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THE BATTLE FOR ‘MIDDLE-EARTH’: THE CONSTITUTION OF INTERESTS AND IDENTITIES IN *THE HOBBIT* DISPUTE

ABSTRACT

This article draws on an industrial dispute over the filming of *The Hobbit* in New Zealand in 2010 to contribute to the theorisation of the interplay between interests and identities and our understanding of mobilisation and collective identity. While industrial disputes are typically viewed as a conflict between groups with opposing material interests, this may miss the way in which both the identities of those involved and their interests are discursively constituted in articulatory processes. Specifically, we apply Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and in doing so demonstrate that the dispute was more than a conflict over working conditions, it was a hegemonic struggle to fix meaning. In making this conceptual contribution we highlight a tendency within industrial relations analysis to reify interests.

Introduction

This paper contributes to our understanding of mobilisation and collective identity through examining the dynamics of interests and identity in the industrial dispute over the filming of *The Hobbit* in New Zealand in 2010. On the one hand, this was an epic industrial relations (IR) dispute where a powerful US conglomerate defeated the unions’ attempt to improve working conditions in the New Zealand film industry. Following the passing of a ‘do not sign the contract’ motion by the International Federation of Actors (FIA) in pursuit of collective bargaining and an improvement in terms and conditions of employment, the films’ director and New Zealand icon Peter Jackson went public, accusing the unions of trying to destroy New Zealand’s film industry, while the films’ financiers threatened to relocate the production offshore. The end result was that the New Zealand government changed employment legislation at Warner Bros’ behest, effectively removing all employment rights for workers in the film industry, and granted the company substantial additional tax incentives. At the same time, it was more than an IR dispute. It was a highly significant event for New Zealand, received widespread media coverage over the period, led to conflicting positions adopted between actors and film production workers, and invoked high levels of emotion among a large section of the general public. In a country with a reputation for its easy-going attitudes and aversion to overt displays of conflict, public rallies across the country to ‘save *The Hobbit*’ were an unusual sight. Pivotal to the dispute was an emerging national identity, with the films a symbol of a creative, entrepreneurial New Zealand. The fulfilment of this identity was undermined by the threatened relocation of the filming.

Our attention was drawn, therefore, to the role of interests *and* identity. Not only were both central to understanding the dispute, but they were hotly contested, with significant public debate about the motivations of different actors and their presumed identities. Existing analyses of the dispute have adopted an interest-based, political economy lens (e.g.

McAndrew & Rizak, 2012; Haworth, 2011) and while these accounts provide some very important insights into the dispute, we find their treatment of the identity issues, and thus their explanations as to why the union failed in its attempt to mobilise support for their demands, somewhat incomplete. Their approach is not unusual in the field of IR, with interest-based and institutional analyses dominating (Meardi, 2011).

We contribute to the theorisation of interest and identity dynamics by drawing on the neo-Gramscian discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1990) to analyse a highly significant international labour dispute. We chose Laclau and Mouffe because of its analytical focus – it is well suited to the analysis of group formation and collective identity, having developed as a theoretical resource for explaining the emergence of social movements, such as feminism, in the 1970s. We use it to highlight the ways in which interests and identities can be constructed through a process of hegemonic articulation. Interests are more than an explanatory variable; they are a subject for analysis (Whittle and Mueller, 2011). Thus, we offer an empirical illustration of how Laclau and Mouffe’s approach can be used to explore the discursive nature of power and the struggle to fix meaning in an IR conflict. Laclau and Mouffe’s theorising has been used by a number of critical management scholars (e.g. Bridgman and Willmott, 2006; Bridgman, 2007; Kenny & Striver, 2012; Willmott, 2005), but it has had limited influence on IR issues, one exception being the analysis of Contu, Palpacuer and Balas (2013) who use it to explain collective resistance to organisational restructuring. Laclau and Mouffe’s approach “assumes and affirms the primacy of the political” (Bridgman and Willmott, 2006: 114) and draws our attention to the contingent and historical nature of social relations. Drawing on the concept of ‘chains of equivalence’, our analysis shows why the union campaign to achieve collective bargaining and improve working conditions in the sector was unsuccessful. Theoretically, we respond to the call of Edwards (2006, 2015) to approach interests as fluid, multiple and shifting.

The paper proceeds as follows. Following a review of the treatment of interests and identity in the IR literature, we outline the contribution of Laclau and Mouffe. We present our method, a brief overview of *The Hobbit* dispute and an analysis of the case using Laclau and Mouffe’s approach. We then discuss the ways in which our analysis can enrich the study of interests and identity in industrial relations.

Conceptualising identity and interests in IR

Understanding worker mobilisation and the building of solidarity in advancing workers’ interests is a principal concern of IR. However, the notion of ‘interests’ is not unproblematic. Edwards (1986, 2006, 2015) has long argued that while workers have ‘real interests’ as a result of their location in a structured relationship with capital, what he terms the ‘structured antagonism’, those interests are also multiple, complex, shifting and conflicting. Thus, he argues that their behaviour cannot be predicted based on an assumed set of ‘real interests’, and that what workers interests are, is a question to be resolved through context-sensitive empirical research. Interests cannot be predetermined; they are socially constructed and influenced by the ideological exercise of power. While Edwards does not use the concept of identity explicitly, its role in understanding interests is implicit in his analyses. Hyman (2001; 2004) is another who has explored the interaction of identities and interests. In highlighting

the elusive nature of class solidarity and collective identity, he points to the fragmented identities and interests of individual workers in contemporary society. He argues that unions need to engage in the ‘battle of ideas’ to both shape workers interests and to counter the prevailing neo-liberal ideology. Similarly, Kelly (1998) notes that collective identity cannot be assumed because it is, at least in part, socially constructed. IR scholarship, he argues, should therefore engage with the processes by which interests are constituted, defined and redefined. Drawing on mobilisation theory he discusses the way in which unions might shape workers’ interests through the framing of grievances or injustice, thereby enabling a collective identity to emerge.

However, the role of identity has until recently been largely ignored by much of the IR literature, such that Heery and Conley (2007: 7) suggested that Edwards, Hyman and Kelly were ‘honourable exceptions’, with the discursive dimensions of power largely neglected by IR scholars. Instead, interest-based explanations and rational-choice analyses predominate (Greer and Hauptmeier, 2012; Meardi, 2011) with resistance to the ‘cultural turn’ that has influenced other disciplines (Heery and Conley, 2007; Holgate, 2005). As Meardi (2011: 336) argues, interests need to be “recognised, defined and expressed – which are three particularly complex processes in the case of collective interests”. Specifically, Meardi looks at the question of national culture, which he argues is largely neglected in IR, and where it is included it is unproblematised, seen as a form of ‘false consciousness’ or used as a variable of last resort when interest-based explanations leave ‘unexplained residua’. National culture he argues is inextricably linked to issues of class, with socialisation processes a significant influence on how actors define their interests. Too often in the IR literature appeals to national identity are referred to perjoratively as ‘parochial’. Interests are understood as the primary driver of behaviour, while appeals to national culture are a rhetorical strategy deployed by actors to conceal their real motives and to mobilise power to further their interests. Subjectivity and processes of identity are taken for granted, and in doing so, aspects of contestation, complexity and contradiction are ignored. Deeper understandings of human agency are needed for analysing interests and how they are shaped and altered (Greer and Hauptmeier, 2012).

Given that the attack on trade unions over much of the past 30 years has undermined collectivism, weakened union legitimacy and political influence, and promoted individualism, the lack of attention by IR scholars to discourse and identity analysis is surprising. This lack of attention to the symbolic is beginning to change and more recently, there has been a greater focus on ideation and symbolic resources in shaping the dynamics of the employment relationship (e.g. Hauptmeier and Heery, 2014) and on the ways in which unions might draw on discursive resources and frame grievances to mobilise resistance (e.g. Lévesque and Murray, 2010; Turnbull, 2010).

While the focus on identity is welcomed, we notice a tendency to reify interests. That is, ideation is marshalled to build collective identity around advancing interests, but the interests themselves are rarely the subject of analysis: they are taken as given rather than being created and open to change. Marks and Thompson (2010: 322) argue that identity and interests need to be treated as “equally plausible explanations of behaviour” in the employment relationship, and importantly they note that identity can trump or negate economic interests as a primary driver of behaviour. It can also lead to a re-defining of interests. Greer and Hauptmeier’s (2012) analysis of the way in which unions were able to build transnational worker

cooperation at General Motors Europe in the face of management whipsawing through ‘identity work’, is better in this regard. Despite much of the literature on international solidarity suggesting that transnational solidarity is unlikely because of conflicting material interests, Greer and Hauptmeier showed that by developing a shared sense of grievance over management practices through education, mobilisation and building relationships between EWC members, a collective identity emerged that allowed interests to be redefined. As a result, different national unions took solidaristic action to support workers in other countries despite the action being against their own locally defined interests. Greer and Hauptmeier (2012) show that interests can be fluid and open to change as a result of identity work.

Laclau and Mouffe’s approach to identity and interests

Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory is an amalgam of developments in Marxist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory. They oppose conceptions of social conflicts in which antagonisms are understood as a clash of agents with fully constituted identities and interests. In deconstructing orthodox Marxist theorising and its privileging of a class identity, Laclau and Mouffe point to the emergence of social movements, such as the environmental movement, that do not appear to be organised around a class consciousness. To theorise these plural contemporary social struggles Laclau and Mouffe turn to Gramsci. His theory of hegemony goes beyond the concept of a class alliance by arguing that identity is constructed on ideology – an organic and relational whole which creates a ‘collective will’ and brings people together around ‘basic principles’ (Gramsci, 1971). However, Laclau and Mouffe argue that Gramsci retains an essentialist core in that even though the meaning of social relations depends on hegemonic articulations whose success is not guaranteed by any laws of history, Gramsci insists that class is always a single unifying principle (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985; Laclau, 1990), all identity and objectivity is incomplete and inherently unstable. Establishing hegemony involves the attempt to fix meaning “so that certain world views, norms and values appear as common sense” (Kenny and Striver, 2012: 619). Laclau and Mouffe define discourse as a social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between objects and practices, while providing contingent positions with which social actors identify. Discourse represents the construction of a structured totality, a “more or less coherent framework... for what can be said and done” (Torfing, 1999 in Kenny and Striver, 2012: 618). This establishment of the relations between objects and practices occurs through articulation: “We will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 105). Relations between elements are created by assigning meaning to what they call signifiers. ‘Floating signifiers’ are important in that they are especially open to being inscribed with different meanings (Laclau, 1990), such as ‘the national interest’, and thus conflicting articulations engage in a struggle to fill them with meaning. Different articulations attempt to fix meaning by creating logics between different signifiers and in doing so exclude alternative meanings. Each articulation organises social space, organises identity and organises discourses, with the ultimate aim of constructing a stable system of objectivities, identities and meanings that appear as natural, or taken for granted (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). This organisation takes place through *the logic of equivalence* – the bringing together into relationship elements that were once isolated, and *the logic of difference* – the linking of elements by emphasising their differences (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), or what have come to be referred to as ‘chains of equivalence’ and ‘chains of

difference'. In building chains of equivalence, commonalities are highlighted and differences are downplayed, such that the identity and interests of previously divergent groups might be altered and mobilised around a common cause or social formation, while chains of difference reinforce a sense of 'the other'. "By reinforcing aspects of sameness and difference, meaning is altered" (Kenny and Striver, 2012: 5). Any apparent social stability is the result of previously successful hegemonic articulations. These discourses are always *contingent* – they might, over time, come to be 'sedimented' and seen as 'objective', but there is always the possibility of them being 'reactivated' and altered by competing articulations.

Kenny and Striver (2012), in examining the concept of the entrepreneur, stress the role of 'affect', or emotive attachment to signifiers, in establishing hegemony. Articulation they posit is not enough on its own to sustain long-term stable hegemony: it needs to evoke emotional attachment through mythic construction or 'fantasmic narrative' (Chang and Glynos, 2011; Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004). Laclau (1990: 67) refers to myth as a "surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed". In Kenny and Striver's study, alternative articulations failed partly because they were unable to build a positive vision that would arouse emotional attachment. Contu et al. (2013) highlight a similar theme in their analysis of collective resistance at two French MNCs that were undergoing restructuring. They use the concept of 'enlargement' to show how chains of equivalence were created at one MNC to build successful resistance against head office restructuring plans but not at the other. Enlargement they argue involves both mobilisation of a range of different actors and the pluralisation of the dispute through connecting it to a broader set of concerns. In their case, the dispute was successfully connected to a wider vision of the type of society that the workers and the wider community wanted.

We now apply Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to an empirical case in order to illustrate its usefulness for analysing the interplay between interests and identity in an industrial dispute, and how these are constructed in discursive struggle.

Method

Our approach is unusual for an analysis of an IR dispute. We were less interested in the 'facts' of the case, as one might adopt in an interest-based analysis, but rather the different articulations of the dispute and meanings that different actors and observers drew from those articulations. The dispute took place between August and October 2010, but we were interested in analysing not only the period of the dispute but also subsequent accounts and commentary, which have continued to shape meaning. Documents and e-mails have been released under New Zealand's Official Information Act (OIA) in the intervening period, and each release has sparked a re-articulation of the dispute by various protagonists and commentators. The period then for which we analysed the data was from mid-2010 until mid-2013. We collected data from a range of sources, including New Zealand print and broadcast websites, commentaries and blogs, public statements issued by the key players, industry and government reports on New Zealand's film industry, and film footage of the dispute on YouTube and media websites. The newspaper search largely focused on the two leading New Zealand outlets, *The New Zealand Herald* and www.stuff.co.nz (the website of Fairfax Media, which operates 10 of New Zealand's other leading newspapers). We also searched the website of Television New Zealand, the national broadcaster. We searched for stories including both 'Hobbit' and some dimension of the dispute ('dispute', 'boycott', 'union'). These searches returned 374 stories. When combined with other sources we had in excess of

450 ‘texts’. Added to the corpus were a number of detailed IR analyses of the dispute (Haworth, 2011; Kelly, 2011; McAndrew and Risak, 2012).

In analysing the data, we were guided by several key concepts within Laclau and Mouffe’s theorizing. Our central questions were: How is *The Hobbit* dispute constituted in discourse? What identities and interests are made available by the different articulations which give it meaning? Articulation denotes these competing ways of constituting the dispute, each of which attempts to become ‘sedimented’ (Laclau, 1990). What chains of equivalence or chains of difference were formed? To what extent were actors able to evoke emotion and enlarge the dispute through mobilisation and pluralisation?

Our analytical approach recognises that all our texts, including ‘realist’ media accounts (as opposed to editorial commentaries) and the academic analyses, are understood as being constitutive of the dispute, rather than merely reflective of it (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011). In addition to the linguistic data, our analysis incorporated other articulatory practices, such as a protest march by film production workers against the actors boycott and the visit to New Zealand by Warner Bros executives. All fall within Laclau and Mouffe’s definition of discourse – all are material and have a constituting effect on each other. Unlike in other forms of discourse analysis there is no distinction made between discursive and non-discursive elements of the social world. We analysed the data systematically, focussing on the key protagonists and looking for the various ways in which identities were made available. Intertwined with these identities were a set of motivations or interests, and these were noted, along with actions that were implied by this combination. We judged that there were two distinct articulations, one of which we assessed to be dominant, or hegemonic, with the other being marginalised. Our analysis is presented in Table 1 – before expanding upon this, we first provide a brief overview of the dispute.

Overview of the Dispute

Peter Jackson is a New Zealand-born Oscar-award winning director, producer and screenwriter, best known for his *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, based on the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien, who also wrote *The Hobbit*. Jackson’s ability to attract Hollywood studios to film in New Zealand saw the industry grow rapidly. In addition to providing jobs and investment, Jackson’s films became an important way of promoting New Zealand as a tourism destination, by increasing awareness of the country and showcasing its spectacular scenery. He is something of a New Zealand icon and was knighted for his services to the film industry.

The first most New Zealanders heard of *The Hobbit* dispute was in September 2010, when the normally media-shy Jackson launched an attack on the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), an Australian union that the New Zealand Actors Equity union (NZAE) joined in 2006. MEAA is a member of the International Federation of Actors (FIA), which represents performer unions in 100 countries, including the powerful Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in the United States. NZAE had tried for some time to improve working conditions in the New Zealand film industry. An industry minimum code (the ‘pink book’) existed, negotiated between NZAE and the Screen Production and Development Association (SPADA), a network of film industry practitioners. This had not been updated since 2005, and NZAE claimed that many elements of the code were not complied with and omitted important terms and conditions (Kelly, 2011). In August 2010, the FIA sent a letter to 3 Foot 7, the production company for *The Hobbit*, stating their concerns about the lack of protection

around working conditions and residual payments (relating to a share of profits and subsequent royalties) given the use of non-union contracts for New Zealand performers. The letter advised that a ‘do not sign’ motion had been agreed in relation to *The Hobbit* until 3 Foot 7 was prepared to engage in collective bargaining with the MEAA. In mid-September, the company’s lawyers wrote to MEAA stating that they were unable to meet with them as to engage in collective bargaining would be illegal under New Zealand’s competition law given that the actors on *The Hobbit* would be employed as independent contractors, rather than as employees. In response, the FIA affiliated unions contacted their members to instruct them not to sign any contracts.

It was at this point that the dispute went public. Jackson issued a statement accusing NZAE of representing only a small percentage of New Zealand actors and the MEAA of taking advantage of New Zealand actors to undermine New Zealand’s reputation as a desirable location for Hollywood studios. He also indicated that, as the demand for engaging in collective negotiation could not be met under New Zealand law (a view rejected by legal advice obtained by NZAE), it was possible that the filming of *The Hobbit* might be cancelled or moved abroad as a result of the union action (Jackson, 2010a). The following day, Warner Bros reiterated the threat to relocate, stating that they were exploring alternative options due to the potential workforce instability. Helen Kelly, President of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (CTU)¹ became involved to try and broker a resolution. In a series of meetings involving the parties, it was agreed the industry ‘pink book’ would be renegotiated, and in the interim any film that met the current terms of the ‘pink book’ would not be subject to NZAE action. NZAE agreed that it would advise the FIA that the ‘do not sign’ order be revoked. On October 17, the Screen Actors Guild informed Warner Bros that the boycott would be lifted and the parties set about reaching an agreement on how this would be announced in public. Warner Bros requested that they be the ones to make the announcement. E-mails between the various protagonists, subsequently shown to the media, revealed that all the parties were aware that the industrial action was resolved (Kelly, 2011). Jackson and the producers subsequently argued that the damage had already been done and hence the threat of relocation remained real.

On October 20, a meeting of film technicians was called by Richard Taylor, the leader of Wellington-based special-effects company Weta, which had already begun pre-production work on *The Hobbit*. Weta was formed by Taylor and Jackson in 1994 and had since acquired international acclaim through its production of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *King Kong*. Taylor had won five Oscars and like Jackson, had been knighted for his contribution to New Zealand’s film industry. Within hours, 1500 people had gathered at Weta’s Wellington studio where they were informed that the boycott remained in place and were given a leaflet containing various accusations against the MEAA and NZAE. Placards, such as ‘Save the people of the Shire’², ‘New Zealand IS Middle Earth’, ‘Please save my Precious home’³ and ‘Aussie unions out’, were available for the crowd who then marched through the city. The threat to the filming was played up in the following days, and rallies

¹ Helen Kelly passed away in October 2016.

² The Shire is a region of the fictional ‘Middle-earth’ in J.R.R. Tolkien’s novels.

³ Gollum, a character in *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, refers to The Ring as ‘my precious’ because of the special powers it gave him.

attended by members of the public were held in a number of cities across the country in support of *The Hobbit*.

The day after the Wellington march, Jackson announced Warner Bros' executives were coming to New Zealand to make arrangements to move *The Hobbit* offshore. Prime Minister John Key offered to meet with them in a last-ditch attempt to keep the movies in New Zealand. The executives arrived on October 26 and were transported by government limousines to the Prime Minister's official residence for meetings with ministers and officials. After two days of negotiations, Key announced that a deal had been struck. The following day the House of Representatives would be put into urgency to pass a law change, meaning it would bypass the usual law making process. The new law would change the definition of 'employee' under the Employment Relations Act by excluding film production workers, thereby categorising them as independent contractors even if the real nature of their employment might be that of an employee. This would mean they could not avail of collective bargaining and legislative minimum employment conditions and protections, such as the minimum wage, annual leave entitlements, personal grievance dispute resolution, unfair dismissal protection and the right to strike (Nuttall, 2011).

In addition to the law change, Warner Bros' executives negotiated a further NZ\$33.5 million of support from the New Zealand government, on top of more than NZ\$60 million previously secured. In return, Jackson would create a promotion for New Zealand as a tourism destination which would be included on DVDs and New Zealand would host the world premiere for one of *The Hobbit* movies.

A Laclau and Mouffe Analysis

In analysing the dispute, we identified two articulations engaged in a struggle, or political contest, to become the dominant way of making sense of the conflict. The first articulation, which became hegemonic as the dispute played out, was constructed around national identity, while the second articulation was constructed around the fight for workers' rights against a powerful multinational.

INSERT Table 1 about here

The first articulation draws on a number of constituent discourses that locate the conflict over the *The Hobbit* films within an on-going national identity project, which had its origins in the filming of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Jones and Smith (2005) note that while *Lord of the Rings* was not exactly 'local', being based on an English novel and financed by an American studio, it was part of a cultural project to legitimise a reconfigured national identity. The New Zealand government worked to develop spin-offs from the films for promoting New Zealand as a film location and profiling the country as a tourism destination.

In the conflict over *The Hobbit*, the films themselves take on a particular meaning connected to this national identity, as veteran broadcaster Paul Holmes (2010) explained:

They have more than become our property, as it were. They have become us. We are extremely proud of them. We love what they say about us, not only in terms of the landscape and the gorgeous country that is ours but also in terms of what they say about our creative ability, our creative people and their extraordinary professionalism.

The films then, are understood as a floating signifier that is filled with meaning by a discursive articulation, a combination of discourses of scenic beauty, creativity and professionalism. As well as giving meaning to objects, this discursive articulation makes available particular identities and interests for the protagonists in the dispute. Peter Jackson, for instance, is a patriotic Kiwi hero and the patriarch of New Zealand's film industry. One commentator noted:

Instead of running to Hollywood to make movies, he performed some magic of his own and got the money to run to him. He built a Hollywood-style film studio in Wellington, a small windy town on the edge of the world. In rolled the stars, in rolled the millions, in rolled the Oscars. Then the tourists followed. And finally, the Knighthood. If individual resourcefulness and "have-a-go" culture is a religion in New Zealand, then Jackson is something of a god (O'Leary, 2010).

Jackson not only placed New Zealand 'on the map', but when it came to big budget films, New Zealand assumed a central position. Wellington hosted the première of the first of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in 2001, with the city temporarily re-named 'Middle-earth' to mark the occasion. Since then it has been colloquially known as 'Wellywood', with a giant sign mimicking that of 'Hollywood' proposed at one point by the airport authority to greet international visitors. A 'fantasmic narrative' (Chang and Glynos, 2011; Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2004) is built around the signifier 'Middle-earth', constituting New Zealand as a creative, entrepreneurial nation at the centre of the world's attention. A personal statement by Jackson read at the public rallies stated:

You have said loudly and clearly New Zealand is where *The Hobbit* films should be made; their creative DNA is here. This is where Middle-Earth was born and this is where it should stay (Jackson, 2010b).

Within this articulation, Jackson's primary interest is saving the New Zealand film industry from an Australian union which constitutes a threat to the potential realisation of this fantasy. I can't see beyond the ugly spectre of an Australian bully-boy, using what he perceives as his weak Kiwi cousins to gain a foothold in this country's film industry... It feels as if we have a large Aussie cousin kicking sand in our eyes. (Jackson, 2010a).

This narrative resonates deeply with New Zealanders – of a small nation vulnerable to its big 'bully-boy' neighbour. It reflects a national insecurity – part material because of the relative size and economic power of the two nations, and part social, based on a perception that Australians are more successful. Within this articulation, New Zealand's film industry becomes something valuable that our Australian cousins would readily take from us.

I believe the Kiwi way of doing things should be protected and celebrated. Turning us into another State of Australia, under the sway of a destructive organisation, carries the very real risk of destroying the big heart that beats inside our films (Jackson, 2010b).

This conception of *The Hobbit* conflict as a national identity project was contested by an articulation of it as a fight for workers rights. Here, unions presented legitimate demands for collective bargaining in order to improve working conditions in the sector. The concern of

New Zealand actors had been evident during the filming of the *Lord of the Rings*, where an American from the production team was overheard describing New Zealand performers as “Mexicans with cellphones”, in reference to their low pay and inferior working conditions. Within this articulation, the dispute can be understood as an attempt to build transnational labour solidarity in response to deteriorating working conditions. By building an international alliance with their Australian counterparts, NZAE attempted to mobilise against the greater power of employers in the New Zealand film industry. Their attempts, however, were crushed by the troika of a transnational conglomerate, a powerful and popular domestic icon and a neo-liberal, anti-union government. The inequality of bargaining power was exacerbated by a largely uncritical media seduced by the international success of Jackson (c.f. Haworth, 2011; Kelly, 2011; McAndrew and Risak, 2012).

Within this articulation, Jackson takes on the identity of capitalist or employer with an interest in weakening union power. As one of the leading film producers in New Zealand, Jackson benefits in future filming from legislation that shields employers from union activities and allows employees to be engaged as contract workers, regardless of the substance of their employment. His production company had lost a case relating to this issue⁴ and the law changed ensured he would not be faced with this situation in future.

According to McAndrew and Risak (2010: 19), Jackson adopted a predictable and calculating line of attack, a “textbook example” of an effective union-free strategy:

The threat to pull the productions was introduced early, maintained throughout, and heightened as time went by, providing urgency to the negotiations, value to the concessions demanded, a basis for vilification of the union, and popular relief and gratitude when the deal was done.

Jackson employed unitarist language in order to undermine the legitimate representative role of the unions, talking of the industry as a “big, noisy, growing family” and a “creative community” that could sort out any employment problems themselves without the involvement of an “Australian trade union, who will never put the interests of Kiwis first” (Jackson 2010b). He played on the fears of workers in the industry and the public by pointing to the potential economic loss of jobs for thousands of film industry workers and “millions of Warner Brothers dollars... about to be spent in our economy”, all because a “tiny minority is endangering” the project for political gain. Thus, throughout the dispute he stirred up anti-union prejudices among the public and employed “time-honored strategies of fear and hatred” (McAndrew and Risak, 2010: 19). In this articulation, the threatened relocation by Warner Bros was merely a ‘bluff’ to extort further financial incentives from the New Zealand government. Between the original decision to make the film and the dispute, the New Zealand dollar had appreciated from 50c to 75c against the US dollar, significantly increasing their costs (Kelly, 2011; McAndrew and Risak, 2012).

⁴ At issue here was the case of James Bryson, who worked for Jackson’s production company 3 Foot 6 on special effects for *Lord of the Rings*. Bryson was made redundant and argued that he was unfairly dismissed. Under the Employment Relations Act (2000), he could only pursue a personal grievance if he was an employee, rather than an independent contractor. The Employment Court found that, even though his contract described him as an independent contractor, the real nature of his employment was that of an employee and therefore entitled to pursue his personal grievance. The Court of Appeal reversed the Employment Court decision but the Supreme Court upheld the original ruling.

The identities and interests of others involved in the dispute are also contested within these different articulations, as illustrated in Table 1. The actors are simultaneously selfish, victims of union bullying *and* victims of the power of global capital, depending on their identification within the competing articulations. In the latter articulation, joining MEAA, a stronger, well-resourced Australian union, is a rational response. As Haworth (2011) points out, in the context of globalised capital, labour has a right to mobilise internationally. While Jackson characterised the involvement of MEAA as undermining the independence of New Zealand actors, Robyn Malcolm, a well-known New Zealand actress and heroine of the highly acclaimed *Outrageous Fortune* television series, and one of the spokespersons for NZAE throughout the dispute, denied they were being dictated to by the MEAA. NZAE appreciated the support of the MEAA and FIA in their fight for workers' rights.

In the dominant articulation the film technicians are 'skilled entrepreneurs' who want successful careers in the local film industry and who do not need unions purporting to represent their interests. They become victims whose livelihoods have been put at risk by an irresponsible union action. They are also 'proud Kiwis' who want *The Hobbit* filmed in New Zealand for both its economic and symbolic benefits. In the alternate articulation, the film technicians are 'vulnerable workers' with a shared interest in better working conditions and therefore a rational reason to support the union action, but are frightened for their jobs.

The interests of Prime Minister John Key are also contested. In the first articulation, he is a saviour, the person who stands between New Zealand keeping and losing its film industry. The concessions he made during the negotiations with Warner Bros are necessary trade-offs. In the competing articulation, he leads a neo-liberal government that had already weakened labour laws since it had come to power in 2008, and the dispute provided him an opportunity to undermine further the trade union movement and deregulate the labour market (Haworth, 2011).

Also contested in *The Hobbit* dispute is a conception of the 'national interest'. In the dominant articulation it was in New Zealand's interests to do a deal with Warner Bros because of the economic benefits of the films, because of what the films say about New Zealanders and because it presented an opportunity to create a more flexible labour market to attract foreign direct investment. Following the announcement of the deal, Jackson thanked the government for introducing the new legislation, saying it would "provide much needed stability and reassurance for film workers as well as investors from within New Zealand and overseas" (New Zealand Herald, 2010). For the unions as well as Opposition MPs, it was in New Zealand's interest that it not bow to the demands of Warner Bros and instead retain its sovereignty and protect the rights of workers. The irony of public rallies in support of *The Hobbit* being held on Labour Day was noted by one commentator:

On Monday, Samuel Parnell, the father of the eight-hour day, would have turned in his grave at the way the day set aside in his memory was desecrated. Up and down the land, crowds marched and rallied to pledge to be servile to a Hollywood movie conglomerate (Rudman, 2010).

Again, we see here that a practice, the public rallies, means both a public affirmation of an emergent national identity *and* a pledge of servitude to global capital, dependent on its articulation within particular collections of discourses.

Following the release of various e-mails over the following three years, the major protagonists continued to attempt to shape the articulation. For instance, Jackson has been accused of keeping the threat of industrial action and relocation alive, even after the industrial action was resolved. Indeed, subsequent information released under New Zealand's Official Information Act (OIA) showed that the boycott by the actors had never been a concern for the film studio. Jackson had thus "enabled the unions to be scapegoated publicly... [in] a fictitious political climate of perilous uncertainty" (Campbell, 2012). In response, Jackson stressed that it was the uncertainty around the nature of employment contracts and collective bargaining that worried Warner Bros. The original hegemonic articulation, however, has become largely 'sedimented'. While the release of these e-mails received some coverage in the media, the dispute had been resolved, the filming completed, and the government felt under no pressure to reverse the changes to employment rights.

Discussion

Chains of equivalence: enlargement and affect

Why did one articulation become dominant over the other? The concepts of chains of equivalence helps us understand the outcome. We can see that Jackson was able to enlarge the dispute by creating a chain of equivalence, with the films and national identity as floating signifiers filled with meaning. Film workers who shared a common interest with actors in working conditions identified more with Jackson's articulation than that of the NZAE and were mobilised to march in support of the films. Large numbers of the public joined in the public rallies, which gave the impression that there was widespread public support to keep the films in New Zealand and equally widespread opposition to the union's campaign. Jackson was able to use the logic of difference to highlight the involvement of the Australian union as 'the other'. Following Contu et al. (2013), we note the mobilisation of a range of different actors and the pluralisation of the dispute by connecting to 'middle earth' as key elements in why his articulation was successful. What was especially notable in this dispute was the strength of the affective responses it engendered (Kenny & Striver, 2012). Local advocates for the union position, including long-standing and well-regarded performers, were vilified and their safety threatened. The march organised by Peter Taylor was the largest public protest seen in New Zealand's capital for five years and it spawned other public rallies in support of *The Hobbit* around the country. Each stage in the dispute was played out in public via the media, and normal programming on TV1, a State-owned broadcasting channel, was interrupted to announce that an agreement had been reached with Warner Bros to keep the films in New Zealand. It would be easy to blame 'tabloid journalism' for sensationalising the dispute rather than engaging in a rational discussion of the competing positions and the issues involved. This is not to deny that the media played a role, both in reflecting public opinion and in shaping it, and research elsewhere points to a media bias against unions taking industrial action (Philo et al., 1995). However, this was about more than the media presentation of an industrial dispute: it had become 'enlarged' and was less about employment issues and more about a quest for national identity.

At the same time, the unions were unsuccessful in mobilising support for their campaign. It was assumed the film production workers would share their interests in improving working conditions. More importantly, they had not given consideration to the identity processes nor anticipated that the dispute would come to be understood as an attack on national identity.

Had they done so they might have articulated a vision that connected with the issues of national identity that the films evoked – for example, about fairness and New Zealand film workers sharing in the success of ‘middle earth’. Alternatively, while there was a sound justification for picking an international film in order to benefit from international actor solidarity, given previous lack of success engaging domestic film producers in collective bargaining (Kelly, 2011), had they been more cognisant of these sorts of identifications, they might have chosen another Hollywood-funded film shot in New Zealand that was not so entwined with national identifications.

The contingency and dynamism of identities and interests

Our analysis shows how individuals, groups and states are sites of multiple interests and identities. Agents did not ‘enter’ this dispute with fully-formed interests and identities– they were constituted, reproduced and transformed through contingent articulatory practices throughout the dispute and in subsequent commentary. Some strands of the IR literature (that we reviewed earlier) point to interests as the primary driver of behaviour, with discourse seen as a rhetorical device to advance and privilege interests. The role of the researcher in this view is to uncover the interests hidden behind the discourse and behaviour of those involved. As the central explanatory variable, interests are not problematised but taken as stable and pre-determined (Whittle and Mueller, 2011). For Laclau and Mouffe, language is not just a ‘channel’ or ‘funnel’ for the communication of interests. Language creates the social world – it is constructive of this dispute – it creates and transforms the interests and identities of those involved.

The union initiated the dispute with a clear set of interests identified. However, while these interests were shared by the actors as a result of on-going attempts to engage New Zealand employers in collective bargaining, they were not shared by the film production workers. According to Kelly (2011), a delegation from this sector had come to see the CTU the previous year to discuss concerns about working conditions. It was perhaps not unreasonable, therefore, for the unions to think the technicians would be on their side. However, their loyalties to Jackson and Taylor, combined with identification as entrepreneurs and proud New Zealanders, meant their interests were multi-faceted, contested and open to change. In contrast, McAndrew and Risak (2012: 19) portray them as frightened for their jobs – that is, they presume to know what their interests are and how they would act were it not for the “significant influence” Jackson and Taylor “commanded” over them. In the case of the public, they portray them as hoodwinked when Jackson “slipped into Kiwi costume and played the patriotic card” by mischievously characterising the dispute as an Australian attempt to ruin New Zealand’s film industry rather than as a conflict over union bargaining and working conditions. However, their analysis ignores the way in which the dispute was not just an industrial dispute over material interests, but also a battle for national identity where the symbolic and material aspects of the dispute were inexorably linked: the nation state was a primary source of identification and what was in the ‘national interest’ was highly contested. By assuming that material interests are the explanatory variable, they fail to account for the way in which interests are multiple, complex and shifting. It also assumes that discourse is an all powerful, pervading force that people cannot resist or engage with. In contrast, by drawing on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, we highlight how interests and identity are co-created and contested in a political struggle over meaning.

The New Zealand public also play an important role. Their widespread identification with the films, connected to an emerging national identity, shaped their understanding of what was in

the ‘national interest’ and thus allowed the National government much leeway in how they sought to resolve the dispute. John Key could trade off whatever was necessary to save *The Hobbit* and was able to characterise those who supported the union action as unpatriotic ‘Hobbit haters’.

The ‘truth’ of the matter.

Critics of our analysis might argue that our treatment of the conflict ignores what Hay (1996, 265-6) refers to as “the descriptive accuracy” of the representation of it – in other words, the ‘facts’. For instance, we noted earlier that information released under New Zealand’s Official Information Act (OIA) showed that the boycott by the actors had never been a concern for the film studio. As CTU President Helen Kelly (2011) concluded in her insider account of the dispute, Jackson, Warner Bros and the Government engaged in “collusion against the New Zealand tax payer and New Zealand workers” in “maintaining the fiction”. From a realist perspective, we can make a reasonable assessment of Peter Jackson’s motivations and interests based on what he said and communicated through various documents. But for Laclau and Mouffe, what is important is not the ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ of competing articulations, but that through a political process some come to be regarded as more truthful than others, with particular effects. For them, the union articulation *creates* Peter Jackson as an employer looking to weaken union power and further the financial interests of his own production firm and of Warner Bros, but the counter articulation also *creates* Peter Jackson as a patriotic New Zealander fighting to save the film industry. Thus, interests become a topic for analysis rather than reified, and the focus of analysis is on *how they are produced* through discursive practices and what the *effects* of this are. From our analysis of the way in which the conflict played out, we can be reasonably confident that Jackson was identified first and foremost by large sections of the New Zealand public to be a New Zealander whose motivation was to protect and advance the New Zealand film industry, whatever we might think his ‘real’ interests and motivations were.

As Willmott (2005: 762) explains, Laclau and Mouffe’s “primary concern is not the epistemological one of revealing phenomena that have been previously overlooked or misrepresented but, rather, the political-ethical one of constructing or advancing a social ontology that is compatible with emancipatory change”. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe would encourage us to think about this industrial dispute as the play of politics – as a production, reproduction and contestation over the fixation of meaning. From this perspective, those who have commented on the conflict, both in the media and in academic analyses, are part of these political processes. Those who have sought to highlight the ‘facts’ about Jackson’s motives and interests are attempting to constitute the dispute in a way that denies the articulation of Jackson as altruistically motivated by the national interest. This articulation did not succeed in achieving hegemony when the dispute played out, but it continues to challenge the dominant understanding of the dispute and may have political effects further down the line.

For IR scholars, there is a ‘reality’ and one of the roles of the researcher is to attempt to uncover it as best as possible, through a variety of research methods. This reality may not always be clearly visible, and researchers’ accounts may be partial, provisional and partly subjective, but academic rigour enables some degree of truthfulness to be uncovered. In doing so, less truthful accounts can be challenged. From this perspective, a danger of the approach of Laclau and Mouffe is that integrity and honesty might be sacrificed in the pursuit of hegemony. If ‘truth’ is not important in a so-called ‘post-truth world’, then is one

implication of the analysis that unions should have been equally ‘creative’ in their articulations? We would argue that integrity matters, and one way of competing for meaning is to highlight the ‘facts’ in the dispute and challenge any mistruths. As Mutch (2005: 785) argues, “a key part of the emancipatory project is its scrutiny of precisely what is happening in ‘reality’”. However, as this case and recent political events such as Brexit and the US Presidential election have shown us, challenging the veracity of facts is not enough in winning the battle for hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe draw our attention to the importance of an alternate vision.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have drawn on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe to develop a conceptual framework which accounts for the competing explanations of the dispute over the filming of *The Hobbit*. In doing so, we have advanced the theorisation of interests and identity dynamics by highlighting how they can at times be co-created and contested in a political struggle over meaning. Discursive practices not only influence the way a dispute is understood by the public at large, but they can also reproduce IR regimes and the workers themselves (Herod, 1998). By drawing on the concept of chains of equivalence, we show how Jackson was able to mobilise support for his position through enlargement and pluralisation. We also add to the literature on Laclau and Mouffe by applying their theory to an empirical issue that has not previously been analysed in this way.

We acknowledge that our analysis only focuses on limited aspects of the dispute; the contest for meaning between the different articulations and how one became hegemonic. Other scholars have adopted different lenses: Haworth (2011) gives an excellent account of the political economy dimensions of the dispute, highlighting the leverage that Warner Bros wielded as a result of the ‘massification’ of the global film industry; McAndrew and Risak (2012) place their account of the dispute in the context of the film industry’s finance structures, including exorbitant fees to attract to ‘star’ directors and actors and concomitant pressure on producers to cut ‘below the line’ labour costs (including minor actors, technicians, craftspeople, etc.); and Nuttall (2011) focuses on the legal dimensions of the dispute, highlighting the *Bryson v Three Foot Six Ltd.* Case, which underpinned the request for the law change. However, we have chosen to focus on the ideological forces and the identity issues as we think these are important in this case and have been inadequately addressed up to now.

In thinking about the study of interests within the IR literature, we believe greater reflexivity is called for. Much IR research is not reflexive about interests – we tend not to subject them to analysis and as a result, there is a danger we see what we want to see. Laclau and Mouffe’s contribution is a sobering reminder that our academic analyses are political constructions involved in a contest to be seen as legitimate ways of giving meaning to phenomena such as industrial disputes. This insight is not to disparage the value of other forms of analysis, or to deny that these conflicts have real, material effects for those engaged in them. Rather it is to recognise that one of our tasks, as well as the task of those involved ‘on the ground’, is to win the battle for hegemony.

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Table 1: Interests and Identities in *The Hobbit* conflict

Agent	Identities	Interests	Implied Action	Strength of articulation
Peter Jackson	Patriotic Kiwi hero	Showcase NZ's natural beauty and creative talents	Convince Government to do what's necessary to keep the films	Dominant
	Patriarch of NZ film industry	Increase financial incentives for overseas film producers	Convince government to further support film industry	Dominant
	Capitalist	Weakening union power	Convince government to reduce union power in employment relations legislation	Marginal
Other NZ Film Workers	Skilled entrepreneurs	Successful careers in the NZ film industry	Protest the union action for threatening their jobs.	Dominant
	Proud NZers	Keeping <i>The Hobbit</i> in NZ, Successful careers in the NZ film industry	Protest the union action for potentially jeopardising the films staying in NZ	Dominant
	Vulnerable workers	Shared interest with the actors in better working conditions	Support the union action to strength their own position	Marginal
MEAA	Bullies	Taking advantage of NZ actors to undermine NZ film industry	Advise NZAE to boycott which will result in NZ losing <i>The Hobbit</i> offshore.	Dominant
	Benevolent representative of workers	Improved working conditions in NZ film industry	Show solidarity through initiating a boycott to assist NZ performers achieve collective bargaining	Marginal
Warner Bros	Rational Transnational Corporation	Maximise profit	Secure a better financial deal with NZ Government or look for a better deal elsewhere. Argue for more favourable employment law.	Marginal
	Exploitative Transnational	Maximise their profitability of The Hobbit films	Play NZ off against other countries, threaten to leave if they don't get what they want.	Marginal
Prime Minister John Key and Govt	Pragmatic	Secure <i>The Hobbit</i> for NZ	Offer Warner Bros what is needed to have them film in NZ.	Dominant
	Neo-liberal	Weakening union power	Use the negotiations with Warner Bros to push through change in employment law	Marginal