



Union Capabilities and Path Departures: How do local unions transform themselves?

**Christian Dufour, Adelheid Hege,
Christian Lévesque, Gregor Murray
(CRIMT, IRES, HEC Montréal, ERIUM)**

**Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la mondialisation et le travail
CRIMT Union Futures Conference, Montréal, 27 October 2012**



Referential Unionisms: Exogeneity or endogeneity?

- Choices of workplace union leaders reflect past practices and norms.
- Previously internalized choices constitute key reference points – referential unionisms – for evaluation and evolution of current and future practices.
- Highlight a) path dependency of union actors & b) complexity of processes of adjustment (not just problematizing impact of external stimuli but how this entails a continuous reconstruction of the internal dynamics of workplace unions).
- Q: Are referential unionisms being transformed in the context of globalization?
- Q: How do union actors act upon their referential unionisms in order to orient the trajectories of their own transformations?

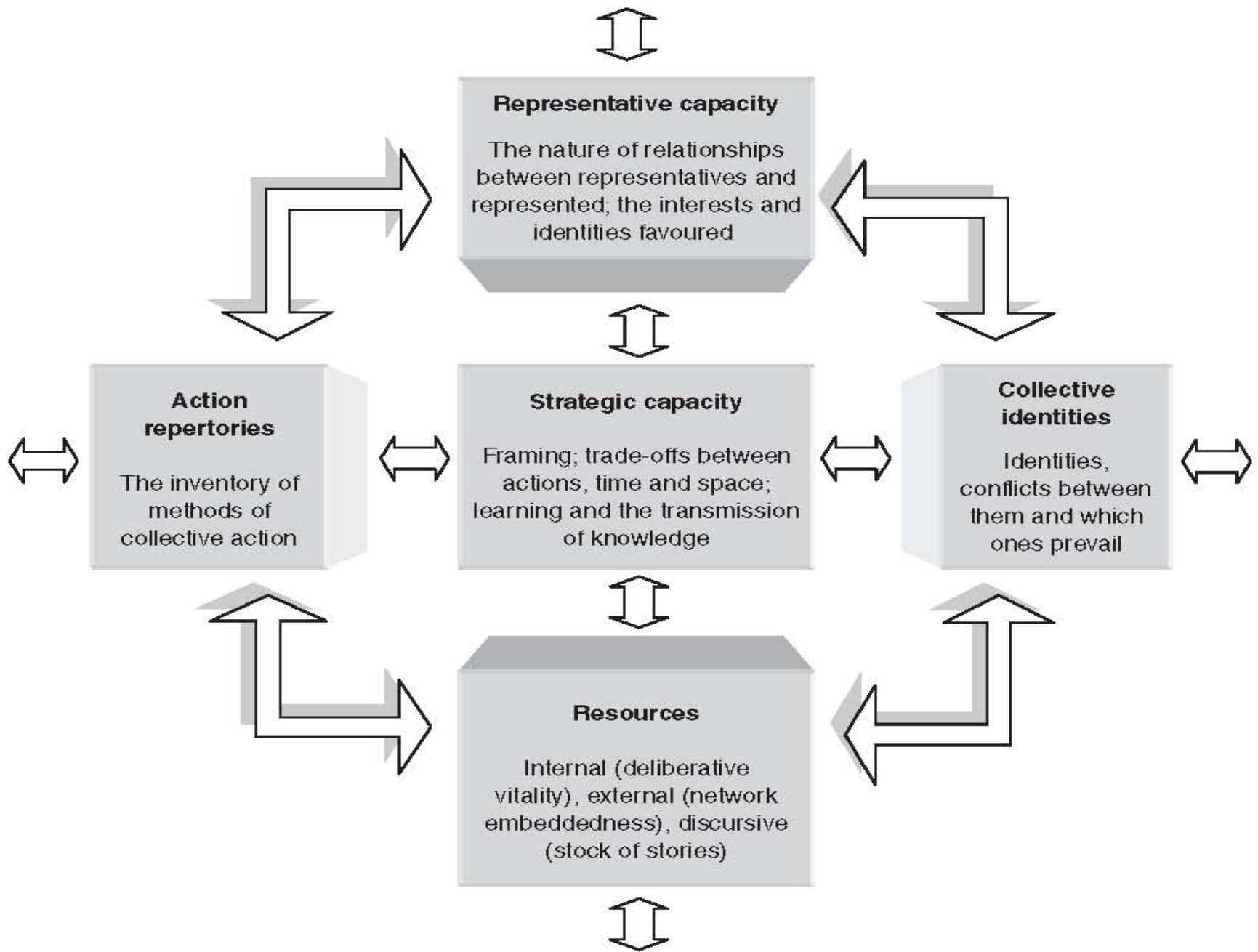


Figure 1. Component dimensions of referential unionisms



Methodology

- **Cross-national workplace union comparisons** (n≈29): observation over time (where possible), diversity of actors (where possible), bi-national team present at all interviews, extensive face-to-face with multiple members of local union leadership teams
- **Purposive selection** (n=4): cases exhibiting a higher degree of self-transformation
- **Four manufacturing sites**: four different MNCs (4 sites); 2 different institutional contexts (Canada and US); Cantire, Amertire, Cantrans, Amermetal



State of Referential Unionisms

Cantire: pragmatic experimentation with partnership, led by local leadership & risk of opposition from members

Amertire: forced experimentation in the face of hostile management and drawing on external union models & resources, external/internal dynamic & risk of opposition from members

Cantrans: effort to codify new set of references, dynamic internal tensions & risks from deliberative processes

Amermetal: pragmatic experimentation with codification of new set of references, led by local leadership with strong external support, risks of mediating between external & possibly deviant allies and internal membership dissension



Nature of Change in Referential Unionisms

Cantire: reconstruction of role from claimer to manager & partner in job protection (change in importance of contract admin), enlarged def. of interests, but weakened alliances

Amertire: increased distance from management, leader & not lagger in external coordination, enlarged definition of interests

Cantrans: enlarged definition of interests & means to achieve them, new alliances, new claims, without partnership

Amermetal: enlarged role because union becomes co-manager of jobs with enhanced external alliances



Key Findings I: Work on Union Self or Self-Reflection

- Referential Unionisms and work on union self (“travail sur soi”, “work on self”)
 - each union lives in relation to referential unionism but volatile, contested & unstable reproduction
 - conscious work on self-definition or union self is at the heart of renewal processes = rethinking boundaries of referential unionisms and different dimensions of referential unionisms



Key Findings II: Common Traits in Four Cases

- **Context:** each site on the edge, facing dangerous opportunities because facts no longer fit referential; but opportunities not a given, union plays key role in the creation of the opportunity that is then woven into the self-narrative (referential)
- **Capacity:** importance of resources & capabilities (see Lévesque & Murray (2010) because each leadership has a capacity to act
- **Temporality:** the change in referential unionism takes time and change is constructed over time (leadership must be able to assume this temporality)



Key Findings III: Varieties of Path Departure

- **Cantire:** reconstruction of union in relation to management (↑ proximity); entails changes in relationship to externals (↓ larger union, ↑ community, ↑ public authorities) & to members
- **Amertire:** reconstruction of union in relation to management (↓ proximity); entails changes in relationship to externals (↑ larger union, ↑ community) & to members
- **Cantrans:** reconstruction of union with movement from job control to social movement (def. of interests); (↑ ↓ larger union, ↑ community) & to members
- **USmetal:** reconstruction of union in relation to management (↑ proximity); entails changes in relationship to externals (↑ larger union, ↑ community) & to members



Key Findings IV: Core Self-Reflection Processes

- **Practical dialectic** between work on union self and union repertoires, mediated by strategic and representative capacity; which comes first = varying sequences
- **Strategic capacity:** unions carve out strategic (critical) space relative to management; engage in boundary-spanning beyond institutionally prescribed roles (network embeddedness, articulation)
- **Representative capacity:** change in relationship with members; cohesive leadership group facing opposition from members = risk; seek to preserve precarious equilibrium between older and newer referential unionism; most likely successful if leadership can create strategic space relative to management



Key Findings V: Take Aways

- **No magic recipes** for self-transformation ≠ universalistic
- **Continuous tensions** between older & newer referential unionisms: conscious management of these tensions by the leadership group; legacies of older references, embryos of newer references?
- Renewal of **key relationships**: to employer, to larger union, to community, to members
- Shifts & enlargement of **repertoires of action**
- **Representative capacity**: conscious reconstruction of leadership group; centrality of **deliberative processes** & willingness to take on membership on key issues
- **Strategic capacity**: capability of leadership group to navigate and structure these changes; willingness to take on risk

CRIMT



CENTRE DE RECHERCHE INTERUNIVERSITAIRE SUR LA MONDIALISATION ET LE TRAVAIL