

Resistance

The picture above shows electrical resistors. This might seem a lame joke, a crass way of illustrating a concept so abstract and politically portentous as 'resistance'. But behind this lies something more serious: In Poland in the early 1980s, under Martial Law, these miniature, multi-coloured electrical components were often worn, pinned to a sweater or the lapel of a jacket, as a small symbol of resistance to the governing authorities.

Two facts stand out in the present context. First, this disarmingly humble gesture reveals that resistance has a tendency to seek out *symbolic forms*. Even in situations where the luxury exists of expressing resistance openly and explicitly (and historically such luxury has been rare) resistance cannot resist redoubling its message through simple symbols: the peace sign, the jingling of keys, the improvised shantytown put up in the sight of the privileged. And often the events associated with resistance movements assume, almost despite themselves, shocking or triumphant symbolic significance, such as when a peaceful march crossing a bridge is halted through violence, or an ugly concrete wall is torn down. In short, while resistance appears in the first instance a social or political category, it is drawn inexorably into semiotic systems that bring it into traffic with cultural expression. It is no coincidence that resistance movements so often produce iconic music, rhetorical performances, and literature.

Second, resistance involves a paradox: it centres on a clear message yet commonly works through *ambiguity*. Is that strange little object pinned to people's jackets an emblem of specific political demands, the expression of a general attitude, or simply a curious fashion trend? One needs to read the symbol, to interpret the allegory – and even then the ambiguity may linger intentionally: harassing or arresting people on the basis of a clothing accessory or a hairstyle, after all, draws authority unwittingly into the realm of absurdity. The same, unprepossessing little object will be nearly invisible to people unaware of its significance, and will stand out immediately to the 'initiated', an emblem either of greeting or of provocation. Further, resistance often takes forms more subtle than do explicit messages. A novel may constitute political resistance because of the explicit tale it tells; but it may also do so simply because of the way it is written (take the Stalinist association of 'experimental' prose with Western 'decadence', for example). And sometimes the mere act of reading literature or listening to music that has no political resonance at all becomes a form of resistance: a refusal to engage, a resistance even of resistance, an insistence that life exists outside the imposed discourse.

The term 'opposition' might appear a synonym for 'resistance', but there is an important distinction. Opposition involves counterbalanced or conflicting forces: action and reaction, left and right, yes and no, black and white. These forces engage

in tug-of-war, a zero-sum game where the advantage of one comes at the disadvantage of the other. Not only does opposition involve dichotomies or binary forces, however, but it tends to assume formal or even official shape. Democratically elected governments, naturally, have recognized opposition governments, with offices in the halls of power. Resistance, by contrast, does not operate through such clear dynamics: it is multi-valent and poly-directional, and its forms of organization are often complex or loose. Resistance does not simply confront the structures of power head on, but may seek paths or detours around those structures, often seeping into the cracks and fissures in the barriers, or inhabiting spaces that have been deemed outside of or irrelevant to the shape of the discourse. Resistance to a single regime or practice can encompass a magnificent variety of beliefs, simultaneously incompatible yet united. And when resistance is victorious, it need not necessarily oust or eliminate what it resisted, but often simply replaces the dynamic of opposed forces with a less structured, more complex swirl of possibilities.

This again links political resistance to cultural expression. Or more accurately, resistance occupies a grey zone in between categories such as 'political', 'social', and 'cultural'. Ambiguity – the structure of 'both-and' or 'neither-nor' – is thus not simply a common tactic that resistance uses to express itself: it constitutes its very essence.