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Understanding "Resistance": Exploring definitions, perspectives, forms and implications

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“[In] order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides...[If] there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all.” (Michel Foucault)¹

“The university is ‘an ultimate place of critical resistance...to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation’” (Jacques Derrida)²

“Moreover, power needs resistance, and would not be operative without it. Power depends on points of resistance to spread itself more extensively through the social network.” (David Couzens Hoy)³

The aim of this paper is to explore the meaning of “resistance” and develop a starting point for “resistance studies” (Vinthagen & Lilja 2006) in order to show its possible contribution to our understanding of political conflicts. “Resistance”, is a relatively under researched field of social science. Depending on the definition of power, different types of activities will count as resistance. Within resistance studies (Amoore 2005; Couzens 2005; Duncombe 2002; Lilja 2007; Scott 1992; Vinthagen 2005; Vinthagen & Lilja 2007) there exists a plurality of concepts and definitions of resistance. Outside of the still non-established field of resistance studies misconceptions of resistance prevail, often connecting resistance to anti-social attitudes, destructiveness, reactionary ideologies, unusual and sudden explosions of violence and emotional

¹ Quoted in Couzens Hoy (2005), p. 82.

² Quoted in Couzens Hoy (2005), 228.

³ Couzens Hoy (2005), p. 82.

outbursts. On the contrary I argue that resistance has the potential to be – as power – productive, plural, and changing and integrated into the everyday social life.

This paper will firstly discuss various definitions and understandings of “resistance”, secondly its plural forms and content expressed in various typologies. The types of resistance will vary according to who acts, where, with what means and organizational forms and against what. It will also vary according to what motivating ideas and ideologies that guide the resistance. Thirdly I will discuss the possibilities of a “genealogy of resistance”, i.e. analyzing historical changes of resistance. Lastly the paper will, based on the mainly theoretical clarification of “resistance”, briefly indicate what implication resistance studies might have to our understanding of contemporary political conflicts.

Definitions and perspectives of “resistance”

Within the small and recent social science field which we call “resistance studies” where “resistance” is explicitly discussed, theorised and investigated there exists a plurality of concepts and definitions of the core concept, incorporating e.g. “disguised resistance”, “critical resistance”, “off-kilter resistance” or “civil resistance”. Within other somewhat overlapping fields, such as social movement studies, terrorism studies or subaltern studies, there exist also suggestions of other concepts with different but similar connotations, e.g. “contention”, “protest”, “power struggle”, “revolution” or “mimicry” (Vinthagen & Lilja 2006). While recognizing that numerous research fields might have valuable concepts, insights and theories to contribute to resistance studies I will here, for practical reasons, maintain a focus on explicit resistance research.⁴ Most studies from which resistance studies might fruitfully build are such overlapping studies that use concepts and theories somewhat unclear *connected* to resistance studies (e.g. protest, revolution or subaltern), or case-studies which *add-on* to resistance studies with their implicit use of “resistance”

⁴ I have together with Mona Lilja at other places tried to map the various fields’ contribution to resistance studies (Vinthagen & Lilja 2007b).

to describe particular modes or instances of resistance (e.g. racist resistance groups in the US, or strategies of Muslim “martyrs” doing “suicide bombings”). Such studies typically do not connect to other literature on resistance, only literature in their respective fields. The smallest fraction is studies that focus on a theoretical and empirical discussion on resistance; what resistance is, how it varies and why, i.e. that *develop* “resistance studies”. That is the kind of material I focus on.

The aim is to suggest the distinguishing properties of resistance while maintaining its plurality of forms in different contexts (by initiating a list of resistance types).

Foucault fundamentally changed the view of power, and thus logically, resistance. If power is not only a sovereign centre *forbidding* (and punishing), but more importantly a *productive* multiple network of power techniques, without a unifying centre, then resistance also changes face. If the decentred powers produce regimes of Truth/knowledge, specialized institutions of discipline, and ultimately, the very subject that make resistance, it sure has consequences for any resistance studies. While Foucault made a paradigmatic turn in our understanding *power/resistance* he is not very helpful in understanding *power/resistance*. Foucault did study power (with resistance always in brackets), and he did it from the view of power (its archives and techniques) (Deveaux 1994: 234). The subjugated is virtually silent and invisible in Foucault’s texts.

Among the major definitions and perspectives of resistance within resistance studies we find firstly the paradigmatic work by Scott (1987; 1992). Scott argues that class resistance, which is his main interest, “includes any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farms, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those super-ordinate classes.” (Scott 1987). To Scott this definition has the advantage of focusing on the material basis of class struggle, and on intentions rather than consequences, allowing for both individual and collective acts, while not excluding ideological resistance that challenges definitions and standards

of the superordinate. Still, he recognises that “enormous difficulties” arise from having to show that resistance was intended.

The major achievement of Scott, which has spurred a lot of new research, is his insistence that resistance predominantly is informal, hidden, and non-confrontational (a kind of “infra-politics”). “Formal political activity may be the norm for the elites, the intelligentsia, and the middle classes, which in the Third World as well as in the West, have near monopoly of institutional skills and access. But it would be naïve to expect that peasant resistance can or will normally take the same form.” (Scott 1987).

The problem is that Scott focus on resistance against explicit *claims* (of class interests) and does not recognise *unintended* or “other-intended” resistance, that which do have (the possibility) to undermine power relations through its consequences. Maybe all power makes claims, although not always explicit, but not all resistance is intended to affect power. A prime example is one of the now biggest resistance movements in the world, the digital file-sharing, in which millions (who mainly seek free films, music and software) actually undermine some of the biggest transnational corporations in the world – within the entertainment industry and software business – and an essential feature of contemporary informational capitalism: intellectual property rights. The industry’s claims are outspoken but few resisters have any intent to deny the claim. An alternative is to exclude the intent from a definition altogether. The advantages arising from excluding the consciousness/motivation or intention of the resister might be questioned, but it is, following post-structuralism, maybe even more problematic to include it. My point is that in some cases – when the intent is unclear, unknown or non-political – it might still be resistance. Some acts are arguably in themselves de-facto undermining power relations, irrespective of the intention of the actor, e.g. disloyalty, sabotage, evasion, working slowly.

The irony is that Scott, who more than anyone is famous for brining informal, non-organised, disguised resistance into the field, excludes a lot of everyday resistance by demanding a

political consciousness. I understand this as a remaining emphasis on class interest and class consciousness.⁵

Still, aims, purpose, intent or some form of (class) interest are common ingredients in the literature on resistance. Within the specialised pedagogical “theory of resistance” resistance is possible to understand as: “the counter-hegemonic social attitudes, behaviours and actions which aim at weakening the classification among social categories and which are directed against the dominant power(s) and against those who exercise it (them), having as a purpose its (their) redistribution in a more equitable way.” (Fernandes 1988: 174). Here it is a matter of developing such “counter-hegemonic curricula, teaching materials and pedagogical practices” which can undermine the schools cultural reproduction of dominant forms of class, race, ethnic and gender relations.

Routledge (1997: 361) define resistance as “any action imbued with intent that attempts to challenge, change or retain particular circumstances relating to societal relations, processes and/or institutions..[which] imply some form of contestation...[and] cannot be separated from practices of domination”.

Others turn to a definition that not only take into account the intention of the resister but also the *perception of the one being resisted*. In a study of resistance in Western Europe against Nazism and fascism Moore (2000: 2) writes that a common definition of resistance counts “any activity designed to thwart German plans, or perceived by the occupiers as working against their interests”. Thus, in the terms of our discussion; any activity of the subordinated which, in the view of power holders, causes a problem or is a threat to power, could count as “resistance”.

A more problematic kind of definition can be exemplified with Pile & Keith (eds. 1997) in their study of the “geographies of power”. After saying that resistance “stands in implacable opposition to ‘power’”, they state that “‘resistance’ is the people fighting back in defence of freedom, democracy and humanity.” Here resistance becomes per definition

⁵ This is a problem with Scott although he is critical to the Marxist idea of “false consciousness”, see (1992), Chapter 4.

something normatively good. Such a definition excludes not only fascist or terrorist resistance but also the (unintentional) oppressive effects or power dynamics of resistance activity, as e.g. the well known stratification of resisters into (sometimes even formal) hierarchies.

Within some parts of resistance studies such aims are not included. In the study of imperialism, anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance Bush (1999: 16) opens up the concept of “resistance” to “any action, individual or collective, violent or lawful, covert and overt, that is critical of, opposes, upsets or challenges the smooth running of colonial rule.” This kind of definition says nothing about the resister, who can be anyone, but focus on the activity and its relation to or consequences for power. Another example is “civil resistance” which is defined by a senior scholar in the field, Adam Roberts (2007: 2), as “activities against a particular power, force, policy or regime...[Where “civil”] denotes that which pertains to a citizen or society...which is peaceful, polite, non-military or non-violent in character.” Here the resistance is simply “activities against” power relations. With such a definition a different problem arises of including too much, e.g. power struggles or war in general. All kinds of acts in which power is engaged become “resistance”, even the exercise of power...

Resistance needs analytically speaking to be a different phenomenon from power. Otherwise we are just talking about a different form of power. In my understanding power is essentially a matter of subordination and superordination; a hierarchy. Sometimes that hierarchy is hold together with brute force, at other situations by productive power that forms the subjects that then “voluntary” subordinate themselves. At yet other occasions we will find hierarchies where the subordinates are not only willing but enthusiastic in their obedience to the power with which they identify and live. But power is always a matter of subordinate positions. Thus resistance is the kind of actions which dissolves, undermine, question or challenge such subordination – and ultimately, produce non-subordinate relations.

From this quick overview of definitions and perspectives we can conclude that there are some (theoretical) properties of resistance which distinguish it from other similar forms

of political actions. Resistance is always about *denying, challenging or undermining power* (relations or claims by power). But some literature on resistance adds the criteria of some kind of *aim* (purpose, intent, motive, interest) of the resister of actually denying, challenging or undermining power.

Mona Lilja and I recently (Vinthagen & Lilja 2007a) suggested resistance as *a subaltern response to power, a practice that challenge and which might undermine power*. For us an alternative to some sort of intent or consciousness of the resister is that the act against power is done by someone in a *subordinate position* in relation to power. Irrespective of intent or (objective) interest we are satisfied with (1) an act done by someone subordinate, that (2) in response to power, do (3) challenge power, and (4) contain at least a possibility, that power gets undermined by the act.

Here intent or the knowledge about actions as “resistance” is not necessary in order to detect resistance. But it will be helpful in those cases the intent is evident. When it exists as an explicit aim and perhaps even a conscious strategy it will have consequences and it will be easier to see the resistance. Still, the definition doesn’t rely on such a detectable state of mind within the resister.

It does, on the other hand, demand a subaltern or subordinate position in relation to power. The agency and activity is not just any agency or activity but that which emanates from that subaltern subject position. That excludes “resistance” from those who acts from a power position; irrespective of their acts is (intended to) damage that power. Resistance comes from below, but is not necessarily intended, not necessarily “good”.

Tentative typologies of resistance forms

Within resistance studies we find currently two general types of resistance which dominate the discussion. Firstly we have what is intuitively associated with “resistance”; the confrontative and *public challenge* against power (revolutions, demonstrations, union strikes, boycott). But thanks to the already classic work of James Scott on everyday resistance (*The Weapons of the Weak*, 1987)

there is one more mode of resistance; hidden, circumventing forms of *disguised resistance* (work-slow, playing stupid). Others have suggested a third one, consisting of the *survival practices* of subordinates in “third spaces” against effects or aspects of power (“Off-kilter resistance”, Butz & Ripmeester 1999), which somewhat overlaps everyday resistance.

Yet others emphasise a difference between two types of public challenges; *violent or nonviolent* resistance actions. The difference between *collective/organised or individual/non-organised* resistance is also usual in the literature, and that typology is basically only giving other names for public or everyday modes of resistance.

Compared to the complexity of power theory the state of resistance studies is embarrassing (Vinthagen & Lilja 2007b). I understand it as a sign of the yet immature character of this field in-the-making. With the sole purpose to demonstrate that resistance is plural, plastic, evolving, thus a phenomenon with many faces, I will here outline some simple typologies. The categorizations are not trying to be systematic, mutually excluding or complete; instead making sure our understanding of resistance is not simplified.

Scott has made a categorisation which builds on the two main forms of resistance; *the public and the disguised resistance* (Scott 1987: Table 6.1). Here he divides resistance into two forms (public and disguised) which corresponds to three forms of domination (material, status and ideological), resulting in six types of resistance. Resistance exist in the public form as *public declared resistance* (open revolts, petitions, demonstrations, land invasions, etc) against material domination; *assertion of worth or desecration* of status symbols against status domination; or, *counter-ideologies* against ideological domination And, resistance exists in the disguised form (low profile, undisclosed or “infra-politics”) as *everyday resistance* (e.g. poaching, squatting, desertion, evasion, foot-dragging) or *direct resistance* by disguised resisters against material domination; *hidden transcripts of anger* or *disguised discourses of dignity* against status domination; or, *dissident subcultures* (e.g. millennial religion, myths of social banditry, class heroes) against ideological domination.

But the table doesn't encompass all the variation that do exists. Resistance will vary according to *what social structure it resists*; if it is done against e.g. the state institutions and laws, corporations and market-rules, cultural institutions, traditional norms or discursive rules; and, what *form of power relation* that is engaged (e.g. disciplinary, hegemonic or suppressive power). It will vary depending on *social space*; if it is done in e.g. an established and recognised public arena, in an informal and emergent political space (e.g. in a neighbourhood), or is transcending "private"/"apolitical" space, making that space a space of political contest. And resistance will also vary according to *what social category* is resisting/resisted and the *relative size and power* of contending groups; in what *historical context* resistance is played out (e.g. in an authoritarian European state in the 17th century or in a liberal democracy with a welfare-system like Sweden today), and what *values or ideologies* that guides the resistance. Also other factors will matter, e.g. if the resistance is part of a strategic plan or a spontaneous reaction. Accordingly, resistance will also have a *variation of consequences* depending on all these factors (leading to democratisation, equality, chaos or increased repression, etc.).

If we choose some simple categories – as whom the resister is, where the resistance is made, how it is organised and against what it is directed – we can illustrate how different resistance might be. There exists a rich variation of non-institutionalised resistance along these dimensions, for example;

Who acts?: In the "who" dimension we can differ between individual-collective, minority-majority, and type of social category or ideological groupings doing resistance. *Individual* acts of resistance, e.g. "proletarian shopping" (i.e. "theft" from supermarkets by activists against private property and capitalism), "Whistle-blowers" (Martin 1999) or individuals with "courage" (Gilbert 2002). *Majority mobilisations*, e.g. the Indian anti-colonial struggle (Sharp 1973). It might be mobilisations of specific *social categories* according to gender, class, ethnicity or sexuality, or specific *ideological groupings*, e.g. fascists in a liberal democracy or liberals in a fascist regime.

Where?: Organised collective action in an established and recognised *public arena* (e.g. TV or parliaments), spontaneous uprisings and riots in neighbourhoods which create *informal and temporary political space* (cf Piven & Cloward 1977), or “everyday resistance” *transcending “private”/”apolitical” space*, as e.g. feminists’ politization of sexual relations in their respective family, or silent disloyalty to one’s work place (e.g. work place sabotage/theft or Svejkest kind of “playing stupid/sick” or “go-slow”, Sharp 1973). This silent resistance is a form which is not formally organised, not even an explicit confrontation, a resistance which avoid creating awareness of the challenge going on, yet it is de facto undermining power relations (Scott 1987; 1992).

With which means?: *Nonviolent or lawful non-institutional* resistance as e.g. the various actions used by the civil rights movement in USA, like protest, demonstrations, strikes, boycotts etc. (Sharp 1973), *non-armed* resistance (with incidences of violence but still not militarised) as e.g. the secret sabotage done by ecological activists of the US Earth First!, the autonomous movement or animal rights activists in the UK (Abramsky 2001. Do or Die 2000) or *military organised* resistance, as in non-institutional terrorism (e.g. the Israeli Stern gang, Islamic Jihad, Contras in Nicaragua) or guerrillas (Peralta 1990).⁶ Resistance might as well approach power politics from an aesthetic dimension of *cultural means* (cultural values/products, identities or discourses), e.g. through the construction of alternative life-stories (Johansson 1999), or the deconstruction of symbols which Ad Busters do when they change and imitate logos and advertisements from transnational companies.

Organised how? Resistance is not necessarily organised in a formal and explicit way as *organisations* (e.g. social movement organisations; SMOs, nongovernmental organisations; NGOs, or civil society organisations; CSOs etc.), or not even in a collective sense as (in)formal *networks* (e.g. social movements; SMs, or transnational advocacy networks; TANs). It might arise

⁶ Here I use the term “non-institutional” trying broadly to capture that kind of terrorism which is not directly carried out in special operations by regime agencies as e.g. CIA, or regular nation state armies in a declared war. The concepts and their use are here, as often when it comes to resistance, highly politicised (e.g. “terrorism”, “freedom-fighters”, “guerrillas” etc.).

from a sea bed of a *counter-culture* of some kind, i.e. a social field of groups related to a number of ideological positions or beliefs. Counter-cultures are different in kind and style, e.g. progressive left-wing or reactionary right-wing. The white neo-fascism and racism in USA seem to have enough of communication tools, active participants and links to be a stable environment for a counter-culture but at the same time not enough of common discourse or behavioural orientation to be a "movement" (Gardell 2003).

Against what? Against the *state institutions and laws, corporations and market-rules*, discursive rules or *cultural institutions and traditional norms*, as e.g. *civil disobedience* to state laws (Herngren 1999), economic resistance as wild-cat-strikes, or resistance to *gender* stereotypes (e.g. the queer actions of Outrage! or feminist reconstructions of gendered life styles in a patriarchal society, Hochman 1994; Rosenberg 2002). Counter culture or youth resistance to *established "normality"* or expectations from older generations through provocations or experiments with new identities and styles (The Birmingham School. Fornäs, Lindberg & Sernhede 1994. McKay 1996), or even creations of postmodern identities of *anti-identity*, to "exist against-in-and-beyond" prescribed roles, as the Chiapas Indians' Zapatista movement which fight for autonomy while it simultaneously includes everyone in the world oppressed by neoliberalism as part of being a "Zapatista" (Holloway 2002). As a specific variation we will also find those resisting the fabric of *society* itself, i.e. civil relations between different groups, like those warlords who thrive from a war-economy of looting and "primitive capitalism", rule through terror and are not striving for legitimacy (Kaldor 1999).

Forms of "Nonviolent Resistance"

It is also possible to go into detail of one form of resistance, e.g. "civil" or "nonviolent resistance", and elaborate on the existing variation. Seven basic forms of nonviolent resistance (a development from the three basic forms suggested by Gene Sharp 1973 outlined in Vinthagen 2005):

1. *Discursive resistance*: Attempts to convince and communicate through developing good arguments and convincing behaviour (e.g. fact-findings, counter-research reports, symbolic communication, countering enemy-images by counter-arguments and counter-behaviour).
2. *Competition*: Creation of alternative and competing nonviolent institutions (building the new society and social system that we want instead of that which we resist).
3. *Non-cooperation* with the oppressive aspects of the contemporary system's roles/functions (e.g. boycotts)
4. *Selective cooperation* with others and contemporary system (including the "enemy") around legitimate and mutual needs (e.g. by helping your opponent with relief work during a sudden natural catastrophe).
5. *Withdrawal* from destructive power relations (e.g. by escape to other countries or areas) and thus refusing to take part in the system (similar but more evasive than non-cooperation).
6. *Hindrance* or stopping of the processes of oppressive power systems (e.g. blockades, occupations, interventions).
7. *Humoristic undermining* of power relations/discourses by dramatization of an existing injustice or a possible community (e.g. self-irony, re-definitions, chocks) by e.g. Pride-parades or "Kiss-ins".

In a similar way other single forms of resistance, like guerrilla, terrorism, demonstrations, might be described in a detailed typology.

“Constructive resistance”

Resistance may also sometimes transcend the whole phenomenon of being-against-something, turning into the *proactive* form of constructing “alternative” or “prefigurative” social

institutions which facilitate resistance, i.e. “*confrontative alternatives*” or “*constructive resistance*” (Vinthagen 2005) as e.g. the landless workers movement MST in Brazil who not only “expropriate property” of others (by land occupation), but also undertake to create a cooperative, ecological, anti-capitalist, non-sexist and non-racist farming society on that very land. Similarly the US-based organisation Movement for a New Society played a key role within the nonviolent tradition with their emphasis on radical democratic meeting-, work-, action- and housing forms, literally supplying other movements with new social structures to experiment with. Accordingly these movement groups attempt to fight the existing system by replacing it, making it obsolete by constructing alternatives which themselves enable qualitative confrontations.

In this section we have seen how resistance, although being possible to define as distinct, is articulated in many forms. It is possible to make *general typologies* or “resistance” as well as *detailed typologies* from what initially seems to be one single form, e.g. “nonviolent resistance”. While we still don’t know the full extent of variation of resistance I do claim that resistance, at least on theoretical and conceptual levels, is a “family concept” encompassing multiple forms as well as a potential of creative development and adaptability in different contexts. It seems even possible to develop forms that are contradicting the most common (mis)understanding of resistance: “constructive” or “proactive” resistance where resistance is actually creating new and different social relations and institutions, not (only) hindering or undermining them.

Resistance is not only a response to power, power might as well be a response to resistance, a response both to its construction of new social structures which negates power logics and a counter-response to the resistance against power. In a fundamental sense power and resistance need each other to develop and expand. In the words of Scott regarding everyday resistance: “The practice of domination, then, *creates* the hidden transcript. If the domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a hidden transcript of corresponding richness. (Scott 1992: 27).

A “genealogy of resistance”

From the previous analysis it becomes necessary to ask if not resistance might be more similar to power than we initially proposed, being a productive force similar to Foucault’s understanding of disciplinary power? In order to find that out there is a need to turn towards empirically informed research. So far I have exercised a conceptual and (purely) theoretical exploration of resistance.

Foucault did a famous genealogy of power in which he traced the historical relatives of contemporary techniques of power. Through it he showed how the contemporary configurations of power, common sense and subjectivity was not natural or given but historical and contingent (thus possible to challenge, undermine and change). He did not try to prove a causal relationship between e.g. medieval monastery discipline and modern surveillance forms as the Bentham panopticon, but instead showed both the inheritance of structural similarities and the changing forms of power. He showed both a continuation and difference within disparate institutions as the school, the hospital clinics, the prison, the military barracks, the industry, as well as the monastery, leper colonies and other pre-modern experiments with forms of power. Through his genealogy of power it was possible to convincingly show that power has (without any grand master plan from any power centre) evolved from a forbidding punitive mode (producing a crude fear of the “sovereign”), into a discursive and detailed disciplinary mode (producing “truth regimes” and “subjects”) and a biopower mode (producing a “population”), in which all modes are still used, although the first is much less important. And, such a genealogy has made it possible to argue, as Deluze (1990), that power has continued to change into a “society of control”, producing general surveillance and modulation (into digital archives) of what goes on in society, not longer limited to the classic total institutions of discipline (the prison or military barracks). The society of control makes storage and control of different kinds of information flows possible, thus, based on statistical patterns of risk-behaviour (social diagrams),

regulate flows of behaviour through reactive interventions. Thus power is today able to make *pre-emptive* interventions: eliminating the damage *before* it happens (Kullenberg, forthcoming).

In a similar way it should be possible to trace the history of resistance to power, its changing and stable forms, in different traditions of world history. “Done in more detail...such an analysis would outline a technology and practice of resistance analogous to Michel Foucault’s analysis of the technology of domination” (Scott 1992: 20). A genealogy of resistance is similar to a genealogy of power in some sense and in other different. In a similar way a genealogy of resistance need to demonstrate structural continuity as well as innovation. How different historical contexts enabled and demanded new resistance repertoires. The work of Charles Tilly (e.g. 2004a; 2004b) is a useful foundation for such genealogy. He shows how “movement repertoires” both limit and enable oppositional groups, forming a specific set of methods that are possible to use, a set of methods that are inherited and modulated at the same time. Still, Tilly doesn’t fulfil the need fully, although he is not only interested in peaceful forms of contention but also violent forms and processes of revolution. He downplays the extent to which innovation is possible from the given historical resistance culture in which groups live and work (Chabot & Vinthagen 2007; Vinthagen 2007). Both historical continuity and contemporary innovation need to be taken into account in our understanding of the genealogy of resistance.

One important difference is that the archives of power techniques (which were so important for the research of Foucault) are a lot more extensive than the archives of resistance techniques. The rebellions, mutinies or arsons on power structures are documented by the winners, mostly by governments, landlords, priests or other representatives of power – if they are documented at all. And, it becomes even more difficult to find the historical traces and subaltern voices in the case we speak of hidden forms of resistance, which according to Scott is the main form of resistance. That has been one of the key problems of subaltern studies, the main discipline trying to trace the life and views of those subordinated to power, leading Spivak (1988) to ask: “Can the Subaltern Speak?”.

While the question posed by Spivak deals with the inaccessibility to the (genuine) “voice” of the subaltern (in history and literature), this representative problem is acute also for contemporary resistance. It is not self-evident that resisters want their resistance to be documented, analysed and drawn to a conclusion, thus becoming visible and traceable for its enemies. Resistance fighters have good reasons not to talk (honestly) to researchers while their struggle goes on. During, as well as after, resisters have *the self-legitimizing tendency* to justify, select and control their stories. Such framing of resistance discourses is interesting to study but it is also in itself a hindrance in empirical investigations. Furthermore, a problem is *the stratification of resistance* in which resistance cultures and movements will be divided between those who are the intellectual leaders and organisers and those who belong to the majority who make the movement into a movement (Scott 1979). The different discourses and action repertoires of movement elites and movement population are fundamental and a divide few resistance movements are able to bridge (Scott 1979).

So, in the worst of cases, a genealogy is impossible and we are left with the option to research the traces power allows us to find in history, observing what contemporary resisters allows us to see, and wait until after the “victory” of some resistance movements until we can make intensive interviews and fact-findings. That is if we don’t want to or are not able to do participant observation, doing resistance ourselves, while systematically collecting information. Besides the less risky and more nonviolent forms of resistance that might not even be an option for most of us...

Still, Scott (1987; 1992) has shown it is possible to trace a genealogy of resistance, even if you focus on intentional resistance. His method has basically been to trace “hidden transcripts of anger, aggression” and “disguised discourses of dignity” in folk tales, songs, myths, etc. Through such extensive studies it has been possible to show forms of resistance among slaves, serfs, farmers, etc.

David Couzens Hoy (2005: 227-239) argues that a “deconstructive genealogy” would be the best way of researching (critical) resistance since a genealogy of resistance can’t only ask critical questions about history but must also be “self-critique all the way down” (p. 228). A constant openness to the other possibilities power restricts/organize demands that the historical investigations (also) turn the criticism towards itself. Genealogy is deconstructive since it “thinks and exceeds critique without compromising it” (p. 237). And the deconstruction becomes “genealogical insofar as one inquires into the origins of one’s own beliefs and reasons for acting....showing that what is taken as natural or as necessary is really contingent and historical.” (p. 238).

In order to make a genealogy of resistance possible we need to learn from earlier similar projects, foremost subaltern studies and different black and feminist historical recreation projects, but also such projects as the pioneering work of the Birmingham School and their “subcultural” studies of working class youth, or Edward Thompson’s attempt to describe the history of the British working class. In such explicitly partisan projects there is a need to avoid simplifications which romanticise or gives pre-analytical privilege to resistance or the subaltern position. The project of writing a history in which the subaltern is recuperated as an agent “rather than as the helpless victim of impersonal forces” demands a careful and skilled approach if we are to avoid the kind of “essentialist humanism” which early (South Asian) subaltern studies were criticised of, in which crude dichotomies of elites and subaltern were used (O’Hanlon 1988).

A case study: The history of “nonviolence”

In my dissertation I made a short historical investigation of the variation of forms and ideas of “nonviolence”, as a different from “pacifism” (Vinthagen 2005). The historical origin of nonviolence – as political action form – is normally connected and limited to Mohandas K. Gandhi, from his work in South Africa from 1906 until his death in India 1948. It is quite easy to show how the *idea* of nonviolence exists earlier but connected to other names. E.g. is Hinduism

using “ahimsa” since thousands of years. And it is easy to show how various nonviolent *methods* are used earlier in history. E.g. by people described in the Old Testament in the Bible. As separate phenomena the idea(s) and the method(s) clearly exist in history. But it is not so easy to show the combination of the idea and method in a movement which uses it...

In my study it was possible to show that (at least) 70 years earlier radical Christians at the East coast of the US developed the same ideas and practical action methods: in the struggle against slavery by the New England Non-Resistance Society during the 1830s.

Before 1830 “non-resistance” is, from the dominant Christian interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, understood as acting *without violence*. After the 1830s non-resistance is instead understood as acting *against violence* without using violence, i.e. a form of active nonviolent resistance to violence (and injustice or tyranny).

One exception is the 18-year old law student the university in Toulouse, France; Étienne de la Boétie, who 1548 wrote the article “Discours sur la servitude volontaire” (*Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*) – an eloquent political pamphlet against “tyranny”.⁷ The text is similar to the classic work by Machiavelli from 1513, this time not with advice to the Prince but to his subjects. Inspired by his studies of ancient classics and the brutal repression of a local uprising by farmers he writes: “If a tyrant is one man and his subjects are many, why do they consent to their own enslavement?”, and is probably the first to formulate a theory of how power can be resisted through nonviolent non-cooperation.⁸

“It is not the troops on horsebacks, it is not the companies afoot, it is not arms that defend the tyrant...Five or six have always had access to his ear,...to be accomplices in his cruelties, companions in his pleasures, panders to his lusts, and shared in his plunders...The six have six hundred who profit under them, and with the six hundred they do what they have accomplished with their tyrant. The six hundred maintain under them six thousand whom they promote in rank, upon whom they confer the government of provinces or the direction of finances, in order that they may serve as instruments of avarice and cruelty, executing orders at the proper time and working such havoc all around that they could not last except under the shadow of the six hundred, nor be exempt from law and punishment except through their influence...The more tyrants pillage, the more they crave, the more they ruin and destroy; the more one yields to them, and obeys them, by that much do they become mightier and more formidable, the readier to annihilate and destroy. But if not one thing is yielded to them, if, without any violence they are

⁷ Translated to English by Harry Kurz 1942 at Colombia University Press, New York, called *Anti-Dictator*. See www.constitution.org/la_boetie/serv_vol.htm (041116). Étienne de la Boétie was born 1530 and died 1563.

⁸ McElroy, Wendy (*Étienne de la Boétie* 2003).

simply not obeyed, they become naked and undone and as nothing, just as, when the root receives no nourishment, the branch withers and dies...[T]he essential reason why men take orders willingly is that they are born serfs and are reared as such...[I]t has always happened that tyrants, in order to strengthen their power, have made every effort to train their people not only in obedience and servility toward themselves, but also in adoration...I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces.” (Étienne de la Boétie [1548]1942).

Still, Étienne did not lead any social movement practicing these methods against tyrants, thus not developing the praxis of nonviolent resistance. Instead the New England Non-Resistance Society with the anti-slavery leader William Garrison and the non-resistance author Adin Ballou did that. They changed the meaning of non-resistance and they developed a movement against slavery, doing e.g. “sit-ins” where mixed race groups refused to move from “White only” seats on steamships or horse-carriers more than 100 years before the Civil Rights Movement. Their radical understanding of “non-resistance” meant that they understood it as a form of resistance. Adin Ballou even writes that he sees “non-resistance as the highest form of resistance”. And he explained the difference between non-resistance and no resistance:

“Learn to discriminate between *no resistance of evil at all*, and *Non-Resistance of evil with evil, injury with injury*. Christians can, may and ought to resist evil in many ways, but never *with evil*, by doing injury to the soul or body of any human being. He, therefore, who tells you that the Non-Resistants hold to *no resistance of evil at all*, tells you a very foolish lie.”⁹

My historical investigation leads me to understand how nonviolent resistance is changed into different concepts, forms of action and contextually adopted discourses (adapted to e.g. different religious traditions). It is possible to describe this nonviolent resistance genealogy in some broad steps. A pre-period is the time from about 500 B.C. when ideas centred only on avoiding using violence in your life, speech and actions (i.e. pacifism). That is a time when the emphasis is on “no harm”, “Resist not Evil” and “Non-resistance”. After that, from 1830 and onwards a number of ideas, action forms and movements develop nonviolence as both “without violence” and “against violence”:

⁹ Non-Resistance Tract No. 2, Community Press, Hopedale, Ballou, Adin (*On Non-Resistance* 2002 [1846]).

1. *Non-resistance as Resistance* (from 1830s). Within groups of radical Christians in East coast USA.
2. *Non-violence* (from 1906). Within Indian civil rights groups living in racist South Africa. The technique is called “Satyagraha” (from 1908), and “Non-violent Resistance”, “Civil Resistance” & “Civil Disobedience” (from 1920s) when the technique becomes more diversified and movement adopted in the liberation movement in India against British colonial rule.
3. *Nonviolent Direct Action* (NVDA) (from 1940s). Within the civil rights movement among black (predominant Christian) groups in Southern USA.
4. *Multiple forms and contents*. (from 1960s). Various concepts, discourses and contexts adopt parts of the strategies, methods and ideas. It is e.g. called “Positive action”(Ghana), “liberating steadfastness” (Latin American liberation theologies), “People power” (Philippines), “Defiance” (South Africa), “freedom from violence” (Germany), “Divine obedience” (radical Christians in the US), “nonviolent civil responsibility” (environmental activists in the UK).

It is possible to understand nonviolence as a political action form with a long world historical tradition of a combination of “without violence” and “against violence”, where “violence” is having different meanings for different groups in that history. For some that means simply killing, for others it means all forms of “evil” including degrading of others, injustice and oppression. In this historical tradition different concepts, action methods and discourses are developed, changing its meaning and use.

As an example of a genealogy of resistance it illustrates how both the collective idea and practice of one specific resistance form is possible to describe. Thus, it should be even more possible to trace resistance through history if we only look for subaltern acts against power, not

(always) having to find the “voice” of these subaltern groups in the cases in which it is difficult to do that.

Conclusions

Having explored various meanings of “resistance”, some of its broad variation of types, its necessary (but problematic) empirical grounding in world-histories through a “genealogy”. My conclusion is that resistance studies is a necessary companion to all critical theory and other research interested in agency or social change, yes, probably also if we are to understand power, since power is not, it is exercised in historical and contemporary relationships. The dynamic qualities and creative innovations of power, resistance and social change are connected. By just studying how power is structured, exercised or changing the world, we actually miss half of it, and, more importantly, we over-emphasise the role of power.

Resistance is maybe sometimes utterly destructive and anti-social. At least that is a theoretical possibility. But mostly resistance will be, as other social activities, productive, or, at least, both tearing down some things in society while creating new. The fundamental and possible normative value of resistance is its *creation or expansion of space for making choices*, the open up possibilities by undermining or restructuring such power relations which limits and produces our (possible) identities, action space or bodies. Resistance is not necessarily directing people, telling them what to do but enable them to make their own choices. A society thriving with resistance doesn't necessary lead to nihilism or anarchism – “nothing matters” or “anything goes” – but a limited pluralism. Any vital social arrangement organises certain things while forbidding others. Thus, resistance doesn't annihilate the social bonds of society, it simply, construct new ones while deconstructing others – and, in the best of cases – opens the space for a freer choice.

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