

EDITORIAL

# An invitation to Develop “Resistance Studies”

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No society can be understood without accounting for its power structure. In many respects our world is structured by frozen power relations—that is, by one or another form of domination. Power undeniably forms, permeates, and encompasses our social interactions. We do well to analyze the dominating structures, discourses, and practices that shape our societies, prescribe our identities, and hold us prisoners, but we must do a great deal more than that to keep these forces in check.

In seeking to create a more humane society, we cannot allow exploitation and violence to continue to run rampant. We need *resistance* toward the dominant structures that build our world along the lines of capitalism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, racism, casteism, militarism, authoritarianism, and all their unholy kin. In order to effectively resist in ways that foster social change and ever-expanding human liberation, we need to learn from both previous and ongoing struggles all over the world. We need to accrue *resistance knowledge*. We need to understand how power and resistance interact, and how they factor in the struggle for social change.

The *Journal of Resistance Studies* has been created to do all of that by encouraging the formal development of resistance studies. Researchers in many disciplines have studied historic and contemporary instances of such public, collective, and often violent mobilizations as riots, guerrilla wars, revolutions, and social movements. Influenced by E. P. Thompson’s ‘history from below’ or ‘people’s history’, Ranajit Guha and others in the early 1980s formed the Subaltern Studies

Group to approach South Asian history from the perspective of the masses, not the elites. When in 1986 political scientist James Scott wrote *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, his focus on such 'everyday forms of resistance' as foot-dragging, pilfering, feigned ignorance and the like led to much new research.

All of this work, however, never cohered into an independent research field, probably because the authors worked and published in widely different disciplines. At the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, Mona Lilja and I therefore began researching and networking around 'resistance studies'. In 2006 our effort began taking shape. Over the years an international peer-reviewed, open-access journal (*Resistance Studies Magazine*, 2008–13), a global research network (*Resistance Studies Network*), a website ([www.resistancestudies.org](http://www.resistancestudies.org)), and Sweden's first anthology of resistance studies (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2009) have all emerged, and public seminars and several international workshops have been developed. We also got major research funding, especially the RESIST research program *Globalization of Resistance* (2011–15).

And the word is spreading. A new resistance group was formed at the University of Sussex in 2013, and the recent conferences of the International Studies Association have reflected a strong and growing interest in all aspects of resistance. In 2014, I was named the inaugural holder of the first faculty position anywhere devoted to resistance studies: the Endowed Chair in the Study of Nonviolent Direct Action and Civil Resistance at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, in the United States.

'Resistance studies' is both more than and different from what other disciplines have seen it as being. It combines several theoretical traditions, including the state-oriented, structuralist, and public scope of 'contentious politics' (itself a combination of social movement studies, revolution studies, and studies on guerrilla warfare, civil warfare, and terrorism). It also includes informal 'everyday forms of resistance' within subaltern studies, the history-from-below movement, and 'autonomist' approaches to radical politics within post-Marxist and poststructuralist studies. Resistance studies should also draw on the many specialist fields that at least tangentially engage with it: gender studies and feminism, queer studies, peace studies, political science, sociology, critical race studies, anthropology, pedagogics, psychology,

media and communication studies, critical legal studies, heritage studies, design and crafts, and so on.

These many disciplines, models, theories, and discussions relate because ‘resistance’ challenges all forms of domination—not just the particular territorial configuration of power relations that we call ‘the state’, but the exploitative practices, commodification, fetishism, alienation, and economic injustices of capitalism, the discursive truth-regimes and normative orders of status quo, and the gender, race, status, caste, and taste hierarchies of the sociocultural sector. When activists resist patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, or any other nexus of intersectional power relations, not only is the state questioned, challenged, and undermined, but so is power as such.

We therefore must not limit our research to particular forms of resistance—riots, protests, sabotage, strikes, social movements, revolutions, mimicry, ‘talk-back’, slander, work-slow and the like. We must also take on the whole range of resistance articulations. We need to consider the subject in all of its manifestations, mechanisms, actors, techniques, and dynamics, and in all of their historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Moreover, along with Foucault we should assume that power and resistance are always interlinked. The concept of ‘resistance’ is meaningless and impossible to understand in isolation from those of power or domination. For two significant reasons, however, we need to break with Foucaultian tradition by shifting our focus from ‘power/(resistance)’ to ‘resistance/(power)’. First, since we know less about the resistance side of the complex power/resistance nexus, we need to pay more attention to it. Second, power can never be fully understood without relating it to resistance; failure to do so can lead to systematic distortions that exaggerate power and underestimate the potential of resistance.

In comprehending resistance and power in their many forms and manifestations, we need a forum for presenting and discussing our perspectives, arguments, and findings. The *Journal of Resistance Studies* provides such a forum. As an international, interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed scientific journal, it explores unarmed resistance with a focus on critically understanding resistance strategies, discourses, tactics, effects, causes, contexts, and experiences.

Our aim is to promote the understanding of how resistance can undermine repression, injustices, and domination of all kinds, and how resistance might nurture such forms of autonomous subjectivity as constructive work, alternative communities, and oppositional ways of thinking. We invite the submission of articles, book reviews, and opinion pieces.

Our core topic, 'resistance', will be covered in a broad sense, focusing on all kinds of unarmed resistance by diverse means and techniques. Though we do not invite analysis of purely military means, we are interested in relationships and tensions between armed and unarmed resistance. Our empirical examples will include those that combine means and those in which sporadic organized violence occurs in otherwise nonviolent struggles.

There are other outlets for critical studies of wars and terror. This journal exists to fill a gap and develop a neglected area: resistance by *other* means.

The *Journal of Resistance Studies* welcomes critical reflections, evaluations, theoretical developments, or empirically based analysis. We encourage broad critical discussion on the possibilities, forms, conditions, and problematics of 'resistance'. We will avoid dogmatic agendas, will not favor any particular framework, and will encourage debate on definitions of 'resistance'.

Our long-term ambition is to help develop a heterodox scientific field of 'resistance studies', one that critically engages with and learns from other relevant fields that discuss similar phenomena. It will, however, apply such key concepts of its own as activism, contention, deconstruction, disengagement, disobedience, disruption, encroachment, identity politics, insurgency, mimicry, multitude, performativity, protest, queering, rebellion, refusal, riot, revolution, and social movement.

We confidently assume that the forces of order, control, and regime stability already study resistance in order to develop the means to stop, manage, manipulate, or undermine it for their own purposes. Such efforts amount to a dark mirror-image of our own by studying resistance in order to facilitate repression, pacification, and assimilation.

The aim of developing resistance studies, of course, is to better understand resistance, but such knowledge, like all knowledge, can be bent to serve a particular interest. We cannot write or talk from a 'neutral' place. We are always interest- or value-oriented. Our interest needs to be critical and emancipatory, and therefore in principle it must be on the side of the subaltern and resistance, and against domination. I hope that the critical assessment of what constitutes 'emancipation', either in particular contexts or in general, will always be debated within resistance studies and never be given or received as set dogma.

The *Journal of Resistance Studies* exists for those interested in how human liberation can be furthered with the help of creative innovations and mobilizations of unarmed 'resistance'. Such gains call for collaboration between academics and practitioners. The journal will need to find ways to include experience-based knowledge gained by a generation of activists and to transform research discourse into effective resistance. This could, for example, be attempted through thematic issues of the journal with evaluation reports from seasoned activists or by through collaborative workshops and special issues created by activists. We have yet to determine how best to do this and are open to suggestions. Be assured, however, of our deep determination to infuse theory with action, and practice with analysis.

Several challenges, questions, and problems face us in social-scientifically investigating 'resistance'. Among them: Has 'resistance' already been adequately studied by other social-science fields, with results couched in terms other than those we use or fully comprehend? Can vastly different concepts, models, and theoretical frameworks from other established disciplines be introduced into a new specialist field? How can we successfully unite, gather, and systematize enough to create a field of resistance studies, yet avoid making the field homogenous and mainstreamed? Is the focus of 'resistance studies' too broad to be tenable (since resistance can exist in all kinds of social relations), or is it actually too narrow (since it is just one part of complex dynamics that shape social relations)? How do we combine theoretical depth and analytical sophistication with practical resistance skills and advice for resisters? Does a research program that strives toward emancipation by encouraging appropriate resistance tactics and strategies risk becoming too normative? What ethical standards are possible and necessary for resistance research? Is there a need for a

special 'code of conduct' to keep our knowledge from unwittingly assisting repressive forces, state surveillance, elite interests, or other hostile opponents of resistance mobilizations? Do we need our own version of the Hippocratic oath? (Perhaps someone would like to write a proposal of such an oath or code for resistance researchers by way of initiating a discussion in the journal.)

The questions go on. Can resistance be studied with the same sort of methodology as other forms of social science, or does it demand a particular set of research methodology of its own? Does the attachment to 'emancipation' put the field at risk of developing a new kind of ideology that blinds us from the necessary critical attitude and willingness to be open to unexpected and uncomfortable revelations? How do we deal with the resistance of non-emancipatory mobilizations? How do we bridge activist-community knowledge, discourses, interests, and needs with those of academics? How do we bridge the vast and different scientific fields and disciplines and find academic communities able to collaborate and develop interdisciplinary projects? How do we nurture trust and collaboration with activists and movements while at the same time critically examining their potential ineffectiveness, contradictions, or hypocrisies? Is there any kind of resistance that is able to resist domination effectively without producing new problematic power relations? Is it possible to develop an emancipatory ontology, epistemology, and methodology within academic institutions that have emerged from and are structured by power interests?

These are some of the questions we would like to see explored in the journal. There are surely many more, but these are enough to make the main point: there is a need for a systematic, collective work to develop a new scientific field able to provide relevant knowledge on how power and resistance shape social change. Without a serious effort to address these challenges we will be irrelevant to movements, networks, organizations, and individuals attempting to engage with the systemic repression, domination, and violence that plague our societies.

The *Journal of Resistance Studies* hopes to foster critical discussions, reflections, and meeting points between different research fields, theoretical traditions, methodological approaches, and area studies of resistance. We fully recognize and respect the fundamental

interdisciplinarity of the study of ‘resistance’. Without broad communications between disciplinary traditions and collaborations that move beyond established mono-disciplinary frameworks and develop new concepts, models, theories, and claims, there will not be any ‘resistance studies’.

I hope to see a new academic mobilization in which we as social scientists assist those social forces that ‘from below’ work to increase human liberation—a mobilization in which we abandon the present service and production of management knowledge for state authoritarianism and biopower, corporate marketing techniques, the refinement of the military death machine, and state terror-driven counterinsurgency in order to help mobilize a liberationist social science.

Such a science will need to avoid becoming an instrument of elites, the state, capital—or, for that matter, the liberation movements, which need no academic amplifiers to echo their rallying cries. Reducing academics to a choir of megaphones would be boring and a waste of energy, and would betray our professional role and intellectual tradition by surrendering our tools of critical social inquiry. We can best serve liberation struggles by critically analyzing their strategies, effects, and functions as part of ongoing dialogue and collaboration with those seeking emancipation.

I hope to see solidarity and dialogue flourish among academics and between academics and activists. I hope to see encounters between the comparative, critical, and empirical social science developed by engaged academics and the experience-based, practical knowledge so hard won by activists. I further hope to see ‘resistance studies’ emerge as the critical friend of resisters worldwide who are contributing to human liberation and emancipation.

Ultimately, what resistance studies becomes will depend on what we all bring to it and what we make of what we find. Resistance researchers of all lands, unite! Make the *Journal of Resistance Studies* an example of engaged social science, one that makes a difference and shows how we academics can support the global struggle against domination.

## Resistance Studies: A Note, A Hope

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### I

Ayotzinapa. There is no other way at this moment to think about resistance studies. Ayotzinapa: supreme expression of the horror that we are resisting. La Escuela Rural Normal Isidro Burgos is a rural teachers' training college in Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, from which a number of students went on the evening of the 26 September to the nearby town of Iguala to collect money to attend a national demonstration. They were attacked by the local police, three killed, forty-three arrested and disappeared. In the hunt for them many clandestine graves have been found with hundreds of bodies. Twenty-two thousand people have disappeared or been disappeared in Mexico in the last few years. Horror.

Horror that turns into rage, into a huge wave of “¡Ya Basta! Enough! No more!” throughout the country and far beyond, with protest after protest after protest after protest calling for the return of the students. “Fue el Estado. It was the state.” Horror into rage into a thing of beauty, a cry of dignity. That is resistance. That is our resistance.

There is no neutrality, no standing by and looking on, no objective observation. The rage rises up from inside us. There is no ambivalence here. It is a scream of “NO.” Ayotzinapa says loudly, “Clear ambivalence out of the way!” What worries me about the term “resistance studies” is that it is ambivalent. It could be understood, especially in a university context, as “studies about resistance,” studies in which we take movements of resistance as our object and analyse them objectively. Such an approach would be a lie because there is no way in which we can stand outside the social conflicts that constitute society. Even worse, it would be a lie compounded by self-betrayal, because most of us who study movements of resistance do so because



we feel part of such movements. Much better to think of our studies as resistance studies in the sense of being part of the struggle against capitalism. Much better to let our studies burn with the fury and horror and hope of Ayotzinapa. For, of course, Ayotzinapa is not just Ayotzinapa, it is Guantánamo, it is Iraq, it is Palestine, it is the 300 African migrants drowned in the Mediterranean last week, it is, it is...

It is better to say clearly from the beginning that the aim of what we are doing is to strengthen the struggle against a hateful system. No ambivalence. The complication comes from the fact that the ambivalence of the term “resistance studies” may be useful, or even necessary, in order for us to do what we want. I assume that many or most of the readers of this journal work in a university context. Universities are capitalist institutions, whether they are public or private, in much the same way that states are capitalist states. They depend on capital for their income, and they are under pressure to educate students who can integrate themselves into the world of capitalist reproduction. It is unusual for a university rector or principal to take a public stand against capitalism, however progressive he or she may be (I have heard it only once, and it literally changed my life). Critical, anti-capitalist thought walks in the opposite direction. In all the world, there is a strong tendency to expel critical thought from the universities. For this reason, those of us who are very clear that our starting point is a scream of rage against capitalism may feel under pressure to dress our work up as something else: as an objective study of “social movements” or “resistance movements.” Although I understand the pressures, the danger of succumbing to them is that we produce studies that are dishonest, sterile and do nothing to strengthen the struggles that were our starting point. It is better to be clear, at least to ourselves, about the contradictions of the situation in which we work—better not to gloss them over, but confront them directly.

Turn the university upside down. To think of resistance studies in a university context as part of the struggles against capitalism means that we subvert the university. We walk in the opposite direction, we study against the murderous system in which we live, rather than for it. We turn the university upside down: not necessarily by gaining control of the university and turning it into an openly anti-capitalist university: this may be possible (as was the case in the university where I work, the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla for some years in the 1970s and

1980s), but is bound to be contradictory, in much the same way as the attempts to turn the state against capital are contradictory. It seems much more practical and more fruitful to try to create cracks in the university, spaces in which we say openly that the only purpose of scientific work is to try to secure a future for humanity, and that this means understanding our scientific work as part of the struggle against a system that is destroying us.

Such cracks differ in size. They may be whole departments, or just small groups of researchers: I have the good fortune to work in a postgraduate school where we probably all understand our work in these terms. Even within the general neo-liberal clampdown on critical thought, I suspect that there are a growing number of such spaces within the universities of the world, as students carry their anger into their studies, their anger against a repugnant, obscene, failed system.

Scream, then. Throw away ambivalence. Say with confidence: the only scientific question left is, How do we ensure a future for humanity? And this includes: How do we get rid of the system that is destroying us? How do we think of our studies as part of the struggles against capitalism and to create a different world?

## II

Resistance speaks of aggression. We resist because we are attacked. This is not about inequality and social justice; it is more than that. It is about being attacked and defending ourselves and, what's more, trying to halt the aggression. The attacks come in many guises – Ayotzinapa, the destruction of communities to build highways or open mines, the closing down of schools or hospitals, the firing of workers – but it is more than that. The society in which we live is built upon antagonism, a movement of attack-and-resistance. Capitalism is constituted by antagonism. The core of this, as Marx suggests in the first sentence of *Capital*, is the fact that richness exists in the form of commodities, things to be bought and sold. This means that there is a constant movement of commodifying our products, of measuring the social value of our activity in money, of monetising all social relations: a fierce aggression that goes to the root of what it means to be human. This world of commodity and money (or, more accurately, commodification and monetisation) has as a precondition the separation of people from the conditions of being able to produce for

themselves individually and collectively and hence being forced to sell their creative abilities as labour power in the market, the starting point for the daily repeated attack on people that forces them to get out of bed at a certain time each morning and go and dedicate their days to the expansion of the wealth of those who exploit them. This constituting aggression of capitalist society has a driving dynamic: the pursuit of profit. "Accumulate! Accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets!"

The movement of aggression-and-resistance: class struggle, in other words. Yet starting from resistance (rather than rebellion or revolution, say) has the great advantage of pointing to the fact that class struggle comes from above. Capital is aggression, a movement of attack that constantly uproots our lives, seeks to subordinate all our activity to the logic of money, the logic of profit: to which we say No. "No, thank you very much, but we would prefer to carry on as we were." Or, more ambitiously: "No, thank you very much, we do think there is a need for change, but change as we determine it, not as profit determines. We shall take control." Very often, and with an increasing vehemence that reflects the increasing desperation of capital's pursuit of profit, the response from the other side is quite simply, "We don't care what you want, out of the way of the onward march of Progress!" It is this "out of the way!" that led to the tragedy of Ayotzinapa: the students of the rural training colleges have a long history of fighting for an education that responds to the needs of the students, a concept that comes into stark confrontation with the educational reforms being pushed through by the Mexican government with the aim of providing the proper conditions for the expansion of capital. It is the same "Out of the way!" that explains the imprisonment in the state of Puebla (where I live) of more than forty social activists for no other reason than that they have opposed the onward march of Progress in the form of building a gas pipeline around the edge of the volcano, opening gold mines and destroying farming communities, building a Disney-type theme park around a pyramid. "Out of the way!" gathers speed in the same way as the production of cars or computers gathers speed: the rule of the commodity is faster, faster, faster, and leaves no time for listening to anybody.

Resistance overflows, and must overflow. A resistance that focuses just on one particular manifestation of aggression may be

successful in defeating that attack but it does little to address the fact that society is structured upon aggression. Or rather: it is difficult to imagine a resistance that does not spill over. A struggle to stop a school closure, however much those involved just concentrate on that particular school, lights up the sky like a beacon and stimulates other parents and children faced with school closures. The struggle to stop the privatisation of water in Cochabamba fifteen years ago has been an inspiration in the struggles against water privatisation in all the world. The Zapatista uprising has made the sun shine for millions in pain.

Resistances resonate, and perhaps the changing forms of resonance is one of the most important themes to be explored by “resistance studies”. I suspect that this resonance is primarily non-institutional, that struggles in one area (spatial or not) inspire or stimulate struggles in other areas not as a result of party organisation or committee meetings but that the spread is primarily through word of mouth, songs, theatre, poetry, communiqués, books, concerts, PhD theses, intergalactic conferences: all or some of these making contact with the constant goading of capital’s repeated attacks on our ways of living.

Resistance overflows in another way too. It becomes more than resistance, pushes that which is resisted aside and says, “No, we shall do things our own way.” The focus shifts from a direct confrontation to the construction of an otherness. The Zapatistas are the shining example of this: especially since 2001, when the attempts to get the government to implement the measures they had already agreed to finally break down, the Zapatistas have concentrated on just getting on with it, constructing the world they want to live. Many movements have reached the same conclusion: in many situations the best way of resisting is simply to live the world that we want to create, the world that does not yet exist and therefore exists not-yet, as dream, as project, as struggle. Resistance spills over into revolution: the attempt to stop reproducing the existing sociality that is based upon aggression (capitalism, in other words) and to replace it with different forms of sociality, different ways of bringing our activities into interaction, forms of sociality that, for the moment at least, can only be experiments, projects, possible steps towards building a world of many worlds. The study of resistance becomes a thinking about revolution, about how we

can get rid of the social organisation that is destroying us and construct other, more sensible ways of living

### **III**

Welcome, then, to the new Journal of Resistance Studies! May it strengthen resistance to the global project of death and destruction, and may it open paths of hope!