EDITORIAL

Where to, resistance studies?

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In the first issue of the *Journal of Resistance Studies,* the editor Stellan Vinthagen (2015) wrote that 'resistance' can be to a wide variety of systems of power, for example the state, patriarchy and capitalism. It can be at a large scale, like global mass protests against war, or at a local level, such as a workplace go-slow or an encounter with an overbearing family member. The field incorporates diverse theoretical perspectives and draws on numerous academic disciplines.

For a contrast, think of social movement studies, where most of the attention is on the activities of groups rather than individuals. Resistance studies is broader. What can be gained from that?

One advantage is the possibility of applying ideas from one domain to another. An example is resistance in organisations. When workers in a corporation resist managerial directives or propose an alternative plan, this is different from resistance against a repressive government, but there are also similarities. What can be learned from this? One thing is the similarities between the bureaucratic form, based on hierarchy and a division of labour, and a repressive state (Weinstein, 1979). The implication is that struggles against corporate bosses have similarities with campaigns against authoritarian rulers. Another thing is the differences between the two domains, between corporate and state authoritarianism, the most obvious of which is the role of violence. State authorities can call out police and troops against protesters, but few corporate managers have this prerogative. When they fire workers for challenging bosses, they rely on state power in a different way, via protection of private property and enforcement of the law.

Another example is resistance in the family. When there is a patriarchal head of a nuclear or extended family, the stage is set for resistance through a wide variety of means, including quiet refusal, rational persuasion and open defiance. Can methods used by family members be categorised and theorised and used to offer insights into collective struggles at wider domains? And can methods used at larger scales be applied within the family?

These are just a couple of examples. There is much more to be learned by trying to apply insights from one arena of resistance to another.

One of the arenas of resistance is the other side, the opponent, the target of the resistance. Can we talk about resistance to resistance? The point is that resistance assumes there is someone or something to be opposed, and it usually has agency.

An example is a repressive regime, which can respond to resistance in various ways, including by learning how better to repress, distract and undermine opposition. In doing this, do autocrats use some tools from the resistance repertoire? Is there something to be learned by thinking from the point of view of the opponent?

This is standard in what is called strategic nonviolent action. The word 'strategic' here points to planning that takes into account resources, opportunities, methods, campaign stages and, of special relevance here, the likely actions of the other side. In strategic nonviolent action, understanding the opponent is crucially important. With the advent of social media and greater ease of organising rallies, many nonviolent campaigns may be lacking in the strategic dimension. Mass protests can be powerful emotionally but may be more expressive than instrumental: they feel good but may not be so effective otherwise.

By analogy, we might talk of strategic resistance, namely resistance that takes account of the opponent or system being opposed. Some studies do this, but there is much more to do. When studies of resistance apply ideas from one domain to another, this can encompass ideas about strategy.

For example, the labour movement can be thought of as organised resistance to capital, but within the movement there are other types of resistance, such as to trade union leaders co-opted by management, to male domination and to workplace bullying. What might be a strategy to oppose one or more of these forms of unequal power? And what can these different struggles learn from each other via a resistance-studies analysis?

Useful? To whom?

Can you imagine a dictator sitting down with issues of *Journal of Resistance Studies,* trying to learn how to subjugate resisters? Unlikely, for sure. What about operatives in a national-security agency doing the same? A bit more likely, but then they would have to convince their higher-ups to adopt any suggestions they derived from *JRS* authors. Organisational imperatives

might overwhelm insights from research. In any case, as Anton Törnberg (2017: 9–10) suggested, resistance studies should address the risk of their findings being used by powerholders.

Now try to imagine a human rights campaigner or a climate activist sitting down to obtain insights from *JRS.* Aside from finding this a distraction from urgent matters, they might find the usual academic style unappealing, and not be experienced in converting scholarly insights into practice.

These imaginary scenarios raise the question of the relation between theory and practice, something raised in several previous editorials (Meyer 2021: 9; Vinthagen 2016: 5–6; 2021). Issues of *JRS* contain a large amount of valuable information that potentially could be used by resisters or their opponents, but would any of them be particularly interested?

The more likely process can be called popularisation or translation. Ideas in scholarly publications need to be converted, explained, illustrated or otherwise transformed so they are more likely to be taken up by others. For this, a crucial role is played by popularisers, journalists and publicists, and sometimes authors can help in this. First, though, consider what *JRS* authors might do themselves, to make the transformation to practice easier.

One possibility is posting a non-academic summary of an article. Another is writing short summary treatments for other outlets, such as *Waging Nonviolence,* as suggested by Johansen and Brown (2023: 8). Articles can be posted on sites like Academia.edu and ResearchGate.net.

There is another possibility, and for this let me tell you about a study by Malcolm Wright and J. Scott Armstrong (2008). One of Armstrong's articles, from thirty years earlier with a different co-author, was about a technique for estimating non-response bias in mail surveys. This earlier article received many citations by authors who used the technique. Wright and Armstrong examined 50 articles that had cited the earlier article, and discovered only one that had reported its findings correctly.

Wright and Armstrong recommend that authors should read all papers they cite—that sounds obvious enough—and send drafts of their papers to all cited authors whose work is important to their conclusions. Well, this isn't possible if Foucault's work is central to your analysis, but in many other cases it is feasible to contact authors. Since reading Wright and Armstrong's article, I have often done this myself, and found it extremely valuable for ensuring accuracy and making useful contacts.

If the resistance studies field is to become more like the fabled community of scholars, one way is to connect with researchers whose work we are building on, or criticising for that matter. This is also a good way to make work more visible after publication, because some of those whose work has been cited are promising ambassadors.

Academic politics

Many of the contributors to *JRS,* actual or potential, have university jobs, and would be familiar with the many struggles within academia. They encounter abuse and discrimination, power plays, conflicts of interest. They engage with identity politics, including its excesses. They experience the ongoing neoliberalisation of the academy. I would be delighted to see studies of university politics using a resistance studies lens. What about a guide, informed by resistance concepts, for negotiating life in the academy?

What is holding us back? Well, it is awkward to use case studies involving ourselves and our colleagues. This might sour relationships and limit job and promotion prospects.

Then there is the obstacle of research ethics, of institutional review boards, which are supposed to protect participants but can limit possibilities for studying the actions of academic powerholders. What about resistance to research ethics rules?[1] What about academic disincentives to resistance studies itself, when investigations touch sensitive areas?

Research ethics is about how to carry out research, but there is another challenge, deciding what is worth studying, which in a sense is an ethical challenge of a different sort. What is our research for: our personal satisfaction, our careers, our search for understanding, or our hope to support struggles? How can we balance or mesh these different motives?

Perhaps, people outside the higher education sector are better placed to do research into resistance inside the academy. They do not have to worry about their careers and they are not subject to the research ethics bureaucracy. Is this a prime area for academic-activist collaboration?

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Lea Bonasera and Craig Brown for useful comments.

[1] For critiques of research ethics processes, especially in the social sciences, see Schneider (2015); Schrag (2010); van den Hoonaard (2011).

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