Review Essay: 'Cultural resistance': Can such practices ever have a meaningful political impact?

Eben Barnard, Bachelor of Youth and Community Work

Introduction

Cultural Resistance is yet another topic whose deceptively simple title belies its depth and complexity. Differing, essentially ideological, approaches to understanding resistance, the mechanics of power relations, the nature of politics and the definition of culture continue to inspire robust debate within and outside the spheres of social and political science.

Source: Dejan Kršić, 2003 (after Brecht) in Glazer and Ilić, 2005; 141
This paper will try to go some way in outlining the differing views on how cultural resistance may be understood and to illustrate this with a small range of examples of cultural resistance. It is hoped that by examining practice critically through the lens of theory, the strengths and weaknesses shown will indicate the degree to which the political impact of cultural resistance can be said to be meaningful.

**Conceptual definitions**

In attempting to understand the political impact of cultural resistance it may be useful to define, or at least to try, some of the terms bound into the concept. The meanings of Culture, Resistance and Political are notoriously flexible and open to subjective interpretation. The definitions offered below are not intended to be exhaustive, but to represent some of the more relevant notions and to stimulate further thought.

**Culture**

Culture is an instrument wielded by professors to manufacture professors, who, in their turn, will manufacture still more professors. (Simone Weil cited in Davis and Osborn 2003; 126)

Weil’s somewhat cynical view of the academic debates surrounding the ‘slippery’ concept of culture (Duncombe 2007; 490) nevertheless indicates the difficulty of nailing down a firm definition. However, before we reach, like Goebbles, for our revolvers (ibid, 2002; 1), Duncombe (2002; 36) again offers help by summarising Williams’s myriad definitions into three meanings: Firstly the biological, referring to the process of cultivation and growth, secondly the anthropological, referring to patterns of living and shared understanding and thirdly a concrete, artistic meaning referring to cultural products and things such as artworks, music or poetry.

In terms of understanding how Cultural Resistance works, these meanings offer useful starting points for questioning how, and in what environment, a particular resistance phenomenon was able to grow, what shared customs, circumstances and patterns of behaviour linked the participants and how the resistance manifested itself, through what medium.

These meanings may offer insights into the colour and form of Cultural Resistance, yet culture should not be looked at in isolation. We might take heed of Picasso (1972; 126) who said, of culture: ‘If everybody is looking for it, then nobody is finding it…And if we knew the real value of this word we would be cultured enough not to give it so much importance.’

**Resistance**

Although Duncombe (2007; 490) finds it ‘fairly easy’ to define resistance as ‘simply to act against’ this belies some of the complexities associated with resistance. Raby (2005) asserts that understanding the concept of resistance requires more than simply defining the word. Resistance is an integral part of power relationships, of domination, subjugation and as such may be viewed from different ideological viewpoints. Raby compares and contrasts the modernist perspective, as championed by subcultural theorists and Scott among others, with postmodern viewpoints primarily using Foucault as an advocate.
Modernism tends towards viewing resistance as an oppositional force to a dominant power (Raby, 2005; 153) and is, depending on interpretation, the more empowering face of delinquency or deviance. Building on Gramscian concepts of hegemony, Scott (1990; 4) identifies ‘hidden transcripts’ of speech and behaviour manifesting this resistance ‘behind the official story’ of hegemonic ‘public transcripts’. This refers to subordinates keeping enough of a veneer of respect and compliance to avoid reprisals from the dominant power, while resisting in safe cultural spaces, even internally. It is this idea of the hidden transcript that characterises much of Cultural Resistance, and it is the transition from the hidden to the public transcript that holds the key to meaningful political impact.

Postmodernism adds ‘disruptions’ (Raby, 2005; 161) to the almost comforting possibilities for powerful resistance offered by the modernist paradigm. Postmodernists view power and resistance, not necessarily as oppositional, but rather as a complex of diverse, fragmented and transitory relationships between individuals (ibid; 154). Foucault in particular introduces the concept of diffuse power which sees domination and resistance not as a binary but as integral parts of each other(ibid; 161). This micro-view of resistance has led, as Raby (162) explains, to Foucault being criticised for ‘under-theorising agency’. Postmodern views of power seem to offer little hope for cultural resistance if a movement can only be seen as the sum of its parts and if its very existence is tied to the existence of its dominator – a sentiment echoed in Brecht’s question: “What happens to the hole when the cheese has gone?”

Political

Agreeing on a definition of ‘political’, given the diversity of views of power, might also seem problematic. The Oxford English Dictionary (2001) gives as one definition: ‘relating to the pursuit of power, status etc.’ This opens possibilities for cultural resistance to be seen as political without necessarily being party political.

Scott (1990) draws together modernist ideas of powerful resistant agency with postmodern fragmented individual power into the concept of infrapolitics. Scott explains that ‘So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life…’ Thus the individual hidden transcripts of infrapolitics have the collective potential for great political impact. In fact Scott (ibid; 201) goes as far as to suggest that infrapolitics ‘is the building block for the more elaborate, institutionalised political action that could not exist without it.’

Taking a globalised view of politics, dissent and human agency, Bleiker (2000; 278) conceptualises dissent and cultural resistance as being ‘located in countless non-heroic practices that make up the realm of the everyday and its multiple connections with contemporary global life.’ With the immediacy of global media, these everyday non-heroic infrapolitical acts can become worldwide movements instantly.

Taken together, then, the political impact of cultural resistance is as variable and elastic as its definitions. As Duncombe (2002; 5,6) suggests, it may be seen positively as a space for developing tools for political action, a dress rehearsal for the actual political act or as a political action in itself by redefining politics.
Illustrations

Introduction

Duncombe (2002; 5) brings another idea to the understanding of cultural resistance by describing it as the use of culture ‘consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political economic and/or social structure’. The idea that an individual or community may not be aware that they are resisting opens interesting possibilities in illustrating cultural resistance.

To get a real idea of the meaningfulness of a resistance culture, it is more useful to look at examples in action.

On the wall

Carving one's name, one's love, a date, on the wall of a building, such vandalism cannot be explained solely by destructive impulses. I see in it rather the survival instinct of all those who cannot erect pyramids or cathedrals to perpetuate their name.

(Brassai, 1933 / 2002; 11)

Graffiti is both a global and a local phenomenon, ubiquitous to the urban and suburban landscape and symbolic of youth subcultural rebellion. While it has become, for many, a moral panic, emblematic of urban decay and the breakdown of law and society (Wilson and Kelling, 1982), graffiti’s deviant delinquency may be reframed as cultural resistance.

White Street Car Park, Cork    Bus Shelter Western Road, Cork

Graffiti culture, or subculture, illustrates well Williams’s three categories of culture outlined by Duncombe (2002; 36).

‘Biologically’ the architecture of cities provides a fertile Petri-dish for the culture of graffiti. This, coupled with the tight-knit social community of writers, illustrates Scott’s two ideal conditions for the culture of hidden transcript:

… first when it is voiced in a sequestered social site where the control, surveillance and repression of the dominant are least able to reach, and second,
when this sequestered social milieu is composed entirely of close confidants who share similar experiences of domination. (Scott, 1990; 120)

The biologically cultural conditions of alleys, toilet cubicles and derelict buildings have seen graffiti’s hidden transcript spread with hip-hop subculture from the inner cities of North America to almost every urban environment across the world (Reiss, 2007).

‘Anthropologically’ graffiti writers share values, ethics and codes of behaviour in where and how graffiti is produced (MacDonald, 2001; 74, 75) as well as artistically cultural themes that make graffiti recognisable across the globe, whether it appears on a wall, train, t-shirt or advertisement.

As a form of resistance, graffiti presents a less unified front. It is easy to see the hip-hop graffiti explosion of the 1970’s and 80’s as a Resistance Through Ritual (Hall and Jefferson, 1976 cited in Macdonald 2001; 37) to the anomic of inner city life. Some graffiti writers may agree with Ferrell’s (1996; 11) description of graffiti as ‘aesthetic sabotage’, acts that break ‘the hegemonic hold of corporate/governmental style over the urban environment and the situations of daily life’ (ibid). However, despite shared rules of engagement and style, graffiti is frequently characterised by rivalry, even warfare (Macdonald, 2001; 211-213) resembling more closely the fractured and incohesive force described by postmodernism.

It is perhaps the fragmented and transitory nature of graffiti’s agents that has led to the slow, arguably non-existent, political impact graffiti’s resistance has had. In terms of outcomes, it seems that graffiti has been largely self defeating as states dedicate increasing resources to combating the phenomenon. The introduction of custodial sentences for offenders in the UK has tragically led to the prison suicide of Tom Collister aka SKEAM in February 2009 (This is Local London News online; 9/3/2009).

While graffiti is demonised by some, the edgy ‘cool’ associated with graffiti is a much sought-after resource for marketing companies (Klein, 1999; 63) leading to the commercial appropriation of cultural resistance to be sanitised, packaged and fed back to the youth market. Ultimately graffiti is frequently about individual fame and/or notoriety rather than meaningful political impact so while some graffiti writers will consider complicity with brand marketers ‘selling out’ others embrace the additional publicity and associated kudos.

All is not pointless, however, even taking a pessimistic view of graffiti’s potential as a tool for political impact. Rewriting cultural discourse is a political act (Duncombe, 2002; 6) and while the infrapolitical acts of aesthetic sabotage may not win many political wars, the graffiti writer’s guerrilla tactics have been borrowed to great effect in other more overtly political and cultural skirmishes. This anonymous declaration of the hidden transcript, described by Scott (1990; 140) has become the modus operandi of culture-jammers and other street artist activists. The street has become not only a canvas for rewriting cultural discourse, but a potent weapon for declaring the hidden transcript through topical political satire or even a call to infra-political arms.
When looking for infra-politics and the hidden transcript of cultural resistance, it may frequently be found behind gross imbalances of power in the workplace. From the abject subjugation of slaves to more subtle corporate colonisation of workers’ identities through cultural engineering (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; 158), similar styles of resistance have developed as cultural defence mechanisms, as a means of safeguarding dignity amidst degradation.

These resistant cultures are characterised less by ‘heroic’ acts of open rebellion than the aggregation of petty acts of ‘foot-dragging, false compliance, flight, feigned ignorance, sabotage, theft’ (Scott, 1985/2002; 93) designed to give satisfaction to the subordinate and subtly frustrate the dominator.

Kelley (1994/2002; 97) describes his practice of this style of resistance in the rigidly uniform workplace of McDonald’s fast food restaurants as not only ‘deliberate acts of carelessness’ but also stylistic skirmishes; where ‘looking cool’ at the expense of corporate culture-management rules on uniform and procedure provided a way of preserving some form of pride and identity within a culture of conformity.

The attempt by large businesses to colonise the identities of their employees with an engineered culture ‘based upon the principle of situating the success or failure of the organization ‘within’ the identity and selves of individual workers’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; 173) is wont to meet with a culture of resistance from those employees who take a conscious, critical, even cynical view of their employer/employee relationship.

The author has first hand experience as the editor of a counterfeit employee motivational magazine for a multinational medical supplies company. Designed to look like the real internal magazine, treated with universal disinterest or disgust by Irish workers, the fake was filled with parodies, in-jokes and aired grievances at managerial staff and decision-making.
While being extremely personally satisfying to produce, on company time, an account of a mythical corporate gulag staffed by the many employees who were leaving the medical company each month, Fleming and Spicer warn of how politically ineffective the ‘ideological practice of this kind of disidentification’ (ibid; 166) might be and suggest that it may even reinforce the corporate identity.

Ironic cynicism may be deliberately tolerated or co-opted by the company to reinforce its own image as a ‘cool’ open-minded employer (ibid; 163). Also this form of cultural resistance or disbelief may be counterproductive because ‘even though the cynical worker disbelieves ‘internally’, their external actions believe for them’ (ibid; 173) leaving the actual structures unchanged.

So as not to leave subordinates hopeless and defenceless, however, Fleming and Spicer offer some alternative additions to the weapons of the weak. If, they argue, hidden resistance is counter-productive, then ‘flannelling’, or deliberate over-compliance to the point that the system cannot function, may work, an idea also referred to by Baudrillard (1985/2002; 113) as ‘hyperconformist simulation’. Following every rule and regulation to the letter offers a blameless way to clog up the organisational machinery. Externalising corporate culture such as by continually singing the company song would direct annoyance at the song while the employee remains within the espoused culture. For management to challenge the employee who ‘believes too much’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; 173) they must challenge the engineered culture or become cynical themselves.

And all around
The need for brevity in this paper means that the wealth of examples of cultural resistance has barely been referred to. In fact once the critical observer develops an eye for the hidden transcript it appears almost ubiquitous. It would seem like a missed opportunity to not give at least a passing mention to some, admittedly subjectively, outstanding examples of cultural resistance.
When art meets injustice, cultural resistance is in its element. Artist and active citizen Michael Rakowitz met several homeless people in New York, Boston, Cambridge and Baltimore, and created with them the ‘paraSITE’, a temporary shelter and a cultural response to corporate and local authority clamp-downs on rough sleepers. The paraSITE attaches to the exterior ventilation systems of buildings to simultaneously inflate and heat the portable devices while creatively declaring the hidden transcript of homelessness. Rakowitz (2005) explains that the paraSITE is not a naïve solution to homelessness but intended as a temporary ‘station of dissent and empowerment… a protest device…’

While some forms of cultural resistance like the paraSITE, the Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey, 1985/2002; 115), Reclaim the Streets (Klein, 1999; 311) and dissident graphic design (Glazer and Ilić, 2005) are, by tactical necessity, transitory, others forms have achieved long lasting and sometimes iconic status. Although this longevity might facilitate commercial assimilation, as with the by-now lamentably meaningless Che Guevara icon, others have somehow resisted this.

Music and song have had a long history of carrying and fanning the smouldering embers of resistance. The North American slaves’ use of poetry and euphemism to hide the transcript of resistance in songs (Levine, 1993/2002; 215) can be seen in cultures all over the world. Songs of freedom from South Africa, Jamaica and North American blues find echoes in the music of Tinariwen, a Touareg band from Mali, who have adopted the guitar in place of the Kalashnikov as the weapon of choice in carrying on the struggle for Touareg independence (Chandra, 2009).

Closer to home, Irish rebel songs, as public transcript, are arguably as popular in Ireland today as they were as hidden transcript during the British occupation of Ireland. The lasting political impact that this musical resistant culture has had should not be underestimated.

**Conclusion**

Cultural resistance has been seen to be a slippery and flexible concept, easily characterised as rebellious deviance or emancipatory struggle depending on the observer’s ideology. Examples of cultural resistance are ubiquitous yet may go unnoticed because the resisters may not consciously define their actions as such.

This has further implications for the meaningfulness of any political impact that cultural resistance may offer. The dominant hegemony may be reinforced by the
internalising of hidden transcripts or may retaliate disproportionately if the culture becomes too overt in its resistance. A culture of resistance defines itself only within the parameters of that which it is resisting and is seen by some as sapping the energy of meaningful politics.

So, must it forever be a revolution in waiting, only to reproduce and replace the hegemony it struggled against, as Bey (1985/2002; 115) declares ‘like seasons in Hell’?

Speaking personally, this observer, having weighed some of the arguments, cannot help but feel that Cultural Resistance is the inevitable, necessary reflection of a need. Wherever there is an imbalance of power there must be resistance. Where immediate redress is not an option, cultures of resistance grow to make the idea of change possible.

To say that cultural resistance is at odds with meaningful political activity seems to miss the point. Bleiker (2000; 187) refers to Herta Muller’s assertion that resistance is an instinctive moral, rather than a political, gesture that separates us from the daily grind. Cultural resistance can point the way, like a moral compass, for meaningful political activity. It can be a proto-revolutionary culture offering a rehearsal space for more concrete overt political action. It can be a lightning rod for revolutionary zeitgeist. It can be a smouldering ember keeping the flame of emancipation safe in unfavourable times.

Although debatable as a meaningful political activity in its own right, Cultural resistance, then, might be described as a satisfying bellow of rage against the darkness while we are looking for the matches.
Bibliography


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