

Resistance Studies as an Academic Pursuit

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A few years ago, when Tep Vanny and her associates of the Boeung Kak 13—a group of impoverished middle-aged mothers, homemakers and a grandmother who resided around the Boeung Kak lake—did not only refuse to move from their houses and sheds, but also decided to enter the streets of Phnom Penh and express their profound and deep dissatisfaction with local politicians and businessmen, the national government, the increasing problem with land-grabbing in Cambodia and ultimately the effects of neo-liberal globalization—this could be understood as ‘resistance’; resistance against a policy or practice that marginalizes them (even further) and which they are simply not willing to accept any more. In their ‘doing’ of resistance, the women have been very creative and have, in addition to using national legislation as well as submitting a complaint to the World Bank, also, among other things, displayed the close historical connection between the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and the Khmer Rouge (KR) in their street protests as well as using humor on different occasions; for example, by donning bird’s nests complete with chickens on their heads, thereby defending their role as ‘mother hens’, and exposing their bare breasts outside the Cambodian parliament, with the aim of demonstrating the vulnerability of being left with only their bodies (Brickell 2013). Following the protests, the World Bank stopped its payments to the Cambodian government and shortly after, some, but not all, families living around the lake were given titles for the land on which they have resided for many years. The protests—which are still ongoing—have inspired other resistance activities, not only in Phnom Penh but also in other parts of Cambodia and possibly abroad.

Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in December 2010 in response to the confiscation of his wares and

what he experienced as harassment and deep humiliation inflicted on him by municipal officials. His act could be understood as a more dramatic form of 'resistance' than the one played out by the women of the Boeung Kak 13. Bouazizi's act of self-demolition is generally considered a catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and, by extension, the wider Arab Spring—'resistance encourages resistance'.

A young girl, perhaps no more than 10 years-old, detonated powerful explosives concealed under her clothes in January 2015 at a market full of people in northern Nigeria, killing some 20 people and wounding many more. This could also be understood as 'resistance'; however, a very drastic, violent and destructive, not to say 'irrational', form of resistance. It is not certain that the girl even knew that she was carrying a bomb. Whether or not this act of resistance against perceived westernization will promote Boko Haram's goal to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria, still remains to be seen.

Less obvious, but no less important than the examples above, is the resistance performed by thousands of women in Teheran, who on an 'individual' and 'non-organized' basis are wearing sandals (and hereby showing skin), colored hijab and/or makeup. By this, the women are, in a rather subtle way, challenging local Islamic moral codes as interpreted by the influential clergy and implemented by the morality police in the country. Conversely, the insistence of female French Muslims wearing hijab in schools could be considered as resistance against the legal ban of wearing conspicuous religious symbols in French public primary and secondary schools. The practical effects of these acts of resistance still remain unclear. It is, however, quite clear that the action per se is creating a lot of emotions and, by this, functioning as a catalyst in a heated debate.

Even more subtle forms of resistance than the examples from Iran and France can be identified. One example is when organizations that work against gender-based violence (GBV) in Cambodia, change their

programs to focus primarily on men; both in the capacity of ‘trainers’ and ‘participants’. In these men’s groups, resistance practices against violent gender norms are played out. Different gendered images of identity and men’s understanding of a violent masculinity, which previously resulted in GBV, are being questioned and, by extension, ‘renegotiated’. By this, the male trainers turn into agents of resistance, carrying out resistance on behalf of the Cambodian women.

Yet another example from Cambodia is the resistance performed by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in relation to the KR Tribunal (formally known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, ECCC), who by re-categorizing the earlier practice of ‘arranged marriages’ into ‘forced marriages’ and by this, are transforming a local practice from a ‘tradition’ into a ‘crime’—‘the crime of forced marriage’. Also, when speaking about the ECCC, the resistance carried out by the lawyers defending the ones prosecuted at the Tribunal should also be mentioned. In the ECCC, a number of lawyers following the late Jacques Vergès’ ‘strategy of legal rupture’ seek to reverse the legal process, by turning the prosecutors into the ones who are being prosecuted and hereby resisting the entire process of transitional justice that is currently taking place in Cambodia. This resistance activity— which was applied by Vergès for the first time when he was defending different FLN activists struggling for national independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s and taken to never seen heights when he defended former SS Officer Klaus Barbie in 1987— aims at revealing the hypocrisy of different (international) criminal courts as well as the interests of power establishing and supporting them. In doing so, the lawyers potentially relativize, as well as other things, the suffering of the victims of the KR period. What then are the ethical implications of this type of resistance, which ultimately challenges not only the victims’ claim to seeking justice, but also the legal process and, by extension the entire liberal post-Cold War order and the current politics of global governance? Resistance activities have many faces and are connected to one another in complex webs.

In New York City in October 1998, Reclaim the Streets, displayed an example of ‘constructive resistance’, suggesting alternatives rather than just ‘being against’ as demonstrating. Stephen Duncombe, author of the path-breaking volume, *Cultural Resistance Reader* (2002), described the event in the following way:

Instead of the exhausted march, chant, and civil disobedience protest model that we (and the police, media, and the public) were used to, we had created our own liberatory culture—at least for a little while—had demonstrated it to the world. In place of the sour Lefty cry of ‘No! We’re against it’, we yelled triumphantly: ‘Yes! This is what we’re for’ (p. 3).

From the examples above follows that what qualifies as resistance is very much dependent on context, as the aim of various resistance practices also varies very much; so, does its different articulations as well as the ability of various activities to challenge political, legal, economic, social and cultural structures in society—ultimately to achieve ‘social change’. As indicated above, resistance does not per se mean being against something, but could also be constructive—establishing ‘creative’ and ‘constructive’ alternatives to existing institutions and practices. A very good example in latter this regard of this is the Landless Workers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra, MST), a social movement in Brazil with more than 1.5 million ‘members’, who fight not only for general access to land, but also for an ‘alternative social covenant’ that would provide a self-sustainable way of life, characterized by equal income distribution, non-racism and non-sexism. Put somewhat differently, previously there has been a tendency to address resistance primarily in terms of organized protests, demonstrations or as violent revolts. Resistance is, however, better understood as multidimensional, unstable and a complex social construction in dynamic relations that are related to differences of context. Resistance thereby displays an impressive variation; it can be anything from violent to non-violent,

confrontational to circumventing, deconstructing to reconstructing, productive to hindering, individual to collective, accommodating to enforcing, and materialistic to virtual. Needless to say, other continuums could be used to catch the manifoldness of resistance and resistance activities. The examples above are just a few.

Resistance is both a common and somewhat unusual concept. It appears often in political debates and the media. Members of various non-governmental organizations and social movements also frequently use resistance when they refer to their various activities. In spite of the significant growth regarding the use of resistance during recent years, the discussion about the meaning and content of the concept, the ways resistance activities can be understood, as well as their potential impact, et cetera, is still rather divided and underdeveloped within academia. Hence, in spite of offering a necessary addition to the earlier focus on 'power' within the social sciences, the rapidly growing field of resistance studies is still very much in its infancy.

There are multiple reasons for the current growth of resistance studies. One important reason is the so-called 'post-structural turn' within the social sciences. In this regard, David Couzens Hoy (2004: 11) writes:

... from the poststructuralist perspective, a society without resistance would either be a harmless daydream or a terrifying nightmare. Dreaming of a society without resistance is harmless as long as the theorist does not have the power to enforce the dream. However, the poststructuralist concern is that, when backed by force, the dream could become nightmare.

Over and above anything, it is the focus by various post-structuralist scholars on the different ways that discourses constitute subjects—i.e.

the ways in which our established manner of speaking also shape who we become as individuals—that has made concepts such as agency and resistance popular in current social science research. Generally speaking, post-structuralist scholars focus on the possibility for the subject to relate critically to various discursive ‘truths’; they look after possible ‘escape routes’ from determinism and discursive power over individuals.

The study of resistance is not limited to the post-structural turn in social sciences, and scholars other than post-structuralist ones carry out interesting research on resistance. But, the post-structural turn has been very important for the development of resistance studies and in spite of several other interesting ‘turns’ in social sciences—for example, ‘cultural’, ‘historical’ and ‘material’ turns—the post-structural perspective still plays a key role in the development of resistance studies. The perspective is still very much in development and ‘interacts’ and ‘integrates’ in interesting ways with later ‘turns’ in the social sciences, not least the ‘affective’ turn.

This article is a lightly edited version of the introduction chapter of our monograph, *Researching Resistance: A Critical Approach to Theory and Practice*, which will be published by Rowman and Littlefield International during the end of 2017. The book is a first attempt to bring together some of our main ideas on researching resistance in a systematized and structured fashion. It is also the first volume in a book series on resistance that will also be published by Rowman and Littlefield International. The three of us are members of the editorial board of the book series. In addition to introducing our views on resistance studies as an academic activity, we see this article as an appetizer for not only the forthcoming book but also for the entire book series

References

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