

Resistance and Emancipation

Cultural and Poetic Practices

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Introduction

The title of this volume refers to a central question, at times tacit, at times explicit, that motivates the essays included herein: what role, if any, does cultural production have to play in movements, groups and struggles that oppose the present political order and/or propose radically different forms of social, political and economic organization? Although the contributors understand the terms 'resistance' and 'emancipation' in a variety of ways, their respective etymological meanings of 'standing against' and 'liberation' (from slavery, from existing morality) have motivated much of the research work and activism that is represented or analysed. This book is the product of a network of researchers and cultural producers from Europe, Latin America and the USA, entitled 'Poetics of Resistance'. The members of the network are committed to a long-term research project into the creative strategies of counter-hegemony, and the dominance of and resistance to neoliberalism in culture, knowledge production, and education.

The network emerged as a result of discussions in 2007–8 between founder members Cornelia Gräbner, Ben Bollig, Arturo Casas, William Rowe and Santiago Chávez, about the relationship between cultural production, political activism, the role and future of the university, and the contemporary context of neoliberal capitalism, although in many respects it reflects long-standing interests of these and others involved in the project. The network held its first meeting at the University of Leeds, UK, in March 2008, and met again at the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in April 2009. Since then, Poetics of Resistance has developed a website (www.poeres.org) and published an online edition of the journal *Cosmos & History* (<http://cosmosandhistory.org/>). Members of the network also participated in the edited volume *Performing Poetry: Rhythm, Place and Body in the Poetry Performance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011). Together, the

introductions to these volumes, written by Cornelia Gräbner and David Wood, and by Cornelia Gräbner and Arturo Casas, represent the most thorough introduction to the shared – yet conflicted and tense – methodological and theoretical points of reference for this project. The book you are holding brings together papers developed from interventions at both of our meetings to date, by academics, poets, activists, filmmakers and others engaged in practices of poetic and cultural resistance.

Although the approaches, opinions and responses of members of the network are many and varied, discussions at the two symposia suggested a series of common points of contact, many to do with a sense of discontent at contemporary responses to questions about the role of culture in politics. This discontent of course stems in part from the particular nature of this political conjuncture. Neoliberal capitalism, that is to say, the ideology that the ability of markets and capital to cross national boundaries is the prime indicator of global development and wellbeing, has shaped to its convenience not only the economy. It also targets higher education, knowledge production, and cultural production. The homogenizing, exclusionary and destructive consequences of its interventions can be felt throughout all these areas. In this sense, as editors we feel strongly that the variety of themes and optics, and the differing personal trajectories of the contributors, has been one of the strengths of the group, and that many of the tensions that these differences have occasioned have been productive in the development of ideas and shared dialogues.

The members of ‘Poetics of Resistance’ aim to understand and analyse these strategies and tactics and to develop practices in their areas which seek to actively counter the impact of neoliberal politics and ideology, and the values associated with it. In keeping with the name of the network we aim at reclaiming concepts and spaces through working with language, image and their impact on the imagination.

‘Poetics of Resistance’ draws on discourses and knowledge developed in various areas. Research-based knowledge and knowledge that is developed in cultural production are equally important to our project. Action and analysis cannot replace one another and are not mutually exclusive. The resistance to the neoliberal imaginary and to neoliberal politics has to draw upon and engage different creative discourses. However, the engagement of

different discourses is not in itself an act of resistance: it must not lose sight of concrete aims, grievances and demands; the withdrawal into alternative spaces must not be among its inherent characteristics; and acts of resistance must not be limited to a given repertoire or set of clichés.

‘Poetics of Resistance’ opposes the commercialization and privatization of public life and of creative activities. The members of the network are committed to the development of a global network of persons who contribute to the construction of global discourses and practices of resistance. In that sense, ‘Poetics of Resistance’ aims to make a contribution to the project of ‘globalization from below’, as opposed either to forms of resistance to globalization based on exclusionary or essentializing definitions of identity or belonging, or to celebratory notions of a globalized resistance inherent or implicit in globalized capitalism. Therefore, the network questions discourses that homogenize the notion of globalization into a concept that in its final consequence endorses pro-Capitalist globalization. In other words, the hope that a *de facto* worsening of conditions for the majority – of workers, of the un- or underemployed – as is implicit in the development of neoliberal globalization, might eventually lead to the spontaneous emergence of coherent oppositional movements, appears insufficient as a strategy capable of creating ‘livable’ lives for human beings.

The relationship between creativity and resistance lies at the heart of the network’s concerns. Creativity and its manifestations in art, cultural production and in knowledge production is an important resource for a type of resistance that draws upon the resolve and contribution of the individual to the same degree to which it emphasizes the importance of collective reflection and action. The relationship between creativity and resistance therefore cannot be reduced to the manifestation of or commitment to particular ideologies as expressed in art. Rather, ‘the poetics of resistance’ are produced through the negotiation of the subjective and the collective, of reflection and action, and of practices and ideologies. Many of the contributors make productive use of Critical Theory, and in particular the philosophical and sociological investigations of Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School; from such authors we feel that a number of contributors draw a sense of the need for

intellectual enquiry that is explicit about its political goals as well as its aesthetic preferences.

The title of this volume, *Resistance and Emancipation: Cultural and Poetic Practices*, reflects a desire to bring together reflection and testimony by members of the network that analyse resistance, but also attempt to think possibilities beyond the defensive stance that can all too easily turn resistance into reaction. The term ‘emancipation’ highlights the need expressed in a number of the texts included in this volume, and by several of the practices described, to conceive strategies and practices not only for the defence of certain rights and possibilities actually under attack from neo-liberal policy – access to education and free healthcare, the occupation and use of public space, control over one’s own biometric data, for example – but also to perceive and design a future or possibilities not based on perpetual economic growth (read: ever-increasing exploitation of natural resources and labour) or the reinforcement of existing privileges, in particular through the preservation of rights for the few – wealthy citizens of the global north – at the expense of the lives of many.

Moreover, the phrase ‘cultural and poetic practices’ expands the scope of ‘Poetics of Resistance.’ Although the latter term, which used poetics in the sense of its classical Greek roots, ‘making,’ never had as its intention a strict limiting to the writing of poetry, or practices in some way associated with the creation of discourses perceived as ‘poetic,’ by expanding the register to include ‘cultural and poetic practices’ we hoped at once to facilitate the inclusion of pieces analysing a variety of forms and registers – newspaper articles, popular art works, documentary film, television – without losing sight of the ‘and.’ That is to say, the practices described and analysed herein have in common with *poetics*, as outlined by Gräbner and Wood, and by Gräbner and Casas, a strong sense of the negotiation between individual commitment and collective projects or actions, a negotiation that must tread a fine line between the ivory tower of modernist aesthetics and the vitalist spontaneity of popularized theories of the multitude.

The editors have chosen to include texts in both Spanish and English, whilst ‘framing’ the book in English (biographies, this introduction, for example). These decisions reflect a number of aspects of the network: Spanish and English are the two languages that almost all members of the

group speak or understand; the initial meeting in Leeds was conducted largely in Spanish and in English; in Santiago de Compostela Galician and Portuguese were also used. But the choice of Spanish and English facilitated the inclusion of a greater number of texts, and allowed members of the group in many cases to express themselves without the need for translation. Furthermore, bilingual publication reflects what is now widely accepted practice by many literary journals, including prestigious organs such as *Recherche littéraire/Literary Research* and many Hispanic studies journals worldwide.

The variety of texts, themes and approaches reflects the many research interests, areas, and practice as individual researchers, teachers, artists and activists. They have been grouped into three sections, although there exist obvious points of contact, dialogue, and polyphony within and between the sections. The first section very broadly speaking addresses theoretical and practical questions around subjectivity and resistance. If a strong philosophical tradition in the twentieth century has problematized the notion of the subject, either because of one's necessary non-presence to oneself, or because of the discursive nature of constructions of subjectivity, what purpose can the taking of a position, as resistant, or in favour of emancipation, hold?

As is well known, psychoanalytic notions of resistance, in particular as explored by Jacques Lacan, throw into question positive values assigned politically to resistance. In his contribution to this volume, William Rowe explores a particularly thorny matter for conceptualizations of poetic resistance, to wit the lyric subject, an entity questioned by the avant-gardes and post-war literary theory, and explored in great detail in the work of many twentieth-century poets working in Spanish and Portuguese. Rowe reads events and experiences that exceed the poet or the poem's capacity for expression, including pain and political defeat, to encapsulate in Rimbaud's engagement with the Paris Commune the notion of an event within an event, a wound held open as a space yet to be occupied. Like a number of the contributors to this volume, Rowe attends to concepts drawn from the influential writings of Slavoj Žižek – indeed it could be argued that the re-emergence of the term emancipation in contemporary theoretical discourse owes much to the Slovenian – and in Jorge Sacido's