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Resistance and the ‘Post-Recognition’ Turn in Organizations

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I want to draw on the contributions of Courpasson (this issue) and Hardy (this issue) to reflect on the nature of resistance in contemporary organizations and extend the discussion by focusing on why and how actors might resist today. In particular, I propose that some types of resistance are motivated by what I label post-recognition politics rather than traditional struggles to be recognized, heard and listened to. Hence the prominent theme of exit, escape and social independence in emancipatory discourses in and around the workplace.

But what does escape mean in this context and is it possible? To explore this question I want to argue that post-recognition struggles might entail ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ manifestations. The former seeks complete social independence from the neoliberal workplace in the name of self-determination. Whereas the weak version still participates on the stage of power but resists by deploying anonymity and camouflage to turn the tables on the powerful. The example of US Federal Reserve Bank employee Carmen Segarra is presented to explore this kind of resistance in action.

Why Resist?

When people resist they have usually come to a simple realization: I/we cannot go on like this and must therefore act. This realization is important to note because those who resist often feel they have little choice. They simply must, which renders it not so much ‘tactical’ in the Foucauldian sense (since there is little freewheeling opportunism involved) nor determinist as in the Marxist perspective (since there is a still choice not to resist) but more existentially speculative. Resistance refuses a present that is considered impossible. This makes it dangerous (for those in power) and a sensitive topic for scholars, especially in social science disciplines that aim to remain value neutral as much mainstream management research does.

Resistance in contemporary organizations is generally driven by three motives. Actors resist practices that might *economically* undermine their interests (e.g., a pay-cut, redundancy, etc.). Individuals/groups may resist practices that are *socially* threatening, which is often linked to collective identity (e.g., if I am a member of a workers union who calls a strike over a particular issue, I maintain a united front even if not directly affected economically by the issue). And resistance might occur if a practice or circumstance is deemed *ethically* unacceptable (e.g., a whistle-blower who reveals dubious corporate behaviour). In many cases, including gender and race discrimination, people will resist for a combination of these reasons. Economic inequality may interlink with questions of social identity and ethical issues (i.e., hurt, indignity to others or oneself, etc.) may crosshatch with the other two motivators.

When an individual or group realizes that things cannot continue as they are, a ‘stake’ is introduced into the mix, which renders the situation *political* proper. In other words, resistance prompts action because there is something to lose: for example, wages/employment, political solidarity and identity and/or ethical authenticity. Both Courpasson and Hardy’s insightful pieces demonstrate this well since the stakes are high in both descriptions of resistance: a livelihood and free speech (blogging) in the case of a French insurance firm and freedom from fascist tyranny in Hardy’s discussion of the French Resistance.

However, both cases also reveal another element of the loss that orientates resistance as political action. People may resist because of the actual or potential losses that could befall them as described above. But resisters often also register the prospective *costs* of resisting in the first place, especially if the resistance fails. The hunger strikers in Courpasson's example risk losing their lives, a cost that is surely greater than unemployment - however, it is clear that this struggle has moved beyond the economic and into the social and ethical realms. And in Hardy's example of the French Resistance, actors risk not only their own death if they are discovered to be part of the *Maquis* but also family and communities members. Courpasson and Hardy's examples of death are extreme cases since not all types of organizational resistance entail such costs. But they do surface the ideal-type structure that many forms of resistance approximate.

What I really appreciate about Courpasson and Hardy's analyses of resistance is the obvious departure from post-modern tendencies that marred the research agenda in the past. Scholarship gravitated toward water-downed Foucauldian themes that celebrated 'micro-emancipation', the discursive construction of interests and the relativization of the rationales behind resistance. As a result, any scholarly consideration of the high stakes animating resistance was considered 'grandiose' and ontologically essentialist. Researchers gravitated towards more mundane and quotidian expressions of resistance since they did not risk implying the presence of untenable 'grand narratives' or 'utopian' ideals. Secret subjective attitudes like cynicism and irony were now deemed highly subversive. Failing to adjust one's necktie deeply recalcitrant. Even silent farting was classified as a political act.

Given the high stakes that Courpasson and Hardy describe, this post-modern trend now looks rather trite and conservative, perhaps only reflective of the kinds of resistance that academics were willing to engage in and thus naturally imputing it with over-the-top importance. In light of the regressive economic, political and environmental 'catastrophe' facing the 99% in many Western economies today, researchers are thankfully taking stock of the formidable scale informing the stakes and costs for those who resist. In this sense, the time in which subjective 'micro-emancipation' might have mattered is long over given the stark socio-economic inequalities, impending environmental disaster and the abrogation of democracy we see many organizations perpetuating today.

However, there was one post-modern insight that undoubtedly remains useful; the insistence that both resistance and power are mediated through social discourses in a highly indeterminant manner. Conceptualizations of resistance have in the past often relied upon what we might call a threshold analytics of social struggle. Power dominates the weak. But there is a sort of inbuilt threshold that when crossed causes the disempowered to finally snap and revolt. The study of resistance would be rather straight forward if it functioned in such a predictable and formulaic manner. We often see very little opposition in situations so oppressive that straight our revolt would be expected. For example, most people in Nazi occupied France did not resist and wilfully collaborated. On the other hand, resistance can occur in some of the most unexpected moments. For instance, historians have long noted that major social revolutions hardly ever transpire when the oppressed reach rock bottom. It is generally when socio-economic conditions begin to improve, ironically, that revolt is triggered. Both Courpasson and Hardy demonstrate how social mediation, exchange and discursive fomentation are crucial in its development. In other words, there is nothing inherent in a social situation that will automatically prompt resistance.

As Courpasson notes, some suggest that the concept of resistance (especially as developed in Critical Management Studies) is often handicapped by overly *romanticizing* the phenomenon.

This leads to a reading of the power/resistance dynamic that is normatively black and white. Consequently the workplace is seen to be populated by the good guys (or the weak) and the bad guys (the powerful). We can perhaps observe this in the way the French Resistance is retroactively inscribed with almost mythological levels of bravery defining the courage of the French nation itself. Of course, the truth was a little less romantic since only tiny fraction of the population joined the movement. And even among the collaborationists, the logic was complex and contradictory, fused with sentiments of dissent, regret and survival, as depicted in Némirovsky's beautiful novel *Suite française*.

Some argue that resistance research risks imposing a rigid and predetermined analytical narrative - workers are good, managers are bad - onto a messy reality. I agree. But I think it is possible to avoid this romanticization, not by emptying our analysis of morality which would be a mistake, but to once again discern the costs and potential losses staked upon an act of political refusal. The employees in Courpasson's discussion have much more to lose than the corporate executives who fired them. This also helps us deal with a related problem raised by Courpasson. Not only low-level workers resist. Actors in more privileged positions might as well, including CEOs, a point missed when the phenomenon is romanticized. This inevitability raises problems around the distinction between power and resistance itself. Is Bill Gates' attempt to thwart the US government's move to dismantle his monopoly resistance or power? If we are to retain the concept of resistance at all, it is crucial to address this issue. Here I follow David Collinson's (1994: 61) argument when he states, "particular practices are invariably located in specific conditions of power asymmetries and inequalities which in turn largely determine whether they are best seen as an exercise of power or resistance". Gayatri Spivak (1996: 36) makes a similar claim when discussing 'victims of the system': "the most powerful technocrat is in that sense also a victim, although in brute suffering his victim-hood cannot be compared to that of the poor and oppressed classes of the world".

The one inescapable weakness with the concept of resistance, for me at least, is the way it invariably posits emancipatory movements in a secondary relation to power, as a reaction to a primary first mover. That is to say, resistance appears to always follow the rules of the game laid down by dominant players whereas the dominated challenge those rules in a variety of ways. This sequencing is not so surprising given the natural science metaphor the term resistance draws upon. In Newtonian physics, every primary action has an equal and opposite reaction. What troubles me with the metaphor is the emergence of protest movements that are not reacting to power in a secondary form but departing the game altogether to enjoy its own positivity, creating new social worlds that are more just. In the case of the digital commons, for example, post-capitalist social movements have simply vacated the socio-economic paradigm of intellectual property, copyright and other impediments to innovation. They do not want to be included in the business world in any format and thus do not really resist it in a direct sense. In this case it is the corporation who is resisting as it seeks to recapture the social technologies that have superseded the capitalist institutional imperative.

The 'Post-Recognition' Turn in Worker Resistance

The above point concerning exit and autonomy brings me to a distinction I want to make between recognition and post-recognition politics in and around the contemporary workplace. Both types of struggle have been definitive facets of resistance for many years, but I argue that post-recognition politics is becoming increasingly popular for reasons I shall explain.

Indeed, given the discussion so far, we have a clearer idea of why people resist. Now I want to turn to how that resistance is articulated and practiced.

We might differentiate recognition and post-recognition politics (or resistance) in the following manner. The former involves acts that seek to be seen and *included* in an organizational power forum in order to garner a better deal. Resisters strive to be recognized as a legitimate voice so that certain grievances, propositions and claims can be made. What I term post-recognition politics functions in a different manner. Here actors are skeptical about participating in dialogue with those whom they resist, since it often turns out to be merely a ruse for identifying ‘trouble makers’ and silencing collective grievances, especially by-way of ‘consultation’. Therefore, emancipatory objectives might be achieved by collectivity going it alone. Preplanned *exclusion*. When groups have decided that nothing constructive can be gained from continuing to play a game defined by distant elites, then exit and non-negotiation become attractive forms of refusal, be it in relation to work (Fleming, 2014), personal debt (Ross, 2014), the neoliberal marketplace (Perelman, 2002; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos, 2008) or male domination (Jones, 2012). This has nothing to do with individualist isolation, reserved silence or social withdrawal. On the contrary. As the Greta Garbo perfectly put it: “I never said, ‘I want to be alone.’ I only said, ‘I want to be left alone.’ There is all the difference.”

The struggle for recognition has been a key philosophical facet of modernity and liberal democracy. According to Honneth (1996), the moral basis of social conflict in pluralistic democratic settings is premised on not only being heard (‘voice’) but also being recognized as a legitimate citizen with certain rights and obligations. Such demands for recognition have also been crucial in struggles for workplace democracy and equality. Indeed, deliberative dialogue was foundational in the post-War Fordist compact between labor and capital. Courpasson’s analysis of the retrenched insurance salespeople provides a nice example of recognition politics in action. The blog and the subsequent hunger strike forced the company to address the accusations concerning their treatment of these ex-employees. In the case, we see three steps unfolding. First, a justice claim is rendered visible: “this radical resistance is a performance that is meant to be showed and made public, as to tip the balance of power” (Courpasson, 2014: 3). Secondly, visibility implies a certain voice. And third, that voice demands recognition and recompense, not only in terms of content – what is said – but also its form or who is saying it.

What I have labelled post-recognition politics utilizes an alternative strategy. It begins with the tenet that neoliberal societies have seriously eroded the Fordist compact between labour and capital and have developed rather parasitical tendencies. Hence the perception that organizations take much more than they give back. The economic, political and ethical motivators of resistance have accumulated to such an extent that it appears irrational to desire inclusion in a game designed to penalize you. This type of refusal views dialogue in particular as a weapon of the dominant order, leading some to call life in the post-Fordist workplace the ‘nightmare of participation’ (Kolowratnik, and Miessen, 2012). Post-recognition politics opposes power by attempting to fully or partially depart its hold and deploy social autonomy towards more progressive and democratic ends. Overall, the point is not to be recognized in the mirror game of domination – that is to say, identified and held to account on unwinnable terms – but instead socially disappear, developing emancipatory projects for their own sake rather than react to the edicts of power in the hope that it might finally include you.

I suggest that this desire for exit is very redolent in neoliberal societies in crisis, especially symptomatic in the way many citizens have given up on formal processes of deliberative and dialogical representation. For example, in the U.K the radical social commentator and comedian Russell Brand (2014) recommends young people not to vote. His rationale being that parliamentary democracy has been so fully co-opted by a concentrated hegemonic elite that voting is more than pointless - it also feeds the myth that real democracy exists (also see Wolff, 2012). Brand suggests it is better to detach ourselves from a moribund political infrastructure and build our own democratic projects. This discernment concerning the irredeemable cultural ruin of late capitalist societies is captured perfectly in Cremin's (2015) book *Totalled*, a phrase used in some parts of the world to describe damage to an automobile so severe that it is worthy only of abandonment. But as Cremin argues, in the realm of social struggle this sensibility should not lead to pessimistic nihilism or resignation, but a poignant change in the nature of oppositional activity.

I suggest there are 'strong' and 'weak' versions of post-recognition politics. The strong version, associated with Italian Autonomists (see Hardt and Negri, 1999, 2009) and separatist groups such as the black liberation movement in the US (see Moten, F., and S. Harney. 2012), calls for complete self-determination and social independence since there is nothing left to lose. We can see this in arguments made by the Canadian work-refusal movement the *Institute for Experimental Freedom* (2009: 156) when they aver, "one does not tidy up in a home falling off a cliff". This might also explain the recent rise in 'how to quit your job' advice columns (see Altucher, 2013) and books that describe people 'escaping' (*Escape the City*. 2012), 'opting out' (Jones, 2012), 'down-shifting' (Nelson, Paek and Rademacher, 2007) and so-forth vis-à-vis a life paid employment.

The weak version of post-recognition politics does not go so far as to completely depart the stage of power but seeks invisibility or anonymity in order to be left alone and avoid the worst excesses of participation. This invisibility may be ongoing, as explored by Fleming and Sewell (2002) in relation to organizational Svejks or an episodic strategy to buy time and exact a blow to domination at the right moment. The strategies used here are similar to those deployed by the French Resistance mentioned by Hardy. The *Maquis* could not simply depart their occupied homeland. Thus the resisters had to blend into the crowd, become imperceptible so that their acts of sabotage could be as precise and effective as possible. The modern workplace, of course, is not as hostile a terrain. However, labor activists have recently suggested that anonymity might be utilized in situations in which both participation and non-participation are untenable. As the French anti-work network *The Invisible Committee* (2009) argue:

Turn anonymity into a defensive position. In a demonstration, a union member tears the mask off an anonymous person who has just broken a window. "Take responsibility for what you're doing instead of hiding yourself." But to be visible is to be exposed, that is to say above all, vulnerable. When Leftists everywhere continually make their cause more "visible"—whether that of the homeless, of women or of undocumented immigrants—in hopes that it will get dealt with, they're doing exactly the contrary of what must be done. Not making ourselves visible, but instead turning the anonymity to which we've been relegated to our advantage, and through conspiracy, nocturnal or faceless actions, creating an invulnerable position of attack (Invisible Committee 2009: 112–113).

A good example of this method of resistance is demonstrated by whistleblower Carmen Segarra, a regulator employed by US Federal Reserve Bank of New York (see ‘This American Life’, 2014). In her role as Fed regulator Segarra began to notice major discrepancies concerning the close relationship between the organization and Goldman Sachs. The famous investment bank has a reputation for being very powerful, very male and very aggressive. Following the global financial crisis *Rolling Stone Magazine* colorfully described Goldman Sachs as “a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money”. The Fed was supposed to be an objective auditor. However, the level of collusion and exchange with Goldman Sachs deeply troubled Segarra. She had no choice but to resist for ethical reasons. But first Segarra began to hone her skills of camouflage and imperceptibility. She recalls her reaction when the boss announced her new assignment:

He said, do you know where you’re going? And I said, no. And he said, you’re going to Goldman. And my thought was, uh oh ... The look on his face was like he was very much looking for my reaction. And when I ... I think after so many years of practicing law, when you see someone that is just looking to see what your reaction is going to be, my first instinct is let me make sure that I don’t give a reaction (‘This American Life’, 2014).

According to Segarra, the collusive relationship between the Fed and Goldman Sachs derived from a climate of fear among governmental officials. It meant that large investment banks could count on regulators turning a blind eye when required. This is when Segarra began to carry a hidden voice recorder, secretly taping 48-hours of conversation revealing the true relationship between the Fed watchdog and Goldman Sachs. As she recorded, Segarra was mostly invisible, a wallpaper-like character that looked like everybody else. But she finally spoke out when a superior asked her to alter a report about Goldman Sachs so it omitted a damaging fact. Her defiance was no doubt licensed by the clandestine voice recorder. Coming out of the woodwork at the crucial moment, and knowing full-well that she would probably be fired, Segarra does the unspeakable. She defies her superior as this transcript from the secret recording reveals:

Johnathan Kim: I’m never questioning about the knowledge base, or the assessments, or those things, right? It’s really about how you are perceived. And so if there’s a more of a general sort of feedback that says, OK, it’s not only one person, it’s not only two persons, but it’s many more people who are perceiving that you have more sharper elbows or that you’re sort of breaking eggs. And obviously, I don’t know what the right word is ... I think the message has come back to me saying that you really need to make these changes quickly in order for you to be ...

Carmen Segarra: Not fired?

Johnathon Kim: ... successful as part of the team.

Carmen Segarra: Not fired, basically.

Johnathon Kim: Well, I don’t even want to get there, because ... and here’s why.

Carmen Segarra: Well, I think that it would be unfair to fire me when I am, at the end of the day, doing a good job.

Johnathon Kim: Well, there's ... look. I'm here to change sort of the definition of what a good job is, right? Couple of things that could ...

Carmen Segarra: I can see it a mile away.

Johnathon Kim: OK. Couple of things that I would suggest ... have a sense of humility, because a lot of the things that you say ... and this is the way you're coming across, right? I think I know you well enough that that's not what you're saying, but if I were to be a new person, I would say, Carmen, you're very arrogant ('This American Life', 2014).

If Segarra was practicing recognition politics she would have openly voiced her concerns from the outset, hoping to discuss the issue in a constructive, consensual and egalitarian forum (something like Habermas' (1971/2001) famous 'ideal speech situation' in which the best argument wins). However, Segarra correctly understood that to be an impossible scenario. Instead, she needed to act normally and avoid being recognized as a resistor until the last moment. With the help of her clandestine recorder, Sagarra illustrates some trademark components of post-recognition politics, utilizing her longstanding status as a nameless office-drone to undermine the trajectory of domination in this male-dominated space. First, she uses the language of power against itself by redirecting its insinuations back at her boss. Kim vaguely admits to things that he could not openly state in an 'ideal speech situation'. And secondly, knowing full well that she was going to be fired, Sagarra made sure she had a record of the real reason. Not only does she go public with her story, forcing the Fed to overhaul its procedures and protocols, Sagarra will probably receive a litigation payment for unfair dismissal.

In summary, both Courpasson and Hardy point to two kinds of resistance that shed light on its structure, motivations and outcomes in contemporary workplaces. I have hoped to introduce the concept of post-recognition politics to advance our understanding of resistance in the current era of economic crisis and the search for alternative organizational forms. Above all, I think it is important to not analytically reify resistance as an isolatable thing. Rather, we ought to view it as symptomatic of struggles over questions of self-determination, social justice and what a good life might mean. The real question is whether these political objectives can be achieved within the current structure of work and organizations or if some sort of radical departure is required. I believe that question will be important for how we study resistance in the future.

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