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La Résistance: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose¹

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Courpasson's reflections on resistance raise a number of points that I would like to explore by comparing his contemporary example of resistance through an Internet blog with the 'classic' example of resistance to the German Occupation of France in the Second World War. The term 'resistance' comes from the French word 'résistance', and its use often conjures up images of French 'résistants' fighting their occupiers. Jackson (2001: 365) argues that: "creating resistance involved creating the idea of the Resistance." It is this very act of creation – or, to be more precise – the countless acts of co-construction from which the French Resistance emerged, that makes it relevant to contemporary resistance. I will first provide a brief summary of key developments associated with resistance in France, and then compare them with the experience of the bloggers in order to highlight the diverse nature of resistant identities, the precarious nature of the resistant organization, and the ambiguous meaning of resistance.

La Résistance²

The French surrendered to the Germans only nine months after the start of the Second World War in September 1939. Under the terms of the armistice, the country was divided into two zones: an occupied zone in the North where the Germans took complete control, and a free zone in the South, run with more independence by the French government in Vichy, but in collaboration with the Germans. The Germans took control of food, industrial products and other resources to fuel their war effort, while French citizens were held as hostages and workers in Germany. As the French came to terms with the implications of their surrender, it soon became clear that their circumstances had dramatically changed.

General Charles de Gaulle, later President of France, had left for London shortly before the surrender, and was opposed to it. He was a junior general in the French army, with some money but no army, little support, and a difficult relationship with his British and American allies.

Nonetheless, he established himself as leader of the ‘Free French’ Army and broadcast an appeal via the BBC calling on the French to continue the fight: “Whatever happens the flame of French resistance must not and shall not die”³. In calling for resistance, de Gaulle meant military resistance from outside France. His relationship with local resistance initiatives from within France was far more ambivalent.

The French people began to resist although it had little to do with de Gaulle, since few of them heard his speech. Individuals initially took issue with their German occupiers in different – and idiosyncratic – ways. Some of the first to resist were women, insulting the German army, participating in food demonstrations, and distributing leaflets decrying the Occupation.⁴ On 11th November 1940 (Armistice Day from the previous war), it was turn of school children and university students to demonstrate against the Germans. A journalist called Jean Texcier produced a leaflet entitled *Les Conseils à l'Occupé* (Advice to an Occupied Population), advocating a low-key approach – polite aloofness and pretending not to understand German – although with a view to subsequent retribution:

On the outside, pretend you do not care; on the inside, stoke up your anger. It will serve you well (*Les Conseils à l'Occupé*, quoted in Cobb, 2009; Kindle location: 686).

Other individuals cut communication lines, burned papers, posted stickers, and produced newspapers. For many, resistance consisted of simply listening to the BBC: every evening, thirty minutes of news and sketches were broadcast in French, including a five-minute slot for de Gaulle. Listening to the BBC wasn’t easy and it wasn’t safe; and it very soon became illegal under the German occupation.

Resistance networks⁵ began to build as small groups of friends got together and decided to do take action. None of these early movements had much to do with de Gaulle either. They developed organically through friendships and connections. The *Musée de l’Homme* network, formed in the summer of 1940 by anthropologists, librarians and other professionals connected to the museum, organized escape networks for French POWs, sent information on German installations to London, and produced a newspaper – *Résistance*, which first appeared in December

1940. Newspapers were integral to the resistance movements' propaganda goals and over 1100 different publications have been recorded. Most resistance groups had tragically brief existences: the *Musée de l'Homme* network was betrayed by an infiltrator working for the Germans, leading to execution of its leaders and the demise of the organization within a year of its formation.

Other networks continued to emerge. In Lyon, Henri Frenay and Berty Albrecht created *Combat* in August 1940, while *Libération-Sud* was established by a group of French intellectuals including Emmanuel d'Astier and Lucie and Raymond Aubrac. Although both groups were established in the Free Zone around the same time, they were very different: Frenay was a former member of the army with right wing views, while aristocratic d'Astier was a former socialist journalist. Different again was the French Communist Party (PCF). Initially paralysed by the Stalin-Hitler pact, the communists had been slow to join the resistance. However, when Germany declared war on Russia in 1941, they entered the fray, initially with the help of the party's youth wing as young, poor individuals from the working class – very different from the intelligentsia that made up other resistance groups – carried out acts of sabotage and assassination. In 1942, The PCP formed *les Franc Tireurs et Partisans* (FTP), which remained hostile to de Gaulle and his right wing supporters. Other resistance groups operated in the North, where life was even more dangerous, such as *Libération-Nord*, founded by trade unionists and socialists, and *Défense de la France*, set up by a group of Parisian students. The Resistance at this time was a group of disparate, uncoordinated movements and networks, subscribing to different ideologies.

Sometimes I wondered how many of us there might be – dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? And how many groups like ours were there? Did anyone know? Did we all depend on some leader, who was pulling the strings from afar (Simone Martin-Chauffier, member of the *Musée de l'Homme* network, quoted in Cobb, 2009; Kindle location: 982).

De Gaulle remained intent on unifying the resistance under his control, and charged Jean Moulin with the task of bringing the different groups together. Originally prefect of Chartres, Moulin had been arrested by the Germans and, later, joined the resistance. Following a meeting in London with de Gaulle, he returned to France in 1942 as de Gaulle's representative and with the aim of uniting the main resistance movements. Major differences continued to exist between the

resistance movements and de Gaulle. Even those who supported him in the liberation struggle, did not want him setting up a dictatorship once the struggle had been won.

You seem not to realize what we really are – a military force and a revolutionary political expression. If on the former point, and with the reserves I expressed at our last meeting, we consider ourselves to be under the orders of General de Gaulle, on the second point we retain our full independence (Frenay to Moulin, quoted in Cobb, 2009; Kindle location: 2951).

There was, as a result, considerable tension between Moulin and the other resistance leaders.

Eventually, with Moulin's urgings and promises of funding from London, not to mention his ability to exploit rivalries among the different leaders, a series of consolidations took place. In 1942, *Liberation-Sud*, *Combat* and *les Franc Tireurs et Partisans* combined their paramilitary activities into a single organization known as *L'Armée Secrète* and, later, *les Mouvements Unis de la Résistance* (MUR). Moulin continued to work on forming a coordinated movement and, in May 1943, MUR joined with five Northern resistance movements, as well as trade unions and political parties, to form the *Conseil National de la Résistance* (CNR). However, the appearance of unity masked the continuation of internal squabbles, which were blamed for the subsequent capture of senior resistance members, including Moulin.

By mid 1943 – with Moulin dead at the hands of the Germans and many of the other original leaders captured, deported or out of the country – a second generation of resistance leaders surfaced. They were less antagonistic to de Gaulle but were still sceptical of further centralization, having witnessed the vacuum created by Moulin's death. Another brake on centralization came with the incorporation of the *Maquis* into the Resistance. Individual resistance cells of guerrilla fighters started to form among the thousands of young men from poor rural and working class backgrounds in the South, who had escaped into the mountains to avoid being conscripted as forced labour for Germany. Despite having little military training, discipline, weapons or money, these cells became part of the wider resistance movement, threatening de Gaulle's newly created – and somewhat fragile – centralized operation.

The diagrams of the internal organization of the Resistance, drawn up with typically French Cartesian precision, littered with acronyms and rigid structures, literally had to be torn up (Cobb, 2009; Kindle location: 3088).

The Resistance thus continued to adapt and diversify in ways not controlled by de Gaulle.

As the German defeat looked more likely, the Resistance continued to grow, with more members joining in late 1943 and 1944.

In 1941, a few resisters had struggled to create a ‘Resistance’; in 1943, the Resistance began to create ‘resisters’: it offered tasks to people who wanted to act. (Jackson, 2001: 456).

A common command structure finally emerged with the formation of *Les Forces Françaises de l’Interieur* (FFI), which grew from 50,000 to 500,000 members between January and August 1944 (Jackson, 2001). It instigated 1,000 acts of sabotage in the first 24 hours following the Normandy landings in June 1944. Following the landings, thousands of new recruits joined the Resistance and as many as 24,000 resistance fighters are estimated to have died in the last rounds of fighting as the Germans withdrew. The FFI oversaw a series of actions, often in ways not prescribed by de Gaulle, including the insurrection in Paris that led to the city’s liberation in August 1944. De Gaulle nonetheless arrived in Paris soon after to declare France liberated by her own people, with the help of the ‘armies of France’. He did not name the Resistance directly. Soon members of the FFI who wanted to continue fighting were folded into the regular army, and the Resistance was no more.

Resistance across the Decades ... and into the Future

Despite the more than 50 years between La Résistance and the blog, we can see a number of similarities. First, in neither case was there a single, clearly defined resister identity. The French résistants came from all walks of life and held a range of political views.

A pro-Pétainist [Vichy] resister; a pro-British and anti-German Pétainist; a pro-Jewish Pétainist; two anti-Semite resisters; those are not the categories, we expect. They reveal the complexity of reactions to the Occupation and the extent to which antagonists might share as many assumptions with their enemies as with those on their own side (Jackson, 2001: 579).

Similarly, of the 86 protesters who took legal action against the insurance company, only two fitted the profile of ‘activists’. Only six out of the 16 individuals who engaged in the hunger strike were among the original leaders; the rest were ‘ordinary’ bloggers, as many members of the Resistance were ‘ordinary’ French citizens. Some individuals did engage in the heroic activities so often associated with romantic notions of resistance i.e., in “concrete confrontational actions”

(Courpasson, this issue), such as physical attacks and hunger strikes, but most did not. Instead, they played what might loosely be described as ‘support’ roles.

Nonetheless, *both* versions of a resistant identity were crucial. Heroic, combative acts attracted new members, as with the growth in resistance members towards the end of the Occupation and the dramatic increase in bloggers following the hunger strikes. Meanwhile, more mundane forms of resistance played a key role in sustaining more active members. For example, when Agnès Humbert, one of the founders of the *Musée de l'Homme* network, found Texcier’s leaflet on a metro seat, she noted:

Will the people who produced the *33 Conseils à l'Occupé* ever know what they have done for us, and probably for thousands of others? A glimmer of light in the darkness ... Now we know for certain that we are not alone. There are other people who think like us, who are suffering, and organizing the struggle (Humbert quoted in Cobb, 2009; Kindle location: 695).

In the case of the bloggers, the wider membership was crucial in providing more combative resisters with a sense of belonging:

Of course a blog is about seeking support and making our voice clearer and more explicit ... it is also about sharing different stuff with other people, not feeling alone (blog founder).

As Courpasson (this issue) notes, the creative dimension of resistance is not only a matter of subversive tactics, it also relates to “an ethos of collaboration between resisting people, where the idea of belonging is still very powerful.” Resistance in both examples formed at the intersection of the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’, the heroic and mundane, the active and passive, and the formal and informal (see Martí & Fernández, 2013). Viewing resistance as *either* re-appropriation, as many labour process theorists argue, *or* as micro-political dynamics of power and resistance, as is the case with some Foucauldian studies (see Spicer & Böhm, 2007) may not be attuned to the range of resistant identities that may engage in resisting.

Second, both examples involved a virtual network that evolved, rather than appearing fully formed in the guise of an ‘organization.’ Resistance ‘became’ organized to a greater or lesser degree over a period of time (cf. Tsoukas & Chia, 2003). The French Resistance took many years to unify and was never fully controlled by de Gaulle. Similarly, the blog morphed and mutated in

ways that were not ‘owned’ (cf. Mackay & Chia, 2013) by its putative leaders, the Action Committee. Nor was the meaning of resistance innate and predetermined. For de Gaulle, resistance meant armed military attacks by trained soldiers, conducted from outside the country, while for those involved in the various networks, it meant localized actions that were political as well as military. Initially, local resistance meant primarily propaganda, as evident in the large number of newspapers. It then came to mean practical action such as helping prisoners of war and downed airmen. For the most part, it did not mean rescuing Jewish deportees, although it did mean returning foreign fighters (Poznanski, 2012). Towards the end of the war, resistance came to mean military action. The meaning of the French Resistance, which now seems clear with its connotations of a heroic freedom fighter working to liberate his⁶ country, was far from evident at the time.

Before it [the Resistance] could be joined, it had to be invented. So, indeed did the very concept of resistance (Jackson, 2001: 386).

Similarly, when the blog was formed, resistance did not mean hunger strikes. Its meaning also emerged over time, starting with legal action, writing to and co-opting customers, meeting with the government, appeals to the media – even providing food to the homeless – through to the hunger strikes, as more familiar actions gave way to more creative, surprising and drastic ones. Thus resistance takes on meaning over time, forged from the activities that serve to constitute it.

Finally, the two examples support Courpasson’s argument that there is no single locus of resistance but, rather, to follow Foucault’s lead, resistance and power are locked together in an on-going iterative, recursive dialectic. Resistance was a struggle in both cases (cf. Fleming & Spicer, 2008): a struggle to form; a struggle against power; a struggle that involved power; and an internal struggle. A focus on the tentative, sporadic and incremental emergence of a resistant network – rather than on a clearly defined resistant organization – brings into view not only resistance to the power relations in which it is situated, but also the power-resistance dynamics *within* the network (also see Kraemer, Whiteman & Banerjee, 2012). Resistance against the ‘other’ does not preclude conflicts among resisting individuals as, for example, among the leaders in France and between them and de Gaulle; and against the initiator of the hunger strike who was dismissed by some

bloggers crazy.

This focus on networks of struggles whose meaning is fluid and multivalent seems pertinent given the new forms of social media on which resisters can now draw. It seems likely that resistance will continue to run along dispersed, centripetal lines, as we have already seen with the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and various transnational advocacy networks. Resistance and resisting extends beyond individual workplaces, and includes some less palatable examples, such as the network that constitutes the Islamic State Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This example certainly strips away any romantic notions of resistance, at least for most Western observers, which may be no bad thing. As Deetz (2008) has pointed out it is important not to assume those who resist are the ‘good guys’ since reducing complexity into such simple terms may hamper our attempts to understand resistance. It is time to problematize not only the certainty of resistant identities and resistant organizations, but also the very meaning of resistance, in order to explore it more fully.

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NOTES

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² The meaning and significance of events in France during the Second World War remain contested (e.g., Jackson, 2001). The description here is drawn from Cobb, 2009; Jackson, 2001 and Kedward, 1994. It is not intended to be complete and, rather, is presented for illustrative purposes only.

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/29/greatspeeches1>

⁴ Other women did take leadership roles, such as Marie-Madeline Fourcade who ran the underground intelligence network known as The Alliance, Lucie Aubrac who helped set up Libération-Sud, Nancy Wake who was a guerilla fighter in the maquis, and Bertie Albrecht, who was a co-founder of Combat (Collins Weitz, 1995).

⁵ Jackson (2001) differentiates between clandestine resistance networks, which were small groups of individuals working with the Allied intelligence agencies whose aim was specific military objects, and larger resistance movements, whose aim was to galvanize the French population into opposing the Occupation. The two became more separate over the course of the war because of the networks' need for security and secrecy.

⁶ The meaning of French Resistance has been predominantly male. Women were ignored, e.g., grossly underrepresented in official figures (Jackson, 2001) or, worse, denounced, for example by Texcier in his leaflet (see Jackson, 2001: 470) and after liberation when up to 20,000 women were punished for so-called 'horizontal collaboration' (Cobb, 2009).