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Rethinking Subaltern Resistance

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ABSTRACT *This special issue seeks to rethink “resistance” as a critical social science concept in the light of a range of critiques since the 1980s. The five articles in this issue draw their empirical materials from contemporary India, but their arguments have significant implications for those working on other parts of Asia and the world. The articles acknowledge the inherent ambiguities and ambivalences of subaltern resistance in the face of hegemonic social formations, yet, shorn of exoticising and homogenising tendencies, resistance can be reconceptualised as the negotiation rather than negation of social power. Such a reconceptualisation is useful to study a wide range of contentious politics from foot-dragging through protests to social revolutions under a single analytic umbrella. Resistance, in this sense, ought to be recognised as a vital part of a critical realist ontology of society, which helps us understand and critique existing structures of social domination in order to pursue emancipatory possibilities via the generation of social scientific knowledge.*

KEY WORDS: Resistance, power, hegemony, subaltern politics, the state, contentious politics

Once upon a time, resistance was a relatively unambiguous category, half of the seemingly simple binary, domination versus resistance. Domination was a relatively fixed and institutionalized form of power; resistance was essentially organized opposition to power institutionalized in this way (Ortner 1995, 174).

To resist is, in ordinary parlance, to oppose or fight off what is pernicious or threatening to one’s existence. Since the late 1960s, social scientists have identified an entire spectrum of resistance from outright rebellion to everyday forms of defiance against political authorities (Wolf 1969; Migdal 1974; Paige 1975; Skocpol 1979; Scott 1985, 1990; Kerkvliet 2009). In these accounts, peasants, workers and other subaltern groups resisted the social forces represented by the modern state, colonialism and capitalism with varying degrees of success. In South Asia, the Subaltern Studies Collective, founded and led in its early years by the Marxist historian Ranajit Guha, pioneered the study of subaltern resistance to modern forms of power and domination (see Guha 1983). To the Subalternists, as for their counterparts outside the Indian subcontinent such as Thompson (1971), Scott (1976) and Comaroff (1985), the “moral economy” of subaltern politics, especially in the countryside, existed autonomously from or outside of the workings of modern state power and capitalist economic transformations that threatened subaltern “lifeworlds” (see Guha and Spivak 1988; Chakrabarty 1989; Chatterjee 1993; Skaria 1999). Resistance by the

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subaltern classes and the social bases of power/domination were, therefore, akin to the *yin* and *yang* of society–state relations.

Yet “resistance” has always been a contentious term with its fair share of detractors and sceptics. For Abu-Lughod (1990, 42), resistance is simply a “diagnostic of power,” that is, “in the rich and sometimes contradictory details of resistance the complex workings of social power can be traced.” For Mitchell (1990, 547), positing the dualism of power and resistance prevents us from appreciating how “domination works through actually constructing a seemingly dualistic world.” Both Abu-Lughod and Mitchell follow Foucault’s (1978, 95–96) dictum that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” This Foucauldian injunction has led to a post-structuralist turn in studies of resistance, according to which power and resistance are now widely seen as “entangled” rather than simply opposed (Prakash and Haynes 1992, 2–3). For Ortner (1995, 175), this revisionist perspective necessarily implies “the ambiguity of resistance and the subjective ambivalence of the acts for those who engage in them.” By invoking ambivalence and ambiguity, Ortner suggests that not only is the intention to resist power/domination unclear in subaltern politics, but so are the wider implications for social change. Such a revisionist perspective was received enthusiastically by the Subalternists studying South Asia (Spivak 1988; Prakash 1990; Chakrabarty 1992). This was especially the case as they grappled with the difficulties of predominantly upper-caste Hindu males representing the interests of lower caste, working class, and forest dwelling groups as well as religious minorities and women. Besides being ambivalent and ambiguous with respect to the workings of power, therefore, resistance was increasingly seen as difficult to represent in and outside academia.

Scepticism over the notion of resistance has, however, hardly been confined to Foucault-inspired anthropologists. Keesing (1992), Gledhill (1994) and Moore (1998), for instance, have argued from fairly different theoretical perspectives that resistance is neither homogenous nor autonomous from the social logics of power. The workings of hegemony in the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci’s sense, a theme taken up later in this introduction and the issue as a whole, invariably encase notions of the subaltern as well as resistance within dominant frameworks of capitalism, culture and statemaking. As Roseberry (1996, 361) observes, hegemony and resistance are thus far too “intimately intertwined” to be free of the context-specific ambiguities and ambivalences to which Ortner had pointed. Hegemony is often misunderstood as a static realm of culture and power (Kurtz 1996), but, as Judith Whitehead (2015) explains deftly in her contribution to this issue, hegemony and resistance are dynamic concepts that suggest a historical-materialist dialectic at work in society. This is why we see in the present historical moment, for instance, how anti-austerity protestors in Greece cling to racist stereotypes of Germans and nationalist idealisations of classical civilisation (Theodossopoulos 2014a). It is why the ability of indigenous communities in Mexico to resist states and corporations is constrained by organised crime networks and extractive economies in which the resisters are socially embedded in neo-liberal times (Gledhill 2014).

In this special issue, we endeavour to rethink “resistance” as a critical social science concept by acknowledging the challenges posed by its inherent ambiguities and ambivalences in the face of hegemonic formations, and by charting a scholarly path that avoids the intellectual paralysis engendered by poststructuralist scholarship as well as the pitfalls of earlier studies of subaltern resistance. To this end, we make common cause with a

recent call for a unified scholarly focus on resistance, shorn of exoticising, pathologising or homogenising tendencies, by which a range of contentious politics from foot-dragging through protests to social revolutions can be studied comparatively (Theodossopoulos 2014b). At the same time, our approach to resistance in this special issue is somewhat distinctive. Our aim is to redefine “resistance” as a working concept for critical social science that is committed to a realist ontology of society, critique of the existing structures of social domination, and the pursuit of emancipatory possibilities immanent in the generation of knowledge (Bhaskar 1986; Shapiro and Wendt 1992).

To do so, we, first, accept that defining resistance too broadly stretches the concept to the extent that it includes ambiguous or ambivalent acts in everyday life. Second, we agree that subalterns who resist the status quo may not be fully aware of *all* the implications of their actions, but, in pragmatic terms, they act as rational agents with sufficient intention and purpose. Third, we acknowledge that resistance itself may be power-laden to some extent, but not wholly, and this is what permits social change to occur at least partly from below. Lastly, we wish to direct readers to the Latin root of resistance *re + sistere*, literally enduring or withstanding, to re-orient the older emphasis on opposition or negation towards a logic of negotiation.

To resist in our narrower but arguably more robust sense of the term is, therefore, to minimally apprehend the conditions of one’s subordination, to endure or withstand those conditions in everyday life, and to act with sufficient intention and purpose to negotiate power relations from below in order to rework them in a more favourable or emancipatory direction. Three caveats need to be kept in mind. First, resistance may, as we know all too well, fail to alter existing social arrangements in particular instances, but the *failure of resistance* ought to be differentiated from the *failure to resist*. Second, there is no teleology implied by our emphasis on the emancipatory direction taken through everyday acts of resistance. Power relations may be reworked from below in a manner that makes one’s life more bearable or ameliorate the material conditions of one’s subordination, but we do not intend to imply that such a change in individual lives and society at large is either revolutionary or the harbinger of future revolution. Third, although class is not explicitly theorised in every article in this special issue, we follow a recent wave of Marxian political sociologists in taking it as central to our conceptualisation of subalternity (see Agarwala and Herring 2008; Herring 2013). In particular, we avoid the postmodern temptation, discussed in the South Asian context by Chibber (2006), to stretch the notion of subalternity to embrace any situation in which individuals may *feel* deprived of power. The material forces that produce and sustain subalternity as well as state power are laid out elaborately in each empirical context. With these caveats in mind, we would like readers to appreciate how the articles in this issue seek to rethink resistance as a concept even as they focus empirically on contemporary India to substantiate their respective theses. We believe, in sum, that this special issue not only adds to our existing knowledge of India today, but also, more generally, reorients and reinvigorates the study of resistance beyond the hurdles placed by revisionist scholarship before it.

Towards a Theory of Resistance as Negotiation

[B]uilt into the subaltern studies focus on peasant insurgency...was the assumption that the state and forms of governance were external to the immediate social world of peasants (Chatterjee 2013).

A key point of departure for our contributors is the growing focus on the state and the law among scholars of subaltern resistance working on modern India and beyond. Analytically speaking, this is a significant departure from earlier studies of subaltern resistance, which focused on different sub-strata within the subaltern classes, their modes of political organisation, and their strategies of protest and defiance (see Alavi 1965; Guha 1983; Chatterjee 1983; Bayly 1988; Chandavarkar 1998). Of this new wave of scholarship, the three most prominent and influential conceptual frameworks are those concerning “rightful resistance” (O’Brien 1996; O’Brien and Li 2006), “lawfare” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, 2009), and “political society” (Chatterjee 2004, 2011). Each of these three conceptual frameworks, examined below, shifts scholarly attention from peasant rebellion and social revolution towards an understanding of what O’Brien (2013, 1058) calls “within-system form[s] of contention in the reform, not revolution, paradigm.” These three conceptual frameworks thus share a kinship with a well-known within-system form of contention, namely, Scott’s (1985) “everyday forms” of resistance. By everyday forms, Scott meant those less-than-revolutionary acts of peasants and other subalterns who display a “calculative rationality” in negotiating the terms of their subordination (see Theodossopoulos 2014b, 424). Yet there are crucial departures, too, from Scott’s earlier theorisation of subaltern resistance: rightful resistance, lawfare, and political society do not assume that resistance is autonomous of hegemonic forms of power¹; nor do they work with an unsustainable distinction between the public and hidden selves of subaltern actors. These forms of “contentious politics,” as Tilly and Tarrow (2007) have demonstrated ably over the past three decades, can and do lead to progressive social change but they do not necessarily imply regime change or revolutionary politics. For our purposes, these recent works on subaltern–state relations in South Asia and elsewhere dovetail nicely with our ambition to articulate a narrower working definition of “resistance” that is rooted in the logic of negotiation rather than negation.

“Rightful resistance,” as O’Brien and Li (2006, 2) define it after extensive field investigations in rural China, is

a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public.

Rightful resisters, in other words, recognise the structures of power and domination in society and work within those structures to articulate their claims, exploiting crevices and cracks in social arrangements to push forward subaltern political agendas. In the context of the Chinese party-state, for example, peasants and their leaders complain routinely about the everyday conduct of local party functionaries and bureaucrats, urging their superiors in the higher echelons of the communist party to intervene on their behalf. Rightful resisters strategically utilise the rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party and appeal to the established norms and values of the vanguard elite to articulate their claims without challenging the legitimacy of the regime per se. In this special issue, the article by Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2015) operates within the less-than-revolutionary paradigm of “rightful resistance.” His rich case study of forest-dwelling groups in central India illustrates how subaltern resistance can meaningfully negotiate and re-work power structures from below even as it is deeply shaped by the languages and logics of modern state-making.

Although votaries of a more radical politics may be disappointed with what are essentially reformist agendas for social change, the material and non-material consequences for subaltern lives are not easy to dismiss altogether. Indeed, it is useful to remind ourselves here of Gramsci's (1971, 229–239) notion of a “war of position,” by which the subaltern classes negotiate the structures that subordinate them bit by bit in a manner that is least costly to them.

A close cousin of rightful resistance, “lawfare,” as defined by the anthropologists Comaroff and Comaroff (2009, 26–27), refers to the “use of legal means for political and economic ends.” As they put it in an edited volume titled *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, “[i]t is not just self-imaginings, interests, identities, rights, and injuries that have become saturated with the culture of legality. Politics itself is migrating to the courts...Class struggles seem to have metamorphosed into class actions.” Their examples vary across world regions and by the degree of success achieved: indigenous groups claiming rights over land and natural resources via class action suits in North America; concerted action since 1984 in US and Indian law courts by victims of the gas leak at Union Carbide's factory in the central Indian city of Bhopal; Bushmen successfully winning the legal right to return to the Kalahari reserve in Botswana despite the unwillingness of the state to grant them this right. The current wave of “judicialisation of politics,” according to the Comaroffs (2006, 26, 29; 2009, 56), has an “insurgent potential” in so far as it permits “the ‘little peoples’ and marginal populations of the world” to use the law and its instruments strategically to better their lives. In the Indian context, the sociologist Nandini Sundar (2009) has recently drawn our attention to popular struggles over the law and their growing importance for subaltern resistance in a liberal-democratic polity. In this special issue, the articles by Kenneth Bo Nielsen (2015) and Heather Bedi (2015) engage directly with the judicialisation of politics and lawfare as a strategy of subaltern resistance in eastern and western India. Much like rightful resistance, lawfare is a within-system form of contentious politics and does not imply regime change or any other revolutionary consequences. It denotes a set of strategies by which subaltern actors turn the law and its institutions into sites of contestation and negotiation with varying degrees of success. Lawfare, too, offers subaltern actors the means to engage in a Gramscian “war of position” vis-à-vis the structures that subordinate and oppress them.

Last but certainly not the least, Chatterjee's (2004, 2011) recent work on the “politics of the governed” as expressed in the iterations of “political society” holds much relevance for us. Whereas Chatterjee's examples are all drawn from South Asia, the theoretical claim of a bifurcated public sphere in postcolonial societies is true elsewhere too (see, for example, Ekeh 1975, Mamdani 1996). Civil society consists of the privileged bourgeois few who enjoy the rights of citizenship in postcolonial contexts, and the majority live as subjects in varying degrees of subordination in the shadowy realm of what Chatterjee calls “political society.” This is, of course, the unfortunate legacy of colonialism in these societies, but to the extent that India is more governed than it has ever been (Chatterjee 2011, 172), the existence of political society allows subaltern populations to make claims on patrons within governmental structures, to use electoral democracy strategically to their advantage, and to engage in seemingly uncivil or unruly forms of politics that nonetheless serve their interests (Chatterjee 2004, 47, 59, 138). Political society as a peculiar feature of postcolonial life consists of four distinct features: at least some of its “demands on the state are founded on a violation of the law,” it demands welfare benefits as a “right” by reading the law

back to the state, its demands for welfare negotiate “collective rights” for putative communities, and the state and civil society treat members of political society as welfare-earning populations rather than as citizens subject to a liberal-democratic constitution (Chatterjee 2011, 177). Unlike the earlier writings in the subaltern studies tradition, which saw the state as external to subaltern lifeworlds (see, in particular, Guha 1983), Chatterjee’s recent work has placed the modern state at the centre of subaltern politics. Subaltern actors operate in a Bourdieusian “field” in which they, despite their marginal structural position, strategically manipulate the promises of the postcolonial state to their advantage. Chatterjee never terms these subaltern negotiations “resistance,” but his theoretical framework and his many examples from everyday life speak directly to the revised notion of resistance we propose in this special issue. The article by Indrajit Roy (2015) on rural Bihar follows most closely Chatterjee’s “political society,” whereas the article by Judith Whitehead (2015) offers a valuable critique of the concept based on a close reading of Gramsci’s writings.

The three theoretical frameworks discussed above overlap often, even as they differ at times, yet the tensions between these frameworks, we believe, are fruitful and productive. For instance, lawfare and political society allow for illicit or extra-legal forms of contentious politics, whereas rightful resistance does not. Political society, unlike lawfare and rightful resistance, even encompasses violent forms of subaltern claim-making. Political society and rightful resistance, however, share an interest in subaltern–state interactions that are not mediated by the law. The overlaps and tensions between the three concepts and the theoretical frameworks that support them are excellent ways for us to rethink resistance today and to revitalise it as a valid and useful concept. The articles in this special issue reflect these overlaps and tensions in a fruitful, productive manner. From our perspective, O’Brien, the Comaroffs, and Chatterjee take criticisms of earlier studies of resistance very seriously as they respond to emerging forms of politics in very different parts of the world (China, southern Africa, and India). Yet what unites them and puts them in the same critical intellectual tradition as Scott’s “weapons of the weak” is a desire to understand the ways by which subaltern actors seek to undo, however partially, the conditions of their subordination.²

What these recent theoretical frameworks do, in sum, is to zoom in on a logic of negotiation embedded in everyday subaltern–state relations. To redefine resistance as negotiation is to, above all, place the modern state at the heart of subaltern politics (Chandra 2013b). Subaltern resistance is thus not extrinsic but intrinsic to everyday power relations within which the state is embedded as a multi-layered leviathan (Chandra 2013a). As we work towards a full-fledged theory of resistance as negotiation, we take seriously the recent words of Scott (2005, 398), who likens subaltern negotiations vis-à-vis the modern state to

a kind of struggle or contest constrained within some rough limits. The antagonists in such contests...know each other’s repertoire of practical action and discursive moves. There is, in other words, a kind of larger social contract that gives some order and limits to the conflict.

In the South Asian context, the historian C. A. Bayly (2011, 25) has commented astutely on these subaltern–state negotiations and urged us to venture beyond the thrall of subaltern studies:

The ideologies of low-caste, tribal and poor peasant movements were by no means pre-political. Yet neither did they inhabit a wholly separate and homogenous realm of subaltern sensibility. Instead, these movements appropriated notions of rights and representation widely disseminated across a society, in which the politics of the literate and the moral claims of the poor had long resonated with each other.

Rethinking resistance in this manner helps us avoid the problems inherent in earlier conceptualisations, as revealed by various critics, albeit within a critical social science paradigm committed to emancipatory knowledge. Chatterjee (2012, 49) wrote recently that

[t]he specific project called Subaltern Studies begun 30 years ago has run its course...The questions it asked have now taken other forms; to answer them, it is necessary to craft new theoretical concepts. Subaltern Studies was a product of its time; another time calls for other projects.

We see this special issue on rethinking resistance as one of these new projects, deeply engaged with contemporary India, but also contributing to a wider comparative theoretical discussion on how best to define resistance and understand the varied forms of everyday subaltern–state negotiations around us today.

The Papers

The rich and diverse contributions to this special issue on rethinking resistance offer a set of overlapping perspectives on understanding subaltern–state relations in contemporary India. They revisit and pay tribute to older theories of subaltern resistance in India and beyond, but also respond clearly and forcefully to the challenge posed by a range of critics of resistance. Resistance as negotiation, not negation, unites the articles in this issue as we work individually and collectively towards a working definition of this all-important notion for the critical social sciences. Whereas some contributors such as Nielsen and Bedi focus on the law as a site of subaltern negotiations with the state, Roy reminds us that resistance literally means withstanding or enduring domination as a subaltern “community” and developing collective strategies to rework power structures in a more favourable direction. Whitehead and Nilsen put us on a solid theoretical ground with their subtle critiques of subaltern studies that draw on a careful reading of Gramsci. Together, these five articles draw on their in-depth understanding of politics in particular regions within contemporary India to make the case for rethinking and revitalising resistance as a key social science concept.

In their articles, Nielsen and Bedi present us with two popular struggles in the legal domain against forced land acquisition in West Bengal and Goa respectively. These legal struggles have transformed the nature of subaltern politics today in India and are at the heart of numerous conflicts over social inclusion and exclusion in a turbulent democratic polity. Nielsen and Bedi show carefully how and why subaltern resistance to the state’s land acquisition policies came to be increasingly judicialised over time and what they mean for theorising resistance in India and beyond. Nielsen’s article focuses on the controversial acquisition of farmland in Singur to build a Tata Motors factory. As resistance to land acquisition came to be channelled through the languages and multi-

tiered institutions of the law, subaltern actors learned that judicialisation is both time-consuming and costly, especially when the Calcutta High Court turned down their petitions. Lawfare thus came to be recognised as one among many options in peasants' repertoire of resistance, cutting across Chatterjee's civil/political society divide and pushing us to appreciate the contingent, shifting nature of subaltern resistance in and outside the law. These lessons are heeded well in Bedi's article, which shows how the demarcation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in the western India state of Goa led to partly successful protests against land acquisition by the government. Whereas subaltern protests were powerful enough to convince the chief minister to end SEZ development in Goa, legal de-notification of these zones did not follow. Resisters worked in and outside the law in response to or in anticipation of state responses. At the same time, the law proved to be an unsteady ally in the struggle against state-sanctioned land grabs favouring the interests of business elites, promising justice to resisters at times and denying it at others.

Roy takes us inside the everyday politics of subaltern castes in rural eastern India. Roy's article combines a close-to-the-ground understanding of the subaltern desire for greater social equality and better lives with a careful sifting of the complex relationship between resistance as negotiation and the politics of accommodation. Drawing on his fieldwork in rural eastern India, he shows how the much-despised Musahar or "rat-eating" Dalit caste in Bihar has sought to negotiate and rework rural power structures via the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation as well as the Musahar Sevak Sangh. Far from organising themselves autonomously from state institutions, Musahars work and network through leftist and caste-based organisations in order to make claims on the state and elites and to alter the political environment in which they live. Although driven by the promise of equality that defines modernity, this subordinated caste group does not merely mimic or reproduce pre-existing Western liberal categories but comes up with their own political vocabulary of "encroachments" in the course of negotiating the intricate structure of caste domination. Resistance, conceptualised as negotiation rather than as a simple opposition to power, accurately describes Musahar strategies for "upliftment."

The final two articles by Whitehead and Nilsen draw on extensive fieldwork and reflection in western India. For Whitehead, Chatterjee's notion of "political society" rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of Gramsci's ideas concerning the state and hegemony. She argues that "civil society," "political society," and the "state" are processual, not static categories, in Gramscian thought. All three are sites for constructing hegemony as well as sites of subaltern resistance. What Chatterjee's recent formulation does, as Whitehead shows, is to re-map conventional liberal binaries of elite-subaltern and modern-traditional onto Gramsci's civil/political society. Nilsen shows concretely how a processual analysis of subaltern-state relations over time can be done in Gramscian terms outlined by Whitehead. Nilsen examines a series of tribal rebellions among the Bhils of western India from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, and argues that this "rebellious century" offers rich evidence of subaltern negotiations with colonial state structures. The implications for contemporary debates over subaltern resistance are clear enough: to the extent that resistance can be re-conceptualised as the negotiation of power relations from below, a Gramscian war of position is implicit in these negotiations. The old ideas of autonomous subaltern rebels seem rather quaint, in comparison.

In combination, the five articles in this special issue explore new ways of rethinking "resistance" as a critical social science concept. With comparative cases drawn from

across contemporary India, we hope that this special will serve as an invitation for further critical comparative research and scholarly dialogue both within and beyond India.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- ¹ A similar problem afflicts Scott's recent reformulation of resistance in "Zomia" or highland Southeast Asia, where a neat hill/valley dichotomy replaces the power/resistance binary of yore. Brass' (2012) scathing critique of what he sees as Scott's "populism" for a postmodern readership, among others, makes this point succinctly, though Brass' reading of *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) is neither widely shared nor unproblematic.
- ² For an excellent overview of this critical intellectual tradition that engages with Marxism today, see Barker et al. (2013).

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