



## The Physics and Metaphysics of Struggle

Martin Parker

**review of:**

Peter Fleming & André Spicer (2007) *Contesting the Corporation: Struggle, Power and Resistance in Organizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (HB: pp.236, £45.00, ISBN: 9780521860864)

I am on holiday, sitting on the decking outside a lodge in some woods in Lincolnshire. I have my laptop, and am waiting for the others to get up, so have decided to make a start on this book review. I don't seem to resent sitting here, but am puzzled now, after reading Fleming and Spicer's challenging little book, as to whether I should be doing this at all. I am clearly a certain sort of obsessive subject, but (assuming I don't bother with the search for my original authentic self) I wonder what else I want to do, right now. I could go for a walk, watch TV, read another book. But I like it here, on my veranda, with my laptop and coffee, and the trees sighing all around.

Presumably Peter Fleming and André Spicer, both good academic Stakhanovites, had moments like this too. They have published enthusiastically in many journals with excellently high reject rates, and presumably this has meant burning the midnight oil, or the morning coffee. I can also easily imagine the three of us having a cynical and knowing conversation about the disciplining effects of careers, the RAEification of the CV, and perhaps even the desire to be the sort of person who writes on a veranda, surrounded by trees. And the three of us can have this conversation, and then march back to our desks, carrying our prisons joyfully on our backs. Does that mean that resistance, for subjects like us, must mean switching our laptops off for the final time? Or can we write, or think, our way to a 'theory' that allows us to decide when we are doing resistance and when we are doing power? To borrow Dennis Mumby's terms, to decide what is a bow and what is a fart (p. 49)? And, given our collective claims to be 'critical', can such a 'theory' encourage more resistance and less power?

Fleming and Spicer are smart enough to see the traps in these questions. Their book (only available in hardback) is, I think, a very good summary of contemporary thought concerning the relation between 'resistance' and 'power'. The Newtonian model, of the straight line motion of an object through space being deflected by some other force or object is attractive in its simplicity, but misleading. Consider the following. In *De*

*Rerum Natura*, some 17 centuries before Newton, Lucretius had suggested an original state of being in which the universe was populated by many objects traveling in parallel straight lines through infinite space (1951: 60 *passim*). Then, and this is the key moment, the trajectory of one of the objects changes, and it collides with another one, which collides with another in turn and so on. The messy universe is born, but where is resistance and power, in Lucretius' model? There are endless collisions, and consequent deviations, but the idea of one particle being 'force' and another being 'resistance' is something which makes no analytic sense. Unless we decide that the biggest deviation from a trajectory is the minor term and hence 'resistance'. And then, I suppose we decide to sympathise with the particles which are bounced around more than the others that continue mostly in straighter lines? But even then, our allegiances might change, as power becomes resistance when it meets an even bigger particle, and is forced to change trajectory itself.

For Fleming and Spicer, for slightly different reasons, power and resistance are better condensed into 'struggle', which I suppose (in my version of Lucretius' terms) we might think of as an endless Brownian motion between particles. Sometimes, for certain ethical-political purposes, we might decide to call one movement 'power' and another one 'resistance', but there is no methodological or theoretical security behind such distinctions. Ask me, now, on the veranda. Which am I doing? What sort of answer or observation would allow you to decide? Another question that Fleming and Spicer want to answer is to decide when to call such moments 'political'. This word might be modified in the minor direction as 'micro-political', but that may itself be a problem if we are interested in encouraging struggles that appear to have effects which endure beyond particular localised claims or resentments. Our authors are often indignant about the vapidness of 'postmodernists' on this score (though their scholarship lets them down in terms of identifying people who do actually claim such things). They are suspicious that micro-politics is really politics at all, and want to see politics as a bigger process of making universal claims for justice, whilst recognising all the attendant problems of contingency and irony that are necessarily involved in such claims.

I think that Fleming and Spicer do a very good job of framing the question of struggle, but are less convincing when it comes to the question of politics. This, in part, is because of a slippage that is potentially very powerful, but happens in the background of this book. The subtitle tells us that it is about action that takes place within organizations, but the last third of the book is really about attacks on corporations from 'outside', such as pressure groups, the movement of movements and so on. (Though why is there so little on alternative organizations?) Now, in principle, there is no reason why we could not collect these "thousand swarming refusals" (p. 3) together, ending up by gathering all sorts of different moments under this generalised ontology of struggle. That would mean that a contested case of sexual harassment, the formation of a worker co-op, and the Genoa protests would get treated as the same sorts of things. This could be a really useful move, but it isn't quite the symmetry that Fleming and Spicer want, because they do seem to be attached to the idea that many people (postmodernists, cultural studies types, certain organization theorists) can no longer distinguish 'big' struggles from 'small' ones. And though they are not definitive or categorical (because this is a clever book) they want the "cult of the subject" (p. 185) to be augmented by a return to a concern with "capitalism, wealth distribution and class relations" (p. 187). In

which case, one might ask the authors, are the smaller collisions ‘politics’ at all? Or, to put that a different way: who gets to decide when something is ‘politics’, and when something is not?

The first three chapters provided an excellent summary and typology of power and resistance which could be very useful indeed (and would easily justify Cambridge putting this out in paperback). Identifying four couplets, the authors suggest that there are struggles over action, activity, interests and identity which are manifested as coercion and refusal, manipulation and voice, domination and escape, and subjectification and creation respectively. This is a neat collection of ideas, and it really begged further application. I suspect that the ghosts of ‘small’ and ‘big’ politics could have been nicely exorcised if this typology had been applied to the detail of particular struggles throughout the rest of the book. However, it largely disappeared as we moved into the discussion of various, and rather uneven, pieces of empirical work. New concepts then begin to appear and disappear, perhaps reflecting the genesis of this book in a variety of different papers published by the two authors: Diogenes’ cynicism, Nancy Fraser on justice, de Certeau on tactics, a little Laclau and Mouffe and a sprinkling of Hardt and Negri. At various points we get emphases on the absorption of resistance by the ‘corporate machine’ (p. 127), or on the potentials of worker solidarity and the paradoxes of gay and shareholder rights. All interesting, and well written, but I felt that the organization of the early parts of the book was being lost in a series of collisions and movements which did not add up to a clear direction.

But perhaps more important than this reviewer’s need for neat organization was the absence of sustained reflection concerning the ethical-political. Fleming and Spicer say:

We *must* side with the subordinated, but also remain sensitized to the overdetermined and contradictory nature of political struggle in contemporary organizations. (p. 107, emphasis in the original)

But why *must*? What sort of imperative is this that would have us claim allegiance to some of Lucretius’ atoms rather than others? To prefer the small ones that change direction a lot over the bigger ones that continue in fairly straight lines? I suspect my sympathies are similar to Fleming and Spicer’s, but I think they simply assumed that they were. This is preaching to the choir. It is precisely because they are asking hard and important questions about power and resistance that I expected them to ask parallel questions about their allegiances and the possibility and desirability of certain effects, whether we call this ‘politics’ or not. Why do they want to ‘side with’ certain resistances, but not others? And, when ‘on side’, does this mean that academics become part of the resistance too? Is *Contesting the Corporation* an act of resistance? As this smug reviewer knows only too well, it is easy enough to be a radical on the veranda, as the sunshine dapples down through the trees, and the atoms collide with one another. But my holiday is nearly over now, so back to wage slavery on Monday. Reviewing is leisure, but writing is work.

## references

Lucretius (1951) *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans R.E. Latham. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

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