

## **PRISON, POWER AND RESISTANCE: A RESPONSE TO RAYMOND SUTTNER'S "RETHINKING AND RE-REMEMBERING PRISON"**

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Let me extend my thanks to the College of Human Sciences and also to Raymond Suttner for inviting me along to participate in this seminar today<sup>1</sup>. Before I respond to some of what has been discussed, I would like to add a single caveat. On today's programme, I am billed as a clinical psychologist, and while this is completely accurate, I will not really be responding as a clinician, but as a social scientist more broadly. This is not to say that clinical psychology does not have anything to add to issues of violence, trauma, repression, torture, prisons, incarceration and extreme political traumatising - indeed, some may argue that this has been its stock in trade at some points, but that this has perhaps occurred at the expense of more wide ranging, wide-angled views of these psychosocial phenomena. And so my response is far less clinical, and perhaps more open to engaging with some of the panoramic issues that lie in the background, that act as the canvass on which violence, repression and forms of resistance to them, occur - in short, some of the meta-questions.

Slavoj Žižek (2009: 10), the cultural critic, in his book titled, **Violence**, argues that:

"The ... task is precisely to ... move from the desperate humanitarian ... call to stop violence, to the analysis of ... the complex interaction of the three modes of violence: subjective, objective and symbolic. ... [O]ne should resist the fascination of subjective violence, of violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds: subjective violence is just the most visible of the three."

When I was thinking about responding to the input after I had read it, I initially felt that I could not and dare not, in some ways. Here, before me was a narrative, a deeply personal account, a set of reflections on a set of extraordinary life experiences, and I felt unjustified to make any commentary on someone else's life. I did not really want to engage with the actual content, because I feared that I would disembodiment the narrative from its experiential base and from its authorial position. So instead, I have stayed away from the content of the input and rather engaged in a more acceptable form of disembodiment that I have no doubt that all readers will experience, by abstracting and

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<sup>1</sup> The seminar was held on 11 March 2010, UNISA, Pretoria, and Garth Stevens was the respondent to Suttner's paper (above).

distilling from the presentation some salient points that I would perhaps like to raise for discussion.

Nevertheless, what stood out for me in this presentation was in fact the central idea that in the face of political imprisonment as a form of violence, objectification, reification and dehumanisation, that there are opportunities to enact open defiance, to draw on meaning systems that help us to make sense of our experiences, to draw on the solidarity of a shared community, to draw on a tradition of struggle and justice, to cast suffering as sacrifice, to merely survive, to flout rules in the everyday institutional culture of prisons, to disrupt routines, to invert the system, and to replicate aspects of humanity that are bludgeoned to death within such a system. These for me encapsulated the relationship between power as a strategic social relation, and resistance to it. You will notice that I have used the term resistance as opposed to agency, as I believe that they may reflect different ontologies of the subject, but perhaps this is a point of discussion best left for later.

Of course, Suttner is absolutely correct and accurate in his description of the prison complex. For Foucault, the birth of the prison was in fact a form of disciplinary punishment that followed on periods of monarchical punishment, that is, the difference between sovereign and disciplinary forms of power. It is where disciplinary power in the forms of surveillance, bodily regulation, forms of moral orthopaedics associated with biopolitics and so forth, find expression, but not in the absence of sovereign power. While power is the ability to act on others' actions, when such forms of power fail, are flouted or resisted, violence is frequently deployed as a means to act on bodies directly. However, as Foucault also notes, it is in the presence of power that resistance also finds expression, a matrix in which the two are not conceived of as binary opposites, but as integral components of a dialectic. We see this matrix enacted in prison complexes all the time – the constant surveillance, the meaningless routines, the dehumanisation and objectification, the theft of time, the self-regulation, and the removal of basic human controls. But, there are also resistances to these forms of power. These resistances can sometimes be met with forms of violence, but most frequently, power and resistance reach a comfortable truce in these contexts.

Steinberg (2004) points out eloquently in his book, **The number**, how during the day warders control the prison, but at night it is *the number* who runs things, “die bandiete”, the gangs, the non-political prisoners. Similarly, in contexts of political imprisonment forms of resistance to extreme traumatising, disciplinary power and violence are often met with equanimity and creativity. Mandela started work secretly on **Long walk to freedom**, Gramsci wrote his famous **Prison notebooks**, Lenin his thesis on **The development of capitalism in Russia**, Trotsky his classic ideas on **Permanent revolution**, and perhaps more ignominiously, Hitler penned **Mein kampf**. From a psychological perspective, Victor Frankl's personal experiences and work in this area with reference to the Holocaust suggested that meaning-making and forms of signification around one's traumatic experiences may act as fundamental mediator of our experiences of these events, and can determine the degree of resistance, or agency, as Suttner refers to it. In fact, as I read and re-read the narrative, I realised its powerful nature as a means to construct experiences, not as replicas of a past, but as reconstructed versions of past events. In this way the narrative itself can become a site of resistance or agency.

So where does this leave us if we accept that resistance or agency is possible in the face of violence, repression, political imprisonment and extreme political traumatising? Well, the paper implicitly raises three very important and distinct issues in my view:

- The first is, what enables resistance or agency in the first place?
- The second is, what exactly do we mean by agency, and here I have already alluded to the fact that I would prefer to use the term resistance as part of the power-resistance matrix.
- The third refers to the nature of some of the specific mediators that allow for a positive sense of self to emerge in the process of enacting resistances.

Let me take each of these briefly, and perhaps share some thoughts and questions on them.

Is resistance or agency not fundamentally and ironically enabled by the very strategic relations of power that exist in institutions such as prisons, but elsewhere of course as well? In other words, forms of resistance in the minutiae of everyday life are always bound up in the complex matrix of power and resistance. They are not separate, they co-exist and have implications for how we think about resistance or agency in such contexts.

This leads onto the second question – so how do we then define agency? Well, if agency implies an ontology of the subject that presupposes a complete free will, how accurate is this? Does this mean that agency is in fact an enactment of psychological resolve, of wilfulness? Or is agency a subjective experience of the enactment of resistances that are premised on a set of conditions of possibility around us - the material and the symbolic. And is this resistance not embedded in the material and symbolic that rest outside of ourselves, outside of the psyche so to speak? Is resistance not a set of responses to power as a strategic relation that is made possible by us drawing on history, on traditions, on discourses, on subject positions and so forth? And so, are our experiences of agency not more a subjective enactment of resistances that are mediated by a whole range of conditions of possibility that exist outside of ourselves and our psyches at a given point in time? In short, is resistance not driven primarily from outside of us and not from inside of us, or is such a binary itself problematic?

This of course leads to the final question. If we assume that resistance is premised on the subject being embedded within the social, then what are the specific mediators that generate a greater sense of well-being when resistance is enacted in some form or another? Several authors have argued that in the face of experiences of trauma and violence, both within and outside of the prison context that meanings attached to events can help us to define our responses to them. For example, both Andy Dawes (1994) and Gillian Straker (1992) conducted work with children during the height of anti-apartheid counter-violence in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, and found that those who constructed themselves as “young lions”, showed very little psychological sequelae in response to violence and certainly no moral truncation. Ann Levett (1989) in her study on a slightly different form of violence, namely sexual abuse, found that the construction of subjects as “damaged goods” often created “damaged” subjects, but that this was not always the case. Similarly, Brandon Hamber (2009) in a recent text,

**Transforming societies after political violence**, argued that in instances of war, when veterans were constructed as damaged, that this generated “damaged” subjects (e.g. Vietnam). Furthermore, Hamber (2009) argues that while psychology acknowledges that certain intrapsychic, personality, and temperamental factors undoubtedly have an impact on our responses to adverse circumstances that in fact the most significant mediators can be found in the social context.

So what do all these references to context within the topic of resistance in prisons really mean for us; what are the implications? Well for one, I think it implies that we have to continue to expose axes of power, cleavages of difference, fault lines and fractures where strategic relations of power are enacted, as these are also the places that resistances flourish. Secondly, it suggests that in cases of extreme political traumatising, torture and so forth, that we encourage a contextual understanding of resistance. It places less of an onus on individuals who may be at the receiving end of repressive systems, allows them to draw from collective resources that are symbolic in nature, and minimizes the reliance on discourses of intrapsychic strengths and assets. Finally, it may also imply that in contexts of violence, oppression and political repression, that we consider ways of focusing on contextual mediators, of altering discourses in a direction that favours those who have been incarcerated as dissidents, of promoting forms of signification in memorializing processes that link individuals and collectives, as these have great import in generating forms of cultural capital and therefore in shaping our responses to violence and trauma.

By way of conclusion, let me state clearly that it is not that I do not believe that intrapsychic processes are important, nor that psychological sequelae are experienced, but rather that in psychology’s attempts to make a meaningful contribution to this field, it has frequently been trapped in a cage of its own making – the cage of focusing almost exclusively on subjective violence and resistance, and this often forecloses the possibility of engaging with the more objective, systemic and symbolic forms of violence and resistance that may very well serve us better as we engage the matrix of power and resistance.

One final question that lingers for me, is whether such an approach to the power-resistance matrix has any merit in being transposed onto contexts outside of prisons - within civil society - where axes of power play themselves out in even more insidious ways? Here, Suttner’s reference to the prison as a liminal space is an instructive and insightful perspective that, in my view, could be developed even further. While the prison is a social location in which subjective *inbetweenity* is experienced, is this not the case for all spaces in which the power-resistance matrix occurs, and does liminality of this nature not then suggest opportunities for resistance outside of the prison complex as well? For me, my intuitive response is an affirmative one, but perhaps that is best left for another discussion.

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