

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.

