Multinational corporations’ politics and resistance to plant shutdowns: A comparative case study in the south of France

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Abstract
MNCs’ politics has been considered a ‘contested terrain’ and further research is needed into the dynamics between the Head Office’s drastic restructuring decisions and local responses to understand how collective resistance is performed, and on what conditions. A neo-Gramscian approach is developed to analyse two plants in France facing drastic restructuring, including shutdown. We trace the dynamics of forces significant in aligning resisting subjects. We identify two structural processes – chains of equivalence and chains of difference – which were significant to the constitution of resistance. This article contributes to the development and refinement of a neo-Gramscian approach to management and organization studies in general and to multinational corporations’ politics in particular. It refines the study of multinational corporations’ politics by explaining how collective resistance is constituted and organized, what favours and limits the possibility of creating a collective antagonistic front and the role of local managerial resistance.

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Introduction
The dynamics of resistance against organizational restructuring and plant shutdowns in multinational corporations (MNCs) have been marginal in the mainstream business literature where resistance is often seen as an unwarranted reaction to necessary changes driven by market logics. However, a growing appreciation of the politics of MNCs is noticeable (e.g. Boddewyn and Brewer, 1994; Hillmann and Hitt, 1999). Institutional and critical perspectives are calling for theoretical developments that would better account for the political aspects of MNCs (e.g. Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2011; Kostova et al., 2008). Edwards and Belanger (2009) suggest that MNC politics should be understood as a ‘contested terrain’ with often-conflicting interests between management and labour and a micro-politics generated by the institutional duality of a company’s head office (HO) and its subsidiaries (e.g. Morgan and Kristensen, 2006). Such a ‘contested terrain’ has been studied by focusing on discursive aspects with the objective to identify ‘how specific corporate actions and issues can become politicized and how the legitimacy of these actions – as well as the corporation as a whole – may be questioned’ (Vaara and Tienari, 2008: 985, emphasis added).

In this article, the actions and issues we focus on relate to the closure decision of two factories in the south of France, owned respectively by Nestlé and IBM. As Vaara and Tienari (2008) suggest, politicization regards how these actions and issues are questioned and resisted; however, a gap persists in understanding concretely how resistance is played out and the role of various MNC stakeholders in this process (Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2011; Edwards and Belanger 2009; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). Our aim is to contribute to the understanding of the politics of MNCs and resistance to organizational restructuring and plant shutdowns – threatened or actual – by identifying (i) how key actors in and around the production sites of large multinationals both shape and resist decisions of restructuring involving plant shutdowns; (ii) the role of managerial resistance in such a contested terrain; and (iii) how local elements of context and history shape resistance and its outcomes. Blazejewski and Becker-Ritterspach (2011) indicate that studies of MNC politics often have a conceptual fuzziness. To avoid this pitfall we mobilize a neo-Gramscian approach that enables us to show the dynamic forces in the responses of a company’s subsidiaries to HO drastic restructuring decisions. In what follows, we outline the problem of MNC politics in relation to restructuring and shutdowns, and introduce and justify our neo-Gramscian approach. We then illustrate our methodology. Finally, we elaborate our findings and discuss the contribution offered to understanding MNC politics from examining how local plants respond to restructuring and shutdown decisions taken by the HO.

MNC politics of organizational restructuring
Organizational restructuring is defined as the effective and efficient re-organization of components of corporate work (e.g. Hirsh and De Soucey, 2006: 172; McKinley and
Scherer, 2000). This phenomenon has increased in frequency and intensity over recent years as studies on varieties of capitalism have indicated (Whittington and Mayer, 2002). While there are various reasons for it, in the past decades the restructuring of MNCs at the global level has been associated with neo-liberal features and values (i.e. centrality of the market and its pressures as being the main rationale for restructuring, financialization of corporate governance and globalization of value chains) (Harvey, 2006; Levy, 2008; Turner, 2008). Studies sensitive to MNC politics question the economic ‘inevitability’ associated with restructuring, examining how this is accomplished through discursive processes of legitimation and (sometimes) contestation. For example, Vaara et al.’s (2007) study of the Finnish–Swedish paper and pulp industry shows how restructuring was indeed legitimized with reference to neo-liberal ideals. Others have indicated that MNC changes are often legitimized as a necessity in global competition, but that nationalism and the local legislative framework, for example, also play a role (Geppert et al., 2003; Palpacuer et al., 2011; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). Much has been learnt on the discursive processes of legitimization of MNC restructuring, but more work is needed on how restructuring is contested and resisted, particularly within MNC subsidiaries that, according to HO’s strategic decisions, are heading for closure. As Erkama and Vaara (2010: 813) emphasized: ‘there is a need to examine in a more detailed way the various ways in which specific actors cope with and resist shutdowns and other drastic restructuring plans in MNCs’.

We submit that if MNCs are a ‘contested terrain’ (Edwards and Belanger, 2009) then one must elucidate why and how resistance, here defined as the contestation/opposition to MNC restructuring plans, is realized and by whom. It is important to ascertain how, why, and under what conditions, resistance can become collectively organized in a unitary front where the inevitability of restructuring decisions is locally questioned. Social movement theory employs the notion of ‘frame’ to explain how different agents come together in a collective movement creating a common antagonistic front (Benford and Snow, 2000). Our contribution is to propose that structural processes are involved in creating a common frame. We also contribute to an understanding of the role that local managerial resistance may play in organizational restructuring. While significant to MNC politics (e.g. Morgan and Kristensen, 2006) this still needs further exploration.

Our approach to politics draws upon the Gramscian theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 2001[1975]; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). For Gramsci, hegemony is what is accomplished when, in a struggle, a social configuration is established with a social group (or a combination of them) prevailing to provide a unity of economic and political ends (Gramsci, 2001[1975]: 1584). Importantly, this involves the leadership of certain social groups in giving moral and intellectual direction to the resulting social formation. This is achieved when such social groups are able to provide answers to the demands present in the struggle. These answers have a universal dimension that transcends corporatist interests (i.e. particular and narrow economic/social concerns of each social group) (2001[1975]: 1584, emphasis added). As Laclau (2005) suggests, the ‘demand’ is the minimal unit of analysis when examining how collective identities emerge to challenge the dominant social group(s). The ambiguity Laclau (2005: 73) identifies between ‘demand’ as a request and ‘demand’ as a claim refines what Gramsci has identified as the passage from narrowly-defined corporatist interests to a broader, universal expectation. The former are
based on a ‘demand-as-request’ that may be accommodated in the existing order, while the latter correspond to a ‘demand-as-a-claim’ for something else that cannot be easily accommodated and thereby invites a social reconfiguration.

Gramsci shows how hegemony is never accomplished completely, as antagonism is never completely eliminated from the social. A social formation is characterized by constant struggle (sometimes more obvious than others, such as in a crisis) played in a delicate web of relations of forces (i.e. power relations). Gramsci also indicates how to examine the forces at play in a given historical situation (2001[1975]: 1583). An approach to MNC politics inspired by Gramsci is thus useful when, as in this article, the premise is to understand MNCs as a ‘contested terrain’ because he offers ways to study the form and content of such contestation (the dynamics of forces) and how these shape the terrain (i.e. the key features, subjects and relations consolidated in the social configuration).

A neo-Gramscian approach

While there is no unitary neo-Gramscian framework in management and organization theory, Gramsci-inspired studies have steadily, if slowly, developed a presence over past decades. From the 1970s when Gramscian thinking was mobilized by Burawoy (1979) to study the labour process, it has also been employed for organizational identity, management education and hegemonic moves in international management discourse (e.g. Böhm et al., 2008; Elliott, 2003; Prasad and Elmes, 2005; see also the work of David Levy and his co-authors). The neo-Gramscian approach offers a historically-sensitive and politically-aware picture of MNCs’ actions, management and networks, showing that they cannot be explained just as efficiency-seeking systems. Levy and Egan (2003), for example, show that corporations are situated in a contested terrain where they engage in political strategies to enhance market ideology and their legitimacy in the current ‘historic bloc’. An ‘historic bloc’ is the Gramscian term used to indicate a ‘hegemonic social structure’, which refers ‘to both the alliance of social groups and the alignment of material, organizational and discursive formation stabilizing and reproducing relations of production and meaning’ (2003: 806, emphasis added). These authors suggest that three forces – material, organizational and ideological/cultural (2003: 813) – should be examined to study how social stabilization is achieved. Importantly, one should not be deceived by the word ‘bloc’ and imagine a static state of affairs to be neatly categorized. Rather, the point is to examine the social subjects and forces at play, examining if/what subjects are mobilized and what alliances and alignments are realized. Results of a concrete analysis of a social formation, therefore, may speak of mere linkages rather than a solid ‘bloc’ (Van Bommel and Spicer, 2011). Our level of analysis will thus be the actions associated with restructuring and the responses to it at the local level, so as to highlight what the contestation is (if any), what subjects are part of it, and if and how they are mobilized in contesting the restructuring decisions. The study of actual actions is exactly what Vaara and Tienari (2008) call for, as more work in this area is needed. Moreover, as Gramsci put it, practical actions are integral to political analysis and should be systematically considered (Gramsci, 2001[1975]: 964).

Neo-Gramscian management studies have also been inspired by the work of Laclau and Mouffe with their discursive understanding of the social theory of hegemony (e.g.
Contu et al., 2002; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Willmott, 2005). Laclau and Mouffe suggest that social stability (the constitution/maintenance of a historic bloc as discussed by Levy) is the result of articulations, defined as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of that articulatory practice’ (2001: 105). Articulation is important because it regards not only the mobilization of subjects and their interests but also how their identity in relation to specific contested social issues (in our case the MNCs’ restructuring) is organized and configured. For example, one could find the emergence of a collective identity against restructuring or a disperse set of responses where each identity maintains its own separate demand and no collective front is created. Studies have shown that there are two articulatory practices significant in organizing social antagonism and stabilizing a social formation: chain of equivalence and chain of difference. Studying the Australian national broadcaster’s transformation, Spicer and Sewell (2010) indicate how in different historic moments ‘chains of equivalence’ linked contradictory groups. For instance, the local discourse on globalization (i.e. the specific way in which the meaning of ‘globalization’ was consolidated) reduced the differences among groups and increased their collective sense of unity. This discourse articulated a new legitimating scheme that responded not only to the corporatist interests of the free-markets ideologues but also to those forwarding local values. Spicer and Böhm (2007) hypothesize that the articulation of a ‘chain of equivalence’ is also significant in establishing links of resistance across different locations (e.g. between the workplace and civil society). However, they also stress the significance of the ‘chain of difference’ (i.e. an alignment where differences are exacerbated because particular interests stay at the forefront). In such conditions it becomes difficult to constitute the equivalences and for particularities to become less significant in the name of a greater good everyone comes to identify with.

Overall, these neo-Gramscian writings sensitize us to two articulatory practices as being potentially significant to the politicization of restructuring. These insights supplement the work of Levy and his co-authors, which focuses on the identification of the ‘what’ (i.e. the content of the mobilization of diverse groups and interests and the dynamics of forces, with the ‘how’, i.e. the form that these alliances and alignments take, showing how they are actually performed in practice). However, further empirical substantiation is needed to provide a clearer explanation of how these articulatory practices might work, and on what conditions. Such empirically substantiated knowledge is what we provide in this article. Noticeably, Gramsci suggested that the distinction between content and form is didactic (2001[1975]: 869), so to facilitate the explication of our approach we continue with such a distinction to clarify our methodology.

**Method**

Our research focuses on two retrospective qualitative case studies in the south of France. The first is of the Nestlé-owned plant of St Menet in Marseille’s suburbs, which was closed in 2005. The second case is of IBM’s plant in Montpellier, which was threatened with closure between 1993 and 1995. These cases inspired our article’s comparative approach because the sites presented particularly strong and innovative forms of resistance, and because of the heterogeneity of their resistance movements. As such, they
illustrate significant features of managerial and/or worker resistance, and their comparison highlights instructive differences/similarities.

Nestlé established its St Menet plant in 1952 to produce chocolate and coffee; IBM opened in 1965 in Montpellier, a greenfield site. A highly-skilled plant, St Menet pioneered the manufacturing of innovations developed at Nestlé’s headquarter. With one-third of corporate global mainframe production, IBM Montpellier also remained throughout the 1980s a flagship factory of IBM Europe. Until the 1980s Nestlé’s employees felt attachment to their production site and corporation as they had high production skills and above-average salary levels. IBM also had good, predominantly low-conflict, employee relations. In the 1990s, both companies went through deep organizational restructuring at the global and local level. But as a result of local resistance, and although such resistance shaped up differently, both plants are still in operation. Our research questions are the following: What actors emerged as significant in the resistance movements against organizational restructuring? What strategies of resistance occurred in the sites and in what forms? What were their conditions? (i.e. what favoured them or not?).

Our focus on resistance was data-driven and emerged from a study one of the authors led on globalization processes at these two MNCs in the early 2000s (e.g. Palpacuer et al., 2011). Access was gained via local managers and trade union representatives. Additional empirical material was produced later when other authors joined the research team. Our multi-methods strategy (Yin, 2009) draws on archival documents (e.g. newspaper articles, academic and journalistic publications, communiqués, corporate reports) and 23 interviews with managers, workers, union reps and activists. Triangulation between interviews and archival sources addressed the fact that some interviews occurred years after the events discussed. The first phase of our analysis mapped out the MNCs’ historical changes. We identified key events and actions at a general level for the MNCs but with a contextual focus on France, and then a detailed focus on the two subsidiaries. We interrelated our data with neo-Gramscian theoretical inspirations (e.g. Van Maanen et al., 2007: 1145) in order that our analysis of the material was sensitized by a focus on the material, organizational, and symbolic/cultural/ideological forces that Levy (and co-authors) identify as central to the dynamics establishing social stability that are particularly relevant when characterizing MNC restructuring. Importantly, neither Gramsci’s nor Levy’s work offered concrete guidance on methodology, and this neo-Gramscian framework has yet to be used to characterize the internal workings of MNCs. These are limitations we had to work with. To counter these limitations we called on a number of strategies when conducting our analysis. We relied on the tacit knowledge and experience developed during a decade of empirical research on MNCs and the existing codified knowledge in this field (e.g. neo-Gramscian-inspired empirical studies) to refine the varied features of MNC restructuring under each of these neo-Gramscian conceptual dimensions. As well as discussion among ourselves we presented and debated our coding with peers; for example, during seminars and conferences. In analysing our data we thus suggest that features such as financial/economic indicators, number of employees, presence/absence of other companies and groups, involvement of the legal system, and regional socio-economic facts can be usefully abstracted as material forces. For ‘organizational’ forces we considered, for example, issues of
coordination, competition, leadership, and communication. The ‘ideological’ forces included ‘ideology’ in the traditional sense of a system of ideas and beliefs directly mobilized by agents in situ to rationalize and legitimize their actions. However, in true Gramscian fashion, we had to be sensitive to the ideological effects of the material and organizational forces considered (Gramsci, 2001[1975]: 869).

This contextual analysis showed that an important material force was embedded in the process of financialization, increasingly institutionalized in France, which transformed the ways that wealth was extracted and allocated within the two MNCs. Organizationally, Nestlé and IBM underwent vast restructuring to consolidate themselves as global businesses. The processes were different but involved massive structural transformations with re-allocations, closures and acquisitions. Changes resulted in heightened and instrumental internal competition within both corporations. Ideologically, Nestlé developed an official strategy where its more traditional long-term view and attention to localism was integrated with Anglo-Saxon features, such as de-bureaucratization and entrepreneurial values to gain global market shares. IBM developed a more market-oriented culture, symbolized, for example, in a letter new recruits received and which detailed IBM values and how success is based on client satisfaction and shareholder value. Overall, these strategies share a number of features that Turner (2008), for example, has identified as part of a neo-liberal conceptual configuration (e.g. enterprise culture, shareholder value and profit maximization).

In the second phase, we examined the ‘how’ (i.e. the specific form through which alliances and alignments were realized, and between whom). How can the ‘form’ be studied? Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony proposes a discursive take based on an analogy between linguistic and social systems. They recommend studying the social as if it was like a language (i.e. a system of signification). Social relations, therefore, would be constituted as linguistic relations. Inspired by post-Sausserian linguistics, they suggest that meaning emerges in specific arrangements called chains of signification. Literally these are chains of signifying elements (i.e. words and actions), which are associated with one another. Laclau and Mouffe call ‘discourse’ a relational chain of signification where a structured and meaningful aggregate of identities and their relations, what they name a structured totality, emerges. This creative way of using the notion of discourse to study social relations is important because, among other things, it has made it possible to examine how social antagonism is organized and the unity of a social formation is maintained or contested. In this regard two logics – those of difference and equivalence – have been suggested as significant, and it is from these logics that the ‘chain of equivalence’ and ‘chain of difference’ discussed earlier by neo-Gramscian writers originate. We now clarify the two. Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 130) suggest that the ‘logic of equivalence’ is akin to paradigmatic relations in a signifying chain, namely, what the elements stand for. To clarify, in the linguistic domain these elements are the words in a text. In the social domain, the elements are social groups, their words and actions. In the logic of equivalence, one element ‘a’, while still holding its particularity, comes to incarnate something that metaphorically brings together (i.e. makes equivalent) all the other elements ‘b’, ‘c’, and ‘d’ constituting a chain of equivalence that articulates a collective will. In linguistics there is a specific name for this function, the synecdoche, where one element stands for the whole; for
example, in English ‘suits’ (a type of clothing) can refer to ‘management’ (the whole social category the part comes to represent). Importantly, ‘a’ represents something that a, b, c, share as they are metaphorically the same (equivalent) in relation to a characteristic ‘e’ that denies/threatens/oppresses each of these elements. Howarth (2000) illustrates these logics in the South African political field characterized by apartheid and white supremacy. For the logic of equivalence one could trace many different discourses that had attempted to articulate an opposition to apartheid, he says; but only the Charterist one (a) was successful. This discourse was effective in aligning different ethnic groups and social classes that became equivalent in their antagonism against the oppression of apartheid.

The logic of difference is predominantly akin to the syntagmatic relational chain, namely the actual order of elements and their combination that specifies how they are related to each other. For example, a, b, c are all differently positioned in the apartheid project. Howarth tells us that the apartheid project was based on a ‘separate development’ discourse. This discourse positioned each particularity (a, b, c) and explained them within a set of territorial units and political institutions that maintained their differences in precise social positions, so establishing the social order of apartheid where ‘a’ is different from ‘b’, which is different from ‘c’ in specific hierarchical ways. This counters the ability of each of them to recognize similarities that could facilitate a collective struggle against the apartheid system.

How does one study the existing logics of articulation in practice? We identified the actions and we examined who did them and what signifiers were associated with these actions. For example, an action such as a strike was combined with specific slogans and people. Then we considered how, if at all, these were aligned. What main logics were evident? Were they logics that tended to create equivalences or enhance differences?

In summary, our analytical work involves an inter-subjective reflective judgement (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 183) based on our experiences as students of MNCs and political economy, and our research team members’ interactions and reflections among ourselves and the broader community of scholars (e.g. seminars, conferences). As Van Maanen et al. (2007: 1156) indicate, there is flexibility in the relation between data and theory. In the Gramscian approach this means that the analysis does not comprise of timeless concepts to which the concrete is subsumed and summarized in a 4 x 4 table. The concepts acquire precision when they are mobilized in a logical and clear manner in a direct relation to the concrete so that their explanatory power can be shown (Cox, 1993: 50). Such explanatory power is based on a logic of discovery rather than validation (Van Maanen et al., 2007: 1156). This motivated our choice to present the material in a narrative form. As in such narrative form the richness of the qualitative data can emerge, the actual agents and their actions can be illustrated, and the form of their alliances and alignment shown in its practical emergence. The forces are italicized to emphasize their role in our analysis. To reap the benefits of a comparative analysis we present two key codes – the actions of managers and the actions of workers – to stress similarities and differences in the politicization of the restructuring decision and the movement (or not) of resistance.
Managerial actions: A comparison

The two cases present similarities, particularly in terms of material forces such as those resulting from the cost-cutting decisions made by their respective CEO, but there are also significant differences. We present below the senior management actions by relating them to material, organizational and ideological forces.

In terms of *material and organizational forces*, in Nestlé’s St Menet plant a trend of high managerial turnover culminated in 2000 when a new director was appointed. The managerial orientation was aligned with the HO objectives to reduce production costs and spur internal competition. The strategy was to push for higher financial performance objectives, shifting from one to two digits the rate of return expected from the site, and to increase profit by cost cutting to the value of 55 million Euros. This involved the lay-off of 126 out of 604 employees and the relocation of entire portions of the production process. On 12 May 2004 the plant’s closure was announced. The *ideological force* behind the closure was one of economic calculation. The rationale was that the site was deemed unprofitable because it was operating at only 30 percent capacity – after substantial portions of production activities had been reallocated to other plants – while the fixed cost of keeping it functioning remained the same. The alignment of the local managerial strategy with HO demands could be explained by a number of reasons, including senior managers’ perceptions of their career, as Morgan and Kristensen (2006: 1477) suggest. For example, this site had high levels of manager turnover and the new director had joined the site after a two-year leadership programme in plant-closure management and was close to retirement. It could be argued the site lacked a critical mass of managers embedded in the site with personal incentives to maintain the site. Overall, there was no noticeable managerial resistance to closure, and the workers initiated a long-standing, far-reaching resistance to the shutdown. Nestlé tried to close the site as it had announced, but was forced to re-open it by the French court. Eventually the company yielded. It closed the coffee production lines, but agreed in February 2006 that a new firm would take over the chocolate production lines. Nestlé further agreed with the French government to promote industrial revitalization for this part of St Menet. Besides, workers managed to obtain incremental improvements in layoff conditions and support for former employees’ entrepreneurial projects.

In Montpellier the managerial strategy was not to simply follow the order to downsize. The CEO’s objective was to transform IBM into a global service company offering IT solutions. Manufacturing had a small part to play in this new global firm, and European manufacturing hardly any. Internal competition had become a problem for Montpellier as *material forces* such as technological shifts in mainframe production favoured newer plants in the south of Europe. Moreover, cost-cutting was paramount throughout the company. For Montpellier the HO required a 30 percent in cost reduction while maintaining current production level. Montpellier’s production director commented:

I did not think that it was possible . . . and the Americans who gave [these objectives] to me knew that it would not be possible. It was obvious, up there in the management, that the future was rather in these plants [southern European plants in Valencia and Santa Palomba] rather than in Montpellier. It was obvious that Montpellier was condemned, there was not a shadow of a doubt.
Organizational forces were characterized by downsizing. IBM France implemented the Adaptation Plan for Human Resources (APHR), which required a significant reduction in employees. On one hand, Montpellier’s management obeyed and implemented the APHR. Employee numbers declined from 3200 in 1990 to 1226 in 1994. The downsizing, together with real estate development and externalization of peripheral and some core activities, made it possible for the HO’s demands to be met. On the other hand, the ideological force accompanying the restructuring celebrated flexibility and entrepreneurial spirit. In the words of the CEO, everyone, particularly managers, was urged to ‘think client’. It is this force, associated with specific material and organizational forces, which proved significant in opposing the closure. This complex alignment resulted in something so unusual that the French financial press called it ‘a silent revolution’. The local managerial strategy had been to safeguard the uniqueness of the site so as to make it undesirable to close. A programme was launched at the local level, secretly at the beginning, to develop client-oriented activities aligned with the CEO ideology. This innovation, later recognized and legitimized by the HO, was to become the main IBM client-demonstration centre in Europe. It changed the fate of Montpellier and kick-started a managerial resistance spirit that is still strong locally to this day.

What material, organizational and symbolic conditions of existence made such a resistance strategy possible? Expertise and social capital appear significant in shaping a strategy that aligned the corporatist interests of local managers and some of the workers. The director who spearheaded the innovation had a blend of competencies and experiences in product simulation, client relation, and manufacturing, together with a personal network acquired while working in IBM’s US headquarters, which was unusual for a production director. He was also part of the annual CEO strategic ‘top 400’ meetings; therefore, understood and identified with the CEO’s ideology, reproducing it organizationally. For example, in Montpellier, hierarchies were cross-cut. Direct dialogue with employees during weekly meetings was encouraged, as was information sharing, sustained communication and explanation of the vision, and exhortations to collective effort in the innovative project. A team of young managers was directly involved in these practices and informed by such thinking and actions. Other ideological forces supporting the resistance strategy emerged from the interviews, indicating that these managers were locally embedded (Morgan and Kristensen, 2006: 1478). The executives and employees talked of their identification with the plant, its culture and what it offered; specifically, a sense of reputation and professional identity in a long-standing site that also provided a desirable work/life balance. Such configuration of forces produced a team spirit and survival culture that others have also found in times of drastic restructuring (e.g. Ferner et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the human cost of this transformation had been high – in 1996 the site employed 1150 people, less than half than in 1990. Many IBM workers who were made redundant or invited to resign or retire did not go quietly and mounted strong resistance against the restructuring.

One of our research questions pivots around the role of management in restructuring. The St Menet Nestlé subsidiary developed what Delany (1998 cited in Morgan and Kristensen, 2006: 1479) calls a ‘boy scout’ strategy by following the HO’s orders. The Montpellier IBM subsidiary deployed what Delany calls a ‘subversive strategy’.
The restructuring was embraced in a creative and innovative manner, which was extended far beyond the cost-cutting mandate. Rather than playing a mere ‘numbers game’ (Morgan and Kristensen, 2006) senior management led a resistance that became successful because it secured the corporatist interests of the local managers and some workers. The strategy was heterogeneous. A ‘strategic acquiescence’ (Levy, 2008: 952) showed conformity towards massive downsizing but also identification with the entrepreneurial ideology of the CEO to ‘think client’. This, together with local managerial embeddedness, became paramount in shaping the success of the managerial resistance. This resistance opposed the organizational forces marginalizing Montpellier in relation to sites like Santa Palomba and Valencia in southern Europe. More broadly, it contested the material forces putting the plant on the path of closure.

**Workers’ actions: A comparison**

The workers’ actions in the two cases are significantly different; and, as we shall show, they participate in articulating what is predominantly a chain of equivalence in the case of St Menet, and a chain of difference in Montpellier.

**Chain of equivalence in Nestlé St Menet**

In May 2004 the St Menet shutdown was announced. A coalition of all local labour unions was created around the demand of ‘no closure’. A business plan was prepared for the creation of an employee-run enterprise for local, low-cost market production. A French company, Legal, also made an acquisition proposal. But the offer was rejected and management refused to consider the workers self-production proposal for low-cost market as Nestlé was also in a low-cost market. Senior management commented: ‘We have no intention to sell the St Menet plant. Accepting Legal’s offer would create competition for our Dieppe factory and would be equivalent to shooting ourselves in the foot’. The employees’ alternative plan was judged ‘unrealistic’ and ‘not viable’.

The St Menet union, like the Montpellier union, pursued a legal strategy. The Nestlé workers contended that the closure, according to France’s employment law, could not be granted on economic grounds. Several decisions from the Court (Tribunal de Grande Instance) supported the unions. Importantly, this was just one of the strategies and it did not fix the meaning of the dispute once and for all. The St Menet struggle never became only a legal/administrative dispute, as was the case for the Montpellier struggle. The St Menet struggle escalated from being workplace-based to a broader oppositional social movement (Spicer and Böhm, 2007) as the broader civil and political society joined the struggle. In June 2004, 40 civil society organizations created the ‘Group for the Defence of Nestlé St Menet and industrial employment in the Huveaune Valley’ (‘the Group’ henceforth). The creation of the Group symbolized that the struggle had moved beyond being a traditional industrial relation dispute. Unlike in Montpellier, in Marseille local and regional political administrators from the right and left of the political spectrum joined the dispute. In October 2005 the Prime Minister openly supported the struggle, tasking the prefect, i.e. the state representative in the Bouches-du-Rhone area, to find an alternative to closure.
What we witness in St Menet is the creation of linkages between diverse social groups articulating a collective resistance against closure. What subtends the creation of a common frame here is the predominance of a logic of equivalence that links social subjects and their interests together. The subjects are made equivalent by their identification in one particular demand (the St Menet no closure) that to them comes to stand for something that exceeds it (Laclau, 2005: 72); specifically, the society they all want against the type of society that the decision of the MNC is delivering. This is why the ‘St Menet demand of no closure’ works as a synecdoche (i.e. the part for the whole), because it constitutes not only a demand as a request (to keep production going) but it also incarnates a more universal dimension, i.e. a demand as a claim for a better future that these diverse social groups collectively want, what Gramsci called the ‘collective will’. We now explain how we came to this interpretation, showing how subjects were mobilized and aligned to articulate a collective identity, and we also discuss the forces that, we found, favoured such articulation.

**Enlargement**

Enlargement is the name we give to what in practice performs the logic of equivalence. Enlargement is characterized by two features: (i) the mobilization of different social groups, and (ii) the pluralization of actions and words that come to be associated with the demand of no closure. The two go hand-in-hand, but keeping them analytically separate offers a way of appreciating the form and content of contestation (i.e. how contestation comes about in this terrain and what features it assumes).

(i) **Mobilization.** Enlargement by mobilization involves actions that attempt to raise awareness and elicit sympathy and active support for the struggle against closure. There are many different strategies of mobilization, and different social subjects are involved in different ways. Union-directed actions were notably diverse, and included traditional (e.g. plant occupation) and non-traditional (e.g. performances at Nestlé’s France HO) actions. The union reps pursued an original strategy based on the ideology to ‘open the playground’ and involve fellow workers, consumers, politicians and citizens to form a ‘true resistance network’ against what to them was a decision motivated by spurious economic reasons. They called for and joined demonstrations with workers from other firms facing similar difficulties because of drastic restructuring (i.e. closures or massive layoffs). They also always sought meetings with political administrative representatives at various locations where such demonstrations occurred. The creation of the Group, it could be argued, institutionalized the notion that the struggle had gone, as the union had hoped, beyond the factory walls. The actions of the Group mobilized the local population with a strategy that included artistic endeavours designed to mobilize different social identities (e.g. Nestlé consumers’ identity, local identity). For example, a song was written and played on local radios; a play was staged; a film made, and a number of demonstrations and events organized that involved, among others, local businesses, unemployed, local workers, students, the Catholic church and political parties.
(ii) **Pluralization and punctuation.** With these two terms we want to show how those different groups got mobilized and actively aligned not only in supporting the St Menet struggle but also in recognizing the St Menet struggle as being about each and every one of them (i.e. how a collective will against closure was articulated). Pluralization is the way in which the St Menet demand of no closure is associated with new meanings that bring in a broader set of concerns and issues (hence the label ‘enlargement’). This can be seen if one charts how the actions are associated with specific words, which literally enlarge the meaning of the St Menet demand of no closure. This is what makes the St Menet demand stand progressively far more than a request to keep production open, until its function as a synecdoche is established. At first, St Menet was a clear request ‘we want management to re-think the economic causes that led to the closure and to reintegrate the production that was transferred’. In the demonstrations in Arles, with workers from another plant facing closure, and in Paris, with the entire agro-food sector, and the general national strike of 5 October 2005, workers demanded that employers reverse their drastic restructuring because of negative local consequences (i.e. material and symbolic impoverishment). Many workers faced similar conditions and consequences. So they identified with the same fears of losing their jobs and their way of life as employed labour. Other broader associations were constituted in the actions organized by the Group. For example, as one of the main slogans chanted in the demonstrations indicated, their demand was for ‘the right to work and live here’ for those currently in employment and for future generations. The words of the film director show how much the St Menet struggle for no closure moved from a demand as a request to stand for something with more universal appeal, a better future for all, a synecdoche: ‘the struggle meant to rehabilitate the sense of work and give voice to those who simply want a stable employment, working in tranquillity and building a future’. Political society was also significant in enlarging and punctuating the St Menet no-closure demand. This was played out as the republican values of the French people versus the selfish greed of multinationals only interested in profit maximization. For example, a communiqué of le senateur-maire de Marseille (UMP, centre-right party) stated ‘the town will not accept that its struggle for employment of the people in Marseille be affected by the search for profit maximizing’. A few months into the struggle the president of the Provence-Alpes Cote D’Azur region, (PS, centre-left party), after meeting the mayor of Marseille, union reps and the minister of labour to mobilize government support for the workers’ struggle, declared ‘one needs to see who is in charge here: if it is the French Republic or if it is a multinational’. Plural meanings have become attached to the St Menet struggle and are punctuated in specific ways. The struggle for St Menet with the no-closure demand (a) becomes the struggle (of different social groups and their interests b, c, d) with a claim for sustaining the future and the way of life of Marseille’s people and, by extension, the French people. In this contested terrain the MNC’s decision is constituted by these social groups as being dictated by profit maximization and with disregard to the negative consequences (i.e. progressive material and symbolic impoverishment) this had for the social terrain where the plant had been embedded for decades. The ‘fight’ was not reduced, to use Gramsci’s language, to a corporatist matter (as in Montpellier). Struggling for St Menet no closure meant to struggle for the type of society the local people collectively wanted.
What favoured the creation of the chain of equivalence?

Specific organizational forces were significant in favouring enlargement and therefore the predominance of the logic of equivalence. The union counted on an organizational apparatus (local and national) and knowledge of the legal system and industrial struggles that went far beyond the Nestlé factory walls, including close connections to the local communist party that remained very active in the Marseille suburbs and played a significant role in the formation of the Group. Hence formal (unions, associations, the Catholic church and political parties) and informal (artist networks, families and schools) ties within the Group made significant resources also available. For example, although the Group relied on its members’ donations, it also received support from local enterprises and authorities, which included waiving the fees for the use of conference facilities. Likewise, communication was fundamental. Communiqués were regularly dispatched to the press and posted on websites and blogs maintained by those active in the Group. Unlike in Montpellier, many local and national newspapers covered this struggle.

Material forces were also significant as Nestlé eventually relinquished ownership of the plant and allowed for its partial survival as an independent company, although tight control over material and financial resources gave a strong hedge to the multinational during the struggle. But a strong ideological force countered the uneven material forces. This ideology projected a vision of a shared heritage that invited locals to act in a way that could maintain a good collective future. Unlike Montpellier, Marseille is a highly-industrialized district with a rich history of workers’ struggles and class politics, and has developed a fiercely-independent culture embodied in a local saying (‘we fear no one!’). This slogan inspired the St Menet resistance movement and could be heard at demonstrations and events. Marseille’s industrial history of self-management experiences was also important. Workers had run local industrial production for a period after the owners, having collaborated with the Nazis, fled the country in 1944 (Mencherini, 1994). Some of these workers joined the St Menet dispute and their resistance was explicitly celebrated in demonstrations and communiqués with the slogan ‘you took over in 1944, we do it now!’.

Unlike the IBM Montpellier site, the Nestlé plant was deeply embedded in the industrial history of the valley. As a worker recalls, for decades school children had visited the plant to ‘dig their fingers into the chocolate . . . Even among the police in front of us, some had dug their fingers into that chocolate and it helped!’.

Chain of difference in IBM Montpellier

The actions of IBM Montpellier workers were different from those of St Menet and were mostly directed against the APHR plan, i.e. substantial layoffs. Managers and workers alike recall the downsizing as a drastic and traumatic process because of its scale (nearly two thirds of all workers over three years), and because of the way it was conducted, that many felt unjust and undignified, as explained below.

The French context presents legal constraints to economic layoffs (e.g. collective bargaining obligations and legal criteria). So IBM did not simply legitimize the APHR plan by employing an economic ideology of market pressures and competition,
choosing instead to implement other forms of more flexible ‘voluntary departures’
(e.g. retirement programmes and personnel transfer to subcontractors). But the unions
repeatedly denounced that these ‘voluntary departures’ were obtained by exerting pres-
sure on workers to leave the company. Workers talked of a climate of stress and fear
that became pervasive in the plant. The workers collectively resisted the layoffs. An
alliance of the local unions was formed taking over the local Work Council in 1993
from a pro-management union. Similarly to St Menet, the alliance denounced the lack
of industrial project justifying the APHR and the impositions of management. Unlike
St Menet workers, however, IBM union reps reduced their demand to the fact that the
APHR should be implemented according to French legal requirements for layoffs.
Their precise request was also to have more information and transparency in the layoff
procedures. In other words, the demand regarded the legal and social conditions of
layoffs, but did not contest the legitimacy of the layoffs per se.

This resistance strategy centred on legal action, as the unions and individual workers
took IBM’s management to court. A court (Tribunal de Grande Instance) in Paris twice
supported the workers by suspending the execution of the APHR. Montpellier manage-
ment was condemned five times for failure to apply legal requirements for layoffs. Local
employee representatives continued to denounce pressures and harassment of workers
(e.g. unexpected job rotations and ambiguous discussions with management). Individual
employees also sued IBM in a bid to obtain higher redundancy packages and restore a
dignity that the restructuring had eroded: ‘You know, when you’ve been employed at
IBM for 30 years of your life, you wish to go before retirement in honourable condi-
tions’, explained one of them at the end of a five-year legal conflict.

Logic of difference: Workers, managers and the tertium quid

The terrain is characterized by a number of contestations to the restructuring directed by
HO. There is the front of the managerial resistance opposing the sidelining of the plant
that for senior management was a prelude to closure. And there is a front based on the
traditional industrial conflict of workers versus management. The two fronts have differ-
ent demands and carry different interests that do not congeal and are not chained in a
collective front against drastic restructuring. The workers claimed they had rights to be
met (which they accused IBM management of infringing) while the plant management
asserted the right to pursue their restructuring plans. This difference was represented
through (and instituted by) the appeal to, and arbitration of, France’s employment law. In
this struggle the court was the tertium quid that signalled the institution of a specific dif-
ference between the two social poles (workers and managers) to be enacted (Laclau and
Mouffe, 2001: 109). Employment law, which establishes and legislates the status and
rights of these two social groups, delineates the terrain of the conflict. As outlined earlier,
the court was also involved in the Nestlé struggle. Yet there it did not function as tertium
quid but only as another of the strategies of resistance. What can account for such a dif-
ferent resulting social configuration? Given that some of the managers were actively
resisting the CEO’s closure decision, were there not possible linkages for a chain of
equivalence that would bring together those managers and workers? In the next pages we
speculate on why the logic of difference is prevalent by accounting for what counters the
possibility of chains of equivalence to be established, not only within the opposition to restructuring internal to the plant but also external to it.

**Molecular strategy**

Misappropriating one of Gramsci’s terms we could say that the workers’ strategy was ‘molecular’ (Gramsci, 2001[1975]: 962) in the sense that it only related to management’s layoff decisions and the conditions of such layoffs for the individual worker. Unlike its Marseille counterpart, resistance never moved beyond the factory walls. It should be noted that the union alliance in Montpellier was already quite significant given the historically strong anti-union culture of IBM, which tended to favour consensual employee representations. Arguably the alliance was an extraordinary response to the extraordinary times faced by IBM workers who had for decades mostly enjoyed a good level of security and working conditions. While the alliance did try to mobilize the workers of other IBM sites, it never managed to get momentum because, among other factors discussed later, it lacked a strategy to enlarge the terrain of the struggle and ‘open the playground’ as was the case in Marseilles. Their demand was articulated around workers’ rights but was understood in particular legalistic terms. In this sense, the struggle remained, as Gramsci put it, a corporatist one, strictly articulating the actors as bearers of interests – economic and moral ones – to be respected. Symptomatic of this is the individualization of the struggle exemplified by individual claims to the court. What else can be accounted for that favours the chain of difference and reduces the logic of equivalence?

**Managerial resistance**

In this terrain we found little mobilization and pluralization. The struggle is punctuated (i.e. consolidated) in a precise and clear meaning from the outset and never became associated (even if potentially it could have) with a plurality of words that could enlarge the meaning of the struggle (and therefore the issues and the concerns) enlarging the ‘cause’ to/for broader social subjects. In other words, the struggle never played out a generic anti-system dimension that, in St Menet, became the claim for a sustainable future.

Arguably, managerial resistance made it difficult to play a generic dimension, since Montpellier’s local management innovatively appropriated the HO’s restructuring orders. First, the layoffs were functional to the strategy of managerial resistance as local strategic acquiescence accommodated downsizing. Playing the number games made it possible to align ideologically with the Americans while constructing a course of resisting actions that made site closure undesirable within the broader IBM corporate landscape. As such, the actions of the workers against layoffs went against what Montpellier’s management needed. Second, the managerial strategy of resistance to the HO’s politics of disinvestment and closure for Montpellier made it difficult for the workers to be openly and officially espoused to a decision of site closure and the far more drastic social consequences this would have had. As the secretary of the Work Council recounted: ‘the strategy for the site has never been discussed during Council meetings; there was never any discourse on the risk of plant closure. Only a discourse on job cuts demanded by US headquarters’.
**Organizational and material forces**

Social conflict was absorbed within a legal dispute, as workers resistance was conveyed in industrial relations played out in corporatist terms. The unions’ resistance was molecular in the sense that they wanted to bring the layoffs within a legal framework and improve its terms (higher financial layoff packages, better pensions and other provisions). *Organizational forces* were important in limiting the possibilities of enlargement that would favour the logic of equivalence. IBM unions could not count on a deep knowledge of industrial conflict and far-reaching organizational apparatus. IBM workers had a predominantly professional, white-collar identity, rather than a blue-collar identity as in the case of the St Menet workers who were more attuned with management/labour conflict. Furthermore, the region lacked examples, knowledge, experiences and stories of workers’ resistance that could have been mobilized ideologically to support a strategy of enlargement. IBM unions had been, as we have seen, predominantly pro-management, and historically the region had few antagonistic industrial relations. Montpellier witnessed revolts of wine producers throughout the last century, but it lacked a rich industrial landscape. *Material forces* that could support enlargement were poor. Each sector has its own self-contained history and the IBM plant stood out as one of a few large manufacturing plants, arriving from the outside and lacking connections to the local economy and culture. As we have seen, and unlike in Marseille, no political administrator intervened against IBM’s actions and members of the civil society were equally inert as nothing was mobilized that could favour identification with the workers’ cause. As the demand never moved from the level of request to that of a claim, the request was absorbed and granted by the system itself. The legal system, in its role of the *tertium quid*, granted the unity of this specific historic bloc (i.e. a social formation where employment is a transaction with duties and rights of two fully-articulated parties – management and workers).

**Discussion and conclusion**

This article was motivated by calls to study MNCs as a ‘contested terrain’ and engage in a theoretical appreciation of the politics of MNCs and how drastic restructuring involving threats of plant closure is questioned and resisted at the local level (Collinson and Morgan, 2009; Dörrenbächer and Geppert, 2011; Erkama and Vaara, 2010). With our neo-Gramscian discursive take focusing, as Erkama and Vaara (2010) suggest, on actual actions, we have identified a plurality of strategies of local resistance and a variety of subjects who get involved in, and identify with, the struggle, so becoming political agents. The contestation, we found, could extend beyond the corporate terrain to involve other social groups such as political and civil society groups mobilized in providing a collective response against restructuring, as in St Menet. In contrast, while in the IBM Montpellier case opposition was engendered by different groups (workers and managers), it was confined to a more traditional workplace labour/management dispute.

The detailed (neo) Gramscian approach that we have used to study the politics of MNCs and responses to drastic restructuring has provided further elaboration on how to apprehend the configuration of a contested terrain by addressing the form and content of
the contestation (the dynamics of forces) and how these shape resistance outcomes (i.e., key features, subjects and relations consolidated in the resulting social configuration). Overall, this approach has given us some indications on the kind of social formation that can be constituted/reproduced in a struggle when a company’s subsidiaries resist drastic restructuring, thus providing a useful empirical contribution to the discussion of local resistance to MNCs.

Hirsh and De Soucey (2006) suggest that it is important to question empirically the inevitability too often associated with corporate restructuring. As seen earlier, drastic restructuring is typically legitimized with references to market pressures towards efficiency and economic survival. These, as Turner (2008) indicates, are fundamental values of neo-liberalism. The St Menet resistance movement reconfigures the ‘inevitable’ economic reasons for closure promoted by Nestlé. The reasons are shown to be contradictory and concretely spurious. Not only was there a serious offer (by Legal) to buy the coffee production plant, but workers also proposed a self-production plan. Nestlé accepted neither offer for fear of competition. The question must be asked – if the site was not viable for a large resourceful company like Nestlé, how could it be viable for a local enterprise? Indeed, how could it be so viable as to create real competition for Nestlé? How could Nestlé fear something that they had declared unproductive and not viable in the first instance? The contradiction here is glaring and suggestive of the fact that economic calculations are part of a broader global political strategy to legitimize a restructuring decision that goes far beyond the mere economic potentials of a local site. The St Menet resistance movement also reconfigures the terrain of the struggle. In St Menet, the precise demand (to keep production open) progressively includes a broader vision of what society is (not) and what its values are (not). This case tells us of a social formation resulting from a struggle that has collective local values to check the power of MNCs in pursuing profit maximization. A historic set of linkages here forced the MNC to take responsibility for the negative consequences of its restructuring decision for the local stakeholders involved (i.e., workers and the community). Overall, these features might be considered counter-moves to a neo-liberal agenda where profit maximization is the key role of corporations (Turner, 2008). In Montpellier, the social struggle tended to remain confined to a transaction between management and workers, which included economic and moral considerations, that is to say payments and conditions of layoffs (e.g., workers’ dignity). It was a legal strategy that the workers pursued. The French Court supported their view, as Montpellier was condemned five times for illegal practices. The case of Montpellier tells us that, in Europe, MNCs are prepared to use illegal systems to achieve their economic ends (in this case through drastic downsizing). Here one sees re-affirmed/reproduced a social formation that guarantees (at least in the historic period examined) some rights to workers rather than a free rein to corporate decisions. This, arguably, checks the legal privilege of property that is another key value of neo-liberalism (Turner, 2008). Significantly, both sites are in the south of France and at the macro economic and cultural level share many similarities. Both cases indicate that local resistance indeed counters, if with various forms and degrees, the consolidation of neo-liberal values centred on legitimized with reference to ineluctable market pressures. Yet the differences are stark (see Williams, 2011). This indicates how important the historical political analysis detailed
in our approach is in grasping nuances adding to the more macro-level, aggregate studies.

Another substantive contribution offered is a deeper understanding of local managerial resistance as it intervenes in restructuring. In Montpellier, managerial resistance injected ideological, organizational and material forces that prevented the workers from gaining means to react to a radical threat to their way of life – the ‘general crime’ to use Laclau’s Marxist reference. Rather than creating a potential threat to the MNC, as postulated by Morgan and Kristensen (2006), this managerial resistance is shown to be instrumental in maintaining and reproducing the values and legitimacy of the ideological order in which contemporary corporations are embedded. These values include entrepreneurship, value adding and flexibility, which, in this case, are forwarded and embodied by IBM’s HO and the local management. These can also be considered neo-liberal values (Turner, 2008). However, the emerging picture is distinctly more mixed as other values also play a significant part in such managerial resistance, such as a local managerial embeddedness involving a strong attachment to the site. Without unduly generalizing, we suggest that the differential features we have found in how management responded to HO orders could be examined further (in multi-case longitudinal studies, for example) as potential intervening factors facilitating or impeding the active involvement of subsidiary managers in resisting such orders. These features are (i) a long-standing presence and attachment to the site (e.g. low turnover); (ii) entrepreneurial identification (e.g. a ‘can do’ attitude); (iii) high-level expertise and social capital (e.g. links with customers); (iv) a pool of knowledge/know-how (e.g. being a technically successful site for 40 years).

Finally, we turn to the theoretical contribution our study offers. Our neo-Gramscian approach has attempted to build a bridge between the work of Levy and his colleagues and of those who have been inspired by the discursive take of Laclau and Mouffe. Using the Gramscian didactic distinction between ‘content’ and ‘form’, our study has provided a detailed elaboration on how to study not only the ‘content’ (i.e. what are the subjects in a dynamic field of forces and what are their alignment and alliances), but also the form of these alignments and alliances, arguing that subject mobilization also comprises specific articulations that are important in establishing the resulting identities and interests at stake. Our study corroborates existing theorizations that suggest that ‘chains of equivalence’ are fundamental in linking diverse groups in a common front while ‘chains of difference’ limit this possibility (Otto and Böhm, 2006; Spicer and Bohm, 2007). We have moreover highlighted the structural processes through which the social contestation was performed and its consolidation achieved; detailed how different groups articulated different demands; and shown how the synecdoche was a constitutive aspect of the chain of equivalence. In practice, this meant that the demand, in our case that of ‘St Menet no-closure’, without losing its domain of a particular request, obtained a more universal character. As a synecdoche, the part stood for the whole; that is, a society that local people wanted and that was not merely governed by MNC actions. Our neo-Gramscian elaboration has further grasped the material and structural articulations through which the collective will was established and how these were practically performed, therefore explaining how and why a ‘frame’, so to speak, came into existence. We have suggested that this was performed through a process of enlargement that has two aspects, mobilization and pluralization/punctuation. The first regards the actions and
practices through which new subjects were mobilized to the demand, and how new demands were articulated and associated with the ‘cause’ of oppression that was contested. The second regards the multiple meanings that became attached to the demand, so that we have not only a plurality of demands that furnished the ‘cause’ of oppression but all these meanings were then consolidated (i.e. punctuated) in specific ways. Finally, the comparison has enabled us to consider how different forces – organizational, material and ideological – that intervened in favouring the logic of equivalence or instead the logic of difference, operated; these are too often marginalized in discursive studies. The leadership of the St Menet workers and union, its organizational apparatus and extensive knowledge of industrial conflict were significant in enlarging the struggle, as were a number of material conditions related to the history and socio-economic features of the region. Montpellier, instead, had different forces that by and large favoured the predominance of the logic of difference among the local subjects.

Overall, our study offers a theoretical and methodological platform that invites the neo-Gramscian elaboration of MNC politics as ‘contested terrain’, also understood as politics of local responses to global strategic decisions. More work is needed to refine the methodological standing by detailing and crystallizing useful steps for the analysis. At the substantive level, further studies could trace the global strategy of selected MNCs and how they affect different locations and the responses therein generated. In addition, more individual case studies that detail the responses, including those of local managers, are needed given the relative novelty of this approach in organization theory.

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