Introduction: Histories of Resistance

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Resistance is troubling. In an ideal community, all parts fit together, with citizens and government smoothly and agreeably regulating each other. To resist such an ideal community would appear perverse. Of course, most communities are not ideally constructed, in which case adding some “friction” may do “enough good to counterbalance the evil” inherent in communal machines, as Henry David Thoreau thought—unless the machine in question were so evil, as Thoreau believed was the case in slaveholding America, that the maximal friction of revolt and rebellion was demanded.¹

For many, even minor friction is uncomfortable because it points to a slippery slope, at the bottom of which is dysfunction and chaos. In political theory, “resistance” is sometimes defined as opposition that takes extra-legal or illegal forms, often with the suggestion that acts of resistance tend to evoke a state of war and threaten anarchy. John Locke, speaking in many ways for what became the dominant tradition of constitutional government, asked

May the *Commands ... of a Prince be opposed?* May he be resisted as often as anyone shall find himself aggrieved, and but imagine he has not Right done him? This will unhinge and overturn all Politics, and, instead of Government and Order, leave nothing but Anarchy and Confusion.²

Resistance, Locke went on, might be justified, but only in cases where the prince had become a tyrant and, therefore, was no longer legitimately a prince—a dangerous and chaotic situation that Locke dreaded facing and that much of his philosophical and practical work was designed to avoid.

Histories of Resistance questions the assumption that resistance stands outside of human communities and necessarily disrupts functioning orders. Each of the following accounts points to forms of resistance that involve something distinct from the militant rejection of communal institutions or leaders. Resistance appears here in the assertion, on the parts of individuals and groups, of autonomy and conscience in ways that demand the mobilization of others within a community for a just cause: the emotional integrity

of children, the spiritual freedom of nuns, the reflexive moral conscience of individuals, the liberation of slaves, the recognition of popular rule, the development of cooperative social democracy, the decent treatment of working people. In all cases, resistance—the rejection of oppression by individuals and groups and their determination to chart their own destinies within their respective broader communities—involves not militant reaction against order itself, but the moral claim that others ought to join the opposition to injustice. Of course, those compatriots, and future chroniclers, may fail to hear that call to action and fail to recognize the justified acts of resistance it inspires.

In “*Mater Litigans: Mothering Resistance in Early Eighteenth-Century Rome*,” Caroline Castiglione tells the remarkable story of how an aristocratic widow’s unprecedented claims that motherly affection and autonomous development trump patriarchal power and dynastic interests helped lay the foundations for modern conceptions of human rights. The widow, Teresa Boncompagni, struggled successfully for several years against not only her cardinal brother-in-law but also officials at the Vatican and at the imperial court in Vienna in order to prevent her only daughter, Cornelia, from being placed in a convent. Teresa’s resistance combined a savvy understanding of the Roman judicial system with an articulate view of how central maternal affect is to the well-being of children. Motherly affection inspired Teresa to defend the notion of a childhood free of the dynastic demands for youthful marital commitments. Despite a near total lack of historical or legal precedent for Teresa’s claims, even her harshest critic eventually adopted her language and admitted that she had won over public opinion. Rather than tearing down Roman society, Teresa’s tenacity appears here as a step toward a more humane modern order.

Cloistered women, despite their apparent powerlessness, similarly resisted the traditional legal and spiritual authorities of early modern Europe, as Mita Choudhury argues. In “Gendered Models of Resistance: Jansenist Nuns and *Unigenitus*,” Choudhury investigates how Jansenist nuns in France came to play significant roles in the limitation of royal and papal power in the decades leading up to the Revolution of 1789. Deeply influenced by the writings of Cornelius Jansenius, an Augustinian Catholic theologian who emphasized individual conscience and salvation through election and self-denial, they rejected blind submission to church and state authorities, especially when those authorities called on all Catholics to reject Jansenism. Jansenist nuns confounded the clerics and royal officials charged with gaining their conformity, writing letters outlining what they saw as their imminent spiritual subversion by those authorities. Their activities, in turn, generated sympathy from male Jansenist pamphleteers and parliamentary lawyers, who extolled and defended the nuns, contrasting their weakness and purity with the power and seeming corruption of the male authorities. Once again, “resistance” turns out to be something unexpected—the determined adherence to the demands of individual conscience by the most

unlikely of political players, cloistered nuns—an action that played an important role in desacralizing the French monarchy and laying the groundwork for modern constitutionalism.

My own essay, “Philosophy and Politics of *Résistance* in Early Modern France,” explores the problem of the political seen and unseen, the philosophically expected and unexpected, from the perspective of conceptual history. Beginning with the curious ways in which a right of resistance gained acceptance in early modern political and constitutional philosophy, while real acts of resistance came to be suppressed by emerging constitutional regimes, the article examines how resistance has been conceptualized differently in English and French. Whereas English speakers have tended to associate resistance with armed struggles, prototypically those involving killing tyrants and defending cities against barbarians, French speakers almost automatically associate *résistance* with moral integrity: with the moral conscience of women, specifically, and with people who struggle against internal corruption, more generally. The essay suggests that the contradictions of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which enshrines the right of *résistance* to oppression while simultaneously condemning *résistance* to the state as criminal, reflect a modern tendency to embrace individuality while trying to suppress the moral conscience at its very heart.

In “‘A Horde of Brigands’? The Great Louisiana Slave Revolt of 1811 Reconsidered,” Robert Paquette turns to the examination of what has been seen in the English-speaking world as the typical kind of political resistance—overt rebellion—only to find that the most dramatic case of black and mulatto slave resistance in U.S. history has been consistently overlooked or misread. The “great Louisiana slave revolt of 1811,” though not involving massive numbers of rebels, was in fact the largest slave insurrection in the history of the United States. Nevertheless, the event remains weakly documented and poorly understood, in part because, as Paquette suggests, interpreters have found it difficult to credit Louisiana slaves with the ability to plan, organize, and carry out a rebellion that truly threatened to transform the slave-based order of southern Louisiana. Though eventually defeated and brutally suppressed, the rebel slaves of 1811 showed that determined men (and probably, though the record is not clear, women) with little more than their wits to guide them could organize resistance, making a rag-tag body of people into an effective popular force literally overnight.

Marek Steedman’s article, “Resistance, Rebirth, and Redemption: The Rhetoric of White Supremacy in Post-Civil War Louisiana,” turns the tables on the works encountered so far, and asks the question whether conservative claims of resistance ought to be recognized. Examining the reaction of white supremacists in Louisiana against Radical Reconstruction following the Civil War, Steedman finds a leadership literate in the traditions of Anglo-American discourses of resistance, particularly against tyrannical government. Casting the Federal Government and its allies in the emergent Republican Party of Louisiana as tyrants who had broken apart community traditions and

violated private property rights, white supremacists began a campaign of what they called organized resistance. They started with non-violent civil disobedience but then rapidly escalated to the violent suppression of political opponents, particularly former slaves who were inclined to vote Republican, hundreds of whom were killed in the ensuing violence. Steedman questions whether the actions of those who disagree with what is popular or democratic can be deemed “resistance” if those actions are not framed by convincing appeals to broader principles of justice and community.

In “Feminisms, Foucault, and the Berlin Women’s Movement,” Anne Lopes presents a critical revision of historical accounts of the radical feminist movement that emerged in Berlin in early 1885 and flourished briefly, only to be broken up by the end of 1886 and subsequently derided as fractious, sectarian, and historically irrelevant. Taking her cue from Foucault, Lopes focuses on problematic historical details that do not fit the dominant story: the movement built cross-class alliances; organized successful health and life insurance cooperatives; recruited men, including some prominent social democratic politicians; and, through its newspaper, strongly influenced social democratic understandings of key social issues. Constructing a genealogy of the Berlin Women’s Movement, beginning with the work of its leader, Gertrud Guillaume-Schack, and her successful efforts to build alliances with social democratic men against the Imperial German government, Lopes shows how the organization helped forge common ground on several issues around which a larger left-socialist German movement began to coalesce in the mid-1880s. The Berlin Women’s Movement was resistance, Lopes asserts; not a narcissistic assertion of power, but an unrecognized starting point of modern social democratic development.

Paul Apostolidis’ inquiry into the personal histories of Mexican immigrant meatpacking workers in the contemporary northwest of the United States leads to similar suggestions about resistance today. Questioning Wendy Brown’s claim that pursuing legal efforts to attain equal rights and justice could backfire by creating paternalistic state institutions to repair injuries, Apostolidis, in “Immigration, Liberal Legalism, and Radical Democracy in the U.S. Labor Movement,” considers in detail the lives of three workers. Apostolidis argues that certain forms of self-identification can prepare one to resist successfully, while others may lead one into the kind of victimology and dependence that Brown criticizes. Whereas his male informants rarely spoke of working with others as they emigrated, excluding even their families from their accounts, Teresa Moreno’s story of migration was one of being embedded in networks of mutuality. Apostolidis argues that her relative success as an organizer of union resistance arose, in part, from her understanding of herself as a woman and mother both responsible to others and expecting responsibility from others. Resistance, the essay suggests, arises not from individual self-assertion alone, but from conscientious moral action that arises out of and enlivens networks of mutuality.

Resistance, these essays argue, *is* troubling, but the trouble is raised for the consciences of individuals and for the values of groups and nations they address. Resistance does not so much undermine the being of communities as enliven and broaden it. Rather than endangering order itself, resistance here appears as the determination to correct or avoid wrongs. Resistance is a process of calling on larger communities to recognize and embrace the righteousness of such actions. Resistance has often been misconstrued or misunderstood, not only by contemporaries but also by historical commentators. This volume approaches resistance through a wide-ranging set of social and historical cases, illuminating many manifestations of resistance in European and American history and some themes common to those cases—themes of individual autonomy, moral integrity, and social inclusion.

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Sherman Paul (Boston, 1960), 238.
2. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, rev. ed. (New York, 1965), 449.