



## **The Meaning of Resistance**

Author(s): Justice, Power & Resistance

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## REFLECTIONS

### The Meaning of Resistance

#### Justice, Power & Resistance

The journal *Justice, Power and Resistance* aims to not only provide a platform for the voices of the powerless to be heard but also to be a space where ideas and strategies of resistance and contestation may be shared and reflected upon. It is intended as a space where academics and activists may exercise their power as a group to work towards the genuine empowerment of the powerless, enabling them to construct an authentic counter-hegemonic project capable of overturning existing power structures and promoting social justice. The notion of resistance has always been central to the tradition known as 'critical criminology', especially in the writings and activism of academics whose inspiration can be traced back to Stuart Hall and the *Birmingham School of Cultural Studies*.

Selectively building on the insights of Antonio Gramsci (1971), the *Birmingham School of Cultural Studies* set itself the task of creating genuine 'organic intellectuals' from amongst the working classes to oppose the mainstream intellectuals who only served to reinforce the power of the elites (Hall, 1992: 282). Stuart Hall and colleagues focussed their attention on working class subcultures, examining their potential for resistance. Although oppositional subcultures consciously or subconsciously resisted dominant cultural norms, they recognised that this cultural resistance was hard to translate into a coherent counterhegemonic project with the possibility of political resistance (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). This did not, however, mean that it was not meaningful. As James C. Scott pointed out, resistance does not need to be organised, overt or collective to be successful. Indeed, resistance may appear in everyday acts as much as in organised rebellions (1985, 1990, 2002). These everyday acts of resistance may take the form of hidden 'transcripts'. In other words, they are subtle means of contesting power as it is manifested in 'public' transcripts dictated by the powerful. They may take the form of constant struggles against exploitation and domination and the daily degradations and humiliations of power. Such 'hidden transcripts' of resistance are particularly necessary in contexts where state violence or authoritarianism make the expression of overt resistance most difficult. The hidden transcript exists

outside of the gaze of the powerful, so the resistance remains concealed, but is a means of surviving oppressive relations and 'often represents a form of individual self-help' (Scott, 2002:90). Although subtle or even covert, these acts of resistance can be particularly powerful in creating an alternative cultural and/or ideological counter-hegemony to the dominant 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1976). Such acts, however, do not necessarily allow their actors to assume freedom (as we explain below, power and freedom are not synonymous) but they do facilitate practical means of survival.

Non-violent resistance was for Antonio Gramsci (1971) a key part of what he called the 'war of position'. Anticipating the important later insights of James C. Scott, Gramsci noted that everyday acts of resistance were an essential part of the larger emancipatory struggles for justice. Such everyday 'acts of resistance' (Bourdieu, 1990), sometimes hidden, subtle, tactical, symbolic or overt, entailed a form of 'resistance of the *longue durée*' (Caygill, 2015:143). Resistance then involves questioning the justification (legitimacy) of existing power relations and raising concerns about specific problems encountered in every-day life.

Civil resistance is more obviously emancipatory. It may be defined as the use of methods of non-violent action by civil society actors engaged in asymmetric conflicts with authorities not averse to using violence to defend their interests (Schock, 2015:2). These acts of resistance are not hidden but very visible, openly challenging hegemonic power structures. They are usually collective rather than individual in nature and may take many different forms, from protest to civil disobedience. Examples can be found from the American civil rights movement to the Occupy movement today. The demands of these social movements may feed into popular political movements and therefore form a direct challenge to existing power structures. Calls such as 'we are the 99%' provide a simple and understandable critique of the highly repugnant concentration of global wealth in the hands of an elite few (Scott, 2016).

Non-violent resistance is also sometimes referred to as 'contestation' (Coleman et al, 2009). Contestation is a social practice which normally, but not exclusively, entails the verbal critique of the legitimacy and justifications of power. Contestations aim to either resolve conflicts or mobilise for social change through non-violent means. Resistance and contestation arise when people have the courage to stand up against infringements of human rights, democracy and the principles of justice. For, as Caygill (2015:12) argues,

Resistance is motivated above all by a desire for justice, its acts are performed by subjectivities possessed of extreme courage and fortitude and its

practices guided by prudence, all three contributing to the deliberate preservation and enhancement of the capacity to resist.

Acts of resistance and contestation are therefore praxis aiming to delegitimize domination and authoritarian power structures in the name and long-term pursuit of justice (Scott, 2016). For critical criminologies, resistance and contestation have often been motivated by a commitment to normative principles such as *legal accountability*, *democracy*, *human rights*, and *social justice* (Ibid), alongside concerns such as the problematic exercise of (penal) power; the limitations and contradictions within the rule of law; state-determined definitions of 'crime' and the application of the criminal label against those on societies' margins; authoritarian and punitive policies and practices; and the manipulative construction of consent within inequitable political and social and economic contexts (Sim et al, 1987).

The difficulty for both individuals and social movements is in translating resistance into genuine emancipation. Whilst Ugelvik (2014) has recently held that acts of resistance are a form of freedom, it is obviously difficult to have real freedom in spaces of captivity. As highlighted above, everyday acts of resistance are often simply a means of survival, of mitigating the worst excesses of degrading and humiliating life experiences. They do not bring freedom from power as structured constraints and forms of domination continue to exist. Freedom cannot result merely from freeing oneself from domination as there can be no genuine freedom until structures of domination are broken up. If the only freedom is to contest and resist as a means of survival (Cohen and Taylor, 1972) then we are not talking of real freedom. To be truly free, it must be possible not merely to survive but to really live: in other words, to be able to make real choices outside the constraints of hegemonic power structures. If resistance is to be freedom, it must therefore engage in emancipatory praxis, directly contesting and *transforming* existing power relations.

Critical criminology has always been engaged in emancipatory praxis of this kind, seeking to build a counter-hegemonic project. Numerous transformative works have been published over the past few decades. To name just a few: Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959) on popular forms of legal and illegal resistance; Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor's *Psychological Survival* (1972) on strategies of resistance in prison and *Escape Attempts* (1976) on existential escape from everyday life; Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson's *Resistance through Rituals* (1976) on youth subcultures as forms of resistance; Penny Green's *The Enemy Without* (1990) on the collective resistance of British miners to policing tactics during the 1984-5 miners' strike; Ambalavaner Sivanandan's

*Communities of Resistance* (1990) on black communities resisting racism; Phil Scraton *et al's Prisons Under Protest* (1991) on collective prisoner resistance and *Beyond September 11* (2002) on strategies of resistance to foreign policy and military intervention in Afghanistan and the Middle East; Scraton's *Hillsborough: The Truth* (2009) on community resistance to the police cover-up following 96 deaths at the Hillsborough football stadium Sheffield in 1989; Alison Young's *Femininity in Dissent* (1990) on the female peace campaigners on Greenham Common in the 1980s; Bree Carlton's *Imprisoning Resistance* (2007) on collective resistance to death and violence in prisons; Dave Whyte's *How Corrupt is Britain* (2015) on resistance to corruption in the UK; and Joanna Gilmore *et al's Critique and Dissent* (2013) detailing resistance stories from across Europe over the last forty years.

What all these texts share in common is a desire to break the intolerable silence of the dominated by allowing them to speak and exploring their symbolic and material struggles for justice. They highlight new forms of power relations and the symbolic and physical borders of inclusion and exclusion. Many of these works detail resistance as survival, especially in the case of prisons, but together they provide the means to translate individual acts of resistance into collective means of promoting resistance as emancipatory praxis. They seek to go beyond the ameliorative logic that has dominated mainstream criminology towards a logic of genuinely transformative justice. We should though always be wary of power and how it can be used and manipulated and continue in the tradition of critical criminology in the search for peace, solidarity, friendship, freedom from domination and justice.

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