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RETHINKING RESISTANCE IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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Rethinking Resistance in Development Studies

The enormous variety of different understandings, definitions and theoretical approaches in studies of resistance across different disciplines, geographical and cultural contexts is strongly reflected in the interdisciplinary field of development studies in the last two decades. The most prominent characteristic of writings on resistance and development is their shared understanding of unequal North-South relations and the colonial legacy of postcolonial development interventions. Studying resistance on a global level since the mid-1990s did not necessarily imply a critical reflection on the epistemic regimes of postcolonial development discourse, and furthermore little attention was paid to more fragile, subtle, incoherent forms in which social movements or subaltern groups contest, subvert, reformulate and reclaim the dominant development narrative. More recent studies on resistance and development have tried to overcome these shortcomings (McMichael 2010; Motta/Nilsen 2011), and have enabled a perspective, which makes visible how acts of resistance (re-)configure ‘development’.

1. The popularisation of ‘resistance’

As Hollander and Einwohner (2004: 533) point out, “[r]esistance is a fashionable topic”. Struggles in the Middle East, as well as its ‘Arab Spring’, anti-capitalist and anti-austerity protests in Greece and Brazil, the Gezi park protests in Turkey, rallies against rape and police violence in India, feminist activism by *Pussy Riot* and *Femen*, as well as *Euromaidan* in the Ukraine, are all subjected to an extensive medialisation. Regardless of the differences in form, political agenda, organisation and scale of these struggles, they are put under an overarching, crosscutting frame, called ‘resist-

ance'. The diverse set of topics and methods encompass nearly everything from collective forms of protest to subversive clothing and individual hairstyles, from subtle forms of disobedience in workplaces to publicly speaking out about rape experiences, from cultural maintenance to violent transformation and revolt against totalitarianism (Hollander/Einwohner 2004: 535f). Critical legal scholar and philosopher Costas Douzinas (2014) has recently called upon the Left to overcome the melancholic and pessimistic attitude towards political developments in Greece, Turkey and Ukraine in order to "explore the contemporary return of resistance" and to picture the "new age of resistance". However 'resistance' has not been asleep, either on the streets or in academic discussions. It is rather that the popularisation of the term 'resistance' and the labeling of new social movements as 'resistance movements', has called a whole new range of left-wing protagonists into play, who define themselves as 'politically involved', 'progressive' and 'radical' and are little informed of the long tradition of research in this field.

Resistance studies: Originally, studies on resistance in the post-World War II German language area were very much informed by historical studies on National Socialism (see Steinbach 2000) and in the Anglo-Saxon part of the post-colonial world by studies on anti-colonial resistance (see Abbink et al. 2003). In both cases, research investigations were closely connected to the construction of a new national identity, though in very different respects. A more in-depth theoretical discussion about how to define resistance was initiated when subcultural studies applied this term to discuss oppositional acts among the youth in the 1970s (see Williams 2011). Simultaneously, women's and gender studies enriched the conceptual as well as empirical discussion, leading the way for a substantial reconfiguration of resistance which considered the multi-layered, intersectional forms of oppression, through their analysis of women's counter-struggles against patriarchy (see Cosslett et al. 1996). Since the 1990s, resistance has gained a lot of attention in social movement studies (see Goodwin/Jasper 2003), black studies, subaltern and postcolonial studies (see Ashcroft et al. 1995) as well as global and transnational studies (see Amoore 2005).

The popular public and academic debates on 'resistance' over the last 50 years has considerably enriched and broadened the view on political, social,

cultural struggles against domination. The cross-disciplinary employment of ‘resistance’ has, however, simultaneously produced a significant weakness in relation to the use of ‘resistance’ as an analytical category. The limited consensus on what can be understood as ‘resistance’ and the indiscriminate use of the term has put resistance as a concept into question (Weitz 2001; Hollander/Einwohner 2004; Raby 2005). Tim Cresswell (2000) argues that the term ‘resistance’ has been so widely applied, that it is in danger of becoming meaningless and theoretically unhelpful. “Something that is applicable to everything is not a particularly useful tool in interrogating social and cultural life”, and, he continues with a sarcastic undertone, “[it] is not unlikely that soon we shall have policing as resistance, conformity as resistance and perhaps domination as resistance” (Cresswell 2000: 259).

Douzinas’ (2014) claim that studies and theories of ‘resistance’ are not close enough to political practices and therefore face the limitations of “disembodied abstraction”, overlooks the problem that a lot of current studies effectively fail to differentiate between the use of ‘resistance’ as an ‘indigenous category’, that is, as a term used in politically strategic ways, and the analytic use of the term. Frederick Cooper’s argument in relation to the use of concepts like ‘identity’, ‘modernity’, and ‘globalisation’ in studying colonialism, equally applies to the use of ‘resistance’; the problem is not that ‘indigenous categories’ are generally applied as analytic ones, but that “the usefulness of an analytical category doesn’t follow from its salience as an indigenous one: such concepts must perform analytic work, distinguishing phenomena and calling attention to important questions” (Cooper 2005: 8). However, sharpening the analytical understanding of categories like ‘resistance’ within academia does not immediately solve the problem of critical engagement with social movements, as, through that process of re-defining, Cooper (2005: 9) continues, “the task of understanding forms of discourse in their own contexts” is complicated.

2. Structuralist and poststructuralist approaches

There is a great difficulty in defining concepts of resistance, since debates have stretched across the relevance of consciousness, intentionality, experience, culture, identity, power, domination and subjectivity (see Raby

2005). In the first phase of research up to the 1980s, resistance was primarily understood as a conscious act of opposition by subordinate groups or individuals against a dominant power. Later, under the influence of the poststructuralist turn, the boundaries between dominant and resistant actors were set less clearly, and researchers concentrated on small, fragmented, temporary, sometimes also contradictory disruptions of subordination. Rebecca Raby (2005) argues that, underlying the different conceptualisations of resistance associated with structuralist and poststructuralist strands, are particularly diverging understandings of power and subjectivity. In spite of the controversial debates about the constitutive nature of a resistant act (be this active, passive “act” or forms of appropriation) and the extent to which subjects are determined by economy, ideology, class, gender and so forth, different structuralist approaches share the notion that resistance arises from a “rational, pre-discursive, internally coherent, acting subject” (Raby 2005: 155). The desire to resist is seen as innate to humanity and/or the experience of oppression. In contrast, poststructuralists argue that subjects are always produced by historical location and discourses. Resistance is therefore either grounded in counter discourses or in gaps and contradictions that accompany the discursive – never fully complete – construction of the subject. Furthermore, poststructuralist approaches often follow a Foucauldian conception of power as not being possessed or entirely realised by one group relative to another but always relationally constituted through discourses and practices of governance (Foucault 1978, 1980). “Foucault’s conception of power is different from other views of power in that it does not rely on the notion that people are being forced directly or coercively to act against their interests. Also power in the form of a global strategy is not seen as an intentional form of oppression but as an unintended consequence of locally intentional actions” (Cresswell 2000: 262). Resistance is not located outside or opposed to power, but is rather understood as an integral and constitutive element of power relations.

This distinction of opposed epistemological and ontological positions towards subjectivity and power can be particularly useful in tracing the origins of different approaches towards ‘resistance and development’ since the 1990s. Neither has the poststructuralist approach fully or neatly replaced prior discussions of Southern struggles from a structuralist perspective (see Parpart 1993; Marchand/Parpart 1995), nor does the use of Foucauldian

approaches towards subjectivity and discourse necessarily imply the withdrawal of a rather homogenous and totalising conception of power along the North-South divide (see Escobar 1992a; Kapoor 2009; Chaudry et al. 2013). The following section illustrates the development of discussing resistance in development studies with special regard to the confrontation, exchange and synthesis of structuralist and poststructuralist approaches (see also table 1).

3. Resistance and postcolonial theory

At the beginning of the 1990s, discussions on resistance in postcolonial studies attracted attention from critical development researchers. The works of Arturo Escobar (1992a, 1992b) and Jane Parpart (1993) most confidently apply the term to discuss ‘new’ social movements in the Global South and characterized these movements as most radical in their rejection of development (interventions). ‘Resistance’ is not described merely as a struggle over material conditions but also over meanings and discourses. According to Escobar (1992a), in the wake of the financial crisis in the 1980s the dominant development discourse lost control over its subjects and its cultural hegemony started being contested and rejected by social movements in the Global South. Similarly, feminist scholar Jane Parpart (1993: 456) emphasises that the ‘lost decade’ of development evoked epistemic challenges to the development paradigm and that “local knowledges” in the Global South become the most important “sites of resistance”.

Both approaches base their interpretation on a postcolonial reading of development discourse as an ethnocentric and destructive discourse that legitimises the subordination of the Global South in the post-independence era. However they represent different perspectives regarding how and by whom the development discourse is (or can be) resisted. While Escobar (1992a: 24) follows Edward Said in his rather totalising and monolithic conception of domination, and equates the knowledge production on the ‘underdeveloped countries’ (by the World Bank, United Nations, bilateral development agencies, planning offices in the Global South etc.) with the colonial knowledge production on the ‘Orient’, Parpart rejects the notion of an all-powerful construction of the ‘Other’ and frames resistance from

within a developmental power structure. She thereby picks up on important critiques that followed Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and that both relocated oppositional struggles beyond the colonial (discursive) determination (Harlow 1987; Hall 1990; Scott 1990) and presented the colonial discourse as ruptured and hybrid (Bhabha 1983; Spivak 1985). It was this turn towards a reconceptualisation of resistance in postcolonial and feminist studies that pointed out the direction for studying resistance in critical or postdevelopment studies, a direction which equally displayed itself as a 'radical' answer to prior, more technical, depoliticised approaches towards development (Pieterse 1992: 11; Kothari 2005).

Linking resistance *against* or *for* development to the postcolonial discussion on the possibilities of counter discourse and subversion, led to the argument that social movements' struggles in the Global South can be seen as continuing struggles against 'colonial modernity', struggles which were themselves preceded by anti-colonial struggles in the twentieth century. However, the historical moment of anticolonial resistance, the radical transformation of international relations in the aftermath of decolonisation, national sovereignty, and not least the changing discourse and practices under the development paradigm, were often neglected by those who prominently applied the term and praised subaltern agency as counter-hegemonic struggle. Frederick Cooper has rightly argued that the postcolonial notion of an "atemporal modern colonialism" has also limited the possibilities of studying resistance in the postcolonial era: "Within this line of argument, resistance might be celebrated or subaltern agency applauded, but the idea that struggle actually had effects on the course of globalization is lost in the timelessness of colonial modernity" (Cooper 2005: 16). From this vantage point, critical scholars have tried to reconceptualise resistance – some main approaches will be differentiated in the next section.

4. 'Resistance and development': four approaches, four papers

Since the introduction of resistance into the field of development, it has been discussed in various ways that either linked to, or dissociated from, the early postcolonial and post-development investigations. The thematic fields range from movements against land acquisitions and displacement (in

the course of development projects), resistance against neoliberal globalisation and state interventions, to gender justice, sexual rights and women’s movements, as well as educational projects for the decolonisation of knowledge. The geographical focus lies far beyond the earlier focus on Latin America, and while publications contain empirical analysis from very different geographical locations in the Global South, the most important instances in recent years being India, South Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia (see McMichael 2010; Motta/Nilsen 2011; Chaudry et al. 2013). This special issue also takes account of this geographical spread and assembles empirical examples from Tanzania, India, Greece, as well as from the global network level (with a special focus on South-East Asia).

In the following, four main approaches towards ‘resistance and development’ are distinguished: (1) resistance as *absolute refusal*, (2) resistance as *reflexive contestation*, (3) *resistance as resilience*, and (4) resistance as *appropriation, subversion and re-envisaging*.

	progressive	not (necessarily) progressive
poststructuralist approaches	<i>appropriation, subversion and re-envisaging</i>	<i>reflective contestation</i>
structuralist approaches	<i>absolute refusal</i>	<i>resilience</i>

Table 1: Approaches towards ‘resistance and development’

Source: own elaboration

(1) Resistance as *absolute refusal*: Escobar’s writing on social movements in Latin America can be regarded as most influential in discussing ‘resistance’ in development studies since the beginning of the 1990s. With *Imagining a Post-Development Era* (1992a) he sets the agenda for a new debate on the epistemic struggles for ‘alternatives to development’, which he defines as autonomous struggles independent from the dominant development narrative. Escobar thus also sees social movements in the Global South as harbingers of a new transition towards a model of society that goes “beyond the principles of equality, relations of production and democ-

racy” (ibid 1992a: 48). Although he explicitly applies a poststructuralist understanding of discourse formation, following Foucault (1978, 1980), his outline of an all-powerful hegemony of development that can only be challenged in the wake of political transformation, sets him much closer to earlier structuralist approaches by dependency theorists (see the discussion of A.G. Frank’s work in Kapoor 2008). Not least, Escobar’s conception of resistance stands for a complete decoupling and *absolute refusal* of Western epistemology, especially in development discourse. More recently, studies that are informed by decolonial theory (Quijano 2000; Mingolo 2000), have promoted a similar approach and describe “externally-imposed alien developmentalism” as a manifestation of capitalism that is resisted by indigenist solidarity and independent knowledge production (Kapoor 2013: 20). Resistance is therefore defined in this approach as an anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-development act, predominately located in the Global South and limited to subordinate groups as actors.

In his article on German development interventions in the realm of reproductive health in Tanzania, Daniel Bendix (in this issue) draws on this approach in relation to the question of whether challenges of colonial narratives and practices by German professionals can be characterized as ‘resistance’ and of how they should be positioned in relation to counter actions by Tanzanian ‘partners’. Resistance is thereby read against the background of a continuous ‘colonial power’, that sets hierarchical differences between ‘Western’ and East African birth practices and is deeply rooted in the history of (German) colonialism. The degree to which the colonial discourse is resisted serves for the author as a methodological tool to differentiate between, on the one hand, challenges that stabilise a hierarchical relation, and on the other those which can be regarded as an *absolute refusal* of colonial power.

(2) A rather divergent position is taken by authors who define resistance as *reflective contestation*, a relative and relational decoupling of resistant acts from a dominant order. Barbara Heron (2007: 143) for example, states that “resistance never comprises a total response”. In her study of Canadian development workers, she distinguishes different types of resistance; all of them are defined by a constant reflection of individuals on global injustice and its articulation in the power relation between donors and recipi-

ents. The most important aspect in this conception of *reflective contestation* is the conscious refusal of privileges by white, middle-class women, a refusal which entails a “compromising moral narrative” of development workers’ selves (ibid.: 143). While Heron (2007: 143) was not the first to study resistant practices with regard to everyday practices in development cooperation (see Crew/Harrison 1998; Baaz 2005), her conception deliberately breaks with the “common political usage” and the “all-or-nothing connotation”. Resistance is thus considered as an act that can be performed by actors who are in a relatively privileged, dominant position and from *within* the power structure. In a more recent publication by Anne-Meike Fechter and Katie Walsh (2013: 20), the changing lifestyles of European and North American ‘under-class’ expatriates in the Global South is both interpreted as a form of resistance against ‘upper-class’ expatriate identities, as well as a consequence of resistance to the hegemonic position of Westerners in the postcolonial labour market.

Authors that conceptualise resistance as a *reflective contestation* which is not limited to subaltern or marginalised groups, often do so with the aim of establishing an “ethical and dialogical relationship with the subaltern” (Kapoor 2008: xvi). Amongst others, Parpart (1993: 456) argues that the deconstruction of development as a dominating discourse and the recognition of its influence on Western development identities and practices does not imply that there is no “need for solidarity among all women”. She further states that the multilayered and intersecting forms of oppression should be resisted on a global, national and regional political level. Nicola Piper and Stefan Rother (in this issue) add to this multilevel dimension in their discussion of migrant rights movements in South East Asia on a regional and global level. They discuss two migrant networks, the International Migrant’s Alliance (IMA) and the Global Coalition on Migration (GCM) in order to differentiate between different resistance strategies in fighting the dominant migration policy paradigm. While the more radical grassroots network IMA calls for an autonomous struggle and therefore refuses coalition with NGOs, the GCM follows an ‘inside-out’ strategy (ibid.), which includes the mainstreaming of migrant issues at global forums such as the GFMD (Global Forum on Migration and Development). Despite the differences in their resistant strategies, both networks are discussed as an important challenge to a neoliberal discourse that frames migrant workers

as ‘agents of development’. Piper and Rother (ibid.) base their study on a “theory of resistance that is rooted in transformative justice that occurs in the form of institutional change pushed from below”. Their focus of analysis is, however, not limited to the local level but points at the transnational and global struggles against injustice and therefore contributes to the discussion of resistance *within* power structures.

While authors from the *reflective contestation* approach have their doubts about a monolithic and totalising framing of resistance as *absolute refusal*, others question whether movements’ struggles over meaning (Escobar 1992a, 1992b) necessarily include the rejection of developmentalism. Jan Nederveen Pieterse describes the visions and understandings of development in the Global South as highly heterogeneous and certainly not to be equated with ‘one’ mainstream development discourse. Social movements have thus also responded in very different ways and cannot be easily summarised under the label ‘anti-development’ (Pieterse 2000). “Many popular organizations are concerned with *access* to development, with inclusion and participation, while others are concerned with renegotiating development, or with devolution and decentralization” (Pieterse 1998: 363). Furthermore, Pieterse argues that challenges of mainstream developmentalism can, but do not necessarily have to, develop a vision for ‘alternatives to development’.

(3) Movements’ struggles against exploitation and dispossession are often driven by a more material concern to assure a livelihood and access to basic facilities. This critique of reading false motives into subaltern movements in the Global South leads the way to a conceptualisation of resistance as *resilience*, which also breaks with the idea that resistant struggles always necessarily embody a reflection on the macro-politics of domination (Harvey 2003). *Resilience* thus describes an immediate response to the most untoward circumstances (whether caused by natural forces or external domination), entailing an ‘extraordinary will’ to survive and a drive to cultural preservation (Scott 1985).

Maria Markantonatou (in this issue) picks up on this preserving function of resistance when she discusses social resistance movements in Greece from a Polanyian perspective. The author describes the dramatic consequences of austerity policies in the course of the 2011 ‘Memoranda’, a series of agreements between the Greek government and the ‘Troika’ (European

Central Bank, European Union and the International Monetary Fund) during the debt crisis. Cuts in the public sector, labour deregulation, mergers and closures of public organisations, processes of privatisation and a plethora of new taxes were responded to with various different forms of resistance. Those included more established forms of organised protest such as strikes, rallies and demonstrations, as well as the occupation of the public national TV broadcasting station and cooperatives' engagement with water privatisation policies. Not least, the author points to those initiatives which were characterised by a spirit of 'social protection' and 'solidarity', illustrated by reference to the disobedient resistant actions of the electricity utility unionists and the 'No Pay' movement. Through the lens of Karl Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) concept of the 'double movement', Markantonatou reads those responses to the austerity measures as forms of the 'self protection of society' against liberalisation and marketisation, and concludes that "society has no means to protect itself but resistance" (ibid.).

Escobar's focus (1992a, 1992b) on the epistemic struggle has, however, not yet lost its relevance for 'radical' research on development or, as Sara Motta and Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2011: 19) put it, "the politics of knowledge" is at the "heart" of studying resistance in the Global South. More recent studies prominently rephrase and adapt this thesis to what they call the new phase of political transition from state-led capitalist development to neoliberalism (McMichael 2010; Motta/Nilsen 2011). In line with Escobar, resistance is predominately conceptualised as organised and collective struggle, located in the contradictions and fault lines of developmentalism that become visible in the situation of political transition, and which is by definition oriented towards progressive political ends. Philip McMichael (2010: xiv), editor of the book *Contesting development: Critical struggles for social change* has articulated that vision explicitly as follows: "[T]ese struggles [over the dominant development narrative and for social justice] contribute to the emerging sensibility that another world is possible". It is impossible not to read this vision as a rhetorical recall of Escobar's vision of a 'post-development era'.

(4) However, the 'second generation' of postdevelopment and post-colonial approaches on 'resistance and development' has also distanced itself from the monolithic and totalising conception of an *absolute refusal*. Authors have reconceptualised resistance as the *appropriation, subversion and re-envisioning* of certain idioms in the postcolonial development

discourse. Appropriation is, amongst other things, discussed with respect to movements' engagement with 'universal principles' such as citizenship, education, elections, property and so on. Through the process of reclaiming, subaltern groups point out the exclusionary reality of these principles and therefore cause an "epistemic crisis of universalism" (McMichael 2010: 8). According to Sara Motta (2011), however, in this process of reclaiming, the moral economy and subjectivities of developmentalism are transformed, and practices, imageries and utopias move beyond the conventional frame. Research has to find new ways of theorising and conceptualising social movements in the Global South and needs more critical engagement with the epistemic privilege that limits academic perspectives on the *subversive* and *re-envisioning* forms of resistance.

Tiina Seppälä's study (in this issue) on women's resistance movements against displacement and land grabbing in India responds to this debate on how to study social movements from a privileged researcher's position, and discusses forms of co-optation by (Western) academics. Drawing from her interviews with activists, peasants, fishermen and villagers who were involved in local anti-land acquisition and anti-eviction movements in the city of Kolkata, she argues that Western political theory and transnational social movement research need some critical evaluation with respect to Eurocentric frameworks, career ambitions and socio-economic privileges. Foucault's notion of 'counter-conduct' serves as a theoretical basis for her analysis of resistance as opposition to, and transforming of power relations in, the biopolitical governance of neoliberal development. "Counter-conduct does not aim at influencing policies or political institutions – it questions normality, produces and embodies difference, constructs utopias, and creates and experiments with new subjectivities" (ibid.). These concepts are held up to the concerns of South Asian academics and feminists, who criticised the theoreticism, elitism and Eurocentrism in Foucault's work.

5. Concluding remarks

“[T]he temptation to uncritically celebrate resistance [...] must itself be resisted, and some sort of critical appraisal is needed” (Kiely 2000: 1060).

The popularisation of ‘resistance’ has led to an over-extensive application and unreflective, indiscriminate use of the term. ‘Resistance’ functions as a powerful image for a researcher’s self-positioning as ‘radical’ and ‘progressive’, but has not been evaluated enough for its analytical value. This special issue therefore tries to unfold different theoretical understandings of resistance that have led empirical research on resistance *against, for* and *within* development since the 1990s. Four major approaches, which I consider as most influential in the last twenty years of debate, are responded to adapted and reconsidered in the following articles. The theoretical frameworks range from postcolonial critique and Polanyi’s concept of the ‘double movement’ to a Foucauldian notion of ‘biopolitical governance’. Due to the explicit specification of theoretical understandings, which often remain implicit and empirically vague, authors encourage and facilitate further dialogue and exchange on the possibilities, challenges and limits of applying the highly popularised term ‘resistance’ in development studies.

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