004) provide a Canadian example in relation to AIDS service organizations in Canada which contests the practices of multinational pharmaceutical companies. They found that the mobilization of strategic discourses in civil society was a vital means for these NGOs in their task of undermining the legitimacy of multinational drug companies.

However, what is sometimes overlooked is that resistance in the spheres of civil society is often of informal, infra-political nature. For example, there are manifold social movement collectives that engage with particular flashpoints outside the sphere of formal politics and the state (Christmann, 2004; Davis et al., 2005). The target of social movements, like NGOs, is
the legitimacy of particular international business practices. Unlike NGOs, however, many social movements tend to use less formal resistance strategies since they do not have a firm bureaucratic base. Indeed, they will often form ‘spontaneously’ when the need arises (Lounsberry, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2004; Crossley, 2002) employing a range of strategies of ‘direct action’ (Plows, 2006). There are many examples of new social movements being mobilized to resist international business. Perhaps the most obvious example is the so-called anti-globalization movement that has grown in prominence over the last ten years or so. Protest events in Melbourne, Genoa, Seattle, Prague and Davos, to name but a few, were swiftly organized in an informal manner, creating a counter-narrative regarding the inimical effects of international business (Starr, 2000). Underground associations like the Dissent Network protest at international business meetings such as the World Trade Organization, G8 and the World Economic Forum in order to gain maximum media exposure for their critiques of the power associated with multinational companies. Another example is the World Social Forum, which has been a focal point for social movements concerned with international environmental issues, labour rights, fair trade, healthcare access and the protection of indigenous cultures without solidifying into a bureaucratized organizational form (Sen, Anand, Escobar & Waterman, 2004).

ARTICULATIONS OF RESISTANCE: A NEO-GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVE

The different forms of resistance to international business outlined above are best thought of as ideal types. By outlining these six forms of resistance we do not aim to construct an essentialist framework. We cannot stress enough that in reality there is much overlap and blurring between the formal and informal forms of resistance we have discussed. For example, a resistance movement, such as an anarchist network, will involve both informal and formal forms of resistance. Equally, union resistance does not only involve bureaucratic
organisational structures but also informal forms of resistance, such as ‘weak ties’ between people networks. Indeed, the most interesting recent developments have involved links between different types of resistance against international business. Often these links do not appear organically. Rather, they are politically engineered and motivated. This process involves building hegemonic links between different types of resistance. As we have already argued, hegemony is a Gramscian concept that refers to a certain unity in interests and social formations. This unity results from the establishment of what Laclau & Mouffe (1985, p. 130) call ‘chains of equivalence’, a certain hegemonic sameness among resisting actors who articulate a united political identity (an ‘us’) as well as a common enemy (a ‘them’) (Mouffe, 1993, p. 7).

What we highlight here is the contribution by Laclau & Mouffe (1985) who have further developed the Gramscian conception of hegemony, which current critical approaches to understanding resistance to international business often rely on (e.g., Levy and Newell, 2002; Levy and Egan, 2003; and Levy, 2005). While Levy and his colleagues point to the way resisting actors are engaged in a ‘war of position’ that is fought out on a political stage, Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) contribution is to broaden our conception of resistance as an articulatory discourse (see also Contu and Willmott, 2003, 2005). For Laclau & Mouffe, resistance does not only occur at the political level – the level where multinationals, governments and NGOs, for example, are engaged in a ‘war of position’, but involves infra-political, hidden transcripts that affect subjectivities and identities of resisting actors. For Laclau & Mouffe, resisting actors are engaged with each other in a process of articulation, which they define as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 105). Articulation is, for them, the practice of linking as well as differentiating resistance actions.
within certain discursive fields. These discursive fields try to fix certain meanings of struggle, which is when a hegemonic discourse arises. This fixation can, however, never be total, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 111) argue, which means that articulation is an ongoing process of struggle. In this way, articulation should also not be seen as a kind of mediation that attempts to negotiate the values and interests between different resistance actors. On the contrary, articulation highlights that antagonistic relationships involving competing subjectivities and identities cannot simply be resolved through certain dialogical or institutional attempts of mediation.

In the context of this paper, Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) conception of resistance as articulation particularly highlights the possibility of linking a range of different forms of resistance – whether they are formal or informal – in order to build alliances and solidarity among groups with different interests and political identities. Following them, we can say that a hegemonic discourse occurs when different resistance movements articulate common languages and strategies. The focus of this view on resistance is that this articulation process not only involves formal, political ‘war of positions’, but affects infra-political aspects of culture, subjectivity and identity.

An example of resistance groups who have formed ‘chains of equivalence’ between different types of struggle to articulate a challenge to international business is CokeWatch (www.cokewatch.org), an international network that aims to keep an eye on The Coca-Cola Company and its international business practices. This network brings together a range of different resistance groups whose aim is to expose the malpractices of Coca Cola’s business practices in different national contexts. In Colombia, for example, Coca Cola’s employment relations are challenged. In India it is alleged that
communities across India living around Coca-Cola’s bottling plants are experiencing severe water shortages, directly as a result of Coca-Cola’s massive extraction of water from the common groundwater resource. The wells have run dry and the hand water pumps do not work any more. Studies, including one by the Central Ground Water Board in India, have confirmed the significant depletion of the water table. (www.indiaresource.org)

These national struggles against Coca Cola’s business malpractices do not exist in isolation. These struggles are increasingly articulated on an international stage, which involves many different formal and informal resistance strategies. That is, the international CokeWatch network shows that unions, NGOs as well as social movements often work together to articulate their political demands. As the example of the CokeWatch movement shows, building ‘chains of equivalence’ between various modes of resistance is a difficult yet vitally important political task for groups who seek to resist international business. These difficult dynamics remind us that it is not only dominant groups such as the international business elite (Levy & Egan, 2003; Levy & Newell, 2002), or management groups (Contu & Willmott, 2003) who attempt to develop hegemonic relations. Rather, resistant and challenger groups are also engaged in attempts to change these apparent hegemonic relations (Hensmans, 2003). This involves an attempt to resist and challenge the hegemony of international business. But in order to achieve this, it is necessary for resistant groups to attempt to develop hegemonic discourses within and between their own operations by articulating ‘chains of equivalence’, involving the construction of common ideologies, identities and strategies. Within the framework developed in this paper, the articulation of ‘chains of equivalence’ can involve different formal as well as informal types of resistance. We now highlight a range of possible
articulations of resistance to international business which show that alliances can be formed among a diverse set of resistance groups.

**Articulations between Formal Forms of Resistance**

In the above framework we used the examples of unions, political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to illustrate formal types of resistance in the spheres of the economy, state and civil society respectively, which are articulated through relatively institutionalized structures. Clearly, there are multiple links and alliances between unions, political parties and NGOs. Traditionally there are, for example, very close links between the union movements and left-wing political parties. Both are closely connected to the rise of industrial capitalism and the struggle for workers’ rights and better working conditions (Berger & Broughton, 1995). Whereas traditionally unions would concentrate on firm-based resistances against management, wage bargaining and campaigning for better conditions, labour parties would provide the legal and economic frameworks for achieving the goals of the labour movement by participating in state and governmental politics. However, the neo-liberal project, with its heightened emphasis on enterprise, labour market flexibility, privatization of public services, individual responsibility, and the resulting cut of welfare services (Leys, 2003), has seen many traditional ties between unions and labour parties being challenged. In Britain, for example, many unions openly resist the neo-liberal and business-friendly policies introduced or supported by New Labour (Osler, 2002).

Labour politics is, however, no longer represented exclusively by unions and labour parties. Today there are manifold NGOs that address social justice issues related to the workplace. For example, in East London, UK, the Telco Citizens project (www.telcocitizens.org.uk) has engaged in a long Living Wage campaign that has sought to work with a variety of civil
society organizations fighting for a living wage for thousands of low-paid workers (Wills, 2001). The Living Wage campaigners argue that the minimum wage, introduced by Britain’s Labour Party in 1999, is not enough for many low-paid workers, such as cleaners and supermarket checkout staff, to make a living in high cost-of-living cities such as London. Recently this campaign has had its first success by signing agreements with a number of multinational finance companies in the Canary Wharf district in East London to pay cleaners a living wage, which is significantly higher than the UK minimum wage. What this example identifies is that the historically separated spheres of union politics, political parties and civil society become increasingly blurred and challenges to international business practices are articulated across different resistance groups.

Articulations between Informal Forms of Resistance

As we discussed above, in contrast to formal forms of resistance, there are also a wide range of informal, infra-political strategies of resistance. We named examples such as organizational misbehaviour, grassroots guerrilla movements, and new social movements, which operate in the wider spheres of the economy, state and civil society respectively. What these infra-political types of resistance have in common is that they occur outside of official and professional politics. They involve a wide range of non-professional actors who do not primarily seek to keep records of what they are doing. Instead, they engage in a range of direct actions and other grassroots activities.

Again, there are clearly multiple links possible between these infra-political forms of resistance, not the least because they tend to share similar tactics, such as the use of humor, and whistleblowing. For example, the recent Enron scandal highlighted the importance of whistleblowing (see e.g. www.whistleblowers.org) as employees exposed corporate and
managerial malpractices in multinational companies (Boje & Rosile, 2002). Whistleblowing is actively encouraged by civil society organizations, such as the Corporate Watch network, which hope that employees publicly disclose sensitive or confidential information about questionable corporate practices. Company employees can also use a range of Internet websites (e.g., www.fuckedcompany.com) to blow the whistle. This insider information can then be used by various social actors, as well as the state, to identify corporate malpractices.

**Articulations between Formal and Informal Forms of Resistance**

The third type of interaction possible regarding different types of resistance is between formal and informal forms of resistance. As we argued above, formal and informal resistance represent distinct patterns of social activity. However, this division also displays interconnections. In the sphere of the multinational firm, for example, studies show that some unions use tactics of organizational misbehaviour, such as humor and cynicism, which are traditionally associated with informal resistance (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). One can also point to the fact that, as unions become increasingly incorporated into, and co-opted by, the institutional processes of firms and states, union members increasingly engage in informal resistance, such as wild-cat strikes and other forms of unofficial union action (Hyman, 1989). Moreover, in the light of declining union membership in many developed countries and the increasing popularity of new social movements, there is a call for unions to expand their horizon beyond their traditional political sphere, the workplace, to include civil society issues such as identity, education, and culture, as well as adopt less bureaucratic and hierarchical means of organizing (Clawson & Clawson, 1999). The garment workers justice movements and community-based unionism focused around specific localities are examples of unions trying to adopt strategies associated with new social movements (Brecher & Costello, 1990).
CONCLUSIONS

Resistance to international business, which is embedded in long histories of anti-colonial struggles, can assume many forms, not least the recent high-profile anti-globalization protests and social forum summits. Given the panoply of struggles that are identifiable, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the phenomenon as a research subject. Perhaps the contemporary reduction of resistance to international business to the broad category of ‘anti-globalization’ in both the popular media and academic accounts is symptomatic of this complexity. In this paper we have begun the much needed systematic inquiry into the phenomena of resistance to international business. We have done this in three ways. First, we have drawn attention to the phenomenon of resistance in the area of international business. We have argued it is vital to approach resistance as an important part of the management process of international business that is worthy of serious study. Second, we have developed a neo-Gramscian framework for making sense of the myriad of practices and forms of organization identifiable when studying resistance to international business. This provides researchers with a heuristic for understanding the characteristics of various forms of resistance to international business. The framework particularly highlights the value of informal or infra-political types of resistance. Whilst informal resistance has been the focus of a number of labour process and Foucauldian studies of workplace relations, we have pointed to the need to consider infra-political forms of resistance in arenas other than the workplace. Finally, the paper provides a conceptual account of how different types of resistance might interact with each other. This last objective is important because it takes us beyond simple classification and surfaces the complex relationships that structure resistance to international business today. The notions of hegemony, developed by Gramsci (1971), and articulation, developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), help us make sense of this complexity.
A neo-Gramscian account of resistance to international business provides a more realistic picture of the power and resistance relations present in the international business environment. As we discussed in this paper, the political bargaining perspective tends to see resistance as egotistical acts of engaging with individual power holders, while the institutional approach assumes the manageability of resistance within common agreed upon regimes. Labour process theory provides us with useful insights into the formal and informal resistances articulated against the hegemony of management. However, given their main focus has been on studying resistances in the workplace, labour process theorists have often not taken into consideration the asymmetries of power between multinational businesses and those who resist their activities in the wider realms of the state and civil society. The neo-Gramscian perspective goes beyond the restrictions of labour process theory by linking resistances expressed in the workplace to broader questions of social justice, democracy and participation. As Grey and Willmott (2005) suggest, critical approaches to business draw on a set of values associated with social democracy, in which the struggles of weaker individuals or groups against domination are given legitimacy and voice. Extending the neo-Gramscian perspective, which has been particularly developed by David Levy and colleagues, we highlight the importance of the infra-political or informal dimension to resistance, which so far has only been studied in relation to workplace struggles. By drawing attention to informal types of resistance in the firm as well as the wider realms of the state and civil society, we show how international business practices are often challenged by actors that do not have access to formal spaces of political engagement.

What we have not achieved in this paper is to give a detailed account of the precise mechanics and processes of how informal and formal forms of resistance challenge the two aspects of
hegemony, namely, force and consent. We therefore call for empirically driven research papers that study the different forms of resistance highlighted in our paper, in order to understand better how hegemonies and counter-hegemonic movements are constructed and maintained over long periods of time.

REFERENCES


Table 1: Existing Theories of Power and Resistance in Management and International Business Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politics in the management of international business</th>
<th>Political bargaining</th>
<th>Institutional Labour process theory</th>
<th>Neo-Gramscian perspective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing political risks or bargaining over location factors</td>
<td>Establishing rules of the game for business</td>
<td>Workplace struggles involving classes and subjectivities</td>
<td>International business and management as hegemony and domination</td>
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| Analytic focus | Firms-state bargaining | Triangular diplomacy | Firms and the workplace | Economy, state and civil society |

| Underlying conception of power | Capacity of actor to take action despite resistance | Management of issues and non-issues | Workplace antagonisms | Social antagonisms |

| Theory of resistance | Capacity to refuse action by powerful actors | Ability to alter the agenda of issues and non-issues | Workplace struggles over resources and subjectivities | Struggles in a ‘war of position’ |

| Resistance emerges when… | Resistance groups’ egotistical interests are violated | Mutually agreed upon institutions are violated by multinational | Antagonisms are surfaced in the workplace | Antagonisms between the firm, state and civil society are surfaced |

Table 2: Types of Resistance to International Business

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal resistance</th>
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<td><strong>Formal firm resistance</strong> (e.g. unions)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Formal state resistance</strong> (e.g. political parties)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Formal civil society resistance</strong> (e.g. non-governmental organizations)</td>
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<th>Informal resistance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal firm resistance</strong> (e.g. organizational misbehavior)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal state resistance</strong> (e.g. guerrilla action, mutiny)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal civil society resistance</strong> (e.g. new social movements)</td>
</tr>
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Informal resistance