

More than Resistance

Striving for Universalization

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1.

Social protest, dissent, non-conformism, subversion, sabotage, rebellion, revolt, disobedience, and resistance: over the last years and even decades these terms and concepts have been widely discussed within social movements, their associated critical theory and social analysis.

Subversive action should question normalizing social dispositives, delegitimize state violence, and erode social customs. It should loosen the naturally appearing relationship between signifier and signified, undermine the collectively binding meaning of discursive practices, and render the performativity of sex and everyday racism visible.

Johannes Agnoli was without a doubt one of the most important theorists of resistance and subversion in Germany. In the introduction to his 1989/1990 lecture “Subversive Theory” he gave a concise formulation of the central aspects of subversion and resistance.

Theory of overthrow: subversion as the subject of action; or as perspective of all theory ‘in destitute times’—the only possibility of emancipatory thought. That is the thing itself. The thing itself develops historically as a stunning negation of both the existing ‘best order’ and the ‘value system’ of the time. (Agnoli 15)

In these few sentences, Agnoli deploys a figure of thought which can be found in the gender theory of Judith Butler, the social theory of Ernesto Laclau, the democracy theory of Jacques Rancière, as well as the ethics of Jürgen Habermas and Simon Critchley. All of these authors assume that power is located in the naturalization of meaning, the fixation of socially

binding universalities, and the unquestioned monopoly of decisions, decision makers, and decision making institutions. Power causes and results from the fact that meaning—produced by the play of signifier and discourse—no longer appears as arbitrary; that universality is tied to the body and the way of life of a social group; that political institutions and decisions are presented and understood as something altogether different from what they are: the result of political struggles and negotiations. Power causes and is the cause of the coordinates of our social and political organization appearing as a foregone conclusion and natural state of affairs, rather than the totalization of a hegemonic project. In these few sentences Johannes Agnoli however—maybe unwittingly—also expresses one of the central weaknesses of the theory of subversion and resistance. Subversion undermines the established and naturalized practices, resistance turns against the practices of power, but in a singular and specific way these practices of subversion and resistance remain formal and subaltern. Again and again, subversion can or must refer itself to the established—and seen as the best possible—order. Resistance in the name of the other, the signifier and the *sans-parts* turns against the apparently inevitable and necessary crystallization of power. Subversion and resistance are not ‘one-off’ acts. Instead they embody a universal principle. There will always be a right to resist: a right of those who do not accept a given order, who have no part, no voice, and no visibility. Under all the thinkable forms of the social and political, there is always this irreducible space of resistance and subversion. Power, police, hegemony, and the identitary logic of fixed identities will always strive to close this space. They will make their case and claim that resistance is superfluous and dispensable, arguing that the historical calls and claims for emancipation have already been answered and honored. With liberal democracy we have reached the end of history. Radical theories of democracy turn against such an end, and yet they fail to truly go beyond liberal democracy. Everything continues to play out within its horizon. It is seen as open and pluralistic, everything is constructed and everything can be deconstructed again. Whenever as yet new and unpredictable forms of exclusion, dispossession, closure, totalization, and naturalization of the social emerge, these forms will again and again lead to renewed resistance and subversion. For this very reason a theory of subversion and resistance is about keeping a space open for the coming resistance and the coming democracy.

This should not be underestimated. Resistance against exclusion, imposed inequality, disadvantage, disfranchisement, and invisibility cannot be stopped in the name of a once achieved freedom. No tyranny is worse than that emerging from a grave: the attempt, by those in the present, to fix and regulate the life of future generations. It is a central impulse of every theory of emancipation to keep open the social space for the logical possibility of resistance. The argument for resistance is however problematic for three reasons.

Firstly, resistance is formally defined as a negation of the existing order. In this respect, the quality of the existing plays as little a role as the quality of resistance itself. We are therefore faced with the question of the criteria for resistance. What about the resistance of those who, after the establishment of a new way of life and emancipated form of communal living, want to restore the old order and traditional practices? A purely formal definition of resistance becomes even more difficult to sustain when it comes to a functional shift resistance can go through; such a shift can be that resistance becomes an affirmative action, even if many still see, fear, or suspect its critical, resistant and oppositional potential.

Secondly, the resistance of a social group is dependent on another group exercising its power and domination, organizing the social order and taking the initiative to establish the *Nomos* (the order of universally binding principles). The collective subject of resistance is itself the result of the power of another collective. It therefore remains subaltern, being always and only defined by that which the other group—those in power—does. Resistance does not form an own perspective, it is always only resistance; it is defined by that which it turns against.

Thirdly and finally, in the perspective of resistance, the history of humankind itself appears as a mythological fatality: a fatality in which resistance needs to assert itself from anew, again and again. Even if one were to accept or assume that those resisting were to, one day, successfully assert themselves, this would only be the forerunner to a newly constituted discriminated and oppressed subject and its new, different, as yet unknown type of resistance. After resistance is before resistance and the perspective of reconciliation appears messianic and utopian.

After these considerations, one could have the impression that resistance is external to the practice of power. But in this case we would not be dealing with resistance, but a different, positively existent, kind of power, prevented from pursuing its own goals and strategies on its

own terrain. In contrast, resistance is situated within the same terrain as power. Resistance follows from power and deploys itself against power, and yet remains wholly tied to it. There therefore seems to be a dialectic between power and resistance. In a remarkable passage, Michel Foucault emphasizes the internal relation between power and resistance and points to the paradox of power and resistance: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (*The History* 95). What does he mean? Is he trying to show the subalternity of resistance, or is he trying to comfort us: telling us there will never be power without resistance? That would of course be comforting and appeasing for everyone who cannot live with the infamies of power: Power will never have a final victory. One can always count on at least temporary reversals of power relations (cf. Foucault, *Discipline* 27). This reassurance however carries an ambivalence, resistance follows power and remains its subordinate. It is therefore a small comfort: There will always be resistance but power always prevails one way or another. In this respect one can, referring to Slavoj Žižek (2007) say that “resistance is surrender,” that the “politics of resistance is nothing but the moralising supplement of power” (7). With his immanent-theoretical thought, Foucault suggests another question of an equally disillusioning nature: Does resistance just follow power, or conversely does power not always and also constitute itself in and as an anticipation to the resistance it will inevitably call forth? The cause of power would thereby lay in resistance, with resistance itself being written into the genesis of power. Understood this way, resistance is always and already contained in the outline of power. Resistance may drive power before it, but as long as it is not successful in leaving the field and terrain of power, it cannot be as resistant as it might imagine itself to be. In view of this circularity of power and resistance, Foucault was accused of having a functional understanding of power. Power would accordingly reproduce itself through the respective instance of resistance. That is why Foucault can also defend the idea that resistance is never located outside of power. It does not affect power from without, but is always located on the terrain of power itself. To the question whether the relationship between power and resistance is a tautological one, Foucault answered affirmatively.

Absolutely. I am not positing a substance of resistance versus a substance of power. I am just saying: as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility

of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy. ("Power" 123)

Objecting to Foucault's conception on the basis of a functional tautology is itself problematic, because the argument itself implies a teleological relationship between power and resistance and itself plays the game of power. Power is not just about having power over someone and breaking their resistance, but it is about having the power to prescribe the rules and terms of the fight to those who want to resist: to have power is to prompt resistance and to impose the rules of that fight. Power is therefore also powerful because it succeeds in renewing the conditions under which it exists and in transforming every moment of resistance into a moment of increased power. Resistance is reckoned with. Power which wants to reproduce itself must for that very reason deploy the techniques and rationalities of its resistant opponent: to drive on the deployment of power and to elevate itself to new levels. We are therefore not dealing with a functional tautology, but with an adequate theoretical insight. Resistance itself can induce the renewal of power and its elevation to new heights. One can only talk of a tautology of power and resistance inasmuch as a real and temporary victory of power took place, which manages to subjugate any as of yet uncompliant element. One result of this power can be the self-humbling of those who become enamored in their own acts of subversion, revolt, or resistance, and thereby subordinate themselves to the function of power. But with each further step, power necessarily produces new antagonistic constellations. It is for this reason that it is in no way certain that power will assert itself; there is no absolute-zero of power and resistance; and it is wrong to think of the polar constellation of power and domination on the one side and resistance on the other. If power can determine the action of its subjects, many and asymmetrical forms of resistance still remain (cf. Lüdtke 337). The power and resistance relation is no zero sum game; they each point to alternatives beyond themselves.

2.

The relationship between power and resistance therefore needs to be de-tautologized. This means also seeing that part of resistance which is not formal, not subaltern, and which wants to go beyond resistance. Against

those ideas according to which our societies are stable and integrated and deviations and delinquency are only identifiable in exceptional circumstances, in different and specific social conditions; we see resistance emerge in a variety of forms and from a variety of actors. Everyone is struggling with everyone, even the individual with itself. It is also for this reason that Foucault suggested to do away with the concept of repression: the concepts of fight, struggle, strategy, and tactic being more appropriate. In interviews he on several occasions expresses his bewilderment that the vocabulary of struggle and relation of forces is used so widely in certain political discourses in such an un-reflected way. One should, according to Foucault, take the totality of resistant practices in “tactical and strategic terms, positing that each offensive from the one side serves as leverage for a counter-offensive from the other” (“The Eye” 163). This is why the analysis of power “is a matter rather of establishing the positions occupied and modes of actions used by each of the forces at work, the possibilities of resistance and counter-attack on either side” (Foucault, “The Eye” 163-64). It is about establishing who is taking part in the struggle, what for, how, where, with which instruments, and following which rationality. From Foucault’s perspective, it does not start with a struggle of external and global contradictions but with a field of powers and resistances: with a multiplicity of tactics and strategies. Power and resistance do not just face each other on opposite sides: One can turn into the other. What was once a protest can quickly become a form of exercise of power, the subaltern who up until now rejected power can in the next moment exercise power, those who are in one respect perpetrators can be victims the next moment and vice versa.

Following E. P. Thompson, and arguing very much along the lines of Foucault, the historian Alf Lüdtke argues that resistance has its big, official, statistically observable side: the protests, demonstrations, strikes, unrest, insurgencies, revolts, and acts of civil disobedience. But all these spectacular actions must be seen in a larger context: They take place on the foundation of a multitude of inconspicuous, quiet forms of resistance and are as such only the tip of the iceberg. Below the level of the calculated countermovement, numerous and ambiguous resistance movements and activities, by individuals, small or large groups, can be observed. A comprehensive analytical perspective and phenomenology is necessary to account for all of these practices: the quiet withdrawal, keeping silent, complaint and doubt, distance and non-participation,

refusal and refractoriness, emigration. A large number of such quiet practices can be observed in companies, workplaces, and the military: work-to-rule, absenteeism, arriving late, prolonged breaks for smoking or to use the restroom, intentional production of defective goods, changes of work place, refusing military service, refusing military orders, attacks on bullying officers, enjoying oneself, fleeing into religion, or using art as a form of resistance to a brutal world, just not thinking about things because there is not much we can do about it anyway, or to defy the nonsense of the reigning state of affairs with rational thought; all of these can be moments of resistance. Finally, resistance can also use power to its own ends. Lüdtkke, much like Foucault, sees the use individuals make of authority: Much to the distress of the military administration, housewives hang their underwear on the ramparts or use the constant meddling of the police to denounce their husbands and neighbors to the king, accusing them of alcoholism and rape (cf. Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, Lecture 7, 14 Feb. 1973). Lüdtkke suggests that these micro-practices of resistance take place quietly and secretly. This may well be the case: as with the soldier Schwejk, not everything is done and justified consciously. Nonetheless, the argument of quiet unspoken resistance does not strike me as plausible: In the stairwells and kitchens, in the school yards, in the train and on the way home from the barracks, in the pub with others, people talk and discuss these things. People think and reason about to what extent dissent, resistance, and conflict is worth it; whether there are any alternatives or whether it would not just make everything worse.

Resistance seems to be deeply and widely seated in our everyday life and takes place in a multitude of local, regional, unspoken and spoken, individual and collective ways and practices. To a large extent, these practices take place way below the level of wild outbursts of protest or calculated and rationalized strategies and practices of resistant action. Foucault, who strongly emphasized this aspect of local struggles and tactics, however also clearly and emphatically emphasizes the weakness of such struggles, based only on local resistance at the workplace, in the research laboratory or within the family. He sees the danger of restricting oneself to momentary, transient struggles and to limited claims (cf. "Truth" 130). Without a global strategy, local struggles can easily find themselves in a situation in which they become isolated and far removed from that which their expansion could have made possible. The restriction to the local and the specific contradictions sets one up for failure and

defeat. But strategies do not appear from nowhere. As we are dealing with a multitude of local and situative tactics, and due to the fact that the exercise of power as well as resistance can, depending on the constellation of forces, always rapidly be recoded, strategies are themselves the result of complex practices which have consolidated and universalized a multitude of opposing or marginal practices. We must also consider the resistances which form themselves in opposition to a universalizing strategy. To focus our attention on the big social contradictions and their corresponding macro-subjects, i.e., the proletariat, the women's movement, the new social movements, is therefore misleading. It is not that such macro-subjects do not exist, but when they are presented as pre-existing subjects of a collective and rationalized resistance, the processes by which the tactics are assembled into strategies are ignored. Such collective subjectivities and their macro practices are, when they form at all, end forms: They are the result of processes in which equivalent chains and universalizations are constructed, in which those local power relationships become over-determined, and, each in its own specific and contradictory way, become moments of a more comprehensive resistance. That such a universal resistance should emerge is fairly improbable and is a highly contingent process. It may and should not be subsumed under the name of equality or universal values, a class, a sex, a religion, or a geographic-ethnic identity. Neither should it be subsumed under the purity of the final contradiction of wage labor and capital, of men and women, of imperium and colonized, of industrialization, and a way of life closer to, and more respectful of, nature. It should not be subordinated under the purity of a unique and final contradiction in which power stands on one side, and the resistant subjects stand on the other, in unity and solidarity.

3.

Up until now, I have tried to deploy two arguments. According to the first, there is a danger that resistance should remain formal and subaltern and is trapped in a tautological relationship with power. According to the second argument, resistance goes beyond this functionality. To this end, it is necessary to take into account the localization and specificity of resistances which change power relations and power. Resistance can insert itself, both formally and functionally, in the wider reproduction of power,

when it does not become the moment of a global strategy. Resistance is, in itself, not sufficient. It must want and strive for something. In that sense we are dealing with a double movement: The universality of a given and prevailing order is dissolved by a multitude of local and asymmetrical struggles. These struggles are not subservient to some pure antagonism; they are to be understood as an end form of overdetermining contradictions and as the unlikely emergence of a global strategy. It is also necessary that out of these local resistances such a will, such a desire, is developed and organized so that the resistant practices may be linked to one another and achieve a new universality. For resistance is always and already thought with the idea and finality that it will be victorious and will overcome the conditions under which it first emerged as necessary. I would like to briefly point to the fact that the tradition of critical thinking does contain attempts to be commensurate with resistance's teleological dimension: the development of concepts including the idea that resistance is more than the development of a resistant subject which persists in a great antagonism with the powerful. It is much more a case of the rudiments and models forming a collective will, which strives for new and different order.

Resistance is an important moment, for it reacts to power and sharpens the "intolerance of both the facts of power, and those customs numbed by power" (Foucault, "Vorwort" 185; translation: Christopher Robotham). Resistance renders the fragility of power clear and visible. It opens up a dissenting relationship between individuals and the powers which organize both our individual and collective ways of life, and which render the subaltern subaltern. But the process should not restrict or limit itself through false modesty for otherwise it will be drawn in and overhauled by power. Autonomy, a collective will and a new universality must form. A form of autonomy can and may be in the first instance negative in nature. The resistant individuals collectively turn away, leave the field of power and let the antagonism be. Hardt and Negri suggest something similar when they talk of desertion and exodus:

In politics as in economics, one weapon that is constantly at the disposal of the ruled, in other words, is the threat to refuse their position of servitude and subtract themselves from the relationship. The act of refusing the relationship with the sovereign is a kind of exodus, fleeing the forces of oppression, servitude, and persecution in search of. (333)

Those who choose the exit option will be, in other spaces, subject to other and maybe stronger and abstracter power. Among those who flee, this exodus can bring forth forms of power, exploitation, or sexual oppression. It is maybe for this reason that Foucault, in his analysis of governmentality, so strongly emphasized that, under the conditions of the modern art of government, it is not the posture of “not wanting to be governed at all” (“What is Critique?” 44) which imposed itself. Within this modern art of government, he sees another question having gained preeminence. He famously expressed this question, deliberately using inverted commas, as the question of: “How not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them” (“What is Critique?” 44). Here Foucault is telling us that it is not about the abstract turning away from power, but the real and concrete transformation of one mode of exercising power, one form of governmentality into another. It is about the subjects of power working towards influencing and changing how they are subjected to power, and how they are governed.

It is a tragic aspect of the dialectic of power and domination that the option of turning away from power is not readily available. It is primarily the direct producers who are caught up in two types of contradiction, both directly linked with resistance and exodus: their resistance emerges on the terrain of power, reproduces power, is dependent and characterized by it. At the same time, they, in their real cooperative relations, challenge and question power, in that they aim for an overcoming of the relations under which the historically known and existing forms of domination can be overcome. They therefore stand within and without, are resistant and antagonistic. The ruling cannot just let the resistant leave. That would touch on the preservation of power itself.

Foucault’s conception of resistance is again and again cited to show us that we should not expect of resistance that it should lead to the overcoming of power. It is generally read as a plea for a modest “art of not being governed quite so much” (Foucault, “What is Critique” 45). Without wanting to go too much into the details, one must keep in mind that Foucault considers this critical stance, the critical “art of not being governed quite so much,” itself as a moment and form of this power technology of governmentality that is newly forming in the 18th century. It represents a specific form of resistance that is an integral moment of governmentality. Foucault is not suggesting that one should limit oneself to this critical stance, but goes

well beyond that to pursue a much more extensive conception when, in his lectures on “Security, Territory, Population” of 1978, he shows that though there have already been political revolutions, there have been no revolutions against the much more deeply seated art of governing itself. This is exactly what he argues for:

I would say that the feudal type of political power undoubtedly experienced revolutions or, at any rate, came up against a series of processes that, apart from a few traces, well and truly eliminated it and chased it from the history of the West. There have been anti-feudal revolutions; there has never been an anti-pastoral revolution. The pastorate has not yet experienced the process of profound revolution that would have definitively expelled it from history. (*Security* 201)

Foucault sees it as the charge of the intellectual to restore the desirability of revolution. He explains this broadly in an interview given in 1976: to restore the desirability of revolution, from the damage it sustained through Stalinism, back to the level of desirability it had in the 19th century (cf. “Das Wissen” 114).

Although Foucault suggests to go, act and think beyond resistance, and to develop global strategies against the centuries-old practices of power, there is little in his work which helps us understand how such a collective will and universality can emerge. There is a surprising closeness between the thoughts of Gramsci and Foucault where Gramsci discusses the question of leadership and government. For this reason I would like to mention one aspect of his thought here. According to his understanding, it is necessary for resistance to develop a spirit of cleavage: the conscience and praxis not to bow to the hegemonic order and its associated ways of life, but to develop its own. Foucault argues along similar lines when he discusses the moral dissidence of groups, which fight for things such as the right to abortion, the constitution of non-family based sexual groups and laziness. What he sees here is a reversal of that articulatory praxis of the bourgeoisie of the 18th and 19th centuries, which, according to him, connected morals, capitalist production, and the state apparatus. For Foucault, such struggles are more than just the transgression of a prohibition that, for a moment, at a place and for a person, makes the law invalid and meaningless. The dissidence, as he sees it, implies the possibility to fight the power relations themselves (cf. *The Punitive Society* Lecture 6, 7 Feb. 1973). For Gramsci, the spirit of distinction contributes

to helping subjects to reject and leave the actual conformity of their ways of life behind and to break out into something new: new ways of life, new organizations, and new constellations of the social collective, individuals and their every day practices. As Gramsci sees it, it is a molecular process, in which individuals break free from a variety of conformisms which play a defining role in their identities, their uneven and interrelated ways of life and practices. It is about the construction of a new collective will, a new universalism on the basis of the reorganization of the production apparatus, one without exploitation and without one hegemonic collective dominating and leading all others. This new collective will cannot, and must not, be based on the presumed and pre-given identity of the class of the direct producers. For Gramsci it is about the process of hegemony, in which one class first, in its contradiction and its struggles, emerges as a concrete collective, and in which this class then goes on to create instances of generalization and universalization based on the instances of consent and concurrence between the different social groups. Hegemony is therefore the process through which a collective will (which he calls historic bloc) forms, and in which a multitude of different emancipatory practices connect with each other.

The discussion of the concept of resistance shows that resistance, subversion, or transgression are not sufficient to change the situation that made resistance necessary in the first place, to such an extent that resistance becomes unnecessary. These practices, as necessary as they may be, bring with them the danger that, tautologically tied to power, they remain formal and subaltern to power. It requires a double movement, a double movement founded on the energy of resistance, which points beyond resistance, in which resistance firstly disarticulates the articulated moments of domination and power, and secondly strives for a new universality and universalization.

Translation, including quotations: Christopher Robotham

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