

Forum

On Resisting Resistance

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO I served on a faculty committee that interviewed finalists for positions in the humanities at my institution of higher education. After hearing a half-dozen earnest candidates describe how their dissertations focused on the subject of resistance, the college's president, a distinguished medieval historian, turned to the other members of the committee and, genuinely baffled, asked, "Doesn't anyone study cooperation and harmony anymore?" His rueful comments were evoked by an analytical fashion that received far more acerbic treatment in an after-dinner talk served up to the Association of Social Anthropologists by Marshall Sahlins in 1993. "The new functionalism," said Sahlins, consists of "translating the apparently trivial into the fatefully political" (1993:17). He provided a list of offending examples, all instances in which ethnographers claim to have discovered hegemony or counterhegemony in some everyday manifestation of social life. If he had looked beyond cultural anthropology to the world of cultural studies, where cross-dressing, tattooing, women's fashions, dirty jokes, and rock videos are routinely held up as examples of cultural resistance, Sahlins might have found much more grist for his mill.

Resistance, as well as its myriad refinements and mutations (such as "subversion," "transgression," and so forth), has become a central, perhaps even a dominant, theme in the study of social life. Selecting a recent issue of the *American Ethnologist* (February 1994) more or less at random, one finds that "resistance" appears in the titles or internal subheads of about half the essays offered; still others mention it in passing. The heteroglossia so passionately advocated by many of the authors begins, in the aggregate, to look alarmingly like monoglossia. In an influential and prescient essay, Sherry Ortner worried that an overemphasis on domination and conflict would overwhelm the other face of social life, cooperation and reciprocity (1984:157). She has been proved right. If there is

any hegemony today, it is the theoretical hegemony of resistance.

Why have resistance and hegemony come to monopolize the anthropological imagination? We live in a contentious age, of course, and to some extent theory mirrors the political struggles of our time. As some have noted (see, among others, Abu-Lughod 1990; Ortner 1995), attention to resistance has increased as revolutionary dreams have lost their luster. When the great metanarratives of the modern era, especially Marxism, became impossible to sustain, intellectuals shifted their focus to the political nuances of daily life. Feminist ethnography, with its scrutiny of the micro-politics of gender in a range of societies, has been especially influential in moving anthropology toward concern with resistance. Once the personal is redefined as political, the everyday survival strategies of our interlocutors can be reconstituted as subtle forms of subaltern rebellion. Attention to resistance dovetails with the Foucauldian project of exploring power in all of its variations, valences, and subterfuges.

Fair enough. Yet one needn't be a cynic to see a significant occupational dimension in our current love affair with resistance. Even as anthropologists scramble to maintain a semblance of stability in an academic world afflicted by steadily diminishing prospects, the truth standards of the profession become ever vaguer, making it more difficult to assert the relative superiority of one's analysis or perspective. Although the postmodern critique of ethnographic representation seems to have exhausted much of its energy, in its wake there is lingering uncertainty about the rules by which one makes valid analytical claims. Robert Jackall, who has studied the occupational ideologies of groups ranging from public-relations executives to homicide detectives, notes that the postmodern turn has left social scientists with few options other than to make their case through rhetoric that projects moral fervor, so as to "convince others of the correctness of one's position and oneself of one's own moral rectitude" (1994:191).

In this emergent occupational milieu, attributions of resistance become an important rhetorical tool. By

finding grassroots resistance in Mexican *telenovelas* or the household rituals of the Javanese, we reassure ourselves that the pursuit of what might seem to be esoteric ethnographic detail is really a form of high-minded public service. Resistance is a perfect vehicle for the expression of moral fervor precisely because it is so vague, so easily left to the eye of the beholder. The literary critic Mark Edmundson, drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, maintains that for American intellectuals the notion of ideology has long helped to create a "purified space" from which everyone but the writer can be accused of harboring a bourgeois consciousness (1995:142). Attributions of resistance now serve a similar rhetorical purpose, hence their tendency to spread from undisputed contexts of political oppression to the most ephemeral forms of popular culture. The discovery of resistance almost everywhere—occasionally reaching excesses that flirt with self-parody—calls to mind Wendy Kaminer's (1992) criticism of the American recovery movement, which in her view elevates the small injuries of childhood to the same moral status as the suffering of the truly oppressed, a savage leveling that diminishes, rather than intensifies, our sensitivity to injustice.

By pointing to the occupational origins of anthropology's fascination with resistance, my intention is not to disparage the struggles of the downtrodden but to needle the pretensions of the privileged. More importantly, the indiscriminate use of resistance and related concepts undermines their analytical utility, at the same time strongly skewing the project of cultural anthropology in the direction inspired by the work of Foucault: culture as prison, culture as insane asylum, culture as "hegemonic domination of the [insert Other of choice]."

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Let me move my remarks from the tendentious to the concrete by offering two brief ethnographic cases that illustrate the uses and limitations of the resistance concept. On the principle that I should practice what I preach, I draw on my own case materials rather than those of others.

Some years ago, Eduardo Fernández and I documented a series of violent encounters in the rain forest of eastern Peru, a struggle that involved Marxist guerrilla fighters, the Peruvian armed forces, the U.S. State Department, and the Asháninka Indians, a people better known in the ethnographic literature as the Campa (Brown and Fernández 1991). As much as any surviving group of Amazonian Indians, Asháninkas have experienced the full weight of colonial oppression. They have seen their families swept away by European diseases, their lands appropriated by settlers, their chil-

dren sold into servitude. Beginning in the early 1600s, many Asháninkas were herded into missions or plantation settlements. European overseers were often lulled into characterizing Asháninkas as "docile," only to face murderous uprisings a few months later, after which the Indians would disappear into the forest until the next wave of colonization. Several of these episodes had strongly marked millenarian undercurrents, although scant and unreliable documentation stands in the way of a deeper understanding of Asháninka millennial politics prior to the 20th century.

In 1965, a cell of a Castroite political party called the Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR; Movement of the Revolutionary Left) moved into Asháninka territory with the announced goal of organizing a rural insurgency. The leader of this guerrilla group was a brilliant intellectual of African descent named Guillermo Lobatón. Lobatón had studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and guerrilla tactics in Cuba. In his experience and attitudes, he was a microcosm of the hopes and contradictions of Latin America's militant Left in the 1960s.

Through circumstances that need not concern us here, Lobatón and his small band of poorly armed revolutionaries met an Asháninka shaman named Ernesto Andrés. Andrés and many of his kinsmen quickly came to the conclusion that Lobatón was the Son of the Sun, a messiah who would lead Indians in a war to clear the rain forest of Europeans. The extent to which Lobatón and his men understood the religious dimension of Asháninka support is by no means clear, although they welcomed the logistical and military backing of the Indians. The jungle-warfare tactics of the MIR's Asháninka allies helped to prolong by several months a leftist insurrection that was doomed to failure from the outset. The Peruvian government, with some support from the United States, spared no expense to see that Lobatón and other guerrillas of the MIR were hunted down and killed.

Now on the face of it, the Asháninka alliance with the MIR would seem to represent a classic case of active resistance to the oppressive conditions of eastern Peru. At least a score of Asháninkas participated in an MIR-led attack on the hacienda of an abusive landowner. Many more aided the guerrillas indirectly by offering them food and shelter. For this they paid dearly. Asháninka settlements were strafed and napalmed by the Peruvian air force, and an unknown number of Indians—some probably innocent of involvement in the conflict—were "disappeared" by government counterinsurgency troops. In our analysis of this tragic struggle, Fernández and I present evidence that the shaman, Ernesto Andrés, had identified Lobatón as a messiah who would lead Asháninkas out of their condition of poverty and subservience. Andrés

thus cast Lobatón in a role of messianic leadership that had existed among the Asháninka for two centuries. According to our reconstruction of events, Andrés interpreted Lobatón's Castroite rhetoric in spiritual as well as military terms, using the idioms of shamanic prophecy and millenarian resistance to mobilize his followers in support of the guerrillas.

The facts of the case, such as they are, remain extraordinarily murky because of the deaths of many of the principal actors in 1965, the intervening years, and another, even more violent, guerrilla struggle that was intensifying even as we tried to get to the bottom of things by interviewing the few surviving witnesses. One undisputed fact that emerged, however, was that Asháninka support for the shaman Ernesto Andrés was circumscribed and equivocal. When violence failed to produce the immediate world transformation that Andrés and Lobatón had predicted, the Indians turned on them both. In doing so, Asháninkas enacted another dimension of resistance—that is, internal opposition to the leadership of their own shamans. An Asháninka man put it this way: "There is always someone who doubts." Those Asháninkas who opposed Ernesto Andrés and the MIR guerrilla fighters found it expedient to throw their support to the Peruvian army, which used Asháninka scouts to hunt down the revolutionaries. Fernández and I tried to make sense of these conflicting historical currents even while resigning ourselves to a high degree of indeterminacy. In retrospect, however, I think that we let our concern with multiple layers of resistance blind us to certain features of the story that are potentially of great interest. (Please note that in subsequent statements about *War of Shadows*, I speak for myself alone, not for my friend and collaborator, who may hold different views on the matter.)

One such feature is the specific motives of Ernesto Andrés. His death at the end of the insurgency, 25 years prior to our research, prevented us from developing a nuanced psychological profile of a complex man involved in extraordinary circumstances. Instead, we fell back on a rather one-dimensional, paradigmatic portrait that, however inevitable given the limitations of our sources, supports Ortner's claim that studies of resistance tend toward ethnographic "thinness" (Ortner 1995:190). At the time, we comforted ourselves with the knowledge that, at least for the purposes of our analysis, the personal was political. Now I wonder about the extent to which the political might not in this case have been personal—that is, emerging from a unique combination of individuals drawn together in ambiguous circumstances.

With the benefit of hindsight, I regret that we let an inspiring story of resistance distract us from a more thorough analysis of the specific content of Asháninka

prophecy. The Asháninkas who inserted themselves into this conflict were not only responding to external challenge but also advancing their own vision of existential redefinition or transcendence. It is easy to pigeonhole these aspirations by cataloging them as the "hopes of the oppressed" or as a "bold struggle for fundamental human rights." Although accurate, such labels cannot fully address or comprehend the specificity of Asháninka dreams of world transformation or the internal struggles that these touched off within Asháninka society itself.

The inherent explanatory limitations of the resistance concept became clearer as the guerrilla war of 1965 erupted in a new and more virulent strain in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The precipitating circumstance was the intrusion into Asháninka country of elements of the Communist Party of Peru—Shining Path and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, militant groups that advocated Maoist and Castroite visions of revolutionary change. This time the revolutionaries were the principal aggressors, even if, in dreadfully predictable ways, government counterinsurgency forces proved equally willing to use Asháninkas as cannon fodder for an ideological struggle born far from the rain forest. In any event, Asháninkas fought on both sides of a conflict that has produced no heroes, only tales of massacres, abandoned villages, and wasted lives. The intricacy of this struggle and the inadequacy of notions of resistance in the face of it support Ortner's assertion that "resistors are doing more than simply opposing domination, more than simply producing a virtually mechanical *re-action*." "They have," she notes, "their *own* politics" (Ortner 1995:176–177). Asháninkas and others in similarly challenging circumstances act in ways that defy reduction to a counterimage of alleged oppressors, be they ruthless Maoists or more abstract forms of "transnational hegemony," to invoke the argot of the moment. As Marshall Sahlins comments on a similarly convoluted history in Hawaii, "different cultures, different rationalities" (Sahlins 1995:14). I regret now that our research failed to address this dimension of the 1965 struggle more forcefully.

Let me turn to another ethnographic case a world away from the Upper Amazon. For five years, I have undertaken intermittent participant-observation among Americans involved in the New Age practice called channeling, essentially a form of spirit mediumship that incorporates contemporary self-help idioms (Brown, in press). Those drawn to channeling and related New Age practices tend to be middle-aged, middle-class Anglo-Americans. They are, in other words, among the most empowered people ever to have walked the earth. Perhaps this is one reason why many social scientists find it difficult to keep a straight face

when discussing them. Although several anthropologists have authored valuable ethnographic studies of New Age ideology and practice, informal conversations with colleagues at professional meetings suggest that others are deeply ambivalent about American alternative spirituality. The spectacle of middle-class whites organizing sweat-lodge ceremonies and undertaking vision quests elicits from anthropologists disparaging comments that they would never make about the Hopi or the Yoruba, confirming Lévi-Strauss's observation that anthropologists tend to be conformists abroad and critics at home. These critiques, usually delivered in private, also reflect major differences in perspective. Where anthropologists see conflict and cultural differences, New Agers see harmony and human universals. Anthropology and other social sciences focus on oppression and subjugation; the Light Bearers of the New Age inhabit a world of infinite possibilities in which oppression exists only in the mind of the oppressed.

Nevertheless, there are facets of channeling practice that lend themselves to interpretations based on the concept of resistance. For one thing, channeling is highly gendered. At channeling workshops and lectures, women are much more in evidence than men; it is not unusual, in fact, for women to outnumber men by a factor of two to one among both mediums and their clients. This suggests that channeling may continue the feminist tradition of 19th-century spiritualism documented by the historian Ann Braude (1989), whose study shows that spiritualism played a crucial role in allowing an influential generation of American women to demonstrate spiritual mastery in public settings. Her thesis, of course, will hardly be news to those anthropologists who have shown how women in other parts of the world use spirit mediumship to counter the overweening power of men.

It would therefore be easy to do a paint-by-numbers analysis of channeling that leads inexorably to the conclusion that it offers a "site of resistance" for the women who practice it. Such an inference carries with it certain professional advantages. By committing it to print, I would demonstrate my familiarity with and sympathy toward woman-centered approaches to social phenomena while implicitly registering my opposition to the hegemonic forces that drive Americans to seek personal meaning in unconventional religious practices. My subjects, whose subaltern status would likely escape the notice of my colleagues, are thus magically transformed into heroic soldiers in the anti-hegemonic struggle, and I, by extension, into their worthy scribe.

But there is a problem: channeling's practitioners steadfastly reject this analysis. With few exceptions, they see their exploration of male "energies" as a way

of expanding their selves—"filling in the gaps," as one woman put it—or even of experiencing a state of sacred androgyny. Consider the testimony of Katherine, a therapist and channeler who holds a divinity degree from Harvard. "All the feminist stuff that we talked about in divinity school doesn't work for me anymore," she explained. For her, channeling offers direct experience of masculinity without the emotional complications of encounters with real men. Channeled communication with what she described as a "gatekeeper," a male angel, helps her to "understand masculine/feminine on a really experiential level." For Katherine, the feminist theology of her divinity studies was oriented to a battle between male and female. In contrast, her channeled experience of masculine energies is nonconfrontational. It heals the wounds of gender and allows her to move on to things that she perceives as more important. Katherine, like many women attracted to channeling, seems driven by a desire to transcend gender entirely, not to celebrate her femininity or to resist male domination.

More dramatic praise of androgyny can be found in other channeling workshops. In 1993, I participated in an event during which a channeler heavily influenced by the teachings of the "I AM" Activity, a religious movement founded in the 1930s, embodied what she described as the "empowering love of the Divine Maternal-Paternal" by simultaneously channeling Mary Magdalene and Jesus of Nazareth. The language of the event was charged with an almost erotic sense of the power that results from the union of male and female principles. Other channelers offer a more sexless androgyny by acting as mediums for beings who insist that they have never before occupied a gendered body. A video program produced in Sedona, Arizona, for example, shows a man and two women dressed in yellow robes. They carefully explain to the audience that they are "walk-ins," extraterrestrials who have taken up residence in the bodies of sympathetic earthlings. Because they come from a planetary system where sex and gender don't exist, the male channeler argues, they are uniquely able to help others abandon false notions of gender-based limitations. "It is time for male/female balance to come to the fore," he says. "We talk to many beings about androgyny, which we find to be an exquisite state: delightful, balanced, beautiful, powerful. Isn't it neat to be androgynous beings? You get a fresh start!" (Extraterrestrial Earth Mission 1988).

The exploration of androgyny can, of course, be read as an expression of resistance to contemporary gender roles. To some extent, it doubtless is. Cross-gender channeling allows both women and men to play with the boundaries of gender in ways that may, for some Americans at least, change middle-class un-

derstandings about masculinity and femininity. Yet to propose that this resistance to conventionally gendered identities explains the steady expansion of channeling into the American heartland is to lose sight of far more interesting analytical possibilities offered by the narratives of channelers and their clients. The burgeoning marketplace of alternative spirituality offers communities of worship that bring an explicitly feminist edge to their practice—notably, neopaganism and related explorations of the Goddess (see, for example, Griffin 1995; Luhrmann 1993)—so those looking for a feminist vision of God or a woman-centered way of knowing are likely to seek it somewhere other than in channeling.

I would argue instead that the gender-bending practices of American channelers are part of a larger pattern of identity-play prominent in cultural arenas as diverse as the arts, clinical psychology, computer-mediated communication, and religion. The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1993) suggests that ours is the era of the "protean self," a time when personal identity is subject to constant reinvention as people interact with wildly dissonant social worlds, often in the course of a single day. For some, the extreme fluidity of the protean self is experienced as a form of liberation. The best examples of this may be found in the world of the Internet, where thousands regularly reconnoiter exotic regions of the self by assuming different identities in discussion groups and multiple user domains, or MUDs (Turkle 1995). Others, however, discover that they are less protean than the world demands and more decentered than their sense of emotional stability can sustain. The dramatic increase in the incidence of multiple personality since the 1980s is surely one index of the anxiety produced by self-decentering, as is the spread of forms of political and religious fundamentalism that counter the perceived sense of self-fragmentation.

Like people who conquer their fear of heights by taking up skydiving, channelers embrace the fragmentation of self produced by modernity, learn to control it, and elevate it to the status of a sacred principle. In characteristically American fashion, they borrow freely from the religious traditions of others to develop their sense of self-expansion, a process that, rather paradoxically, intensifies a sense of personal uniqueness even as it ties them to what they see as the universal mind or the collective unconscious. Unlike Buddhists, American channelers seem to find, rather than lose, a sense of self in this newfound multiplicity.

The quest for sacred androgyny and other expressions of self-expansion defy our attempts at domesticating them by applying a label such as "cultural resistance." Some facets of channeling and the broader New Age movement of which it is a part surely express

resistance to the bureaucratic and scientific rationality characteristic of modern societies. Others, such as the central role that fee-for-services relationships play in New Age spirituality, can be read as a complete (and for some critics, an ethically repugnant) surrender to the commodifying imperative of advanced capitalism (see, for example, Root 1996:87-107). A myopic focus on resistance, then, can easily blind us to zones of complicity and, for that matter, of *sui generis* creativity. The inclination of ethnographic subjects to "push back" (Ortner 1995:189) against such theory-driven myopia should serve as a reminder that the central goal of disciplined ethnography is to let our interlocutors show us their social world in ways that make sense to them. The ultimate impossibility of such complete intersubjective understanding does not make the goal any less vital.

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My aim in questioning an excessive focus on resistance in my own work and, by implication, in the work of others is not to advocate a return to an anthropology oriented exclusively to normative patterns, shared cultural traits, or social solidarity at the expense of nuanced studies of power. Nor do I claim that ethnography is irreconcilable with political commitment, a matter explored in the recent debate between Roy D'Andrade and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995). I wish instead to urge that the moralism implicit in attributions of resistance, and in agonistic models of culture in general, be brought to bear with a sense of balance and rigor rather than as a form of intellectual mimicry or moral self-validation. Because the concept of resistance is informed by an explicitly moral sensibility, something largely absent from ethnoscience, structuralism, and other theoretical fashions that have held sway in anthropology, there is an inexorable tendency for it to spill over into contexts of questionable relevance, since no analyst wishes to be seen as politically naive or morally insensitive. This invites interpretations that implicitly equate the alleged resistance embodied in, say, an avant-garde film to the struggle for survival of an endangered people such as the Asháninka. Such moral leveling is reason enough to question the indiscriminate use of resistance as an analytical tool.

Perhaps more troubling than the unchecked application of the concept of resistance is the broader theoretical milieu in which its overutilization has become almost inevitable. Here I refer to a totalizing focus on power as a theoretical framework and ethnographic *raison d'être*. As Sahlins alleges in his curmudgeonly after-dinner address, power is the new functionalism, an "intellectual black hole into which all kinds of cul-

tural contents get sucked" (1993:15). Using different metaphors, Mark Edmundson argues that the concept of power has become a "magic word" that, like the concept of God, "is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (1995:156). Examples of the portentous invocation of power are too numerous to inventory here. Fairly typical, however, is the assertion of Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (1994:3), near the beginning of an otherwise instructive essay, that "relations of power are an aspect of every social interaction." Although the authors assert this, they make no attempt to prove it; nor could their declaration ever be proved in a meaningful way. The reductionism of such sweeping claims can best be seen by inserting one of the corpses of anthropological theory into the same formula, as in "every human interaction serves a social function" or "relations of energy exchange are an aspect of every social interaction."

It sometimes seems that those enamored of theories of power would transform anthropology into the comparative study of what Michael Walzer memorably calls the "micro-fascism of everyday life" (1986:63). Here again, as was the case in the anthropological theory of a previous era, the complexity of human ingenuity is reduced to a limited set of anointed forces, variables, or functions—in this case, ones freighted with at least as much moral meaning as analytical utility. But if anthropology is still able to take the long view when analyzing human institutions, then we can do better than this. For while families, organizations, and systems of production doubtless impose forms of subjugation, they are also institutions that enable. Without them, society would cease to exist, and with it, the capacity for human beings to survive. All social life entails degrees of dominance and subordination, which mirror the hierarchy intrinsic to the family and to the socialization process itself. Resistance to such power can no more explain the myriad forms of culture than gravity can explain the varied architecture of trees.

The task of cultural anthropology remains, as it always has been, to illuminate how human beings use their emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and material resources to thrive in a range of social settings. Domination and subordination are, of course, key elements of this process. But so are reciprocity, altruism, and the creative power of the imagination, forces that serve to remind us that society cannot be relegated to the conceptual status of a penal colony without impoverishing anthropological theory and, worse still, violating the complex and creative understandings of those for whom we presume to speak.

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Notes

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