

CLAUDIA FIRTH is currently an MPhil/Ph.D. Critical and Cultural Studies candidate at Birkbeck in the Department of English and Humanities. Her MA was in Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has also written for *Nyx*, the journal for the Centre for Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths and *DIS* magazine.

[claudiaf@talktalk.net](mailto:claudiaf@talktalk.net)  
[www.claudiafirth.wordpress.com](http://www.claudiafirth.wordpress.com)

## Book Review

# *On Resistance: a Philosophy of Defiance* by Howard Caygill

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Claudia Firth



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RESISTANCE IS A STICKY, COMPLEX TERM THAT DEFIES EASY DEFINITION BUT ONE THAT IS EMBLEMATIC OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS. In his recent book *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance*, Howard Caygill maps out and draws together how the term has been understood from a variety of perspectives, in different histories and debates. From various definitions of resistance, he constructs an ‘archive of resistance’ exploring themes such as domination, consciousness, violence and subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> He draws on a wealth of references from progressive and revolutionary politics including thinkers such as Mao, Lenin, Luxembourg, Gandhi and Fanon; artists such as Pasolini, Genet and Kafka; and practices such as Greenham Common and the Zapatista movement. Caygill’s study is easily accessible and highly engaging. He successfully teases apart a term that – although it is very pertinent to the contemporary moment and has had many texts dedicated to inciting, sustaining or repressing it – has remained under-analysed. Generally speaking this is a powerful and thought-provoking book, providing a strong basis for further analysis. However, it does raise questions about what the consequences of the theoretical framework within which it operates are, how this inflects our understanding of resistance, and whether it is undone by its own contradictions.

Caygill begins constructing a philosophical framework for his exploration by arguing for the need to think resistance through a variant of Kantian reflective judgement, but with the understanding that it will itself resist being comprehensively classified or subsumed under a rule. Indeed he suggests that resistance is an evolving practice that is itself resistant to philosophical analysis, coming 'to stand as the limit at which analysis falters and breaks off' (7). Using this Kantian framework to investigate boundaries and limits in this way allows Caygill to appeal to the morality of resistance directly as a stance against oppression. The examples throughout the book, being drawn mostly from radical, emancipatory and progressive politics, underline this moral positioning of resistance. However, Caygill is keen to stress that resistance can also be ambivalent.

Caygill identifies the term 'stasis' when he traces the etymology of resistance. This 'state of standing' is where Caygill locates the origin of and possibility for politics in relation to resistance. This is a place of blockage and inactivity, the state of equilibrium caused by opposing equal forces. It is within this tension that Caygill situates the book. However, forces are very rarely equal and opposite. Caygill addresses this by placing resistance within a Foucaultian network of power relations, describing a complex play of resistances and counter-resistances, both responding to and producing the relations of power that it resists. Rather than being unidirectional it is seen as part of a reciprocal dynamic of change. He turns then to Nietzsche, whose distinction between resentment, which comes out of a desire for revenge, and affirmative resistance, is drawn on throughout the book.

With this theoretical framework set out, Caygill introduces Von Clausewitz's *On War* as a key text. *On War* features as a guide to thinking about resistance historically, dating as it does from the French Revolution. Caygill argues that *On War* could well be titled *On Resistance*, as it is as much about resistance as it is about warfare. Von Clausewitz wrote *On War* in the light of what he saw during the Napoleonic wars and in particular the Spanish peasants' resistance to Napoleon's revolutionary army. Clausewitz differentiates between traditional warfare, likening it to a solid state, and the fluidity of the revolutionary army. In response to this new kind of warfare he describes the 'foggy or cloudlike' quality of what can be thought of as guerrilla tactics.<sup>2</sup> Characterised by what he terms condensation and vaporisation, this kind of resistance erupts and subsides only to unpredictably reappear again (24). Later in the book we see how this model of partisan or peasant warfare is taken up and developed further by Mao and his ideas of People's War. Caygill refers to Clausewitz's classic definition of war being the continuation of politics by other means many times throughout the book, both in terms of its original context and how it was developed by later thinkers.<sup>3</sup> For example, Foucault reverses the statement in an interview entitled 'Politics is the Continuation of War by Other Means', describing power relations in terms of military strategy. What this seems to do is place politics firmly in terms of relations of enmity, the purpose of war being to reduce the power of your opponent to resist – which, if taken to extremes by both sides, can result in warfare spiralling out of political control. This makes the link between resistance and violence – a relationship that Caygill states remains one of the fundamental questions of the politics of resistance (11). The prevailing logic of violence and warfare in this model is therefore likely to become an escalation that threatens to lead to annihilation of one or other of the parties, or even to the threat of mutual destruction (as we saw with the nuclear arms race during the Cold War). The escalating logic of violence – being Kantian rather than dialectical – leads to a limit: to absolute

war, if it is not contained, transcended or avoided. There is an obvious need highlighted here to think beyond this model and escape the logic.

Violence is also a key question for Caygill when he turns to issues of resistant subjectivities. The formation of the capacity to resist, Caygill argues, can take place in a number of ways, but quite often through a moment of reactive resistance, a lashing out at repression or insufferable conditions. This initial resistance of resentment will remain shaped by the enemy, unless it transforms itself in some way in order to escape the logic of escalation. Caygill offers several means to do this including through consciousness, the consecration of violence, and the invention of new forms of solidarity and subjectivity. In his discussion of internal resistance and subjectivity, violent and non-violent subjectivities are exemplified by Mao and Fanon on the one hand, and Gandhi and the Greenham Common women on the other. These cases, whether violent or non-violent, are seen as examples of resistance as extreme fortitude, courage and prudence, motivated by the desire for justice. He defines a resistant subject position as one of sustained defiance over a long period of time, which has more to do with pre-modern ideas of virtue than with autonomy and freedom. Indeed, Caygill is quite clear that resistant subjects are not free. He does suggest that 'their resistance may be grafted onto revolutionary possibility – but resistance and the pursuit of freedom do not enjoy a pre-established harmony' (97). In his recent article on Caygill's book in *Radical Philosophy*,<sup>4</sup> Peter Hallward argues that by doing this, Caygill rejects Kant's own conceptualisation of freedom and appears to side with Clausewitz, against any modality of possibility being consistent with resistant subjectivity: 'If the goal is more to *resist* forms of oppression than it is to overcome or transform them, then indeed dialectic appears to have little to offer'.<sup>5</sup> Defining resistant subjectivity in this way could both preclude any overcoming of conditions and also easily conflate resistance with resilience (the increased capacity to resist becoming purely defensive, mere survival in the face of renewed attack or hardship instead of any kind of move towards self-emancipation). Indeed, by the end of the book resistant practices are defined as being engaged in defiance against existing domination 'but without any prospect of a final outcome in the guise of a revolutionary or reformist solution' (208).

Caygill goes on to discuss Genet as an example of a non-revolutionary resistant, opposed to the rhetoric of both the state and its revolutionary opponents. Caygill characterises him as resisting brutality first and foremost, including the brutality of resistance itself. This is done in the name of 'the delicacy of beginnings', with support given to movements that provoke liberation but do not promise to deliver it (128). This fits with resistance understood as vaporous insurrectionary moments that erupt, subside and reappear. It also seems to embody a moral position that includes resistance to constituent violence, based on the fear that resistance might solidify into something worse than the situation it resists – that the political pursuit of liberation might lead to new forms of oppression. And while this is understandable, particularly in the light, for example, of the aftermath of the French Revolution – exactly when Clausewitz was writing *On War* – there is a danger of abandoning hopes of emancipation in the process.

The form of Caygill's book does offer something towards thinking beyond this stalemate. The main body of the text is bracketed by the foreword and afterword, both indicating through the use of fictional representations the possibility of alternatives. In particular in the afterword, written in relation to Kafka's parable *Before the Law*, the possibility of an alternative solidarity,

rather than an unwinnable confrontation with the state, presents itself, and it is perhaps here that any notion of autonomy or freedom might be found. In Kafka's narrative, the Doorkeeper stands between the Man from the Country and entry to the Law. Caygill uses this stand-off as an illustration of a classic Clausewitzian dual formation. The Man from the Country requests admittance but meets refusal and resistance, with the possibility of an entry to the Law at some point in the future. As his capacity to resist gets slowly ground down, the Man from the Country confirms the growing domination of the Doorkeeper, who always holds the initiative. At the point of exhaustion, there is a growing realisation that there might be others in a similar predicament, each at their own door, and that perhaps he should have sought them out and together turned away.

Caygill identifies several key ambivalences around the term *resistance* that both problematise it and help to develop a deeper understanding of how it might operate. We have already seen the possibility that resistance and counter-resistance can lead to the escalating logic of violence and warfare, or to the constitution of further violence and oppression. In addition, if resistance is always already a counter-resistance, the dependence of resistance on what it opposes can also lead to complicity with it. Resistance in itself can accept the framework that it sets out to oppose. Caygill uses Freud's work on the resistance of the patient to recovery to develop the idea of resistance not only as defiance in the face of oppression, but also working as an aid to internal repression rather than against it. The analyst repeatedly comes up against this resistance and, as direct confrontation is not productive, has to come at it indirectly, undertaking what is essentially a guerrilla war against the patient's own internal resistance. Caygill uses this both in relation to individual subjectivity and also as a wider metaphor for the more general potential for complicity that resistance can have. He also explores these ideas in relation to the Frankfurt school and how they viewed culture as a potential site for indirect 'guerrilla warfare' against dominant structures and ideology.

Caygill's exploration of these ambivalences of resistance is extremely valuable and identifies several difficulties with the term. However, this is where we perhaps start to see how the theoretical framework Caygill sets up at the beginning of the book may also cause some tensions and contradictions. While Caygill very usefully explores the ambivalent status of resistance, the case studies he uses are, almost without exception, defiant theories and practices against oppression. He does not discuss in detail examples of resistance to change, or conservative forces of resistance, apart from those of the analysand's own internal resistance to recovery. With the insistence on a Kantian framework backed up by Clausewitz, there seems little possibility for overcoming conditions, effectively severing resistance from the possibility of emancipation. Rather, the book appears to rely on practices of affirmation to associate resistance with 'progressive' politics. Caygill leans heavily on Nietzsche's distinction between reactive resistance based on resentment versus a pure affirmative resistance. The effect of both of these moves is to draw the limits around resistance as something that goes beyond the desire for revenge but stops short of revolution or emancipation. While placing some kind of limits on resistance might be necessary for an initial study of the term, those very limits may need to be resisted in turn.

Perhaps Caygill's dependence on Nietzsche not only places limits on resistance, catching it in something of a double bind, but also unwittingly reinforces a particular framework in itself. Benjamin Noys argues that the insistent desire for affirmation fits neatly into neoliberal injunctions for

proactivity, productivity and creative thinking: exactly those qualities which drive 'cognitive capitalism' – the contemporary mode of capitalism associated with the shift to a post-Fordist economy that emphasises immaterial and intellectual labour. He contends that this perspective evades the complexity of the question of resistance in the face of capital's powers of recuperation, and that an exploration of the negative and its potential forms of agency are absolutely necessary for thinking through the stalemate of political antagonism.<sup>6</sup> While the double-edged image of the negative – with destruction on the one hand and defeatism on the other – does make its appearance in the text, there could be more exploration and unpicking of it. This also raises the question of whether resistance must always begin with resentment. Is there no room for a stand against injustice that exists without the desire for revenge, a straightforward no, no more, no pasaran, or for the Bartleby who calmly refuses to do what is asked of him? It may well be that as this request is itself resisted, resentment increases, but this again is perhaps an indication of the need for further study.

In general, Caygill's investigation into the possibilities and boundaries of resistance provides an excellent basis for starting to think about the term. In particular, his exploration of the dynamic character of resistance, with its active and reactive qualities acting together, yields some very valuable insights. However, limitations on the term, while perhaps necessary for an initial study, could and maybe even should in turn be resisted, or serve as a starting point for further exploration. In his article, Hallward calls for the possibility of thinking defiance and emancipation, resistance and revolution together. I would also add the necessity of thinking through the negative: perhaps we can think for, against, and beyond at the same time. It may be that this is precisely what the pause provided by states of stasis and blockage might offer an opportunity to do.

Birkbeck, University of London

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 13. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* vollständige letzte Fassung von 1832 (Neuenkirchen: RaBaKa Publishing, 2010), p. 464, cited in Caygill, p. 26.
- <sup>3</sup> The original quote has been translated in a number of ways and appears in Caygill's book as 'war is the continuation of political action through its mixture and other means' (translating Clausewitz, p. 591).
- <sup>4</sup> Peter Hallward, 'Defiance or Emancipation?', *Radical Philosophy*, 183 (2014), 21-32.
- <sup>5</sup> Hallward, p. 27.
- <sup>6</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. xii <<http://site.ebrary.com/id/10430822>> [accessed 27 February 2014].