The Ambiguity of Subversion
Resistance through Radio Broadcasting

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Abstract: This article explores subversion as a practice of resistance and draws on the example of subversive radio for illustration. Radio became an important site of power struggles in the twentieth century, often placed in the service of both resistance and oppression. An examination of subversive acts in radio broadcasting, I argue, helps shift the focus away from the myths of heroic resistance, directing attention to the uncertainties encountered by the subversive actor. To make this argument, I build on Frantz Fanon’s influential work on the resistant potential of radio and engage with literature on subversion and everyday resistance. The article illustrates the ambiguity of subversion on the case study of Radio Bantu, a broadcaster of ethnic-specific radio programmes established by the South African apartheid regime.

Keywords: betrayal, complicity, everyday resistance, Frantz Fanon, radio, South Africa

Recent literature on resistance has sought to re-think the link between resistance and heroism still prevalent in theory and politics (Kirkpatrick 2011; Leebaw 2019). Scholars have shown that ideas of heroic resistance rely on untenable notions of sovereign agency, while obscuring how resistance is framed by complicity and betrayal. Simplistic narratives of heroic resistance may seem to lend the much-needed support to concrete struggles for freedom and justice, yet they risk engendering new forms of domination and exclusion. Myths of the morally untainted liberation struggle, for instance, preclude a sustained examination of the human rights violations committed by the resistance movement and fail to challenge
the persistence of oppressive practices in the present. In response, scholars have turned to exploring the grey zones of resistance – the everyday reality of conflicting allegiances, tragic complicities and moral uncertainties, which stem from the resisters’ embeddedness within the processes and practices of oppression that they seek to fight (see Introduction to this special issue). Attentiveness to these grey zones, it is argued, can enhance our understanding of the potentials of resistance in conditions of pervasive systemic violence, without reproducing the politically troubling myths of heroic agency.

This article seeks to contribute to thinking the grey zones of resistance by examining the ambiguity of subversion as a practice of resistance. Subversion, commonly defined as a secretive activity aimed at the overthrow of a regime, is not a new phenomenon and has received its share of academic attention (Olsson 2016; Rosenau 2007). This article proposes two ways of advancing the literature. First, it challenges the prevalent tendency to erect a dichotomy between subversion and containment that retains elements of the heroic vision of resistance. This dichotomy is present both in the dominant notion of subversion as a problematic act of insurgency and terrorism and in the Marxist and post-structuralist formulations of subversion as the inversion of oppression and dominant discourses. What these theories are unable to capture is the ambiguity of subversion inhering in the lived experiences of the subversive actor. Second, the article draws on alternative conceptions of subversion and the literature on non-heroic, everyday resistance to bring out how subversion as a form of resistance gains its strength precisely from being implicated in some form of complicity and betrayal. A subversive actor, I argue, is likely to struggle to prove their motives and will therefore be identified as complicitous and a traitor by other forms of resistance and/or the oppressive regime. Furthermore, subversion may not even constitute an intentional act of resistance that seeks to overthrow a system, as the term subversion etymologically implies. It is through this ambiguity – that one never quite knows whether subversion is a form of resistance or of collaboration and betrayal – that subversion is able to challenge oppression from within. In response to the limitations of theories of subversion, the article proposes a framework for illuminating the ambiguity of subversion by attending to the context in which
subversion becomes an important form of resistance, the production of subversion and the subversive actor through the oppressive system, and the existential and everyday qualities of subversion. This framework helps us get a better sense of the ways in which concrete acts of subversion constitute resistance and make a positive contribution to overcoming oppression as part of a larger arsenal of resistant practices.

I turn to radio broadcasts as a lens for shedding new light on the concept and practice of subversive resistance for three reasons. Firstly, despite the introduction of television, and more recently streaming sites such as Netflix, radio continues to play an important political and social role – not least through the proliferation of podcasts. Secondly, radio communication represents a propitious site for studying subversion because radio stations were important instruments for both oppression and resistance throughout the twentieth century. Even where the sides of the conflict were relatively clear-cut, for instance imperial states versus anti-colonial struggles, the soundwaves represented a contested, and indeed congested, space that frustrates any desire for black-and-white binaries. Thirdly, over the decades, the radio has served scholars and writers as a privileged prism through which to reflect on the dilemmas of building political communities of resistance to oppression, most famously in the form of Frantz Fanon’s writing on the radio in Algeria (Fanon 1994; Whittington 2014).

Before proceeding with the argument, I want to address two possible objections to my understanding of subversion. First, one might ask, what if subversion occurs from the outside. The attempt to undermine a foreign country’s election through the spreading of false information, for instance, does not seem to require complicity in and support of the institution that is to be subverted. Does this type of subversion not undermine, or at least significantly restrict, the connection drawn between subversion and the grey zones of resistance in this article? While sympathetic to this concern, I would suggest that this objection is less problematic than it might at first appear. For one, globalisation means that for many actors it has become more difficult to remain truly separate from the outcomes of subversion. In addition, the article will stress that subversion is a ubiquitous feature of all societies and usually involves people who are heavily entangled with the institution or system that they seek to subvert.
The second possible objection concerns the fact that subversion is often interpreted as the violent overthrow of a political regime, whereas the examples used in this article are not violent in any conventional sense, for example listening to radio. In part, I take this focus on violence simply to be too narrow to capture the phenomenon of subversion, a view largely shared by the subversion literature. Moreover, a turn to Tal Correm’s reading of Fanon on the relationship between politics and violence in this special issue helps complicate the opposition between the two interpretations. Firstly, she notes how for Fanon the conditions of colonialism make any form of anti-colonial resistance seem violent towards the colonial apparatus. It becomes all but impossible to neatly separate out violence as a distinct instrument. Secondly, she considers the distinction between liberation from an oppressive regime and the freedom to constitute an alternative political community. For Fanon, as Correm highlights, freedom and liberation are interrelated and the consequence is that violence and political action remain in a complex relationship throughout the anti-colonial struggle. This article therefore follows Fanon in emphasising the capacity of subversion to help create moments and spaces of freedom; for a community of listeners to move across time and space through their imagination and to develop the solidarity needed in a successful revolution and political transition. It also articulates how subversive broadcasting communicated and supported the violent, liberation struggle and, in doing so, provided the seeds for political freedom and eventual independence.

The article is split into four sections. Firstly, I theorise the role of the radio in connection to resistance to oppression, by focusing on Fanon’s (1994) *This is the Voice of Algeria*. Fanon provides a rich discussion of subversion in radio broadcasting as a source of quotidian resistance. This article extends Fanon’s insights into how subversion helped challenge the authority of the French imperial state in Algeria, by exploring the ambiguity of subversive resistance that arises from negotiating life under an oppressive regime. Secondly, the article discusses the prevalent interpretations of subversion, noting the limitations of Marxist and post-structuralist articulations of subversion as a form of resistance. Thirdly, I outline theoretical efforts to move beyond heroic formulations of resistance by addressing everyday forms of dissidence, and alternative
conceptions of subversion informed by the literature on everyday resistance. Drawing on their insights, I sketch out key points of a different understanding sensitive to the lived reality and ambiguity of subversion. Fourthly, this article illustrates this refined account of subversive resistance on the example of the subversive radio broadcasts during apartheid in South Africa. In line with Fanon, I focus on the grey zones of resistance from the perspective of the oppressed. In addition, I highlight the relatively privileged status of black South African broadcasters within the oppressed community, which has implications for their choice of subversion.

The Radio as a Site of Subversion

Radio broadcasting was from the beginning faced with the two objectives of creating a community of listeners and policing and regulating the audible. Since the 1920s, the sound waves have been a site of power struggles between amateur radio enthusiasts, pirate radios, and resistance groups on the one hand, and governments, eager to consolidate their control over what is broadcasted, on the other. The radio fostered ‘sonic counter-publics’ during the two world wars and in the postcolonial struggles that followed. It also continued to serve as an instrument of nation-building, deployed in the service of post-colonial states and the authoritarian regimes that emerged in the second part of the twentieth century. As a medium the radio therefore does not fit neatly into either category of oppression or resistance. Instead, it is characterised by a continuous redrawing of multiple lines of contestation and interpenetration ideal for theorising the grey zones of resistance.

The transformation of the radio into a primary weapon of resistance and of subversion became memorialised in Fanon’s iconic analysis of radio broadcasting in Algeria. In the second essay in the collection *A Dying Colonialism*, titled *This is the Voice of Algeria* (Fanon 1994), Fanon explores the role that radio broadcasts could play for ‘a collective politics of anti-imperial nationalism’ (Baucom 2001: 17). His positive view stands opposed to engagements with the radio by intellectuals working within the critical theory tradition, including Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin. Their theorising on the medium
identified the embeddedness of the radio in power structures that far outweighed its ‘tantalising potential’ (Whittington 2014: 636) for bringing together broadcasters and listeners. The reason for the diverging interpretations can be found, in part, in the changing context. Fanon’s articulations fall within the ‘wildfire’ period of the resistance to the national and imperial control over the radio by non-governmental and non-corporate actors (King 2017). This period saw radio broadcasting spread across the continents and become an integral feature of independence struggles in Africa, including Algeria and, as discussed in the final section, South Africa.

Fanon’s *This is the Voice of Algeria* focuses on the changing role of radio in Algeria, caught between the Manichean divisions of colonising French and colonised Algerians, and goes as follows. The radio traditionally was a tool of the colonisers, an ‘instrument of colonial society and its values’ (Fanon 1994: 69). It was owned to a large extent only by Europeans and featured programs modelled on the French broadcasting system. The aim was to create a community ripe with nostalgia and patriotism for a romanticised France. Possession of a radio was essential in the mid-twentieth century as a status symbol of the petit bourgeois class, but it was also the means to escape the ‘native’ environment and connect to ‘civilisation’. On the ‘farms, the radio reminds the settler of the reality of colonial power and, by its very existence, dispenses safety, serenity’ (Fanon 1994: 71). Algerian society, in contrast, was unwilling to adopt this technology as it was a tool of the enemy, of ‘Frenchmen speaking to Frenchmen’ (Fanon 1994: 74). The voice coming from the radio was not neutral, but the voice of the oppressor, ‘a type of violent invasion’ into the private spheres of the colonised (Fanon 1994: 88). The language used, French, seemed ‘doomed for eternity to judge the Algerian in a pejorative way’. Every ‘French speech heard was an order, a threat, or an insult’ (Fanon 1994: 89). In short, to turn on the radio was ‘to give voice to the occupier’ (Fanon 1994: 92), an act of treason.

Fanon identifies a shift in attitude in the early 1950s. The colonised could read in ‘the occupier’s face the increasing bankruptcy of colonialism’ (Fanon 1994: 75) as anti-colonial struggles ensued in Tunisia and Morocco. It became essential to know what was going on, to ‘be informed both of the enemy’s real losses and his own’ (Fanon 1994: 76). For the colonised, it was no longer enough to
view the ‘truth’ of the occupier as a lie to be rejected; instead, there was a need to oppose this lie with an alternative truth of the struggle. The creation of the *Voice of Free and Fighting Algeria* sparked an upsurge in sales of battery-operated receivers that enabled the listener to obtain access ‘to the only means of entering into communication with the Revolution, of living with it’ (Fanon 1994: 83). The radio transitioned from an object associated with the enemy into a ‘right of entry into the struggle of an assembled people’ (Fanon 1994: 84). It finally offered Algerians the possibility of ‘*hearing an official voice, the voice of the combatants, explain the combat*’ (Fanon 1994: 85). Subversion through clandestine radio broadcasts and listening revealed to the Algerian ‘the imposture of the French voice presented until now as the only one. The occupier’s voice was stripped of its authority’ (Fanon 1994: 95). At the same time, the French language, used in the transmission, now gained a different meaning. It had been subverted into a tool of resistance. In sum, subversion using the medium of the radio helped call into question the entire system of colonialism and irreversibly transformed the relationship between coloniser and colonised (Fanon 1994: 69).

The colonisers sought to ban radios to prevent news dissemination and started systematically jamming radio broadcasts. The response only furthered the resistance by providing the community of listeners an active role in the resistance struggle. In a ‘battle of the waves’ between resistance and colonial state, the person operating the radio – their ear glued to the device – was given the important role of finding the alternative wavelength and, in effect, became, a second transmitter of the news. The fragmentary transmissions would later be complemented by this operator and the group of listeners as they acted out the information on yesterday’s battles. Fanon identifies an eagerness to ‘be at one with the nation in its struggle’ as the whole nation ‘would snatch fragments of sentences in the course of a broadcast and attach to them a decisive meaning’ (Fanon 1994: 86). The sabotage thus seemed to have a contrary effect, precisely because the interrupted, broken up broadcasts brought the fight into the homes and invited the listener to take sides and to express their *desire* to listen collectively. Fanon’s villagers ‘gather themselves less to acquire information than to gather themselves, . . . to fabricate a commonality of experience’ (Baucom 2001: 22).
Fanon’s description of the history of the radio in Algeria fruitfully reveals the complexity of social practices surrounding communication that makes it impossible for any one side to fully control the narrative emerging through the radio and thus opens it up to subversion and resistance-building. The essay aptly captures what would later be recognised as a key feature of radios in colonial independence movements: their potential to create and give voice to an imagined community of listeners. It also highlights that the listener’s capacity to draw on the fragments to build a world of resistance was as, if not more, important for subversion as the content to be transmitted. Fanon thus provides a valuable effort to foreground and theorise forms of resistance that do not usually meet the threshold of accounts of (heroic) resistance but have a decisive role to play alongside more spectacular acts of opposition.

At the same time, Fanon’s analysis of the Manicheanism at the heart of colonialism is unable to capture some of the nuances of subversion from within an oppressive regime. The emphasis on how colonialism separates coloniser from colonised, and radio as an oppressive instrument from radio as a tool for subversion, obscures the connection between the subversive listening efforts and the complexities and ambiguities that faced the Algerian listener in their daily lives. Representative of the implications, the focus on the colonialisat binary downplays the fact that radio offered a space for a multitude of competing parties, including different European empires and Arab cultures of the Middle East, which occupied the sound waves in Algeria leading up to Algerian independence (Scales 2010: 415). Far from ‘becoming an oppressive instrument of colonial domination, radio and recorded sound, particularly when travelling from outside Algerian borders, consistently eluded the grasp of the colonial state’ (Scales 2010: 415). References to the acquisition of radios by the urban Algerian middle classes who tuned in for the Algerian music, and the attempt of European companies to get involved in this lucrative market (Fanon 1994: 74), remain too underdeveloped to challenge the impression. This leaves Fanon unable to make stronger connections between the everyday resistance of subversive listening and how Algerians used the radios available before the 1950s, including through collective listening in public spaces, to ‘gain access to the world outside the sphere of French control or find a little quotidian pleasure in the Arabic music
that escaped colonial censors’ (Scales 2010: 417). In doing so, *This is the Voice of Algeria* ends up under-theorising the agency of the resister and the resistant act itself. Both are disentangled from the complicated context of life under a colonial state, and romanticised into a decisive, separate act of resistance. In the following, I build on Fanon’s turn to acts of everyday dissidence by the subaltern which offer an important point of departure for shedding light on the ambiguity of subversion. I begin through a critical appraisal of the literature on subversion.

**Subversion**

Connected to such words as deviance, dissent, misbehaviour, and sabotage, subversion is a highly elastic term that can capture a variety of activities. Indeed, little speaks for attempting to classify what constitutes subversion, for instance whether subversion is destructive or constructive, without turning to specific contexts (Butler 2011: xxii). Etymologically, the term derives from the Latin word *subvertere*, meaning to overthrow, and is associated with the overthrowing of a political regime. Historically, the term has come to be linked with the Cold War period, especially the at times paranoid, repressive hunt for the internal enemy. The dominant view on subversion continues to connect the term with insurgency and the attempt to undermine nation states (Kilcullen 2007). Today, it is seen as a non-violent form of terrorism that may accompany armed struggle and aims to undermine the economic, political, or military strength of a regime by infiltrating civil institutions, manipulating political parties, and generating civil unrest (Rosenau 2007). This view maintains a strict moral distinction between the state and subversion as terrorism and is therefore unhelpful in theorising the complexities of subversion. Subversion as a form of resistance has also been popular within the critical theory tradition. Judith Butler (2011) and Antonio Negri (2005) move beyond the dominant critique of subversion but retain a dichotomic lens that neatly distinguishes between resistance and domination, inversion and containment. This binary, familiar from my analysis of Fanon’s account of subversive listening above, undermines their ability to address the grey zones of resistance facing the subversive actor.
To be sure, Butler insists that subversion can be used for resistance as well as domination, and can misfire (Butler 2011: 189). Her discussion of subversion in relation to gender and sexuality also specifically refuses to generalise about subversion: ‘I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I believe that such judgments cannot be made out of context, but that they cannot be made in ways that endure through time’ (Butler 2011: xxii). In line with Foucault, Butler instead warns against the ‘politically impracticable dream’ of a normative sexuality that is outside of power, and turns to the ‘task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself’ (Butler 2011: 42).

In Butler’s framework, subversion turns into a tool of translation and inversion of heterosexual norms through, for instance, drag performances (Butler 2011: 44). The drag performance plays on the tension between the anatomy of the performer’s body, gender identity, and the performed gender. It creates a dissonance between the person’s sex and performance, their gender and sex, and performance and gender that unsettles the perceived unity between gender, sex, and gendered behaviour. In imitating gender, ‘*drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*’ (Butler 2011: 187), disclosing itself to be a copy of a copy. Butler, in short, connects subversion with the fact that no discourse is ever total, which makes it always open to re-interpretation. An imperfect repetition ‘draws on, but at the same time reveals, the underlying convention’ (Woodford 2014: 208) and thus has the potential to question (in degrees and momentarily) the normalisation and naturalness which gives a dominant discourse its power, that is its taken-for-grantedness and moral legitimacy.³

Butler’s work captures two important ways in which subversion is ambiguous: subversion entails acceptance *and* over-throw of the rules, and the intentions of subversive acts do not always match their outcomes.⁴ Her account can help us acknowledge how subversion may thereby cause confusion in the subversive actor as well as cautioning us against a desire for *a priori* definitions of what constitutes subversion. Nonetheless, the opposing sides remain relatively clear-cut in her account: a system of heteronormative gender rules that claims to be natural, on the one hand, and acts that seek to subvert it by revealing the multiplicity of gender, on the other. Butler’s
The binary framing precludes her from fully capturing the ambiguity of subversion because subversive acts must ultimately fall into the categories of either containment or subversion. The actor’s experiences, especially the fact that subversive actors may pursue neither reactionary nor subversive aims, are lost and we are unable to identify the multi-faceted ways that subversion can contribute to institutional transformation.

The limitation of Butler’s articulation is reproduced in Negri’s account of the politics of subversion. Negri (2005) sets up subversion as the countervailing power of the masses, the subversion of all existing oppressive structures, and the destruction of the violence inherent in exploitation. Subversion in this interpretation is ‘powerful and clear; it is the positive aspect of destruction’ (Negri 2005: 59). While this reading may prove potent for Negri’s normative project, it remains caught within a black-and-white binary that is unable to capture the multi-faceted character of subversive resistance. The observation aligns with Jennet Kirkpatrick’s (2019) reading of Negri’s work on exit, the departure from a system of domination as an act of resistance. Kirkpatrick observes that the connection between exit and resistance is presumed rather than theorised, obscuring the ambivalence inherent to many acts of exit. The consequence of assuming a ‘natural equivalence between exit and oppression’ (Kirkpatrick 2019: 140f.) is a silence on a number of key issues: ‘when is exit an act of resistance?’; ‘to what extent does it further or hinder opposition?’. Furthermore, Negri’s reading of exit obscures the agency involved in the act of exit, including how the actors deal with the risks and costs that accompany resistance. These criticisms can be extended to Negri’s interpretation of subversion, which fails to account for the complexities facing actors engaging in subversion.

Moving beyond the dichotomy of inversion and containment, the next section sets out a framework that captures the ambiguity of subversion using three axioms: the context in which subversion becomes an important form of resistance; the production of subversion and the subversive actor through the oppressive system; and the existential and everyday qualities of subversion. My discussion starts with a summary of the conceptualisation of everyday resistance, which I will use to understand subversion as both a common feature of everyday life and a tool of resistance of the relatively powerless in situations of extreme domination.
Subversion as a Form of Everyday Resistance

The concept of everyday resistance is central to ongoing efforts to displace pervasive heroic narratives of resistance⁵ that serve to ‘mythologise a triumphalist view of history in such a way as to obfuscate ordinary experiences of suffering and the human costs of violence’ (Leebaw 2013: 247). The heroic conception of resistance presupposes sovereign agency: resisters are portrayed as acting voluntarily, decisively and autonomously, without fear but at a potentially high personal cost (Mihai 2020). Heroism is often reduced to an individual, one-off act, which emerges out of an independent deliberation process in which the hero has a troublesome but nonetheless clear-cut choice to make (Neu 2018: 7). Alternatively, the heroic resister becomes a mythical figure of supreme sacrifice that is essentially super-human, for instance Nelson Mandela (Leebaw 2019: 4). Heroic resistance is untainted by collaboration and complicity, reductively understood as an intentional and morally aberrant act of aiding the enemy, be it an oppressive regime or an external occupying force (Lloyd 2003: 17). Traitors tend to be portrayed and demonised as a weak, cowardly, opportunistic, ideologically misguided and vile ‘other’ of resistance, without regard for the difficulties of agency in contexts of pervasive oppression (Mrovlje n.d., also see this issue; Lloyd 2003: ix).

Associated with James Scott’s 1985 book *Weapons of the Weak*, the term everyday resistance was initially an attempt to capture alternative forms of opposition that fall short of open rebellion. Fanon’s turn to subversive listeners provides an important example; others include ‘foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth’ (Scott 2008: 29). This form of resistance may occur in situations where open defiance is all but impossible, is likely to be relied upon by the relatively powerless and tends to take place in spaces where ‘the definitions and performances imposed by domination do not prevail’ (Scott 2008: 328). Scott further claims that everyday resistance is characterised by little or no planning or coordination and may not even be directed at the oppressors directly and instead addresses immediate needs, such as attaining food and income. Scott therefore warns against over-romanticising the impact that such actions might have. Scholarship across disciplines has since
insisted that unlike organised, large-scale acts of resistance, everyday instances of rebellious attitudes, gestures, and disobedience are in fact a continuous part of life (see for instance, Lundmark and Westelius 2012).

Of particular interest for the chosen case study in this article is that everyday forms of resistance initially were thought to disavow public and symbolic impact: where ‘institutionalised politics is formal, overt, concerned with systematic, de jure change’, everyday resistance is ‘informal, often overt, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains’. The success of ‘de facto resistance is often directly proportional to the symbolic conformity with which it is masked’ (Scott 2008: 33). While later literature modified this narrow formulation of everyday resistance, inserting a continuum between public confrontation and invisible subversion (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013: 3), the tension between seeking to remain hidden and the need for public impact offers an important dimension to everyday resistance, and by extension subversion. It highlights that acceptance and reproduction of the status quo are often necessary pre-conditions for quotidian forms of dissidence. The trade-off in public visibility increases the vulnerability of everyday opposition to having no or little impact and passing by unnoticed. The resistant actor is likely to have limited influence on the meaning attributed to their acts.

What I take from the debates on everyday resistance is a movement beyond heroic resistance that opens the space to explore and evaluate a multitude of resistant activities and positions, including the ‘weaker’ alternatives to principled opposition. Without seeking to reproduce a dichotomy between spectacular and everyday resistance, a turn to the latter helps us delve further into the quotidian character of subversion, introduced in Fanon’s essay on subversive listening in Algeria. I conclude this section by showing how alternative accounts of subversion have sought to map out key features of subversion as a micro-mechanism, often with explicit reference to its quotidian character. They highlight that subversion offers a prime example of everyday resistance for its lack of direct confrontation, its emergence in contexts of extreme domination, its ubiquitous character, and its usage as a preferred method of the supposedly ‘weak’. I condense from this literature key reference points that help delineate subversion as a distinctive practice and capture
the grey zones of resistance – the murky everyday reality of conflicting allegiances, tragic complicities, and moral uncertainties – which arises from acting within conditions of oppression and often makes subversion an essentially ambiguous form of resistance.

On these accounts, all societies and cultures are characterised by both homogeneity, or norm compliance, and conflict and subversion. Subversive acts are more commonplace and multi-faceted than usually assumed and an integral part of everyday life (Turiel and Wainryb 2000). They should therefore not be reduced to individual, one-off, extraordinary activities that are separate from an actor’s daily actions and experiences. Instead, subversion captures a plethora of different practices: it is a tool for resistance, but it can also refer to a practice of preserving stability by undermining counter-efforts. While it is often connected to infiltration, subversion may occur and remain at a distance. Popular with the dominated for its relative lack of overt confrontation and small costs in terms of organising opposition, subversive activities are just as common amongst political and economic elites (Jackall 2010: 102).

Despite this diversity, subversion can be fruitfully narrowed down by setting it apart from two alternatives, withdrawal and open protest. As Jan Olsson (2016) points out, subversion could be read alongside Albert Hirschman’s (1970) classic distinction between exit, voice and loyalty. Subversion is distinct from exit in that it entails a buying into and continuing to live and act within the system. The key implication is that subversion lacks the kind of distance from the institution available to the exiting actor and as a consequence the space within which subversion works is necessarily more limited. Subversion can also be separated from voice in that it is characterised by some level of secrecy of the motivations and intentions, or at least that the intention is not primarily to voice the resistance (cf. Olsson 2016: 43). Subversive practices have a complicated relationship with loyalty for apparent reasons. In undermining an institution, the subversive does not break with institutional rules and norms in the way exit does, which leaves room for interpretation whether it actually constitutes an act of betrayal and/or collaboration. Subversives often observe the institutional norms and expectations, while awaiting their moment of opposition or otherwise pursuing countering strategies.
This differentiation from voice and exit has led scholars to argue that subversion emerges especially in contexts where one actor, for instance a state, dominates to such an extent that the overt bending of rules or departure as an act of resistance is too dangerous, implausible or otherwise unrealistic (Mahoney and Thelen 2009: 29). Others have highlighted that subversion thrives in complex and ambiguous situations, for instance when institutional guidelines are vague and open for interpretation (Rao and Giorgi 2006). It exploits these uncertainties to introduce new ideas into the institution and thus opens the space for previously marginal views and positions to slowly become part of the accepted norms and values (Brickell 2005). The internal contestation and transformation brought forth through small-scale acts of subversion could thus even be seen as a necessary component for the success and survival of any institution. Subversive actors’ capacity to innovate may run the risk of institutions actively co-opting the subversive qualities, adding to the ambivalence of subversion as an act of resistance.

Drawing together the insights from the literature on everyday resistance and subversion, I argue that we can best approach the ambiguity of subversion by reflecting on three reference points that help us acknowledge the ambiguity of subversion as a practice of resistance and avoid the fixed binary of subversion and containment, heroic resistance and complicity/ betrayal. The points are, firstly, the context in which subversion becomes an important form of resistance. Specifically, we need to consider a) the existence of an extensively dominant actor or structure and b) the possibility of, and relationship to, other forms of resistance. Secondly, our focus should be on the production of subversion and the subversive actor through the oppressive system, including a) its compliance with the system to be subverted and b) the ways it is framed through betrayal and complicity. Lastly, we should consider the existential and everyday qualities of subversion, especially how subversion a) connects to the quotidian experiences of the subversive actor and b) exploits the ambiguity and complexity of institutions and practices. To illustrate this more dynamic approach to subversive resistance, the next section turns to the example of radio broadcasting in South Africa.
South Africa – Subversive Radio Broadcasts

As with the case of Algeria, the sound waves during apartheid offered a complex, contested space, which opened opportunities for quotidian resistance. I turn to the example of South African radio due to the rich literature on the subject that explicitly seeks to capture the ambiguity of subversive radio (Gunner 2002; Lekgoathi 2011). These scholars enrich Fanon’s theory by evaluating the subversive efforts of black radio broadcasters who worked for the apartheid regime. In line with Butler, I do not take the example to serve as a representative case for what subversion is supposed to be. I accept with Bronwyn Leebaw in this special issue that recovering exemplary stories of resistance is an important but double-edged activity insofar as foregrounding some risks excluding other stories that do not meet the criteria of the exemplars.

Instead it helps me illustrate the proposed framework for shedding light on the grey zones of subversive resistance, too easily obscured by neat distinctions between reactionary and subversive acts.

(i) We need to locate whether other forms of resistance were possible and plausible and their relationship to the act of subversion. Such a move helps contextualise subversion’s potential but also avoids reducing subversive resistance to an individualised, one-off act. The article cannot delve into the plethora of acts of disidence during apartheid and instead focuses on two forms of radio resistance prominent in South Africa. The radio represented, first, a tool of the exiled African National Congress (ANC) resistance fighters for challenging the apartheid propaganda and, second, the medium that helped create a large community of listeners within South Africa. Both are examples of the use of radio for subversive purposes, but the former – more commonly associated with resistance – was significantly constrained by its distance to the community of listeners and its illegality. The latter, in contrast, traded in being branded as a form of collaboration and betrayal in exchange for access and reach.

The ANC radio transmissions from the exile began in the 1950s in an attempt to strengthen the political dimension to the armed struggle (Davis 2009). The initial efforts to establish a radio were highly risky as they required returning to South Africa to transmit
the message. They were also not particularly focused on establishing a community of listeners and ended in devastating arrests. Nonetheless, creating a Free Radio South Africa remained an enticing prospect given the insight derived from the communist revolution in Russia that radio was uniquely capable of spreading propaganda to a disparate, largely illiterate audience. By the late 1960s, the ANC broadcasted three times a week from the facilities of Radio Tanzania. The fifteen-minute slot on ‘The Voice of Freedom’ had the benefit that the broadcast no longer had to be clandestine and allowed ANC to present itself openly (Davis 2009: 363). The radio broadcasts did however not form part of a coherent overall strategy and became embroiled in the struggle between factions for control over the identity of the movement. The year 1973 saw the establishment of a new, hour-long, daily broadcast on Zambian Radio by the ANC and South African Communist Party. It enabled the ANC to take a leading role in the interpretation of the historically significant student uprising of 1976 in Soweto, South Africa (Lekgoathi 2010: 142). From that moment onwards, radio broadcasts became integral to efforts to counter government propaganda. Much like in Algeria, there are indications that the exile radio facilitated a sense of participation among the clandestine South African listeners (Lekgoathi 2010: 144). It helped promote a sense of the escalation of resistance efforts and confidence in the pending overthrow of the apartheid regime in the 1980s. This is not to say that the subversive broadcasts confronted no further challenges which can feed into our reflection on the plausibility of other forms of resistance. The arrival of new exiles in the aftermath of the student uprising created generational tensions and hierarchies of class and education. The 1981 discovery of government spies in the guerrilla camp in Angola combined with increasing impatience at the lack of mass deployment led to the empowerment of the internal intelligence services. Their activities included the settling of scores and the arbitrary targeting of the educated and privileged including members of the radio team (Davis 2009: 369). Restlessness and anger at the secret services amongst the rank-and-file grew until an ultimately unsuccessful mutiny broke out, leading to the death and imprisonment of six of the eight staff members of Radio Freedom. The ANC’s Freedom Radio was ultimately able to reach a wider audience by the 1970s and 80s, including through illegally
distributed audiocassettes. Nonetheless, the chequered history of exile subversive radio in South Africa must inform our analysis of internal subversive efforts.

(ii) The second point I wish to highlight is that subversion gains in importance as a practice in conditions of extensive domination of one actor over another. Radio Zulu and Radio North Sotho are emblematic of those conditions. Created as part of the Radio Bantu, they served as tools for the Afrikaner government to control the majority by advancing ethnic separatism. Ethnic specific radios were implemented in South Africa in the 1960s to counter the threat to apartheid through foreign transmissions. Because of the identified importance of radio propaganda, the radio stations were governed and managed by members of the influential Afrikaner organisation Broederbond to ensure complete control over the information flow (Lekgoathi 2009: 576). The creation of a space for the general population to listen to transmissions in their own language proved a highly effective means to reach and manipulate a broad audience that might otherwise have been put off by broadcasts predominantly in Afrikaans. It furthermore ensured that the listener focused on local services under the control of the government which helped crowd out potentially conflicting foreign broadcasts. On the side of the broadcasters, the immense censorship significantly limited what kind of resistance from within was even conceivable. News broadcasts are exemplary of this: the control over what news were reported on radio became so extensive in the 1970s that the news anchors had little choice but to reproduce the apartheid ideology. At best they were able to add small signifiers that highlighted their distance from what was being broadcasted. One anchor, Jack Rasebotsa, for instance introduced the idiomatic expression of ‘the author says’ (Lekgoathi 2009: 588) to distance himself from the information, which was not well received, and he eventually left the profession.

(iii) The third point that the example illustrates particularly well concerns the reproduction of the dominant system through the subversive actor and, interrelatedly, the creation of that actor through the system to be subverted. The South African Broadcasting Council (SABC) had to employ black South African broadcasters because of its ideology of ethnic separation. The decision created a clear challenge to the SABC’s ability to control what was broadcast,
which was later exploited by some contributors. This made a careful selection of suitable broadcasters even more important (Lekgoathi 2011). The presenters were predominantly chosen among teachers who showed a commitment to political neutrality and journalistic professionalism, with preference given to alumni of missionary schools in an effort to exploit the Christian values of obedience and moderation (2011: 582). For the carefully profiled broadcasters, working for the radio under constant surveillance was enticing as it offered a cultural and intellectual space otherwise denied to non-whites and a means of escapism. It further secured near instant and unprecedented levels of popularity and a higher salary ensuring a position within the black middle class. The judgements we make about the acts of subversion must take these processes of social conditioning into account.

(iv) It is important to observe the ways that subversion is framed through betrayal and complicity. Whatever their motivation, the working arrangements put the radio producers, writers, commentators and news announcers in an ambiguous position as mediums between propaganda and the listeners. Broadcasters became collaborators responsible for implementing apartheid ideology, a link between government strategies of control and the audience who came to adore their voices. It was unlikely that a person, even with the best intentions, would not end up successfully reinforcing the ideology of ethnic separation between groups such as Zulu and Xhosa. This is also not something that all the subversive acts to be discussed sought to avoid – far from it (Lekgoathi 2009: 577). The radio stations reproduced racial and gender hierarchies of power: black announcers remained in an inferior position throughout, symbolised in their back-door entrance to the station, while women broadcasters held an even more marginalised role (Gunner 2019: 49). Only a small percentage of broadcasters chose to resist and the chosen acts of subversion, such as the insertion of idiomatic warnings mentioned above, may seem negligible when contrasted with the pervasive nature of apartheid oppression. Furthermore, just as there were pockets of subversion, many of the radio broadcasts fulfilled the ideological commitments of the SABC, with the radio drama *uBuhekifa* for example clearly sending an anti-resistance message (Gunner 2002: 268). It may thus come as little surprise that announcers were targeted by the politically conscious, who saw
them as ‘collaborators or devil’s advocates’, and at times were even forced to seek police protection (Lekgoathi 2009: 582, cf. 585).

(v) The black South African radio producers acted as a key instrument in apartheid’s propaganda machine, but they also offered a potential vehicle for creating a black resistant community. To capture their resistance potential, we have to pay attention to the *capacity of subversion to exploit ambiguity and complexity of our institutions and practices*. Dissidence took a range of forms that go beyond the refusal to participate in certain types of broadcasting deemed too propagandistic. Some radio producers were able to use their position to subvert ‘white control’ by introducing hidden messages using the ‘thicket of language’ (Lekgoathi 2009: 577). The challenges of translating from Afrikaans allowed announcers to use idioms and neologisms that could potentially alert the listener to subversive meanings, for instance the translation of guerrillas as intimidators instead of terrorists. Similarly, radio dramas, which thrived because of the strong tradition of oral storytelling, and radio commentary, such as on football games, needed no explicit political content to be subversive. Their potential for subversion lay in their capacity to use language and the imagination to counter the separation of the listeners. Both enabled them to move freely in time and space and to join together through their shared sense of a collective listening experience – much in the way described by Fanon. As one such listener, Jacob Dlamini, notes: ‘We befriended the voices of our radio presenters, developing such intimate knowledge of their “timbre, range, turn of phrase and key words used” that we could identify these voices and their owners even in our sleep. We could, thanks to the wireless, let our imaginations wander. We could see far and wide’ (Dlamini 2009: 28). Radio music also had this transcending effect by, for instance, ‘exposing urban Africans to traditional music and rural migrants to “township jazz”’ (Coplan 2011: 136).

South African radio helped connect the ‘rural homes to distant industrial workplaces and unintentionally spread the emerging black popular culture of cosmopolitan consumerism, fashion, drama, and music among an insatiable, unpreventably urbanising audience’ (Coplan 2011: 147). This is not to say that the message of radio dramas, set in rural settings, was the same for everyone, nor to romanticise the effect of these acts of subversion or be uncritical
of the lack of more overt resistance. However, the different broadcasts undoubtedly had the ability to give some dignity and voice to those disenfranchised by the dominant exclusionary narratives of the apartheid regime. In line with Fanon’s description of the power of radio as a means of mass resistance, ethnic radio stations enabled presenters to turn a technique of control by imperial states into an empowering amplification of the voices and languages of the urban and rural oppressed community. The creation of ethnic radio stations gave black voices access to a public sphere while ensuring that these voices were utilised to spread apartheid propaganda.

(vi) Given the complexity of the context, I argue that a particular emphasis has to be on the connection of subversion to the everyday experiences of the subversive actor and how it shaped the decision-making process. The announcers’ lived experience was likely one of a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, they had many sympathetic listeners and the broadcasters became widely recognised stars. They helped create a modern community through the medium of radio storytelling and gave space to the ordinary experiences of the dominated black, which was mirrored not so much in political broadcasts as in the supposedly docile Bantu stories. On the other hand, the ‘announcers had to contend with harsh working conditions and some politically hostile black critics. As a result, a handful of announcers quit their jobs though most hung on to them’ (Lekgoathi 2009: 585). Contrary to the image painted from the outside by the SABC, the radio broadcasters faced huge workloads and long working hours. They encountered naked racism by their superiors who acted contemptuously towards the educated non-white South Africans and generally maintained a cold, strained, and hierarchical relationship. Salaries of white South Africans were consistently higher, facilities remained separate, and the black employees were suspicious of each other, wary of spies. Non-white female contributors to the radio were reduced to the status of badly paid ‘visitors’ and employed only part-time. Broadcasts were accompanied by controllers, Afrikaner who had knowledge of the local African language and were loyal to the apartheid policy. The use of unauthorised metaphors and idioms or deviation from original scripts was made unlawful, which inhibited the rich use of the language that had driven many of the former teachers to the profession in the first place. As a consequence, to secure the broadcast
of their radio dramas, the writers chose to self-censor any political themes, and focused instead on the social dramas that spoke to their listeners’ everyday experiences.

Many of the radiobroadcasters were thus undoubtedly complex figures, caught between conflicting pressures that let them to be seen as either cultural pioneers or sell-outs and collaborators. One example is Alexius Buthelezi, who in 1961 moved from his position as a teacher and choirmaster to the role of broadcaster of the Zulu-section of Radio Bantu. Buthelezi brought his Zulu musicality and missionary choral background with him through the establishment of a radio choir that helped create highly successful musical dramas. The ease with which he moved between different music styles together with his position enabled him to create new sounds and styles and exploit the radio musically while also reaching ‘a diverse audience of black listeners across class’ (Gunner 2019: 51) and geography. The challenge was how to reproduce the Zuluness envisioned by apartheid while simultaneously re-shaping its very meaning and purpose; it ‘may not have been a free space but it was one that had possibilities’ (Gunner 2019: 54).

Representative of this challenging balancing act is uNokhwezi, a musical drama from 1964 which in its harmless, non-political character as a folk tale offered the ideal example of the broadcasts envisaged by the SABC. But this interpretation ignores how Buthelezi was able to draw on the motifs of the past to build a new sense of solidarity and community (Gunner 2019). The drama tells the story of a beautiful young girl, about to be married, encouraged by a group of jealous girls in the village to go on a dangerous journey before her wedding in the hope that she may be lost or killed. Initially, uNokhwezi, the girl, is protected by a necklace given to her by her mother who, in a dream, had been warned of the danger by an ancestor. After losing the necklace and, realising the intentions of the other girls, seeking courageously to retrieve it, uNokhwezi is imprisoned by an ogre. She is later freed by her brave suitor. The story reworks well-worn themes by foregrounding women agents, including the bond between daughter and mother, and the potential for help from within the community rather than a need to rely on external support. Both dimensions to the story would have strengthened its listeners’ sense of agency amidst the experiences of domination. It can thus be interpreted as an ‘inspired
part of a much larger yearning towards something new, a melding of discourses on artistic and social life’ (Gunner 2005: 167) that used a fictionalised past as the source for a distinctly modern, non-white South African cultural experience. With Leebaw (in this issue) we can call it to dive for pearls as an ‘approach to drawing guidance from the past by preserving fragments of meaning in dark times that seemed to offer little basis for hope in the future’ and recover the capacity for political agency.

The framework deployed in this section has helped capture the difficult decisions that faced radio broadcasters in apartheid South Africa. The intention is not to suggest that therefore all acts of subversion were positive and indeed that all actors who bid their time and accepted the rules of the game can be freed of moral responsibility. Instead, it attunes us to the everyday lived experience, complexities and ambivalences of subversion that are missed when adopting the lens of the binary between subversive or reactionary, heroic resistance or vile collaboration.

**Conclusion**

This article has sought to contribute to efforts to move beyond heroic conceptions of resistance by addressing the grey zones of subversive action. I highlighted the limitations of the dominant theorisations of subversion, which retain remnants of the heroic conception of agency, articulated through the inversion-containment dualism. In response, I drew on alternative accounts of subversion and the literature on everyday resistance to propose a more suitable, dynamic, and context-sensitive framework for analysing subversion. The proposed framework sheds light on the ambiguity of subversive resistance by considering the context in which subversion becomes an important form of resistance (the existence of an extensively dominant actor or structure and the relationship to other forms of resistance), the production of subversion and the subversive actor through the oppressive system (its compliance with the system to be subverted and the ways it is framed through betrayal and complicity), and the existential and everyday qualities of subversion (its connections to the quotidian experiences of the subversive actor and how subversions exploit the ambiguity and
complexity of our institutions and practices. This theoretical framework allows us to enrich Fanon’s iconic description of the resistant potential of subversive radio broadcasts. I illustrated the practical political relevance of this framework on the example of subversive radio broadcasts in South Africa during apartheid, mapping out systematically the ambiguity of subversion in Radio Bantu.

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Notes

1. Its importance is evidenced by the fact that novels, films, plays, and histories of the postcolonial became ‘littered with radios’ (Baucom 2001), from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*. The latter notably juxtaposes one of the most iconic moments of post-colonial nation building, Jawaharlal Nehru’s radio speech on the day of India’s independence, and the ‘All India Radio’ receiving station of the main protagonist Saleem Sinai.
2. Bertolt Brecht for instance argued that radios create a community of isolated listeners and that the challenge is how to turn the radio from a receiving to a communication apparatus (Brecht 2001: 42).
3. Identities for Butler are created through the repetition of specific behaviour and the aim becomes how to articulate forms of subversive repetition that challenge the regulatory capacities of identity.
4. Butler’s account of subversion, despite its nuances, has not remained without criticisms; specifically, the question remains whether drag does not ultimately reproduce heterosexual norms (Woodford 2014). The literature on subverting gender
norms that followed Butler’s work has also presented a dual picture of drag as either reactionary or subversive (cf. Stokoe 2019).

5. In broad strokes, resistance refers to an activity or stance that is essentially about opposing something. This definition raises difficult questions about the intentions of the resistant actor or group and whether resistance needs to be recognised and visible as such (cf. Hollander and Einwohner 2004). As this understanding indicates, resistance and its conceptual relatives cover a wide variety of activities. Research may focus on larger macro-political phenomena including global protest movements and revolutions, or micro-political forms of everyday resistance (Scott 2008).

6. Hidden messages as form of broadcasting resistance are particularly interesting in that they combine marginal subversive acts, likely with little immediate transformative impact, and a wide audible reach, to create the means for a community-wide solidarity.

References


