



REVIEW

Mona Lilja, *Constructive Resistance: Repetitions, Emotions, and Time*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. Pp. 184. ISBN: 9781538146484 (hardback).

When Resistance Constructs: Change and Transformation Beyond Opposition

There is a sedimented understanding of resistance that reduces it to a reactive practice of opposition and negation. Resistance says no to power; it pushes back against domination and repression. From this perspective, resistance only resists: it can only be defined in the negative as something that tries to halt the whims of power. But when we look at the actual practices of resistance, the tactics, the emotions, the subjectivities at stake, we find an excess: resistance constructs, creates, affirms, proposes alternatives. In *Constructive Resistance*, Mona Lilja unpacks the creative potential of resistance and its ability to induce social and political change beyond the mere opposition to power. Lilja's conceptualization proposes a distinctive and innovative characterization of those aspects of resistance that exceed opposition and create alternative discourses, ways of life, desires and bodies. Her concept of constructive resistance is an original and complex combination of theoretical reflections inspired by a series of case studies analyzed and discussed both at the level of practices and in terms of discourses. The theoretical framework of the book combines an attentive reading of Foucault's work on power and resistance with a focus on everyday practices of resistance inspired by Scott, while engaging with a materialist perspective that touches upon the work of Butler, Barad and Braidotti.

The book is divided in three sections where Lilja explores the relations between constructive resistance and three concepts that are key for the understanding and the practice of resistance: repetition, emotions and time. The section on repetitions is primarily about identifying tactical ways for constructing alternative discourses by intervening in meaning-making processes. Discourses are here understood from a materialist perspective that emphasizes how artifacts, bodies, figurations and linguistic statements concur in the production and the circulation of meaning. Repetitions are presented as tactical means for constructing effective resistance. Chapter 2 reflects on the border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand regarding the Preah Vihear Temple. The focus is on the

short-lived construction of a replica of the contested temple on the Thai side of the border. This form of repetition unsettles the understanding of authenticity, questioning the very idea of the original, which turns out to be a repetition of previous patterns. Chapter 3 identifies three technologies of repetition in the discourse of environmental movements in their communications on climate change. Here Lilja proposes three patterns of repetition that can help to maintain and strengthen the effectiveness of these resistant discourses: reiterating the message with slight variations to keep the recipient engaged; the careful interplay between simplification and the delivery of the complexity of the issue; the twisting of naturalized discourses in order to undermine their solidity. The last case study elaborates on Braidotti's concept of figurations to unravel how Cambodian female politicians construct their everyday resistance. By repeating traditional stereotypes, they create a space to perform unexpected or dangerous positions.

The second section of the book discusses the role of emotions in motivating and fueling resistance but also how resistance generates emotions. Chapter 5 draws on Butler to discuss public assemblies and large gatherings as a form of acting in concert that disrupts the normality of public spaces by exposing their concrete, precarious or suffering bodies. Resistance is accelerated and up-scaled as a result of an affective intensification of emotions evoked by these embodied representations. The second case study focuses on Japanese social movements and NGOs fighting against the exploitation of farmers in Cambodia and the Philippines. Lilja looks at strategies of representations of these precarious lives aimed at provoking an emotional response that mobilizes these organizations' members or potential members. This is a form of proxy resistance carried out in solidarity with those living precarious lives. In chapter 7, this idea of proxy resistance is explored in the case of two art exhibitions in Sweden (*Destination X* and *History Unfolds*), where artifacts and objects belonging to migrants generate an emotional encounter with the living experience of precarity and vulnerability.

The section on time is perhaps the densest from a theoretical perspective. The underlying polemical target is a notion of resistance understood in terms of spectacular and often violent events. As in the previous sections, resistance is here presented as a slow transformation. In chapter 8, Lilja reviews the temporality of different strategies of resistance. Memory is presented as a contested terrain where the present remembers or dis(re)members the past while shaping expectations for the future. Dinshaw's idea of queer historical touches opens the possibility of an affective connection with the past, generating communities across time. Furthermore, Lilja discusses prefigurative politics as resistance that brings the future within the present.

Chapter 9 offers a comprehensive and original review of Foucault's scattered conceptualization of resistance. For each modality of resistance, Lilja tries to interrogate the specific temporality at stake. Counter-conducts assert the possibility of a final time that decrees the end of the indefinite governmentality of the state. By projecting the end of the time of the state, counter-conducts depict a rupture that will initiate a utopian time-less future. In stark opposition to this, Lilja looks at anti-authoritarian struggles as presented in *The Subject and Power*. As localized struggles, the temporality of this form of

resistance over subjectivation is the here and now. With regards to the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Lilja reflects on the relation between the swarm of points of resistance and the possibility of their strategic codification into a revolution. This process of codification is presented in terms of a 'time-delay' or a 'time lag' (p. 144). The author then reviews resistance as reverse discourse, particularly in relation to homosexuality. Resistance here performs a repetition of the dominant discourse through its rearticulation in 'a temporal pattern which simultaneously displays both continuation and change' (p. 146). In relation to technologies of the self, Lilja recuperates Foucault's discussion of the hypomnemata, notebooks where memories and teaching of the past are recorded in the present in order to guide future potential courses of action.

The last chapter discusses a series of photos of the desert of Western Sahara, where bodies are intentionally left out by the artist to represent the permanence of the desert and its marks over the contingency of the conflict. Although referenced in the text, to some extent this analysis is reminiscent of Foucault's *La force de fuir*. This is perhaps the chapter that better marks an opening to a materialist and posthuman perspective which is nevertheless present throughout the book. This can also be taken as a further attempt to exalt the potentialities in Foucault's work for a posthuman turn.

The strength of *Constructive Resistance* lies in the ability to combine innovative theoretical insights with a series of empirical examples that come from very diverse contexts and display a variety of practices of resistance. This expresses the complexity of resistance and highlights how the plurality of forms it takes implies that resistance resists its own conceptualization. Yet, there are examples that question the idea of resistance altogether. Before analyzing whether these are forms of constructive resistance, there are times where it is legitimate to question whether these practices can be defined as resistance in the first place. This is particularly evident in the case of the Preah Vihear Temple, where it is the initiative of a Thai military general to finance the construction of a replica of the temple to be considered as an act of resistance. Lilja leaves this question open: 'One question that remains, however, is if the construction of a replica can be viewed as resistance that is carried out by subordinate locals (local administration and a few persons of the military establishment) on the border area or should it be viewed as a power-strategy by a more powerful neighboring nation?' (p. 40). Likewise, when discussing examples of proxy resistance, Lilja considers the inherent risks beyond the emancipatory intent: 'in the attempts to display the migrant figuration, there is a risk that it becomes exotic and hypervisible, which thereby strengthens the divide between "us" and "them"' (p. 117). These open questions are the result of the intimate intertwinement between power and resistance and how the latter can either result in a new form of power or can reinforce the power that it seeks to oppose. Yet, this risks lumping together whatever practice emerges from a contingent position of subjection. If a discourse or a practice, even unintentionally, happens to reinforce power, would it still make sense to define it as resistance? This perhaps unveils how the openness of the concept risks reducing its potential. It might be argued that conceptualizations of resistance need a more robust enunciation of its distinctive features.

Perhaps the idea of a constructive resistance is a step in this direction. It helps to emphasize the often-neglected creative side of resistance, its capacity to transcend opposition and instigate social and political change. Lilja does not fully engage with the question of what this distinction actually aims to exclude though: what would the opposite of a constructive resistance look like? Do we need to think of constructive resistance in a dichotomic relation with nonconstructive resistance? Lilja excludes that this question should be responded to according to an either/or logic: 'Many practices of resistance contain both constructive and nonconstructive elements, and these in fact work together to undermine systems of domination. Sometimes, constructive resistance is more constructive and less in oppositions: it is a sliding scale' (p. 18). Although the idea of a scale between constructive and nonconstructive helps to engage with the complexity of practices of resistance, it might be argued that the strength of the concept could have been followed through to the point of negating the possibility of a nonconstructive resistance altogether. Once we establish the affinity between resistance and the constructive affirmation of new and alternative practices, discourses, desires, subjectivations and ways of life, it is much harder to entertain the idea that some specific forms of resistance might entail no constructive element at all.

A more general concern is the unresolved question of how resistance relates to power: 'even though power and resistance are constituted together, resistance sometimes transcends the whole phenomenon of being against something: instead, it constructs alternative or prefigurative social institutions or discourses' (p. 18). This marks the affirmative role of resistance and, to some extent, even its primacy. At other times though, resistance is presented as parasitical or as a reaction. This risks canceling the relationality between power and resistance. Power seems to emerge on its own, in its primacy, as an affirmative and autonomous gesture. Only after that, resistance appears and contests it. But the contested nature of the relationship should be maintained throughout. Otherwise, why should resistance turn to something constructive? And once it becomes constructive, creates new discourses and new practices, what happens to power? Does it not have to react? Does it not have to parasitically use that resistance in order to develop alternative tactics and strategies?

Overall, Lilja's book is a brilliant contribution to recent efforts in conceptualizing resistance beyond its oppositional stance. This view highlights the emancipatory potential of resistance and refines an understanding of power, showing how resistance dynamically contests the dominant order through a rich and creative variety of discourses and practices, while opening trajectories for exploring alternative worlds, desires, forms of subjectivation and ways of life. Once we understand resistance as constructive, this unleashes the infinite potential of what we can construct through resistance. *Constructive Resistance* is a fundamental and much needed contribution to the emerging field of resistance studies, but it also promises to influence debates on power and resistance in philosophy and social sciences. The idea of constructive resistance and its impact on social and political change reflects what resistance has come to represent in the last dec-

ades, after a wide disillusionment with direct opposition and armed struggle in the fight for power.

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