

Concepts of power and resistance



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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’ (Foucault, 1978: 95-96).

In human sciences one of the main issues has always been the relationship of resistance to power. Where there is power, there is resistance; power affirms that there exists resistance and visa versa. But before starting to think about resistance, we have to take in mind that ‘ power is no longer considered a unitary, constant force that emanates from a particular social class or institution, rather it is seen as a more tenuous fabric of hegemonic forms’ (Constable, 2007: 11). Foucault (1978: 95-96) questions our assumption that power is always and essentially repressive, he wants to show how power also can be positively in a way that it can produce forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourses and that it not only works negatively, by denying, restricting, prohibiting and repressing (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 42). The focus within studies of resistance recently shifted from large-scale collective revolts to more unlikely forms of resistance such as subversions and small or local resistances which do not especially aim to overthrow the system and which do not result from ideologies of emancipation (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 41).

Hence both concepts have turned to be more complex than initially supposed, but this makes it even more interesting and more widely applicable to various situations where people try to construct their life within structures of power.

Resistance

The term resistance has been used by many scholars to describe a wide range of actions and behaviours in all aspects of human social life and in different settings. Hollander and Einwohner (2004: 534) illustrated ‘ how everything from revolutions to hairstyles has been described as resistance’. Consequently following from the diversity of actions and behaviours which used to be named as resistance, they found in their analysis of the concept that there is little agreement on the definition (ibid: 234). Therefore it is important to outline the range of characteristics that can exist within the concept of resistance.

First of all the scale whereat the resistance occurs has not always the same size; acts of resistance may be for example individual or collective, widespread or limited to local areas. Levels of coordination are also variable, in some situations there will be a higher extent in which the resisters intentionally act together, than in other. Thereby the targets where resistance is directed to also differs, they vary from individuals to groups and from organizations to institutions and social structures. As well the direction or goals are variable, while resistance mainly is understood to be aimed at achieving some sort of change, sometimes it is possible that the behaviour described as resistance aims to constrain change. Finally, while resistance is generally understood to be a political action, some writers suggest that resistance can also be identity-based (ibid: 536-537).

Action and Opposition

After having observed the dimensions of variation of resistance Hollander and Einwohner (ibid: 537) tried to describe the core elements of resistance

to see how all these phenomena can be described with the same term. They identified action and opposition as two core elements within the discussions of resistance where authors seem to agree on. ‘ Resistance is not a quality of an actor or a state of being, but involves some active behaviour, whether verbal, cognitive, or psychical, and another component common to almost all uses is a sense of opposition’. After having identified these core elements, the lines of disagreements became clearer, which made them realize that several debates of resistance above all differed in their position on two central issues: recognition and intent (ibid: 537).

Recognition and Intention

Acts of resistance are not always equally visible, their variation in visibility becomes clearer when we analyze ‘ the contrast between ‘ everyday’ resistance and more (and more obviously contentious) forms of political mobilization’. Sometimes the intention of resistance is to be recognized, while other resistance is purposefully hidden, so recognition depends in part on the goals of the people who resist (ibid: 540). While Scott (1985) in his book about modes of everyday resistance among peasant workers argues that resistance need not to be recognized as such and that it may remain relatively invisible to the powerful, other scholars define resistance as necessarily provoking recognition and even reaction from others (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 541).

This level of recognition also varies depending on the two different groups of others who can identify an act as resistance, to wit targets and observers. The first group contains those to whom the act is directed and the second

group can comprise the general public, members of the media and researchers (ibid: 542).

After the question ‘ if oppositional action must be readily apparent to others, and if it must in fact be recognized as resistance’, Hollander and Einwohner wonder ‘ if the actor must be aware that she or he is resisting some exercise of power – and intending to do so – for an action to qualify resistance’ (ibid: 542). Also on this matter scholars do not completely agree, roughly classified Hollander and Einwohner (2004) distinguish three different views. The first group of scholars believes that the actor’s conscious intent is a core element to be able to classify certain behaviour as resistance. The second group thinks that measuring intent is difficult or even impossible, as resistance not only arises in public, but also privately. People in these cases ‘ may be conscious of oppression and may intend to resist in some fashion’, but this will not be visible and therefore impossible to measure. Following to the last group of scholars we must not focus on the intent, as resistance can occur consciously or unconsciously, concentrating on intent will neglect important forms of resistance (ibid: 542).

Types of Resistance

Hollander and Einwohner (2004) didn’t want to define the verities and the falsities among all possible meanings and contends of the term resistance. Therefore they decided to analyse the various opinions to see if it would be possible to describe different forms of resistance without judging what is wrong and what is not. They already observed that all scholars seemed to agree that resistance implied ‘ oppositional action of some kind’. Leaving discords about whether resistance must be intended by actors or whether it

must be recognized by targets and/or observers. They therefore argue that it is useful to think of resistance in terms of distinct types, each defined by a different combination of actors' intent, target's recognition, and observers' recognition.

Not all scholars will agree that all behaviours summarized in Table 1 should be called resistance, but it will help to emphasize again the core elements of resistance.

The first type, overt resistance, comprises for example social movements and revolutions, and individual acts of refusal. It is visible behaviour, which is recognized by both targets as observers as resistance and is also intended to be recognized as such.

Covert resistance refers to acts as gossip and subtle subversion in the workplace; they are intentional but go unnoticed by their targets. However they are recognized as resistance by culturally aware observers. These two forms of intentional forms of resistance are followed by some unintentional forms of resistance. The first one is recognized as resistance by both the observers as the targets but is not meant as such. And the second one contains so called 'self-defined targets' who may be the only ones who recognize certain behaviour as resistance (target-defined resistance). A separate category contains externally-defined resistance, these are acts of resistance that are neither intended nor recognized as resistance by actors or their targets, but are labelled by third parties. The last two forms of resistance go to a certain degree unnoticed by others. If recognized by their target but unrecognized by third-party observers, they have called it missed

resistance. If an actor's intentional act goes unnoticed by both targets and observers alike, it may be classified as attempted resistance (ibid: 544-547).

Interaction

Understanding the interaction between resisters, targets, and third parties plays a central role in the comprehension of resistance. Resistance is socially constructed; resisters, targets, and observers all participate in this construction (ibid: 548). Of course often there is no overall agreement on the question if certain behaviour can be seen as resistance or not. What one observer (or participant) sees as resistance, another may see as accommodation or even domination this does not only happen between the different participative groups but also within the parties there is variation. Resistance is a complex set of thoughts and behaviours (Ortner, 1995: 175).

Dichotomizing resistance and dominators ignores the fact that there are multiple systems of hierarchy, and that individuals can be simultaneously powerful and powerless within different systems (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 548).

In her article about resistance and the concept of *débrouillardise* (a way of social manipulation) used by Auvergnat farmers in rural France, Deborah Reed-Danahay (1993: 223) describes how Kondo (1990: 221) based on her research in Japan also emphasizes the intertwining of power and meaning, so that 'no one can be 'without' power'.

Everyday Resistance

After appointing the different types of resistance, it is necessary to take a first glimpse into possible forms of resistance among undocumented

migrants to see on what kind of forms we have to continue focussing. First of all, it is obvious that undocumented migrants won't participate in any overt form of resistance (i. e. demonstrations) because it probably endangers their precarious situation. Therefore it is not very likely that the target of the resistance will recognize their acts as such. It will also vary if the acts are intended as resistance. Consequently, it is more likely that possible forms of resistance among undocumented migrants will be: covert resistance, attempted resistance and externally-defined resistance.

Especially the first two forms of resistance are familiar to Scott's concept of everyday resistance. He describes:

What everyday forms of resistance share with the more dramatic public confrontations is of course that they are intended to mitigate or deny claims made by superordinate classes or to advance claims vis-à-vis those superordinate classes. Where institutionalized politics are formal, overt, concerned with systematic, de jure change, everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains (Scott, 1990: 32-33).

Scott points out different expressions of everyday resistance: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, smuggling, etc. He refers to these practices as hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990) that are not easily visible in 'official transcripts and those on-stage behaviours controlled by elites' (Reed-Danahay, 1993: 222). He described the existence of a too strongly focus on official and public transcripts of culture resulting in an underestimation of subordinated people and argued for a look into the unofficial transcripts to

see the variety of forms of resistance taking place in this area of social life (ibid: 223). Though, Reed-Danahay (ibid: 223) points at a, ly to her, ‘ disturbing simplification [by Scott] by describing resistance as something which can be found in the hidden transcripts of the weak while only conformity becomes visible in the public transcripts of both the weak and the strong.’ This derives from the fact that he sees ideology as a coherent message, while there is contradiction and ambiguity in any discourse (ibid: 223)

Everyday Practices

Similar to Scott’s ‘ everyday resistance’ is Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concept of ‘ everyday practices’. He divides ‘ strategies’ and ‘ tactics’ and explains why many everyday practices are not strategic but tactical in character.

A strategy is ‘ the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power can be isolated from an ‘ environment’’. Strategies possess their own place which forms a starting point from where relations with the outside can be generated. Tactics on the other hand, do not possess their own place, so the other cannot be singled out as a visible totality. Tactics constantly manipulate events to turn them into opportunities.

De Certeau (ibid: xix) describes:

‘ A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance’.

Everyday practices are a gathering of ‘ways of operating’ characterized by ‘victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ and consisting of clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning’, manoeuvres, polymorphic situations, etc’ (De Certeau, 1984: xix).

Tactics produce a certain movement within the system. They show to what extent it is possible to use intelligence to consort power within the daily struggle. Strategies, on the contrary, have a rather ambiguous relation with power. They use the instruments of the power for their own purposes. Hence, the structure of power where the strategies compete against at the same time sustains them (De Certeau, 1984: xviii).

Scott’s concept of everyday resistance, consisting of practices as foot dragging, dissimulation and smuggling tends to be more similar to strategies than to tactics. While De Certeau’s concept of ways of operating (or everyday practices), like ‘knowing how to get away with things’, are more tactical in character. We could say that strategies aspire to undermine the structures of power and thus are more saturated with a notion of resistance, whereas tactics not only aim to resist, but also comprise an accommodating component.

Cunning

Despite their differences, De Certeau and Scott are concerned with the same kind of behaviour. Reed-Danahay (1993: 222) presupposes to use the concept of ‘cunning’ to refer to this behaviour. In her, Detienne and Vernant’s (1978: 3-4 in Reed-Danahay: 1993: 222) description of the Greek quality of metis summarizes accurately the significance of cunning:

[it] combine(s) flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills and experience acquired over the years. It is applied in situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting, and ambiguous, situations which do not lead themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous logic (1978: 3-4; quoted in Scott 1990: 164 in *ibid*: 222).

Also De Certeau (1984: xix) is conscious about the connection between *metis* and his 'ways of operating'. Together with cunning, *metis* refers to the idea of Goffman's concept of 'making do' in difficult situations and overcoming hardships (Reed-Danahay, 1993: 223). In line with Reed-Danahay, 'resistance suggests a mechanical metaphor of solid bodies coming into contact.' Unlike resistance, cunning includes some fluidity in social life, leaving room for play or manipulation (*ibid*: 223).

Débrouillardise

Reed-Danahay therefore speaks of a more complex notion of power and resistance, where forms of power lay both with agents of the dominant culture and with the resisting people themselves (*ibid*: 224). In her fieldwork in a mountain valley in the Auvergne region of central France she describes how people from a place fictionally named Lavalie have 'adopted a stance of 'resistance' to agents who threaten their cultural autonomy'. She shows how these farmers use the French concept of *débrouillardise* as a manner to talk about social manipulation expressing accommodation, resistance, cunning, ways of 'making out' and ways of 'making do' (*ibid*: 221).

Débrouillardise connotes both resisting domination and other forms of social manipulation or even partial accommodation. It is a form of everyday

resistance and it is a way of taking advantage of a situation that presents itself. *Débrouillardise* has a dual nature, it consist of both ‘making out’ and ‘making do’ and is associated with both defensive postures and coping strategies in everyday life (ibid: 224).

Conclusion

Migrants and Resistance

Abu-Lughod and romanticizing resistance

With the concept of *débrouillardise* Reed-Danahay tries to cover the gap between theory and practice. This is viable because the villagers she observes are actually using the concept in their ordinary language.

According to her *débrouillardise* refers to a more complex form of power than the theories of Scott (ibid: 224).

Débrouillardise

Accomodation

The ethnographic literature also contains examples of positive values associated with behaviours interpreted as everyday resistance when no ‘native’ term or vocabulary for it is present. (223)

Even while resisting power, individuals or groups may simultaneously support the structures of domination that necessitate resistance in the first place. Various authors have referred to this complexity as accommodation (e. g., Sotirin and Gottfried, 1999; Weitz, 2001), ambiguity (Trethewey, 1997), complicity (Healey, 1999; Ortner, 1995), conformity (St. Martin and Gavey, 1996), or assimilation (Faith, 1994). These authors stress that a

single activity may constitute both resistance and accommodation to different aspects of power and authority (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004: 549).

Nevertheless it is easy to romanticize resistance as Abu-Lughod says, to view its forms as signs of ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in refusal to be dominated, to focus on successful forms of resistance and neglecting to consider accommodation, passivity or acquiescence adequately (In: Constable, 2007: ??). It is only valuable if we can find a way between romanticizing resistance and portraying young migrants as passive oppressed victims.