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THE REVOLUTIONARY POSSIBILITY OF THE MUNDANE

INTRODUCTION

When we think of actions for social changes we are drawn first to organized, collective, public actions. We think of demonstrations, riots, revolutionary uprisings. We think of petitions, strikes, boycotts, and class action law suits. These actions are often recorded as ruptures or turning points in history.

Many of these actions create evocative images of how collective action challenges power. We think of the Yellow Jackets descending upon Paris, disrupting the City through marches, violence, and graffiti to compel the French government to pause and back down on repressive policies. We think of the throngs of protestors taking to the streets in Hong Kong and compelling the local government to at least press pause on the extradition to China bill. We must, of course, acknowledge the importance and potential effectiveness of such highly visible, collective actions in service of social change.

However, I want to talk about quieter, mostly individual, more local actions inherent in everyday lived experience that also matter in the disruption and redistribution of power. These actions are sometimes called 'everyday resistance,' a term coined by James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak*[1], a study of peasant rebellions in Malaysia. Scott, in a recent interview, said "historians, by paying attention to formal organization and public demonstrations, have missed most acts of resistance throughout history[2]." Collective and everyday forms of resistance are complemen-

1 J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1985.

2 J.C. Scott, *Everyday Forms of Resistance to State Power*, url https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/

tary; both are necessary in political and class struggle. Indeed, one may lead to the other.

This idea of everyday resistance is also at the heart of Vaclav Havel's manifest for dissent, *The Power of the Powerless*[3]. Havel saw the undercurrent of the Czechoslovakian revolution as individual acts of courage, what he describes as overcoming fears that lead people to "live within a lie." This notion of living within a lie is key to understanding how we participate in the hegemonic narrative of capitalism, indeed the hegemonic narrative of any social relationship where power is differentially distributed. The alternative to living in a lie, is to live in the truth, or "Live Not by Lies" as Solzhenitsyn[4] enjoins us. One means to living not by lies is everyday resistance.

What I want to do in this discussion is connect the idea of everyday resistance to power, explicate what everyday resistance is, and show how mundane acts in social life have the potential to be revolutionary and the potential for social change.

POWER & RESISTANCE

Resistance must be understood as a necessary component of power. If we think of power as structural, as embodied within the State or bureaucracies, and existing prior to resistance, then resistance becomes an external response to alter pre-existing social structures. This view of power gives precedence to organized, collective forms of resistance that noticeably disrupt or alter social structures. We are likely to dismiss everyday acts of resistance as trivial acts that at best provide temporary relief to individuals, but having little sociological import.

If, on the other hand, we understand power does not reside anywhere and it cannot be possessed, but rather is an outcome of ongoing transactional relations between the more powerful and the less powerful, we can then see the inherent possibility for resistance in mundane, everyday ac-

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3 V. Havel, *The Power of Powerless*, url https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf, 1978.

4 A. Solzhenitsyn, *Live Not by Lies*. This essay was Solzhenitsyn's call for moral courage in the face of powerlessness, url http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/SolhenitsynLies.php 1974.

tions. Havel contended, people always have "*within themselves* the power to remedy their own powerlessness." People are never truly powerless.
Power, in this transactional view, is a 'probabilistic social relationship' and contingent on the participation of both the more and less powerful. Participation of the less powerful may be expressed in many ways including complacency, sanguinity, organized resistance, or everyday resistance. This fluid conception of power creates the resistance deployed by the less powerful to thwart the class, institution or state that dominates the public exercise of power.
Foucault summaries this view of power: "Power must be analyzed as something which circulates; or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised in a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of its articulation[5]."

EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

James Scott defines everyday resistance thus:

> The Brechtian or Schweikian forms of resistance I have in mind are an integral part of the small arsenal of relatively powerless groups. They include such acts as foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on. These techniques, for the most part quite prosaic, are the ordinary means of class struggle. They are the techniques of "first resort" in those common historical circumstances where open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger. When they are practiced widely by members of an entire class against elites or the state, they may have aggregate consequences out of all proportion to their banality when considered singly. No adequate account of class relations is possible without assessing their importance. That they have been absent or marginal to most accounts of class

5 M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972 – 1977*, Pantheon Books, 1980, p.98.

> relations is all too understandable. The purpose of many such techniques, after all, is to avoid notice and detection[6].

Everyday resistance is conscious (of being less powerful in a power relationship) and it is purposeful (meant to disrupt that power relationship). For example, squatting requires the squatter knows the property is owned by someone else and they have reason to believe they have a claim or right to the property, or perhaps simply the right to housing. And, not every petty theft can or should be considered an act of resistance.
While everyday resistance may be driven by principles (like social justice or feminism or environmentalism) it need not be, and indeed may be about expressing human dignity. The resistance may be about self-preservation, perhaps even one's survival.
Numerous studies focus on the everyday forms of resistance in institutional contexts like mental hospitals, prisons, schools, bureaucracies and courtrooms. A wave of recent research focuses on resistance in refugee camps[7] and that of Palestinians under Israeli occupation.
For example, the Palestinian practice of *sumud*, understood as steadfastness, is apparent especially among women who refuse to leave their land and act as if life were normal[8]. The home becomes a place of safety and resistance by maintaining a sense of normalcy in the face of a situation anything but normal. This resistance also includes: "upholding cultural traditions such as weddings and holidays; maintaining a sense of normalcy; engaging in micro-enterprises; sharing songs and folklore despite threats to personal safety and surveillance; and documenting the Pales-

6 J. C. Scott, *Everyday forms of resistance*, In F. D. Colburn (Ed.), *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Routledge, New York 1989, p.5.
7 See, for example, the following studies focusing of refugee everyday resistance.
E. Olivius, *Sites of repression and resistance: Political space in refugee camps in Thailand*, in "Critical Asian Studies", 49(3) 2017, pp. 289-307.
D. Roy, *From non-places to places: Transforming partition rehabilitation camps through the gendered quotidian*, in "Millennial Asia: An International Journal of Asian Studies" 9 (1), 2018.
8 See, for example, the following studies on the resistance of women in Palestine.
S. Richter-Devroe, *Palestinian women's everyday resistance: Between normality and normalization*, in "Journal of International Women's Studies," 12(2), 32, 2011.
C. Ryan, *Everyday resilience as resistance: Palestinian women practicing sumud, in* "International Political Sociology" 9(4), 2015, pp. 299-315.

tinian struggle through writing, protest art and graffiti[9]."
Everyday acts of resistance are individual; however, resisters often rely on the complicit silence of others and so are always in some way shared. This implies a common sense of shared rights and shared oppression, even if not everyone resists.
Organized collective resistance relies on strategy, everyday resistance on tactics. There are common tactics, but everyday resistance is contextual and the tactics used are constitutive of the lived experience of power relations and reflect the creativity and imagination of the less powerful. Tactics derive from perceived cracks and vulnerability within a particular context, and so there will be many forms of everyday resistance devised to thwart power and appropriation. "What gives these techniques a certain unity is that they are invariably quiet, disguised, anonymous, often undeclared forms of resisting claims imposed by claimants who have superior access to force and to public power[10]."
Tactics are relatively safe (often because of the small scale nature of the resistance), often ambiguous (so as to enable deniability), provide some clear sense of gain (often material, but also emotional or social), and require no or relatively little collaboration or coordination.
A couple of examples of seemingly little import illustrate tactics.

Example 1: The Right to Bare Arms[11]

Recently, women working in the British Columbia provincial legislative building were told by the legislature's sergeant-at-arms to cover their arms in the hallways of the capital. The Speaker of the House asserted the legislature dress code calls for "gender-neutral business attire," generally consisting of layered clothing that includes covered shoulders for both men and women.
The following day, many women came to work bare armed, individual

9 R. Vasudevan, Everyday resistance through women's practices of sumūd in Palestine, url https://sites.utexas.edu/internationalplanning/case-studies/case-study-7/
10 J. C. Scott, *Everyday forms of resistance*, cit., p.8.
11 These events were described in a local newspaper article. Dress code: Women working at BC Legislature win right to bare arms. https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/dress-code-women-working-at-b-c-legislature-win-right-to-bare-arms, April 1, 2019.

choices made by workers challenging the restrictive dress code, forcing a change in that dress code, and winning 'the right to bare arms.'

Example 2: Amelia Bedelia's literal interpretations[12]

Peggy Parish's book series about a young woman, Amelia Bedelia, often highlights women's domestic labour and Amelia demonstrates resistance through literally doing what she is asked. In a sequence from *Come Back, Amelia Bedelia* she literally serves a cup of coffee with cereal mixed in after her employer Mrs. Rogers asks for cereal with her coffee.
Amelia Bedelia's resistance may seem amusing, but it is no less a commentary and self-dignifying act of resistance than when Jessie Jackson as a young man working as a restaurant server (before fame as a civil rights leader) would spit in the food he served to white people[13].
In education we might be most interested in schools as contexts for everyday resistance. Schools are complex contexts of power relations, usually hierarchically structured with students at the bottom (or maybe it is support workers, like janitors and maintenance workers, who are at the bottom), teachers in the middle, then administrators. But, there are also policy makers outside of the school, parents, and other community players. And in spite of their hierarchic nature, schools are driven by a hegemonic narrative that says 'we are all on the same side' and thus power differentials are often masked.
Teachers resist, for example, by deviating from the official curriculum; hoarding supplies and materials; sending subversive messages to students and parents. In a school ethnography I did[14], teachers were told

12 Beginning in 1963, Peggy Parish wrote a dozen chapter books with Amelia Bedelia as the central character. There were many more Amelia Bedelia books subsequently written by other authors and the later books did not always retain Amelia's resistance to authority whilst preserving the comicalness of her literalness.
13 Jesse Jackson's resistance to authority and specifically the reference to spitting in restaurant goers food was part of a New York Times story about his rise to prominence as an African American preacher and champion of civil and social rights. https://www.nytimes.com/1972/07/09/archives/jesse-jackson-i-am-audience-i-am-jesse-somebody-audience-somebody.html July 9, 1972
14 S. Mathison and M. Freeman, *Constraining elementary teachers' work: Dilemmas and paradoxes created by state mandated testing*, in "Education Policy Analysis Archives", v. 11, 2003, url https://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/262

they could not pull students out of class for special individual reading instruction. Teachers had invested considerable time in preparing curricular materials and were committed to the idea of individualized instruction. They went against the policy by teaching students in broom closets where they were unlikely to be detected by administrators.
Students resist, for example, by expending the minimum amount of effort; being argumentative; playing with dress codes; responding to teachers with silence or mumbling; avoiding 'diversions' that get in the way of academic success; sleeping in class. Students may even resist by rejecting school—dropping out or seeking alternative forms of education. There are a number of excellent critical ethnographic studies that illustrate students' everyday resistance. One of the best is Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*[15], in which he describes student resistance as a meaningful political act to subvert the hidden implications of schooling.
And other less powerful actors will also resist; perhaps the janitor steals time by watching movies on his phone, as does the secretary who does online shopping during work, or the administrative assistance who fudges his over time to enhance what he considers inadequate pay, or the principal who augments her work benefits by registering for conferences that are really an opportunity for a vacation.

REVOLUTIONARY POSSIBILITY OF THE MUNDANE

Two primary ways that mundane everyday acts of resistance have the potential to create change far in excess of what might be expected are: 1) when there is a significant accumulation of these acts such that real consequences ensue, and 2) the everyday narration of everyday acts of resistance creates shared knowledge about tactics, thus spreading their use and possible consequences across times and places.

Accumulation of Everyday Resistance

Individual acts of resistance are mundane when taken individually, but

15 P. Willis, *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*, Routledge, New York 2000.

if they are practiced widely by entire classes against a powerful elite or the state, they have the potential for cumulative consequences. "[J]ust as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, thousands upon thousands of petty acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier reef of their own. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not the vast aggregation of actions which make it possible[16]."

Scott uses the example of military desertions to illustrate the cumulative impact of everyday resistance[17]. Desertion is contrasted with mutiny, the former being an individual everyday act of resistance and the latter being an organized collective action to gain control of military force. Scott points to desertions from the Confederate Army during the US civil war as key to the Confederacy's collapse, and the desertions from the Czarist army contributing to the 1917 Bolshevik victory. In neither case were the desertions part of an organized rebellion, but their cumulative impact was as momentous as open acts of sedition might have been.

A contemporary educational example of this cumulative consequence has occurred in Canada, in British Columbia. Teachers' and parents' everyday resistance to standardized testing has over time changed the ways this information can be used. This resistance stems from a right wing think tank's use of the data to rank all schools in the province, a thinly disguised attack on public schools and the promotion of a narrative favoring privatization of schooling.

The individual acts of teachers encouraging parents to opt their children out of the 4th and 7th grade standardized government tests, along with the individual acts of parents and children who opted out, have, over a period of a few years, so disrupted the available data (in some instances whole schools do not participate in the testing; in many others there is great irregularity in the data) that any rankings are suspect. While this right wing think tank continues to report rankings, the public and even right wing journalists know they are compromised and of little value.

16 J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*, cit., p. xvii.
17 Ivi, p.30.

Narratives of Everyday Resistance

Everyday acts of resistance often serve to advantage the individual materially (stealing food, for example, and this is especially so when people live a life that is close to the margins of survival). At a symbolic level, these acts may maintain or restore individuals' desire for fairness or maintain a fundamental sense of human dignity and decency.

Although everyday resistance may be individual acts, they are not isolated and are understood collectively. The acts of resistance become part of a narrative of the less powerful, shared and reinforced at a collective level. Indeed, these narratives of everyday resistance often challenge other narratives (such as narratives of vulnerability, incompetence, ignorance) meant to reinforce asymmetrical power relationships. These narratives create an understanding and a practice of everyday life and may even be the groundwork for more organized political action. Storytelling collectivizes and disseminates what is otherwise understood as only an individual act or experience.

A study of everyday resistance to legal authority in the US by sociologists Ewick & Silbey[18] illustrates how individual acts are extended in time and space transcending the personal, even if not necessarily altering power relations. The overwhelmingly popular closed Facebook group, Badass Teachers[19], illustrates teacher sharing of experiences of oppression and tactical responses to that oppression. Stories posted often define the oppression and the comments share how teachers can and might respond. The Badass Teachers are not, however, a singular voice and do not respond to every authoritarian act in a common way. The comments are in effect individual narratives that others can tap into to develop an understanding of their own experiences and potential responses available to them.

18 P. Ewick and S. Silbey, *Narrating Social Structure: Stories of Resistance to Legal Authority*, in "American Journal of Sociology"108. 1328-1372, 2003.

19 Badass Teachers Association (BATs) was created in 2013 and is manifest primarily in its closed Facebook page. There are 64K+ members, mostly from the USA and a small number from other countries. The group is a pro-public education and pro-union and often focuses on issues of anti-privatization, anti-testing, and unionism with racial and social justice work. While this FB group illustrates how narrative creates shared tactics and responses to oppressive conditions, the group also serves other purposes, such as sharing curriculum resources. https://www.facebook.com/groups/BadAssTeachers/

In both examples, stories are ones where the less powerful become the protagonists in the face of more powerful legal or bureaucratic authority, and the stories reveal very specific ways power can be reversed or disrupted, albeit often temporarily. When individuals tell stories of their everyday resistance they build a shared understanding of power structure and where the cracks in that structure can be exploited. When these everyday forms of resistance are shared through stories, they become shared knowledge, transcending the specific context and suggesting consequential ways of acting in the face of power.

Let me conclude by repeating myself: Organized, collective resistance and everyday resistance are complementary, both are necessary in political and class struggle.

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