

What do we want Resistance Studies to do?

Talk by JENNY PICKERILL, University of Leicester, UK

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I think we all know why we need Resistance Studies. We do not have to look far to see freedoms being eroded, injustices and inequalities. And if any of you are still in doubt then we need only look to Naomi Wolf's recent article in the English paper *The Guardian* – *Fascist America, in 10 easy steps*, to truly understand how pivotal the contemporary moment is, where she outlines how close America is to replicating a form of old European fascism.

But even if we know why we need it, what do we want it to be or need it to be? What do we want a resistance studies network to look like? For me there are 4 key things I would like resistance studies to do. These highlight both the hope of the way forward and some dangers of which we need to be aware.

1. Freedoms within Universities

First, is an awareness of our privileged position within Universities. I mean this less as a call to get out of our ivory tower, although I would always encourage that, and more about acknowledging and PROTECTING the current freedoms we have.

When applying for a post-doctoral position in Australia a few years ago I was surprised to be told by a major University that my work was too radical for them and to be advised to look elsewhere. More recently, I was asked whether the risks I faced by talking to those who might be deemed as he put it 'extremist' was worth the potential risk to my career were I to become too closely aligned to them, and another professor criticised my work for advocating change – we are merely here to describe and reflect upon what is happening he said.

There are warning signs everywhere that to undertake work that challenges the capitalist system in which we live, or embraces those who fight against it, poses personal and professional risk. This is particularly apparent in parts of the US where pressure has been placed on some Universities to fire those who are too "radical" or to listen to right-wing groups who complain that academic teaching is too left-wing.

But these threats are not restricted to the US, young academics are often in a precarious and marginalised position within the system which, for example in the UK, privileges writing articles for staid journals over activism or other forms of writing. Moreover, we still have yet to really embrace any notion of open access publishing, publishing through Creative Commons licensing, or other forms which would enable more people to access our work. Journals are actually restricting access more, limiting what we might legally post of our work on-line with new copyright agreements.

We all have a responsibility to protect the freedoms we have enjoyed and to ensure that others are able to continue to do resistance work within universities. We must also continue to work on ways to open access to all the work that we do, and not let it remain locked up in University libraries. Universities have long been as Naomi Woolf called it "a tinderbox of activism", but we cannot take this for granted and we need to see Universities as a core site of our resistance. We need to create space for political passions within academia.

2. Do the difficult work

Second, we need to do the difficult work which many people here are already doing. By this I mean we should not shy away from the difficult issues.

In recent years my work has shifted onto some contentious terrain. I had prior to that concentrated on, for me, very comfortable issues. Comfortable in terms of my own politics and also familiarity with the types of people I worked with – white, middle class, educated, British etc. For a long time I believed that to do work with those with whom you have common bonds was both ethically and morally superior than to work with quote “the other”.

But in reality by doing that I actually compounded the silences around some very difficult issues. Thus for example, while working in Australia, I looked at environmental activism without ever touching upon the indigenous question. The result was work which almost suggested, by dint of absence, that there were no indigenous people in the Australian environmental movement. This was blatantly untrue and missed an opportunity to counter some ongoing public stereotypes of Aboriginal Australians, even within the environmental movement.

So we need to look at these absences and silences and not be afraid of them. I am currently working on a project for which my part involves working with Muslim anti-war activists. We wanted to work with them because they are such a visible and important part of the British anti-war movement. But none of us had any ties or experience of activism shaped by a religious identity, as it has been in Britain. At the same time British Muslims are suffering from an intense media glare and attack through new anti-terror legislation, which makes them particularly, and rightly, cautious of researchers.

It has taken quite some time, lots of rejection and many challenging conversations. I have felt uncomfortable and out of my depth, unsure whether to share my views and politics with interviewees who would likely disagree with me. But we have now made some great links and had interesting dialogue with a range of activists which we hope will have useful ramifications for all involved in the anti-war movement, and has already led to new discussions about how to maintain diversity and dialogue across difference within the anti-war movement. So we need to be aware, and tackle, those silences and absences, even when it is uncomfortable and challenging.

3. Do less but do it better

Third and this might seem antithetical, is that I believe rather than do more work to enact social change, we actually need to do less, but do it better.

In recent years in academia there have been a plethora of articles imploring academics to do more: more activism, more writing, more outreach, and more empirical research. But most of these calls argue that we need to do all of this in addition to, rather than as an alteration of, all the other demands of academia. Not only is doing more personally unsustainable but it actually does our work a disservice. We are at risk of not only letting down those activists we work with by over-committing, but also fail to challenge the warped academic hegemony that prioritises writing for certain journals over other activities. In other words, we buy into the notion that quantity of topics is more important than quality of work.

Thus actually we need to respect our commitment to those we work with. As I have progressed as an academic it has become more and more tempting to do short-term extractive

fieldwork – go in, get an interview and leave – partly as a response to the greater demands of my job. But spending time with those with whom we work, committing to their projects, working WITH them on things that are important to them through action-research, not just those of interest to us, is an important part of resistance studies. Not only does it enable us to make better interventions in ongoing practices, but of course it improves our writing too. I have found this kind of commitment difficult, and have faced criticism from others in my department for the priority I gave to these projects, for working to their timetable, and for spending time writing magazine articles. But I see such work as vital to pushing for social change.

What I am saying then is that it takes time to do resistance work properly. Taking this time enables us to think more carefully about our methodologies, take the time to practice action-research, to listen and learn. I am not suggesting that there is not an urgent need for social change, rather we need to think more carefully about our roles as people in that change. Part of that role is to live now as we wish to live in the future – prefiguratively. For me, helping create this alternative world does not just mean being part of radical projects, fighting power and subverting current systems, but also matching my lived practice to my theories. So it means making the time for my community, family, neighbourhood, and making time to do more cycling, cooking, laughing and lying under a big tree watching leaves rustle in the wind. And valuing these acts as important within the broader notion of resistance. So I would argue that we need to do less, but do what we are doing better.

4. Looking forward

Finally, on that note, I would advocate that Resistance Studies needs to be looking for the moments of hope that can take us forward. Resistance is as much about building alternatives, as it is about fighting how things currently are. We need to be careful not to fetishise mass protest and instead value the everyday resistances that can combine to create alternatives. This can involve very micro-scale working with groups to overcome the everyday challenges they face. This is not about peace making, these everyday acts can be very much about creating conflicts and disrupting society's notions of what is 'normal' or acceptable, simply by not following traditional customs, but at the same time they are experiments in how we could live.

For example, one of the projects I am currently involved in is attempting to build a large scale low impact development, a radical eco-village in Wales. One colleague suggested that such work had little to do with autonomous activism, that building houses was not radical protest and thus did not count as resistance. We need to counter such narrow minded delineation as to what 'counts' as activism, otherwise we will miss opportunities to support and celebrate real solutions being created. The project has actually been deeply challenging for many in the area and disrupted their concept of housing and community.

So, in summary there are 4 key things I would like resistance studies to do:

1. create space for political passions within academia,
2. tackle the absences and silences in our work,
3. do less but do it better, pay attention to our methodologies and our commitments,
4. and look forward by focusing on how we build alternatives and everyday resistances

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