ANCHORS OF RESISTANCE
THE REAGENT OF DISCOMFORT

An essay by Anil K. Jain

Resistance is truly necessary: it stems from need against the misery of necessity. But while there is no lack of misery, the powers of resistance seem to be exhausted. However, at least potentially, also in the physics of the social field every force meets a reagent: »Where there is danger, the powers of protection grow, too«, writes Hölderlin.[1] Does that mean that protective resistance can be raised?

It is believed that the characteristic of the human being is its upright posture. Yet, man cannot defy the seduction of civilisation to rest seated, which is conditioning us. And we are facing an omnipresent suppression, which makes our backs crooked. Thus, we have incorporated a lowered position, we have become masters of adaptation (well, maybe, we always were). For this reason, man has to learn how to (with-)stand again in order to perform resistance: feel and use the power which is created from the pressure put on the resistant. But how can one transform the powers of suppression into resistance if they are disguised? Is it thus, that the strength of resistance is distrusted?

1. THE GLOBAL COVERING OF REALITY

The powers of resistance are in weak condition. Already the term tells: resistance is a counter-power, and where the powers of adaptation, of suppression and subjugation are covered and cannot be conceived, resistance fails to occur or hits an empty target. Currently, the global constellation makes resistance look like a ridiculous position – not only because the forces of adaptation and suppression seem dominant, but because they largely stay unrecognised. This makes the revolutionary resemble a Don Quixote who fights windmills. Or, the revolutionary simply does not appear at all on the scene – since he/she cannot identify the windmills as opponents.

Suppression always sought to disguise itself (as liberation): parliamentarism celebrated the deprivation of power of the political subjects as the final victory of democracy, and the terror of consumerism and advertising in market economy is presented as »freedom of choice«. These ideologies were and are powerful. But they are ideologies in the »classical« sense, i.e. they unintendedly point to their unveiling and transgression since they form a contrast to the social, political and economic reality, which, in principle, could be recognized. But how to unveil ideology if the structures of reality are shaped in a way that they completely hide the mechanisms of suppression, if reality itself has become a veil? In fact, one then has to act against reality in order to push the powers of resistance (and one can no more claim a deeper understanding of reality or historic truth). Today, realism, as recognition of the factual, simply means a position of resignation, and the »kingdom of freedom« by necessity is located *beyond* any reality – in the dishonoured field of Utopia.

We have to realize this concealing and deactivating structure of actual reality in order to be able to refuse this reality, and the old patterns (e.g. of Historical Materialism) for the identification of suppression are fitting no longer. The age of ideology has passed. We live in the age of »praxology«: ideology became a totalitarian *concrete* reality. In the resulting system of global »deflexion«, all impulses of resistance are deflected and reshaped so that they finally even become supporting elements. This is achieved by hiding the suppressive character of the system in its fluid structures and by simply absorbing or transforming everything which could endanger it (see also Jain 2000a).

Accordingly, Hardt und Negri (2000: p. XII) describe the new global order as »a decentred and deterritorialising apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm with its open, expanding frontiers«. Power can no more be located in this system and thus stays unaffected. The efforts to map power along the lines of traditional coordinates and to give it a face are doomed to fail. Neither is, for example, George W. Bush the real representative of Western power, nor is Osama bin Laden a true challenger. Rather are both symbolic appearances, medial avatars of a diffuse power, which, in fact, hides itself in its false manifestations (since it thus points potential resistance to wrong directions).

In this sense, actual power has a ghost-like character: it is unclear and inconceivable. Also the distinctness of the old class structures is dissolved – and along with it the antagonism of the classes of the oppressors and the oppressed which once created resistance. There are still benefactors and sufferers, but the ruling class of the global age is a true spectre: by its polymorphism and globality it escapes from identification and stays predominant exactly by its diffuseness (see Jain 2002a [2000]). Its borders are blurred and quite often the dialectics of master and slave is even realised within the same person – and is thus sublated, i.e. it is contained and dissolved in this person. The distinction between friend and enemy, which, for Carl Schmitt (1927), is at the core of any political practice, can no longer be made. We are our own friends and enemies – and we fight, if we fight, against ourselves. Resistance fragments and is increasingly directed inwards – in the form self-doubt, fear and ambivalence. However, regarded from the outside, we seem to be fully integrated, since subjugation is now hardly realized by open suppression but is achieved through absorptive integration. And this principle of »incorporation« is indeed a characteristic of the dynamic of capitalism and its global system (see Jain 2002b).

2. FALSE OPPONENTS

Still, where absorptive powers are at work, counter-forces of dissociation will appear, and the formation of the global market created simultaneous processes of localisation and re-ethnisation, which seem to oppose global unification. Therefore, the age of globalisation does not mean the end of nationalism and racially defined citizenship. One can easily see this with the growth of a »new« nationalism, the numerous »independence movements« based on ethnic

groupings, regionalist efforts for separation, and absurd forms of traditionalism. One should, however, not misinterpret these phenomena: they do not represent an actual or basic contradiction to the absorptive logic of markets. Nor do they unfold potentials for practices of resistance. To the contrary, also in global capitalism difference stays the central source of surplus generation. The levelling of difference through global expansion in fact threatens the stability of the system (see Jain 2004). The creation and amplification of certain differences is thus indeed favourable, and ethnic differentiations are especially useful for a *productive* exploitation of the specific deviation from the globalist logic which they represent.

Ethnic differences are tightly embedded into the collective consciousness and are often bound to biologic characteristics so that it is hard to escape and forget them. They thus represent links for differentiation which can be accessed easily. But the biggest advantage of ethic differences is that they overlap with territorial claims and borders, and spatial differences, mediated and sharpened by ethnicity, provide promising resources for profit. This profit is two-fold: materially, ethnic-spatial differences allow (by the means of transfer) the exploitation of cultural and economic differences. Politically and symbolically ethicised counter-spaces are created which, however, remain fully integrable into the space of globalisation. The global family of nations may get into an argument, but the material family ties are never broken. A real threat is just created whenever one member seeks to separate from global space by economic and political insulation. Such rare efforts are punished, whenever necessary, with the use of (collective) violence.

3. THE THREATENED SELF AND ITS MATERIAL RESISTANCE

Is there no escape from this global system of absorption in which even its counter-powers are assimilated? Where can opposition be traced? Where are the anchors of resistance? In order to achieve at answers, one must continue and explore what resistance in fact means, or rather: one has to undergo resistance – the resistance of the massive wood of a chair which is felt while sitting, the resistance of the air stream when leaning out of a train window. With this experience one is ready to accept that resistance is a material power. It is not created from nothing, and it is directed *against* direction: in opposition to the smooth flow. The core of resistance is hardened shape: volition. Uncompromising. Stubborn. Disturbing. Irritating. Unpleasant. The incorrigible, obscene subject, shouting out lout its clear »No!«.

However, the reluctant subject is hardly in a better condition than the forces of resistance. It is attacked from all sides, and the short history of the (modern) individual seems finished before it really has begun. Only in the age of Renaissance there »arose the subjective; man becomes a self-aware individual and recognises himself as such«, knows Jacob Burckhardt (1995 [1860]). And when Descartes (1984 [1644]) finally thinks to have established the only solid foundation of philosophy in the self-consciousness of the reflexive subject, the »eclipse of reason« will assure – after a long and toilsome ascend – the immediate and bottomless fall of the individual (see. Horkheimer 1947: ch. 4). While Nietzsche (1995 [1883]) was just able to declare the death

of god, our time eliminated the subject (see e.g. Derrida 1972). Actually, it was not even an elimination. The individual, the presence of which cannot be denied, is hold as a living dead which is not considered to ever have lived. Because – from the point of view of those currently dominant discourses which took the place and mark the end of the modern philosophy of subjectivity – the subject, as an individual, is seen to be a mere imagination. Right from the beginning, the vision of the authoritative individual was thus a shining fata morgana in the looking-glass of power. »In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals«, comments Foucault (1980 [1976]: p. 98) who represents the most important voice of this discourse. Foucault's underlying concept of power, as it is further explained in his argument, noticeably resembles the picture of a diffuse and masked power which was drawn here in respect of the changed system of rule in global capitalism. (Does Foucault hence take a specific, historical manifestation of power for its general character?) In any case, he wants power to be understood as »something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.« (Ibid.)

This penetrative, circular and net-like flow of power, which creates the subject as an (authoritative) individual, puts at the same time limits to subjectivity. Especially in Foucault's early works, power is characterized as a suppressive, exclusive and normalising disciplinary power. And one has to admit that even in his later writings, which reveal a more positive view on the effects of power, he succeeds in vividly showing how that which Freud (1962 [1923]) described on a mere psychological level as the (suppressive) structures of the super-ego gets inscribed into the bodies. Foucault (1980 [1977]: p. 186) thus remarks on the slippery connection between bodily and psychological internalisation of power that »power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject's own representations.«

In spite of or rather because of this understanding of power as a subcutaneous normalising *and* creative force, it seems that Foucault finally can no longer resist its ambiguous fascination. Accordingly, the subject is perceived as being produced (and therefore also as being a »real« effect), but it is immediately dissolved in the flow of power. Its history of (physical and mental) suffering is reconstructed, but the suffering is neither *subjectively* expressed nor *politically* meaningful, since the dialectics of suppressive power and resistance is sublated in the imagination of an omnipresent super-power. In this »genealogic« metaphysics of power, unexpectedly, the moment of idealistic transcendence, which unites all contradictions, is resurrected. The subject is miserable and commodified, but it is capable as an element of the all-embracing network of power. The subject is suffering, but with regard of the superior truth of power, its misery seems unreal and unimportant. And although it is just a produce of power, the subject is guilty for if it only recognised the reality of power (and its self-power) it would be possible to unchain itself. (Re)viewed from this background of a new metaphysics of power also the

Foucauldian »Technologies of the Self« (1988 [1982]) rather appear like magic rituals which serve to a participation in transcendent power than enabling the self to resist the real power of suppression. Just like a shaman changes into an animal to receive its powers and capacities, or, a yogi seeks to approach the divine through asceticism, the self-engineers try »to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality« (ibid.: p. 18).

In his genealogic analysis Foucault (1986 [1984]) directs his attention to the antique technologies of the self. But also the self-technologies« of our age reflect and express similar desires. The threatened (post-)modern self is looking for itself – in selfhood-seminars and therapy sessions. Yet, it cannot find itself there. A (strong) self has long ago become a disturbing element in the framework of power, and selfhood is an industry which is in accordance to power. Consequently, just like the theories of post-structuralism, its machinery works in the direction of a weakening and deconstruction of the self. Selfhood thus largely means self-abandonment. For example, on the web-pages of »My Way – Institute for Body and Consciousness Work« it is clearly stated that »finding onself means finding the true centre, the true self, the source and the divine within ourselves«.[2] In order to reach there, it is necessary to take down the hardened layers of the self that block the entry points to this divine source. However, in case that this entrance is finally exposed, global success is promised, i.e. a direct relation between successful self-creation and outer success is assumed (see e.g. Tepperwein 2002).

The culmination of this kind of instrumental selfhood can be seen in the current »selfness«-trend. »In a time of social crisis the praxis of mere wellness reaches its limits, it is no more sufficient to lean back and to ›wellness‹. Today, in the European context, there arises more and more the *need to transform on oneself*«,[3] explains selfness trend-setter Horx (2005) in his advertisement campaign. But what is presented here as a need is better to be interpreted as a constraint, since the targeted self-transformation through selfness in fact means adaption. The individual has to be made compatible with »Liquid Modernity« (Bauman 2000). This, however, means that we have to say good-bye to former models of subjectivity, which have become too fixed and cumbersome. Trueness to principles is replaced by situationally adapted interaction and communication, and soft-kills supersede toughness with oneself and others. In order to achieve this, the new »flexible man« (Sennett 1998) has to continuously work on and re-create himself to meet the ever changing requirements. The reward for this permanent adaption is a self-satisfied life in accordance to the fluid »nature« of new capitalism – or, as it is expressed in the jargon of selfness: an ideal »work-life-balance« was found.

Yet, this so-called balance is clearly biassed. A pamphlet of the German »Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens and Women« reveals: »Work-life-balance is primarily to be understood as an economic issue. The three-fold win-situation through work-life-balance results from advantages for the enterprises, for the labour force and from benefits for the whole society and economy.«[4] The responsibility for the successful balancing of selfhood, market requirements and the common good is vastly assigned to the individual. Who ever is reluctant to or careless in improving his/her

»personal skills« proves to be unsuitable for success. We thus work constantly and with high effort on our self – in order to put its reflections into scene.

This exposure and emptying is not limited to the inner self. The (unwilled) impulse for a permanent transformation and optimisation also affects the sphere of body. Its materiality means a challenge. The body has to comply with the enforced self-image, created by life-style magazines and advertisement campaigns. And the surface of the body is an ideal cover and compensation for the deficiencies of inner self-creation. For the (post-)modern individual, its body has thus become a fetish. But also the body must not rest in its shape. It is remodelled through work-outs. Everything which seems imperfect is re-coloured and re-shaped or (surgically) removed. The body becomes a matter of deformation, and cyborg phantasies inspire the imagination of the intellectual avant-garde (see as an example Haraway 1985).

Where can anchors of resistance be traced if even the material resistance of the body appears to be overcome? But the bodies resist. We just have to realize their resistance. They react with pain and rejection. The body is patient but it has its limits. Limitation is, indeed, the characteristic of the body. Matter is shapeable but not freely shapable. Thus, plastic surgery rarely, maybe never is applied without »side-effects«. Sometimes, these side-effects are undeniable. Artificially enlarged breasts harden and encapsulate in order to indicate their resistance. From this material feeling of pain there could result a new perception of the body – a resistive body-consciousness, which opposes the subjugation of the body.

Maybe, these painful side-effects of aesthetic body-shaping are their latent motivation, for it seems that plastic surgery, tattoos and piercings or the practice of body-building have in many cases addictive character: there is no end until the (known or unknown) side-effects become apparent and the limits of plasticity are painfully experienced. These addictive forms of aesthetic body technologies thus reveal a latent desire for self-aggression. Self-Injury is performed in order to re-establish a sense of oneself and one's own body, which has been lost in the slipstream of global liquification, though the media of pain.

Self-Injury is usually hold for a pathological phenomenon. It is seen as a »War Against the Own Body« (Eckhard-Henn 1994). But this view is too superficial. Self-injury is an emergency-strategy which seeks to restore the sense of oneself. Where the self is at the borderline of dissociation, injury and pain are the last means of self-care (see also Sachsse 1987). Also within the mental apparatus there are limits, which, in the case of self-injury, are reconstituted on the level of the body. Through the resistance of the own flesh against the razor blade one can experience that the subject of pain is not arbitrary but is a distinct and living individual. This kind of body-mediated self-creation and -reconstitution is just an extreme example. Also within the fields of sports and recreation going to the limits becomes more and more popular. In this desire, latent moments of resistance can be detected. The self, threatened by the danger of dissolution and dissociation, is driven to its own (material) order to keep a sense of itself through the rigidity of limitation. The effect of this experience is dialectical. It may lead to a inclusive capturing of the self against the thread of dissociation. Or, it may provide anchors of resistance against the elimination of the self.

4. THE UTOPIAN MOMENT OF DISCOMFORT

Discomfort is the source and the effect as well as the counter-force of resistance. The experience of a limit, confinement, the hardness of life, all this creates discomfort, which drives us on the outside. And, perceived from this outside, resistance is hardly less uncomfortable. It is always a disturbing element which cannot expect common agreement. This makes resistance so arduous. It is easier not to resist if one can afford it.

Thus, whenever we want to feel and create resistance (and we will if we need to), we shall seek discomfort. Resistance means: the remembrance of ones own feeling of discomfort. We have to follow the voice of our discomfort instead of appeasing it. But how does discomfort speak to us? – As the weight which lays on us, as the moulding force which hits us. We might be formed by our environment, but as material beings we are not arbitrarily shapable. There are limits of our conditioning. Where these limits are approached, we feel and experience inner resistance – which expresses itself as discomfort (and which could finally become »outspoken«). Also emotion is a substance, and felt discomfort is a substantial and »moving« resource of power (see also Adorno 1970, p. 202).

The effect of this power rarely origins from the centre. The centre rests. Whereas pushed to the margin life is hard. If we are located in a position of difference or exclusion we can strongly feel the discomfort. The system thus works in favour and against our discomfort. It creates discomfort, yet, it also embraces and pleases us, and it seeks to distract our discomfort with attractions. Sometimes, it also threatens. But, primarily, it causes our discomfort to stay diffuse und unclear so that it cannot be directed – in order to become actual resistance. Wherever our discomfort finds ways of articulation, its voice gets translated into other, less hard and less sharp languages. Rebellion may trans-mute into a legal dispute (which, sometimes, might even be won) or into protest votes (which do hardly count).

The system, which appeases us in this way, continuously creates new exclusions and margins, in which discomfort grows. Nevertheless, the resisting subject still stays there isolated and helpless since the drive towards the centre seems greater than the centrifugal forces. Yet, isolation is the true position of resistance. Resistance leads the subject to itself. If necessary: one against all. The superior strength of the others is, indeed, frightening. However, the fear of the self of itself, which pushes us into the arms of the others, is even bigger. This fear is real, and it is, in fact, the fear of reality, as it is, the concrete experience of our discomfort in factuality. We have to reflect this discomfort and stand the fear of our self in order to perform resistance – together with the others. Maybe, we can only reach there while suffering, that is: learn how to perceive our resistance. And even if this self were nothing but an imagination – why would its utopian imaginations of resistance have less reality than the projections of factuality?

NOTES:

1. Own translation. German original text: »Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/Das Rettende auch.«

2. Own translation. German original text: »Sich selbst finden bedeutet, denn [!] wahren Kern, das wahre Selbst, die Quelle oder das Göttliche in uns zu finden.«

3. Own translation. German original text: »Im gesellschaftlichen Krisengefühl stößt die reine Wohlfühllehre Wellness an Ihre Grenzen, es reicht nicht mehr aus, sich zurückzulehnen und sich ›bewellnessen‹ zu lassen. Heute entwickelt sich im europäischen Raum mehr und mehr *das Bedürfnis sich selbst zu verändern*.«

4. Own translation. German original text: »Work-Life-Balance ist in erster Linie als ein Wirtschaftsthema zu verstehen. Die dreifache Win-Situation durch Work-Life-Balance resultiert aus Vorteilen für die Unternehmen, für die einzelnen Beschäftigten sowie einem gesamtgesellschaftlichen und volkswirtschaftlichen Nutzen.«

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