

Ending Remarks: On Violence and the ‘Scholar-Activist’ Debate

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With this volume, we took a pause inside the bursting field of Resistance Studies, and reflected about what field work and theoretical constructions are telling us. The various contributions which form this volume have reinforced the claim that resistance is a multiple, complex process, which never happens in isolation, nor is it limited to a set of practices. It appears because relations of power and domination exist. It emerges from the location of subordination. With laughter, sharing pictures on the internet, refusing displacement, imagining alternative utopias, and all sorts of other cultural and practical embodiments of contestation (chapters 1 to 5), resistance happens within subordinates’ everyday experiences and contacts with oppression, using the creative tools that are available to them. Furthermore, this volume has challenged us in the ways we may draw meaning from these various expressions of resistance (chapters 6 to 10). We demonstrated various avenues to assess meaning, such as crossing observations along space, levels, and forms, observing how bodies in action contradict discourses, constructing alternative epistemologies, and looking beyond consciousness and seaming depoliticization.

Additionally, this volume proposed to consider resistance as an *approach*; that is, not only as a concept to be engaged with but also as an approach that can support the dialogue between academia and other sectors. Resistance as an approach signals the way to go about conducting research, the choices about the locations to start from, or the experiences that will be set to light. It also puts to the forefront the fact that the concept of resistance cannot be disconnected from the institution that attempts to define it. Considering such an approach, as the various chapters in this volume have demonstrated, has helped to further understand what happens in the *interstices* of conceptual dichotomies or classifications such as the private/public sphere, visible/invisible, political/depoliticized, or organized/routine practices. At the cross-road of these opposites lie a myriad of actions that cannot be categorized as one or the other, yet bring about great meaning in the understanding of how resistance happens and resiliently continues to strive – to which the various chapters have empirically given substance.

Alongside the claims that the chapters confront, I would like to address two aspects that emerge from this collective body of work – and which relate to other studies as well – which I propose as futures avenues inside the developing field of Resistance Studies. These themes somewhat traverse the various contributions, yet still need to be further unpacked as important debates surrounding the study of resistance; namely: (1) the intrinsic relation between resistance and violence and (2) the scholar-activist debate.

The Centrality of the Resistance-Violence Nexus

As of now, it seems that violence has solely been conceptualized in Resistance Studies as linked to the form resistance might take – violent or non-violent resistance – and the outcomes of such means. However, I advance here that violence has not been analysed yet in Resistance Studies as being at the root of resistance – as, I would propose, what constitutes a dominant force and

a subaltern position and as the trigger for resistance. Violence as a constitutive, or condition to, or context in which resistance happens. Violence that surrounds and moulds subordination – and thus resistance. Baaz et al (2018) briefly touch upon the close relation between these two concepts:

“The dynamics between resistance and violence is interesting and similar to the entanglement between power and resistance (...). The subjects seem to respond to violent practices in different ways, from obedience to subversion/resistance. (...) The overall conclusion is that resistance and violence are ‘performing a joint dance’, which set off various processes of social change” (p.112).

Others, such as Stierl (2018), have looked into how resistance can be approached as a tracer for violence. More precisely, what I am suggesting is not the question of how resistance and violence can speak to each other but rather, the question of in what ways resistance emerges in a context where violence (structural) is always present.

In this volume, it appears that *militant laughter* (chapter 1) precisely has political value because it appears as the opposite behaviour that is expected in relation to police and structural violence. Could it be that laughter empowers militancy because it allows bodies to resist subordinating to violence? Other place-based struggles (chapter 6) make relevant the violence inherent to ecological destructions for the (neoliberal) needs of mega-constructions and the multiple responses that unfold to address this. Similarly, it is in response to the violence inherent to the complete disregard of health and wellbeing of citizens (chapter 2), when seeing their landscape gradually turned into an open scale dumpsite, that protest emerged and was able to create a nationwide indignation. Violence is intrinsically linked to gentrification processes (chapter 3) and, needless to say, to military occupation (chapter 5) in which actions of ‘staying put’ also hold great political meaning as resistance. This also goes for performative actions of imagining and building alternative utopias to escape tentaculous structural violence that has contaminated every aspects of our daily lives (chapter 4). Bodies seem to react and resist so strongly to violence that it sometimes unfolds through behaviours that are in total contradiction with the spoken discourse (chapter 7). Surprisingly, bodies tend to be visible when discourse and/or structures seek to hide them (chapter 8 and 9). Finally, resistance can also be constitutive of violence. That is, not only as a violent means of resisting, which has already been overly studied, but acting as an erasure in the name of ideological positionings (chapter 10).

In her powerful presentation at the XIX World Congress of Sociology in Toronto, Hill Collins engaged in a reflection about intersectionality as a critical social theory¹. In other words, she argued that we might consider violence as the basis for such a theoretical construction. Indeed, she states, a lot of what has been studied and written about intersectionality is somehow connected to violence. But usually, this analysis of violence is based on the specific case or context. What she emphasizes here is the idea that :

“Intersecting systems of power relations mutually construct one another. That’s the premise everybody seems to draw upon – but what does that actually mean ? I would argue that violence is, what I would call, a saturated sight of intersecting power relations. What you find if you work on racism, sexism, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, nationalism, ableism, ageism, is that you find violence is central to all of those systems,

in some way. But what you also find is that violence is differently organized and configured across those different systems. So in that sense, to me, violence provides a window : studying violence, examining violence, starting with violence, constitutes a window, (...)how is violence configured at that sight. And of course, the implication is *how is resistance, and anti-violence also configured at that sight*. And that to me is a theoretical place for intersectionality. (...) {In other words,} how might violence shed light on the ways in which intersecting powers, mutually construct one another. How might it do so theoretically?” (2018, emphasis added)

I contend that this might be a theoretical endeavour for Resistance Studies as well. What lies, *Between Theories and the Field*, which hasn't been given enough attention yet is, I believe, the tentaculous presence/power/influence of violence and how this is constitutive of resistance.

The Scholar-Activist Debate, or the Practice of “Militant Research”

Some of the founders of sociology were activists: WEB du Bois, C. Wright Mills, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Emily Greene Balch, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Martineau, Anna J Cooper. Of course, these are not the traditional white males that textbooks will refer to as foundational. Nevertheless, scholars are more and more reclaiming the importance of these ground-breaking works (see for instance, Feagin 2001, Feagin et al 2015, Hill Collins 2000). So, what does this tell us about the way we practice (work inside) academia today? Researching resistance and, consequently, relations of power cannot avoid the complicated powerful relations in which we, as scholars, are embedded. Also, quite naturally, ‘researching resistance’ attracts people (and future scholars) who have been in contact with the practice – activists, advocates, minority or marginalized groups, etc. As most of the contributing authors in this volume define themselves as ‘scholar-activists’ and frame their research in a partisan or situated perspective, this is a question that needs to be address.

We can already hear the criticism ahead of the field for being too much on the “advocacy” side and less on the “scientific” one, such as Baaz et al (2018) have stressed: “By taking the sides of resisters and liberation struggles, resistance researchers run the risk of being excluded from the established academic discourse and becoming dismissed as ‘activists in disguise’” (147). Nevertheless, some fields, such as Gender Studies for instance, have succeeded in growing and creating space for themselves on the long run, amidst reclaiming a militant purpose for research. However, it appears that to do so, instead of hiding the activism under the carpet and pretending to play on the same stage as any other ‘traditional’ field of research, it took the opposite road and embraced the militancy. This entailed, as I suggested in chapter 8, engaging with and deconstructing complicated concepts such as objectivity.

So how do we engage with this issue in Resistance Studies? How do we make our research available for those under study, yet avoid being disregarded by academic peers ? How do we think about ‘militant research’ without ending up studying only the ‘good causes’ or the forms of resistance we ideologically stand by? Baaz et al (2018) approach this issue by stressing that:

“in order not to undermine the legitimacy of resistance studies, it is essential that scholars pay attention to the difference between analysis and advocacy. A resistance

studies scholar can also be an activist, but she/he does not have to be one. There is nothing that contradicts this. There is, however, nothing that automatically makes an activist a better scholar of resistance. (...) Resistance studies is ultimately about seeking to understand various resistance practices and, by extension, their role in social change rather than educating activists. Resistance studies could, but does not have to, provide guidelines of how a desired social change can be achieved” (p.13).

If I would tend to agree with this claim – namely, that activists can do research but researchers don’t have to be activists, and activism does not define the quality of a research project – I still am bothered by the fact that this does not address the power relations inside academia.

Like many others, I contend that the aim of Resistance Studies is to critically address the resistances under study. This means to not only advocate for them, or as Vinthagen often stresses, not simply as the megaphones repeating activists’ claims. However, we do know today that the academy can be an obstacle in this process – we know it can set barriers, encourage (finance) specific types of studies or subjects, encourage specific types of publications, etc. So, shouldn’t we at least try to safeguard Resistance Studies from the academy’s biases? Shouldn’t we at least try to safeguard it from “white knowledge” (see Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva’s 2008 *White Logic, White Methods. Racism and Methodology*,)? Shouldn’t there be epistemological principles for Resistance Studies that encourage reflexivity or decolonization? Tuhiwai Smith (2001) has demonstrated how resistance to dominant epistemology is a matter of survival for Indigenous peoples : “To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves” (4, quoted in Strega & Brow 2015, 130). In this line of thought, Motta (2016) highlights that “It is also of no surprise that there is so little written about decolonizing work for activist-researchers, for as Gill et al. (2012: 11) argue, “[there] is limited representation of these peoples in the academy” (109). As suggested by Strega & Brown (2015), referring to Santos (2007), “The array of publications now available confirms that cognitive justice is an essential requirement for social justice (...). The ability to think against dominant knowledge requires forms of knowledge creation that are grounded in diverse ontological and epistemological theories” (2).

So maybe we don’t *have to be* activists at the service of the causes we study but maybe we (scholars in Resistance Studies) *ought to be* activists/militants/critical researchers inside the powerful institutions we are part of. Maybe the interest of developing such a field of Resistance Studies lies in the ability to produce knowledge about resistance, subordination, violence, and power relations in a context where researchers are committed a great deal of effort in making sure the academy and its biases don’t come in the way of the type of knowledge that is being built. Hopefully, it also lies in the processes by which these researchers are working on improving the academy.

Epistemological framings have importance. As Ball (2005, 86) vividly exposed while quoting a participant at an Aboriginal health conference, it is important in the way it structures problematics:

“We are tired of researchers coming in and documenting all the things wrong with our communities: youth suicide, child neglect, alcohol abuse, family violence, poor nutrition, embezzlement. You would think people would want to figure out how we survived white people for so many hundreds of years. How we kept our children alive, kept our stories, kept our knowledge about how to live on the land, kept our ceremonies, kept our fires burning with hope for generations yet to come. How about some research on what’s right with us? About what makes us resilient” (quoted in [Strega & Brown](#), 5).

Strega & Brown further highlight this issue with another example: “the poor have been exhaustively researched, especially from a deficit orientation, and although we may now know more about how the rich live, we do not investigate wealth as an individual pathology in the same way that we explore poverty. Similarly, poverty has long been investigated as a social problem, while wealth has not” (6).

Furthermore, several scholars in Migration Studies, which have deliberately embraced ‘militant research’, have done so because they demonstrated the political implications and avenues for social justice of such knowledge constructions (see the special issue in *Postcolonial Studies* “Challenging the Discipline of Migration – Militant Research in Migration Studies”, Garelli & Tazzioli 2013). In their introduction, Garelli & Tazzioli argue the choice of embracing militant research:

“the term ‘militant’, with its partisan and organizational connotations, seems to best express a political understanding of knowledge as a ‘political epistemology’: both a practice embedded in the politics of production and circulation and a discursive practice of political action. (...) Our use of the term ‘militant’ signals an effort to counter the depoliticization of migration as manifest in its incorporation within the academic practices of a ‘-Studies’. (...) ‘militant research’ may refer to what above we call a political epistemology: in this capacity, critical analytics are developed, sifting through the depth of migration experiences and the acts of governance enacted upon them, to unpack crucial struggle-sites. (246)

Seemingly, through their thought-provoking project on *Forensic Oceanography*, which “uses remote sensing and mapping technologies to document deaths and violations of the rights of migrants at the maritime borders of the European Union” (2013, 289) Pezzani & Heller highlight how practicing militant research has led them to perform a ‘disobedient gaze’. This means that, since unveiling information about migrants navigating the Mediterranean Sea could harm them, they deliberately chose to frame their research on human rights violations :

“to exercise a ‘disobedient gaze’, which aims not to disclose what the regime of migration management attempts to unveil—clandestine migration; but unveil that which it attempts to hide—the political violence it is founded on and the human rights violations that are its structural outcome. Applying this strategy to the ‘left-to-die’ boat investigation entailed subverting the technologies of surveillance deployed by states in the frame of the war. By analysing vast amounts of digital data coming from ocean buoys, fishing and commercial vessels’ monitoring technologies, satellite phones, ships’ logs, maritime distress signals, radars and satellites, *we tried to transform the Mediterranean sensorium into a witness to interrogate*. But whereas all these technologies are usually part of the surveillance apparatus that routinely monitors the area in the attempt to detect migrants heading towards the coasts of southern Europe and

other ‘terrorist’ activities, it was the violation perpetrated by the military that we attempted to reveal, rather than the act of clandestine migration. » (294, emphasis added) Practicing militant research thus entails reflecting about how to inquire, where to start from, and for what purpose.

In the end, I wish to emphasize that if we, as scholars, may (should) study *all* manifestations of resistance – the good, the bad, and the ugly, complicated, power producing forms of resistance – , the underlying question that should be addressed is *why* are we studying them? For what purpose, what aim at the end of the line? Who and where are we choosing to inquire? These are important conversations that other fields are addressing and that I argue we also need to collectively reflect upon, engage with, and give substance to within the field of Resistance Studies.

ⁱ These arguments were announced to be developed in an upcoming book titled “Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory”, to be published in August 2019, Duke University Press. It was not out yet by the time we were drafting these Ending Remarks. However, the Table of Contents that was announced includes a section entitled “intersectionality and intellectual resistance” (sub-sections including “intersectionality and resistant knowledge projects”, and “intersectionality and epistemic resistance”) which thus promises challenging debates on this issue. Her talk at the XIX World Congress of Sociology where she presents the arguments that informs this forthcoming book can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iamj7hyMNXg&t=1697s>