

Chapter 1

THE TEMPORALITY OF RESISTANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Since launching the notion of “resistance” (or at least revitalizing and recasting it) James Scott and his sympathizers have fought an uphill battle to clarify what the opening page of *Weapons of the Weak* bluntly states: there is no easy, binary division between resistance and non-resistance.¹ This seems to have muddled our Manichean minds, and has led to much ink spilled over what resistance could possibly mean if not the opposite of something like non-resistance, acquiescence, submission, acceptance. Over nearly twenty years the discussion has traced some curious routes, inwards to issues of whether self-consciousness is required for an act to be legitimately labeled resistance, and outwards to questions of whether ethnographic particularity undermines the very possibility of a universal category of resistance, or, contradictorily, whether global capitalism is so universally hegemonic as to fold all resistance of any sort back into the logic of profit and the commoditization of absolutely everything—from Che Guevara tee shirts to Osama Bin Laden lunch boxes.

Here I want to take two steps back. I admire Scott’s original attempt to specify the subtleties, gradations and forms of resistance—so that wasting Capital’s time counts for something despite falling short of mature revolution—and I want to suggest that this issue of time holds a clue to a deeper deployment of our term. It may be that some of this is implicit in

¹ This is from a quote on the frontispiece by Colin Gordon, “. . .the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unreal one. The existence of those who seem not to rebel is a warren of minute, individual, autonomous tactics and strategies which counter and deflect the visible facts of overall domination, and whose purposes and calculations, desires and choices, resist any simple division into the political and apolitical” in (Scott 1985:vii). While Scott sometimes suggests that social action can be a “subtle mixture of outward compliance and tentative resistance” (ibid. 289), it is unclear whether the issue is that resistance cannot be epistemologically or ontologically separated from compliance. In other words, is the problem that it is hard to tell (because people hide their resistance) or that acts can simultaneously resist and comply? My argument here lies with the latter reading.

other work, even Scott's original piece, but I want to outline in the starkest terms how I think the idea of resistance can be made more analytically useful by specifying the temporal frameworks of inequality and the role of resistance in them. This project was prompted by Fletcher's visitation of the term "resistance" in a Chilean case, which I employ in the final part of the essay as an ethnographic example.

Fletcher (2001) makes the argument that a transformed, Foucauldian notion of power, its practical ubiquity and inflection/production of "reality" and "truth," are keys to resuscitating the notion of resistance. He explores specifically why different factions of indigenous Pewenche are resisting or, in the majority of cases, accepting relocation due to the construction of a dam in their traditional homeland in the Alto Biobio region. While clearly sympathetic to the minority contingent opposing the dam, Fletcher does not simply dismiss the pro-dam group as victims of false consciousness. Instead he uses the division within the community to explore the point that power is not simply oppressive, and that "oppression" and its "resistance" cannot be easily determined from without by well-intentioned Parnassians—of the Left or otherwise. As Ortner (1995), Scott himself (1985)² and others have noted, categories of understanding matter, or to put it more plainly, power cannot be dissociated from culture, or from specific subject positions within a culture. The argument is that what we are calling "resistance" must be understood in the context of other cultural logics, frameworks of meaning that must be appraised ethnographically.

Fletcher is concerned, however, that we not succumb to interpretive relativism, that we chart a course somewhere between hubristic political activism and a hermeneutic anthropology that takes detached descriptiveness as a form of morally unsullied inquiry. This is not easy and it is not obvious how to go about it. Many aspire to pursue progressivism without positivism, to argue for more "democracy" and "equality" with attention to the cultural inflections such terms may bear. We are asked to "live ironically," in Terry Eagleton's words, without abandoning appreciation for corporal truths like suffering and death. This is in some sense the progressive project of our age: how to realize a more just world in the era "after theory" (Eagleton 2003). In other words, how do we deconstruct power while deconstructing the power to deconstruct—without spinning ourselves into a dizzy apoplexy?

I am not so ambitious as to attempt all this. My aim here is to build on what we now understand as the plurality of power by suggesting how diverse sorts of inequalities are brought together and operated in time. I will argue that resistance is analytically useful, not least as a window into the way temporalities of inequality are synchronized, reproduced and transformed. This, I hope, contributes to the subtlety with which progressives can grasp the operations of power and offers some idea how productive relations and the distribution of their rewards might be conceptualized in more equitable terms.

² Scott writes of a "meaning centered account of class relations" (1985:xvii), "public symbols and goals" (ibid. 33), "socially recognized form[s] of domination" (ibid. 307), and even "cultural resistance" (ibid. 34). In the final chapter Scott writes that "The main point... is that the peasants of Sedaka do not simply react to objective conditions per se but rather to the interpretation they place on those conditions as mediated by values embedded in concrete practices" (ibid. 305). All of this would seem to undermine charges that Scott is insufficiently concerned with the "meanings" locals ascribe to their actions.

INEQUALITY

My students are always dismayed to learn that penguins are twice as genetically diverse as humans, and fruit flies ten times more diverse. This defies all logic, or all my students' logic, and is the kind of "fact" they recognize will be seditiously employed by cranky subversives like myself, usually for what they mislabel my "liberal" purposes. And indeed, the penguins are only diverse *genetically*, for while humans are a young and biologically homogenous species our cultural and social character has facilitated a global presence and a bedazzling florescence of different ways of being, seeing, feeling, building, eating, dressing, and thinking. For a species with very limited genetic diversity, we are nonetheless astonishingly different, and, more importantly for our present purposes, unequal. Put another way, with a counter-intuitively overwhelming biological parity, we have nevertheless produced the planet's richest catalogue of inequality. We have developed, expanded, and aesthetically inflected social inequality, even in societies conventionally labeled "egalitarian." When Bushmen, for instance, used to "insult the meat" or allot portions based on shared arrows rather than hunting skill, they were as centrally concerned with the social operation of inequality as Princess Diana's heirs suing for rights to her name. Whether societies explicitly embrace an ideology of equality or its opposite, difference is key to who we are, difference begets inequality, and managing difference is what we do most cleverly as a species. The appellation "Homo Hierarchicus" might be much more broadly applied than Dumont (1980) supposed.

Simply, inequality is foundational to human social life. This is true in the sense usually given, and well explored by Marx, Durkheim and other metatheoretical Brahmins: a specialization of labor allows for our unique diversity of social life, and thus all societies are faced with tough questions about how to allot the rewards of our necessarily interdependent production. Such inequality runs very, very deep. For example, the human infant is amongst the most dependent of mammals, and thus, ironically, the exploitation of parents (and especially the mother) by the baby is extremely intense. My partner and I are presently raising two children under two years-old. It is quite apparent to us (now, too late) that we have been enslaved, and the one of us with functional mammary glands is enslaved particularly cruelly. Apparently it will remain something like this for the next twenty years, though beyond milk production and after toilet training it is supposed to get somewhat less physically exhausting while growing still more fiscally devastating. This form of inequality, the intense exploitation of parents by children, and later, at least in societies that celebrate it, the equally intense exploitation of children by parents, is revealing of the way inequality works in society, that is, the way inequality is expressed in time. Social inequality is rightfully our main concern here, but it bears a family resemblance to a prototypical form of what we might consider "natural inequality" that is quite striking in our species: not between generic, mature individuals, but instead among continuously maturing people, people at different points in the terminal trajectory of life. Human young make extraordinary claims on their elders, a fact that undergirds the interdependence key to human social life. We will return to this portentous fact below.

In social theory, however, when we talk about inequality we normally mean between adults, and, if examined carefully, politically enfranchised, usually male adults. This is why Phillips can assert that seemingly noble ideals of universal citizenship are essentially unfair,

that the “equality” of the universal citizen is “peculiarly advantageous to men” (1999:23). She writes, “These [liberal] standards are of course presented as neutral—the same criticisms would apply equally to a woman or a man—but since social characteristics *are* gendered, what passes for neutrality turns out to be preferential treatment for men” (ibid. 24). Phillips is thus refuting the political beneficence of an imaginary genderless, race-less, age-less universal citizen precisely because such a being is necessarily and intransigently imaginary. No such person exists in the material world, or could exist. So, amongst the Pewenche, when Fletcher and others express a desire for “equality” we have to ask how much, for whom, and, especially, what kind? Phillips notes that “Treating people as equals does not have to mean treating them the same” (ibid. 26), but if equality is not sameness of something we are hard pressed to define the term. In the US this point emerges in laws requiring wheelchair access or affirmative action—clearly “inequalities” of some sort meant to make other sorts of inequalities equal. The Right roils at such “preferences” with some reason: equality can be a Trojan horse for *any* political program, a way particular injustices are packaged as natural rights or moral responsibilities. The question is necessarily who gets to decide which inequalities are abhorrent, which are palatable, which to ameliorate and which to ignore? Such issues tend to stir the blood far more than the intellect.

In his Nobel prize-winning work Amartya Sen has explored this conundrum of inequality in considerable depth. He points out that political positions normally considered antithetical to one another very often share a concern with equality, arguing that “a common characteristic of virtually all the approaches to the ethics of social arrangements that have stood the test of time is to want equality of something—something that has an important place in the particular theory” (1992:ix). This is to say that libertarians and socialists seem to disagree very fundamentally, yet both are arguing for equality—just different kinds. Libertarians wish to facilitate some sort of equality of opportunity, something ideally free of “government” interference, and are unconcerned if, given “equal” opportunities, people suffer dramatic inequalities; socialists believe this approach to be disingenuous, that equality of opportunity should of course be pursued, but given its unlikely realization, especially without government assistance, we need to ensure some sort of parity of outcome, some minimum level of health, education and welfare. Socialists accept that this is unfair in some sense to a minority who are exceptionally talented or prodigiously propertied who do not receive equally exceptional rewards; Libertarians accept that their system will lead to gross inequality of outcomes. Sen’s point is that both are arguing for equality of *something* and both accept some sort of inequality as the price paid. While Sen’s claim that equality is key to “*virtually all* the approaches to the ethics of social arrangements” would seem to be overstating the case, it is clear that some agreement on acceptable inequalities is fundamental to the construction of a viable society, and, thus, the naturalization of key inequalities is a central and necessary part of our cultural understanding of the world.

This makes general calls for “equality” seem naïve, or, worse, a means of smuggling in pork-barrel appropriations, specific inequalities based on some clever somebody’s ability to sell it in the guise of another form of fairness. Nobody supposes that there is “equality” between mother and infant, as we’ve noted, or even between a woman when she is a mother and when she was a child. A world where mothers and infants were made to be equal *at all times* would be very short-lived indeed. We decide to accept certain inequalities in certain timeframes, or learn to accept them as part of our culturally constructed world, even as we promote a general and therefore meaningless “equality” as a benign social goal. We do not

like to be reminded that “productive inequalities” (Donham 1999:94) are key to our nature, that how we transfer labor between people, across space and time, is precisely what defines particular types of societies as feudal, capitalist or whatever, as well as being more broadly what defines us as a species. How we manage inequality is the core of who we are. And while generalized equality is a dangerous mirage, gaining some equality in spheres we conclude are important is utterly necessary. Conversely, changing acceptable patterns of inequality is a deeper and more complicated task than most people imagine, even most academics who specialize in such things. The horrific and relentlessly expanding inequalities of global capitalism have stupefied us, made us squeamish, stunted our ability to think about how exactly we might necessarily propagate certain inequalities to build a more just, less cruel world than the one we now inhabit. We cannot eliminate inequality any more than we can eliminate power; the question is *why, when and how* inequalities are actualized, and resistance is key to understanding these processes.

This calls, first of all, for a distinction between power and inequality. In one sense the former term is amongst the fields of application of the latter, which is to say that power is one area in which there is marked inequality. On the other hand, most inequalities do not much matter unless infused with some sort of power. As a global population, for instance, we have unequally beautiful earlobes, and while mine are gorgeous this fact carries no real significance and certainly no power; it is irrelevant. There are inequalities in power qua power as a kind of metaphysical oomph suffusing the social world, but it is more fruitful, I think, to examine how specific inequalities are vested with power. Key to this is understanding the social and material world as replete with inequalities, from the aforementioned earlobe comeliness and relations between mothers and babies, to intelligence, capital, health, linguistic dexterity, digestive capacity, red blood cell count, and quantity and quality of friends in high places. Sen suggests that the difficulty of coming to grips with inequality has two main parts: the heterogeneity of human beings and the multiplicity of variables by which equality can be judged. This “heterogeneity” is both biological and social, of course, while the variables considered for judging can be seen as largely culturally or ideologically determined. While it is now commonplace amongst anthropologists to assert that we live through all-important, cultural “webs of meaning,” much of this meaning inflects the cross-cutting and difficult to disentangle webs of inequality through which we constitute our selves and societies. After all, spiders have a material motivation for each night’s elegant spinning, and they eat their webs each dawn in the dim arachnid hope of reproducing new (though structurally similar) webs in new (conditioning) contexts. Moreover, to abuse the metaphor further, the webs are moving.

Charles Tilly has attempted to contend with this. In his “relational origins of inequality” he writes, “For the neat multi-dimensional space of conventional treatments, [relational theory] substitutes a dynamic tangle of incomplete, clumped, and changing connections. From a relational perspective, inequality appears everywhere, but it rarely crystallizes into neat, continuous hierarchies somehow arraying whole populations into strata. A relational analysis leads to the conclusion that any such hierarchies... rest on extensive social effort, only emerge under unusual historical conditions, and undergo incessant pressure for modification” (2001:362). Such a conception of inequality helps us to understand some of the utility of term “resistance.” The “extensive social effort” required to maintain a given pattern of inequality or set of inequalities is resisted by the relatively disempowered, who use what means they have at hand to exert “incessant pressure for modification,” even if this pressure comes from

inaction, dawdling, or poor performance. Resistance here is a useful term because it specifies a type of action in a specific relation of inequality: resistance comes as the disadvantaged press for "modification," purposefully or inadvertently, as the relatively empowered attempt to reproduce and consolidate conditions of social inequality. Thus, resistance is a "diagnostic of power" (Abu-Lughod 1990:41) because "each form of labor control or payment is ... likely, other things equal, to generate its own distinctive forms of quiet resistance and 'counterappropriation'" (Scott 1985:34). The danger, as has been pointed out, is overextending our term. Just as "hegemony" morphed from a general term for domination to a specific, ideological mode of domination and back again to mean almost any sort of domination, "resistance" can easily become any kind of nominally political action by anyone who is in any sense—or believes himself to be—comparatively disadvantaged. Such a dilution ought to be resisted or we end up with right wing pundits whining about their under representation in liberal arts education.

It should be clear, then, that in a world necessarily and productively fraught with inequality, the key is how advantage is amalgamated, amplified, defended, and, especially, reproduced. This is true for inequalities of class as it is of race, gender and age. And since, contra Tilly's "rare" crystallizations, we do in fact see striking and durable patterns of hierarchy along many axes, the question is how such patterns are built and maintained. This is where the use of resistance can be diagnostically useful, by pointing us towards the way power is reproduced. In this sense resistance is action on specific inequalities operated in time, and the term makes no sense without reference to the multiplicity of possible inequalities and their intersections and expressions in time(s).

TIME I

In his 1968 plenary address to the American Anthropological Association Max Gluckman made a last gasping attempt to defend a certain strain of British social anthropology before the ascendant American culturalists. As near as I can tell it did not work, but the beginning of the talk was nevertheless prophetic, with Gluckman stating that "The problem of time is critical for all studies of social and cultural systems" (1968:220). This, of course, finds precedence as far back as Heraclitus and has not gone unnoticed by anyone of any significant stature in social theory, from Ibn Khaldun to Emile Durkheim.³ The Americans of 1968 appeared to get the message, too, with anthropology turning towards "history" so dramatically that by the late 1990s anthropological PhD dissertations routinely had a long "history chapter," or in some cases were in sum more like histories than what had been anthropology.

This was not quite what Gluckman meant, however. His point was that in order to understand history, the specificities of events and the broad currents of social change, we

³ Somewhat contrary to how he is usually cast, Durkheim writes "Far from being immutable, humanity is in fact involved in an interminable process of evolution, disintegration and reconstruction; far from being a unity, it is in fact infinite in its variety, with regard to both time and place. Nor do I mean simply that external forms of life vary.... Rather I mean that the fundamental substance of [men's] way of conceiving the world and conducting themselves in it is in a constant state of flux, which itself varies from place to place" (in Eickelman 1977:485). Arguably Durkheim's notable insistence on social integration, the emotional bonds among a people, and specifically the significance of collective consciousness, involved precisely his fear of anomie, "infinite variety," and the "constant state of flux" in our "fundamental substance."

need first attend to what is relatively stable, or more accurately homeostatic:⁴ the pattern in the reproduction of social life, and particularly the interactions among the timeframes of social institutions. He cited the importance of the “intermesh” between institutional periodicities and argued that only by examining the “structural durations” of each part, and then the relations between the parts, can any sense be made of change. Gluckman notes, for instance, that the British House of Commons has a set of built-in temporal frames, from the period that one may speak on the floor, to the yearly calendar, to the election cycle, but that the institution itself endures beyond the structural durations of its components. The long term, overall perdurability of a complex institution may even be said to depend upon the intermesh of the structural durations of the parts. Gluckman complained, “[recent anthropologists] insist, against the analysis of structural durations, that all real societies in real time are always changing and have always been changing—without specifying what is changing, what the changes are, and how far the changes go, in affecting structural forms. It seems obvious that there are very different kinds of change, and we shall have to develop a vocabulary to differentiate between them” (1968:223).

Alas, we have not got this part of the message and “kinds of change” remain muddled together. As yet we have not developed a vocabulary to discuss them. We have recently obsessed over “globalization” and “modernity” which have, in Appadurai’s words, involved both homogenization and “heterogenization” (1996:32), but this dichotomy only gets us part way back to Gluckman’s sociologically and ethnographically richer “kinds of change.” In 1968 Gluckman gave credit to “the dialecticians” for distinguishing some “kinds of time,”⁵ but today only a few lonely theorists continue to deal with the relationship between “epochal structures” (Donham 1999:131) and historical transformation.⁶ Even so strident a defender of culture as Marshall Sahlins argues that we used to be much better at parsing periodicities and disjuncture, as when he writes that “Linton’s [1936] ‘Study of Man’... included a sustained analysis of the multiple dimensions of variation and contradiction within cultures. The main difference between this text and similar postmodern critiques of cultural unicity is that Linton had no fear of structure, so he tried to fathom the relationship between the variations rather than just pointing to them and assigning them plus or minus grades in Hegemony” (1999:405). It seems that through a century of insisting on the salience of culture, we have somehow reified our object and turned what had been a “noun of process” into a household term understood to be something like a thing, a model, a recipe. Thus Tim Mitchell can write of Ibn Khaldun’s pre-modern theory of social integration and transformation, “building [a civilization] is an active, undetermined process, marked in cycles of abundance and decay, rather than simply the material realization of a predetermined ‘plan’. ... Nowhere in the *Muqaddima* does building, or ‘*umran*, involve the notion of a plan. Consequently in Ibn Khaldun the word ‘*umran* never means culture in the modern senses of the term, which are inseparable from the idea of a plan” (1988:53).

Ironically, the contemporary impetus to challenge our regrettably too-static sense of “culture as a plan” has come largely from the Right, as when Ulf Hannerz reacts to Samuel Huntington:

⁴ I first encountered this term in contemporary ecosystem theory, but it seems to have found its way into social theory via Donham (1999:74), amongst others.

⁵ Meyer Fortes counted three: duration, continuity / discontinuity, and genetic or ‘growth processes’ (1970:1-2).

⁶ See also Friedman (1985).

