

# Resistance Matter(s)

## Resistance Studies and the Material Turn

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August 27, 2013

### **Abstract**

After a period largely dominated by a bias on language, discourses and the social world, a material turn is slowly emerging in social theory, emphasizing the central role of materiality and material power. However, welcoming this new theoretical embrace of the social and the material, I argue that there exists a theoretical gap in the materiality literature when it comes to the concept of resistance. Few, if any, scholars have elaborated on what role material agency plays in practices of resistance. This also goes the other way around; resistance studies has been heavily influenced by the linguistic turn and is largely characterized by a preoccupation on immaterial cultural processes, generally neglecting how the material can act back and shape both social relations and practices of resistance. This article elaborates on how these fields can benefit from each other by sharing relevant insights and discusses what an increased focus on the material has to offer resistance studies.

**Keywords:** Resistance studies, material agency, non-human agency, the material turn, the linguistic turn

## **Introduction**

The Material turn is a relatively new field of inquiry, critical of what is perceived as a prevailing tendency within the social sciences to prioritize culture over nature, the social over the material, and words over things. Instead, scholars within this perspective turn their attention to the central role and power of materiality and non-human agency. However, the new materialist literature has been criticized for not sufficiently dealing with the concept of power, and even less attention has been paid on elaborating on the relation between the material and resistance.

At the same time, resistance studies, a newly emerging field focusing on theorizing and exploring the concept of resistance, have emerged much thanks to the upswing of various poststructuralist perspectives and language as a point of departure for studying power and social change. This perspective is heavily influenced by the linguistic turn with a predominating focus on discursive resistance, identity construction, language and performativity, while the material and non-human agency has been largely absent in the analysis.

My main purpose here is to investigate and discuss how and what an increased focus on the material might contribute to resistance studies. The article will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly introduce the linguistic turn and its central focus on language and the role of discourses. Following this, I will discuss how this bias on language and "the social world" has come to be challenged within the material turn, moving the scope of analysis towards the central role of materiality and material power. I will then problematize the lack of an explicit power perspective and the role of resistance in the new materialist literature. Then, I will turn to resistance studies with the aim of investigating how this field has been influenced by the linguistic turn and to what extent the material has been acknowledged. Following this, I will present and discuss a few theorists within both the material turn and resistance studies to further illustrate my theoretical discussion in a more concrete way and show how these perspectives may be combined and mutually profit by sharing relevant insights and concepts.

## **Poststructuralism and the role of Language**

In the second half of the 20th century, the human and social sciences increasingly started to recognize the importance of language as a structuring agent, leading to the development of structuralism and poststructuralism. Foucault, Butler and Derrida were among the most central and influential theorists within these perspectives and the primary focus was on the power of language- not simply considered as a transparent, neutral medium of thought- but rather on the notion that language in fact constitutes reality.

This wave of (post)structuralist thought can in large part be said to have grown out from anti-humanism and was critical towards the humanist notion of the free, rational individual, happily neglecting the role of social language and of social structures. Scholars within this perspective emphasized the ideological function embedded in

humanism, thus obscuring conflicts of interests and contradictions behind the humanist idea of a common, shared human essence. Another central flaw of humanism was, according to these scholars, the anthropocentric tendency to assess reality through an exclusively human perspective (Åsberg et al., 2012).

What has been referred to as the *linguistic turn* is a part of this poststructuralist tradition, but constitutes a diverse and heterogeneous tradition containing many different perspectives. Even if Gustav Bergmann was the first who coined the expression "the linguistic turn", this expression has been associated to other intellectual movements, sometimes with a somewhat different meaning depending on the context in which it has been applied. However, somewhat simplified, a widely shared denominator is the notion that *the real* is entirely constituted by language. This perspective thus neglects, or at least downplays the existence of any "real world" somewhere out there, focusing instead on the epistemological questions of how objects gain meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourses (Lilja, 2008).

As a consequence, the role of discourses has often been emphasized and remains the central topic for many intellectuals within the poststructuralist movement. The focus here lies on the relation between language, power relations and agency and on how different representations, whether they may be in the form of texts, images or sounds, circulate, get connected and give meaning to each other. This forms what Foucault calls a *discursive formation*, understood as "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak." (Lessa, 2006).

Theories within the linguistic turn do not necessarily claim that there is in fact no reality "out there", but rather move the scope from such ontological issues to the phenomenological statement that nothing has any meaning outside the discourses. Discourses give meaning to objects and produces knowledge, and since what we experience of the natural world is merely objects of knowledge it makes no sense to distinguish between the "real" objects and their meaning.

## **The Material Turn**

Later on, this exclusive emphasis on the social world, on discourses and on the notion that language constructs reality stemming from the linguistic turn, has come to be challenged within the field often referred to as *New Materialism* (Coole and Frost, 2010; Grosz, 2011; Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012), *The Ontological Turn* or *The Material Turn* (Alaimo and Hekman 2008). This is in fact a rather wide and heterogeneous field, consisting of a large number of diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives, often somewhat clumsily put together under the same term<sup>1</sup>. What these approaches have in common

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, different perspectives such as *thing theory*, *material agency* and *ANT* are often categorized within this field, even though they may not be fully compatible. While some approaches such as object-oriented ontology (see eg. Harman) focuses on ontological questions about the independency of objects, arguing that objects cannot be exhausted by their relations with humans or other non-human objects, other scholars such as Latour rather emphasize relations, networks and the inseparability of the social and natural. However,

is that they in a way or another stress the importance of matter and materiality beyond simply constituting a background, an outcome or a medium. Following this, a central argument in these approaches is that the material for a long time has been neglected in the human and social sciences, and that there has been a prevailing tendency to prioritize culture over nature, the social over the material and words over things.

This new paradigm can thus be seen as a reaction against some radical trends of postmodern and poststructuralist thinking that allegedly dematerialized the world into linguistic and social constructions. Bhaskar (2008) has referred to this tendency within the linguistic turn as "the epistemic fallacy", i.e. when ontological issues are understood in epistemological terms. While most agree that we cannot know things outside our conceptual system- which indeed is socially constructed-, the material turn "question[s] the assumption that objects and the material thereby do not exist beyond our conceptions of it." As Grosz (2005) puts it, we need to challenge such notions of nature as simply a form of "timeless, unchanging raw material, somehow dynamised and rendered historical only through the activities of the cultural and the psychological orders it generates".

According to these new materialist theorists, language has been given too much power. This has been expressed by Barad (2003), stating that; "Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter." She continues; "What compels the belief that we have a direct access to cultural representations and their content that we lack toward the things represented? How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?". Also Alaimo and Hekman (2008:2) argue that the linguistic project has failed because of its narrow, biased focus. "Far from deconstructing the dichotomies of language/reality or culture/nature, they have rejected one side and embraced the other".

Thus, scholars within the material turn tend to highlight the relation between what we call *the social* and *the material*. But rather than focusing on how discourses produce, reproduce and naturalize this dichotomy -as the standard approach in the linguistic turn- they instead focus on the role of materiality and the material agency in these processes. A central argument is that the distinction between the material and the social is constructed; it is an effect of socio-technical practices rather than any underlying ontological reality. This idea has been expressed in a long range of more or less punchy formulations. Law (1991:166) argues that what is social is never just social, but "simultaneously technical, architectural, textual, and natural, the division between such categories is itself a relational achievement rather than something in the order of things". Also Latour (2005:75-76) argues along similar lines: "there exists no relation whatsoever between 'the material' and 'the social world', because it is this very division which is a complete artifact". Hence, these scholars argue that the postmodern deconstruction of hierarchical binaries has to be taken

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since my concern here is not that of constructing any grand theoretical synthesis, I hereafter refer to this heterogeneous field as the "the material turn".

one step further since it is still built upon the old epistemic notion of a distinction between 'the social world' and 'the material'. This means that human sociality can no longer be analytically separated from other non-human actors. Phenomena such as climate change, bio-chemistry and socio-technological transitions clearly illustrate this complex entanglement of the social and the natural worlds.

The solution, according to these scholars, is to bring the materiality back on the pedestal and to emphasize the co-relation and the mutual/reciprocal effect of human and non-human agency. However, it should be stressed that the linguistic and material turn do not necessarily constitute a dichotomy since the latter is rather a matter of bringing back the matter into the game, thus it is not so much about opposing but rather about transcending existing perspectives. As Hekman (2010) argues, the goal is "to deconstruct the language/reality dichotomy by defining a theoretical position that does not privilege either language or reality, but instead explains and builds on their intimate interaction".

However, while illuminating many important issues, I argue that a more comprehensive power-perspective has so far been rather absent and under-theorized in the current materiality debate. This argument is also stressed by Otter (2010:49), noting that "ANT and thing theory cannot explain the asymmetrical access to such material forms of empowerment and experience". He continues; "Material agency and effects, then, must be situated within a politico-economic narrative" (ibid). A rare, but interesting exception of this general tendency is Bennett and Joyce (2013) book *Material Powers* that puts a much needed explicit focus on the issue of power in relation to materiality and on how different groups and classes have different ideas that can shape the pathways for technological development. However, as we will see, most of the contributions in this anthology concern the role of states and not so much of power per se.<sup>2</sup> Directly related to this, the theoretical gap in the materiality literature is even more obvious when it comes to the concept of resistance. As far as I know, Dias (2010) is the only scholar in the field that explicitly elaborates on the issue of materiality and resistance and on what potential impact an increased attention to material agency might have when analyzing and understanding resistance practices.

## **Resistance Studies and the Material Turn**

Similar to other fields such as geography, gender studies and anthropology, the linguistic turn has greatly affected resistance studies. Resistance studies is a relatively new, but fast-growing field, focusing explicitly on exploring, theorizing and discussing the concept of resistance. It has been argued that the renewed interest in resistance may be due to the upswing of various poststructuralist perspectives and language/discourses as a point of departure for studying power and social change (Vinthagen and Lilja, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> For example, both Mukerji and Joyce focus on the relation between the power, the state and the material, e.g. how the state controls territories. Joyce focuses on how bureaucratic writing relates to bureaucracy, authorities and the emergence of the modern state with disciplining organs such as prisons, schools and the army.

Acknowledging the fact that resistance studies constitutes a relatively wide field of inquiry with a heterogeneous and including definition of the notion of resistance, it seems clear that the linguistic turn has had a great impact on the field as a whole, and it has characterized many of the central perspectives and notions. A central part of the resistance literature stresses the notion of understanding and studying power and social change as a discursive phenomenon. Authors such as Foucault and Butler have been greatly influential in the field and power is often viewed in terms of "discourses that label and rank identities, create boundaries, reduce complexity, and then promote power-loaded images of identities to be invested in" (Vinthagen and Lilja, 2007:7). With this perspective on power, studies of resistance are generally focused on how hierarchical discourses and power relations are produced, reproduced, and also challenged in ordinary speech and in everyday acts of resistance.

This has opened up for a vast amount of studies focusing on discursive change, including e.g. performativity, mobile subjectivities, mimicry, identity politics, irony, intertextuality, hidden transcripts, anti-identity and anti-power, queer, counter-power and deconstruction (Vinthagen and Lilja, 2007). Thus, a central focus lies on the question of when power-loaded discourses can be transformed, and by what means. Hence, a main question of concern is how people use identities, images, symbols, different counter-discourses and resistance narratives to challenge the dominant discourses and the construction of power. For example, Butler's notion of performativity emphasizes the process of discursive production and it focuses on how normalities of gender, rather than being stable, is constantly being produced and reproduced through repetitions of behavior (Butler 1995, 1997). This means, according to Butler, that even small changes in the repetitions can change the values and meaning of specific words and charge them with new more positive meanings<sup>3</sup>. Irony, parody and mimicry is central here, since they can be understood as "a way of disturbing the ordinary repetitions of 'truth'" (Butler 1999:41-42).<sup>4</sup>

These often inaudible, invisible processes taking place behind the stage of public rebellions are viewed as central as they focus on the construction of meaning. As Bleiker (2000:280) argues, even what is often considered non-political, such as symbolism, poetic language and storytelling can be highly relevant as they "...embody the social relationship between people and their environment / . . . / they are disguised political processes, for they silently frame, enforce and entrench systems of domination". Therefore, he continues, "...the most powerful practices of dissent / . . . / work in discursive ways, that is, by engendering a slow transformation of values"(ibid f.).

Following this, I argue that resistance studies to a large extent clearly has been affected and characterized by a preoccupation on immaterial cultural processes, intersubjective meaning-systems and generally 'less than tangible' entities such as texts, signs, symbols,

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<sup>3</sup> Consider for example, as Vinthagen and Lilja 2007 note, the different meanings of the word "nigger" in white racist versus black hip hop culture.

<sup>4</sup> See also Lilja (2008) for a discussion on irony, parody and mimicry as deliberative resistance strategies.

identity and language. There is no doubt that the linguistic turn has been enormously productive and that it has significantly enriched the field, linking several dimensions and enabled a complex analysis of issues involving the interconnection and entanglement of power, knowledge and subjectivity. As Alaimo and Hekman (2008) argue, this has enabled intersectional analysis concerning how different power-relations co-evolve and reinforce each other, and has helped scholars to understand these relations from new perspectives. However, it has been increasingly clear that it has also brought with it serious liabilities as well as advantages.

Similar to how Otter (2010) describes the development within urban sociology, the more "thingy", "bump-into-able, stubbornly there-in-the-world kind of 'matter'" seem to, at the same time, have been rather neglected in the resistance literature. Following this, one could say that the material and the material world has generally been reduced to an arena within which battles between social forces, discourses, symbols, power and resistance have been fought. In many resistance perspectives, the material has been treated as an outcome and/or the medium in which social relations are produced and reproduced. From this perspective, the material is reduced to simply a text to be decoded or a symbolic bearer of meaning, and the material world simply to an external environment within which the analytically interesting action take place.

While material things often, as Otter (2010:43) argues, indeed "do function as background, arena, outcome, medium, obstacle, text or symbol", the problem is that by simply reducing them to these functions, one thereby "leaves materiality itself- the forms, states and qualities of matter- analytically unexplored". This, I argue, might be the case within resistance studies that, as we have seen, undeniably have been heavily influenced by the linguistic turn, and thus share a general focus on discourses, identity construction, languages and performativity. The problem here lies in the fact that the linguistic turn disconnects and distinguishes the construction of discourses from any material facts. In other words, since material objects, according to the linguistic turn, cannot be separated from objects of knowledge, the emphasis lies exclusively on the discursive construction of these objects. The material has often appeared to exist outside the rather abstract discussion on the role of discourses and language, which has been the main object of scholarly focus. While material things not always have been entirely neglected in such analysis, they nonetheless have remained rather black boxed and undifferentiated. Little attention has been given to the purely physical, material entities and to their potential agency, and they have rather been treated as a backdrop for social action. The potential contribution of the material turn lies, as I will try to argue, in emphasizing how matter matters; in other words by highlighting the central role of the material in the process when discourses are constructed.

The central question here is how far we have to go; to what extent is it necessary to "see the material"? This issue, regarding how much attention the material requires, is a matter of intense debate in the materialist literature. Otter (2010:45) expresses this key question as "can materiality be apprehended as more than an effect but less than a determinant?"

In other words, can we restore force, qualities and immanence to material things without reducing them to clumsy, brute determinants??”.

A quite common and relatively widely shared idea is that by emphasizing and exploring the existence of the material, one can actually contribute to the understanding of discursive formations and production. Hence, in this sense it is not necessarily a matter of simply moving the scope of analysis from the social discourse to the material, but rather to acknowledge the role of the material in the development and transformation of discourses (Colebrook, 1974; Grosz, 1994). As Alaimo and Hekman (2008:4) argue, ”bracketing or negating materiality can actually inhibit the development of a robust understanding of discourses production itself, since various aspects of materiality contribute to the development and transformation of discourses”. Thus, it is not necessarily a question of abandon our painfully accumulated insights from the linguistic turn, but rather to further build upon them with the aim of constructing and developing theories ”in which the material is more than a passive social construction but is, rather, an agentive force that interacts with and changes other elements in the mix, including the humans” (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008:7). Thus, the aim is to challenge the prevailing notion of the material as a passive object that culture shapes and inscribes itself upon.

I argue that such an approach -to focus on the ways the material world contributes to discursive formations and to acknowledge ”the natural” as a participant in these process- seems reasonable and might also serve to counterbalance the potential risk of delving too deep into the ontological issues about the ”true essence” of things. I see no relevance in stressing matter beyond matter (besides perhaps enabling low-hanging puns) and in purely philosophical discussions concerning the true essence of the material objects beyond our possible knowledge of them; a ”true essence” that we in each case will never grasp or even less touch upon. As I see it, it is highly doubtful what such a perspective could contribute to the debate, besides the risk of simply substituting the social reductionism of the linguistic turn with biological/natural reductionism (for a discussion on this, see Gunnarsson, 2013).

As I see it, there might be a tendency within the material turn to overemphasize relatedness and embeddedness with the risk to thereby neglect distinctness. While we may not be able to separate complex phenomena on a higher level due to their entanglement, co-evolvement and interaction, I argue that we cannot settle down by simply stating that everything is a messy entanglement of everything and that no distinction thereby can be made. To fully understand the relation between the social/material we need to zoom in on this complexity and go beyond stating the obvious about the embeddedness of everything.

## **Power and Resistance within the Material Turn**

Coming from this theoretical background I will now try to illustrate and exemplify this rather abstract and theoretical discussion in a more practical way, by discussing what and



how an increased focus on the material might contribute to resistance studies. At the same time, I hope to show how a more complex notion of the concept of resistance could contribute to the new materialist literature. Far from providing any exhaustive solutions, my intention here is rather to open up a discussion on the subject, trying to illustrate potential connections and possible fruitful, mutual contributions.

As mentioned above, there are a few theorists within the material turn that in a more explicit way discuss the relation between materiality and power. I will here discuss some of these scholars, one of which also incorporates the concept of resistance in the discussion. Following this, I will briefly present and discuss James Scott, a highly influential scholar within resistance studies that provides a more elaborated notion of resistance, while at the same time relates to materiality. The purpose with using these examples is neither to prove my theoretical points nor to attempt to provide any exhaustive summary of the scholars discussed. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate the theoretical gaps in a more concrete way, and discuss how the different perspectives might, like two lovers sweetly embracing, lift each other to new heights.

The issue of infrastructure has been the focus of inquiry for recent theorists of materiality. Infrastructure is an interesting case as it is constituted by complex interactive material systems, deeply entangled with political, environmental, economical, ecological and physical factors. Railroads, electricity grids, rivers, sewers, roads do not simply serve as a background or arena for social relation, neither an effect of social and cultural constructions, nor a determinant of these. They must, as Graham and Marvin (2001) states, "be considered as sociotechnical assemblies or 'machine complexes' rather than as individual, causal agents with identifiable impacts on cities and urban life".

Mukerji (2010) argues that there is a bias in the exclusive focus on systems of social relations in theories about the modern state, at the expense of the natural world, territorial governance and politics. Thus, the ways infrastructure, land use and regulations of resources affect the social order are often neglected. Mukerji illustrates this discussion by focusing on how the kingdom/the state in the seventeenth-century France used what she calls *territorial engineering* and constructed a "powerful and showy" infrastructure to change the political landscape. By constructing material infrastructure such as ports, canals and elaborated fortresses in order to achieve territorial control, this also had an impact on social life. This form of territorial politics served to empower the state, enabling to extend the reach of administration and state control, and contributed in changing the political landscape. Hence, Mukerji illustrates material power by elaborating how territorial politics, the material management of the kingdom and an increased administration of its territories unintentionally led to the development of a powerful, modern state (p.98). Mukerji thereby shows how physical infrastructure can be central in shaping social relations.

Similar to Mukerji, Joyce (2010) focuses primarily on the relation between the state and material power, and more specifically on how the state in Britain became increasingly technical in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He argues that these technical systems themselves, their material forms, were anything but neutral tools employed by a directing governmental

intelligence. Rather, "They had their own part to play, their own agency, indeed their own autonomous role" (Joyce, 2010:104). Joyce elaborates the relation between bureaucratic writing and bureaucratic control and the emergence of disciplinary organs within the modern state. He uses this case to illustrate the importance of the material power of bureaucracy in shaping both the institution of bureaucracy and even the imperial state itself.

Dias (2010) takes a somewhat different approach than those of Mukerji and Joyce, by focusing not only on the relation between infrastructure and power/the state, but also by more explicitly incorporating the role of resistance. Dias shows in a striking way how colonization and communication are intertwined and how the construction of infrastructure such as railroads, roads and telegraphs served as a material instrument of colonization by enabling and facilitating the development of colonial governance in French West Africa. Not only did this infrastructure enable information to be transmitted faster and thus allowing France to control territories and to prevent protests, but it was also connected to disciplining the colonies bodies through the recruitment of forced labor for constructing these infrastructure projects (p.171). The construction of infrastructure was thus a part of a military strategy in three steps, "to penetrate, to occupy and to pacify" (p.177).

Similar to Joyce and Mukerji, Dias shows how infrastructure is more than a neutral technological operation, but rather a part of a political project that shapes and reshapes social/power relations. She views the knowledge of the body (regarding for example the resistance, physical strength and endurance to pain of the colonized body) and the development of physical infrastructure as "intertwined elements of the material processes of colonial administration" (p.172). These are thus inseparable parts of the same process of colonization. Communication networks such as the telegraph and railway enabled to transmit orders to colonies, and "thus imposing a disciplinary regime at a distance" (p.178), thereby contributing in constructing a coherent empire where the center acts at a distance. At the same time, the colonized body was connected to this as it was viewed as part of the machinery, as "mere tools ...that could be easily replaced after use" (p.179). The material power of infrastructure was thus manifested in how the administration of territories served as a model for administrating also the colonized bodies.

Since technology was central in exercising power over the colonized bodies, their resistance was also turned against both the construction of telegraphs and railroad, as well as being enlisted as forced labor. "In other words, the colonized people's resistance was directed simultaneously at the administration of territory and at the colonial regime for the management of bodies" (p.183). By focusing on the entanglement between infrastructure, communication, technologies, people and administrative practices, Dias shows that rather than being simply technological machines, "the telegraph as well as the railroad served as techno-social solutions to political questions" (p.186).

However, while bringing together power and materiality in an interesting way, these perspectives do not explicitly connect the discussion to resistance. This bias and exclusive focus on the relation between power and materiality risk neglecting resistance, and thus

treat matter as exclusively a tool for the powerful. While Dias does incorporate resistance into her analysis, her approach is nonetheless narrow and limited as she focuses primarily on the entanglement between state power and materiality and on how technology was central in exercising power over the colonized bodies. Resistance, according to Dias, is understood as the different ways the colonized act to disrupt or destroy the infrastructure. Hence, she does not seem to separate between power and resistance, and the latter is reduced to a form of counter-power, "i.e. a (minor) power against the (major) Power, without its own distinguishing features" (Vinthagen and Lilja, 2007). This understanding is problematic and seriously simplified, since it neglects the notion that resistance is not only about undermining power, but also about producing social relations and social change. As I see it, it is doubtful whether we can reach a thorough and complete understanding of the relation between resistance and materiality simply by treating resistance as acts against the power-materiality. I agree with Vinthagen and Lilja (2007) when they argue that we need to analytically separate these concepts in order to be able to understand the relation between power, resistance and social change. This, I argue, is also necessary to acknowledge the role of material agency in these processes.

### **A Matter of Resistance**

While the new materialist theorists mainly focus on state-construction and on the impact of the material in these processes, James Scott can be said to focus on the other side of the coin; resistance to state control. While this has been the prime focus in much of his work, I here focus especially on his later book *The Art of not Being Governed* (2009), since this book explicitly relates to the role of materiality in relation to resistance practices<sup>5</sup>. Again, I want to emphasize that the purpose here is not to provide any exhaustive reading or exegesis of Scott's perspective, but rather to use parts of his work to illustrate what I have argued is a more general tendency within resistance studies concerning how the material is often treated.

In this book, Scott (2009) investigates how disparate groups in Zomia (a large mountainous region that consists of portions of seven Asian countries) have altered their cultural practices and how they adapted complex but flexible cultural identities to avoid forced inclusion in the state. These groups are generally situated in the mountains as well in as other hard-accessible areas far from established transport routes, and thus far from the center of power.

For Scott (2009), state power was connected to administrative capacity, which he argues often involved estimations of travel times rather than simply indications of physical distance. Therefore, Scott focuses on different factors that affect the "friction" of administrative control. Following this, what is often viewed by the elite as *uncivilized*, *primitivism* or *barbarian* is in fact often conscious resistance strategies from subordinated

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Scott also relates to the role of materiality in some of his earlier work, including e.g. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellions in Southern Asia* (1977) and in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). However, the materiality perspective is arguably not as explicit in these earlier works, and as far as I can see these furthermore gives a similar account regarding the role of the material.

groups, trying to avoid being incorporated in the state. What was seen, from the administrative perspective, as a symptom of political immaturity or instability, was from the Zomians perspective often rather a survival tactic.

Material things such as crops, infrastructure, physical terrain, mountains and valleys are central parts of resistance strategies to avoid oppressive state control. Also technology are seen as central as it enabled the growth of the modern state by reducing time and costs for transports, thus decreasing the friction of distance through the construction of bridges, roads, railways, maps, telegraphs, or more modern technologies such as helicopters and GPS. The same also goes for more cultural factors such as oral traditions, language, literacy and political structures. All these strategies have the purpose to increase the friction and thus to obstruct state appropriation.

From this perspective, shifting cultivation, rather than being a primitive form of agriculture practiced in the uplands, was a fundamentally political choice (Scott, 2009:194-195). Since wet rice farming and the regulation of irrigation systems was easy to see and thus to seize or tax/assess, it was well-adapted for the state-building projects. Therefore, these groups often applied shifting cultivation, or as Scott chose to call it, *escape agriculture*, using root vegetables such as maize and cassava, that were well hidden in the earth and could be planted, left behind, and harvested when the threat had passed. These crops are difficult to discover and thus avoid being taxed, and also less profitable to cultivate in large scale.

The same goes for "historylessness", which according to Scott can serve as a tactical purpose similar to shifting cultivation: the avoidance of rigidity and the assurance of "virtually limitless" possibilities (p.235). As Scott argues, "How much history a people have, far from indicating their low stage of evolution, is always an active choice, one that positions them vis-a-vis their powerful text-based neighbors" (p.237). Scott also challenges the conventional notion of literacy in a similar way as he previously upset conventional understanding of agriculture and the notion of civilization. "Oral traditions are to written traditions more or less what swidden agriculture is to irrigated wet-rice agriculture or what small, dispersed kin groups are to settled, concentrated societies. They are the 'jellyfish,' shape-shifting, pliable form of custom, history, and law" (p. 230).

As I see it, Scott's (2009) perspective is highly interesting as he provides a well-needed focus on the concept of resistance. However, the material in Scott's account is treated merely as a resistance tool; thereby the notion of materiality tends to be reduced to a background or medium for resistance. Scott stresses how groups consciously are using material things as central parts of resistance strategies, but the materiality itself tends to remain rather unexplored and black boxed and the material power is given very little attention. As I see it, it would be interesting to apply a more materialistic perspective; that is to treat the material more as an active participant, thus moving the scope of analysis to the complex interplay between material agency and social relations. Such a perspective would emphasize material power by stressing questions such as; how does the material itself act back in this process and contributes in shaping resistance and social relations?

To sum up, I have argued that the new materialist literature generally seem to lack any well-elaborated focus on the notion of resistance. Resistance is mainly treated as acts of counter-power against the power-material constitution, but the relation between resistance and materiality is not further elaborated. At the same time, resistance studies is firmly situated within the linguistic turn. Very few scholars within this tradition have explicitly elaborated on the role of materiality and material agency in practices of resistance. While influential scholars such as Scott (2009) do indeed discuss material things in relation to resistance, he does not include material power/agency in the analysis and thus misses how the material acts back and in turn may shape both resistance and social relations. As I have argued, this suggests that resistance studies might gain from acknowledging material agency, and that such an approach might contribute to release materiality from its procrustean bed of constituting simply the background, outcome, medium or external environment of resistance practices and open up for a more active, central role for material power. Furthermore, I have argued that such an approach indeed can be combined with the analysis of the formation of social discourses, which means that there are no reason to abandon many of the accumulated insights from the linguistic turn. The critical task for resistance studies remains: what we need is to develop a compelling story of the complex relation between material agency and resistance practices, while keeping in mind that the material agency is in fact an emergent result of the interaction between distinctly social and material processes. Acknowledging the role of matter is of crucial relevance for resistance studies, marking a change of perspective that is both theoretically novel and may open up new strands of research.

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