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Serving coffee with Žižek: On decaf, half-caf and real resistance at Starbucks

Erik Mygind du Plessis

abstract

This paper investigates the term *decaf resistance*, which signifies a resistance, which, although experienced as risky, is harmless in reality, because it – like decaf coffee – is stripped of its potentially dangerous main ingredient. Theoretically, the article is based on Alessia Contu's previous outline of the term and Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology. The explanatory force of this theoretical perspective is examined through the use of the online chat forum ihatestarbucks.com, where baristas at Starbucks, amongst other topics, describe how they as a form of resistance serve decaf coffee to customers who have ordered regular coffee. The paper concludes that while useful in explaining the individual employees' libidinal investment in and subjective experience of his or her resistance, the decaf-perspective also implies a rigid dichotomy between 'real' and 'decaf' resistance, which is rather unhelpful for distinguishing between different types of resistance. The analysis thus shows how the sharing of hidden acts of resistance on a public online-forum seems to make these acts subjectively less 'decaf' for the baristas, albeit without crossing the Žižekian threshold, which would allow for a characterization of these acts as 'real' resistance. This leads to a discussion of how this type of 'half-caf' resistance, which is neither harmless nor revolutionary, challenges the Žižekian dichotomy between decaf and Real act.

Introduction

The following paper takes a Žižekian perspective, refined by Alessia Contu, as its theoretical point of departure, as it critically engages with the idea of '*decaf*' resistance. This term signifies a resistance, which has been deprived of its potentially dangerous main-ingredient, but is still experienced as the original

'dangerous' resistance, where both the resister and the resisted have something at stake (Žižek, 2003, 2004, 2010b; Contu, 2008).

The empirical reference is the chat forum *ihatestarbucks,* where Starbucks-baristas share their experiences on informal resistance practices. The aim of the paper is to examine the explanatory force of the 'decaf'-perspective and contribute to the development of our conceptual understanding of resistance in organizations. The paper concludes that while useful in explaining the individual employees' libidinal investment in and subjective experience of his or her resistance, the decaf-perspective also implies a rigid dichotomy between 'real' and 'decaf' resistance, which is a rather unhelpful analytical distinction for distinguishing between different modes of resistance. The paper thus shows how the sharing of hidden acts of resistance on a public online-forum seems to make these acts subjectively less 'decaf' for the baristas, albeit without crossing the Žižekian threshold, which would allow for a characterization of these acts as 'real' resistance. The paper concludes that while the 'inner worlds' of the baristas, that become visible through the website, can be described and explained quite precisely through the Žižekian perspective, this only applies to the invisible and unrecorded resistance. The moment the resistance is shared on a publicly accessible website, it seems to challenge the Žižekian dichotomy between decaf and Real act, in becoming a type of 'half-caf' resistance, which is neither harmless nor revolutionary.

State of the art

Within critical studies of management and organization (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992*;* Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott, 2009) informal resistance (e.g. Scott, 1985) is by no means a new object of analysis (Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). In recent studies however, the concept of resistance has become increasingly shrouded with ambiguity, as scholars underscore the dialectical and mutually constitutive relationship between control and resistance (Mumby, 2005; Bloom, 2013) and the subsequent difficulties of distinguishing and categorizing one from the other (Fleming and Spicer, 2008; Parker, 2007). Resistance, in this view, is thus understood as a set of situated practices '(...) that are simultaneously enabling and constraining, coherent and contradictory, complex and simple, efficacious and ineffectual' (Mumby, 2005: 37). Such dialectical accounts can be seen as a response to earlier conceptualizations of resistance in organizations, which among other things have faced criticism for either over-romanticizing resisters as pure revolutionary subjects, or conversely – and perhaps more commonly – viewing them as unwitting dupes. This has also to some extent entailed a conceptual division,

where the organization becomes comprised of managers 'as morally deranged creatures who seek to exercise their will to dominate at any opportunity' (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 4), and employees who naturally desire even the most minor form of liberation and seek to further their emancipatory political agenda at every turn (*ibid.*).While the study of resistance in organizations has been undertaken from a wide range of perspectives, including critical-cultural, feminist, interpretive and poststructuralist-postcolonial (Prasad and Prasad, 2000), the historically most prominent of these have arguably been Labour Process Theory (LPT) and Foucauldian approaches. This section thus proceeds with a short outline of each of these perspectives, before turning to Žižekian theory as a potential future avenue for studying resistance in organizations.

The premise within Labour Process Theory (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Burawoy, 1979; Knights and Willmott, 1990; Grugulis and Knights, 2001) is, drawing on Marx, that resistance should be understood less as the outcome of a rational actor, acting out of personal interest, and more as the inevitable result of capitalisms' exploitation of the workforce (eg. Braverman, 1978). Resistance is thus the result of an inherent antagonism between capital and workers, most prominently displayed in the workplace, which is understood as the primary site of exploitation (Spicer and Böhm, 2007: 1669). The purpose of resistance is a 're-appropriation' of the things systematically denied the worker such as identity and time (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 25). While the most obvious forms of re-appropriation happen through unions, there have within LPT also been studies of more informal forms of resistance such as sabotage (Brown, 1977), humor at the expense of management (Taylor and Bain, 2003) and theft (Ditton, 1977). LPT has however been criticized for not being able to sufficiently account for the individual employee's subjective understanding and experience of her daily life in the organization, and over-emphasizing structural and somewhat deterministic explanations when accounting for resistance in the workplace (Spicer and Böhm, 2007: 1670).

Partly as a response to this critique, other scholars have turned towards Michel Foucault in their studies of resistance in organizations (Collinson, 2003; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Jermier, Knights and Nord, 1994). Foucault's emphasis on how subjectivity and reality are shaped through concrete practices and technologies in complex webs of knowledge, power and resistance (Foucault, 1991, 2000) makes it possible to expand the idea of power and resistance beyond a structural and class-based conception. In the Foucauldian tradition, resistance is comprised of informal micro-politics, which are understood as the constant negotiation of discourses and identities that are ascribed new meanings through these subtle processes (Spicer and Böhm, 2007: 1670). In this tradition, emphasis is often given to the ways in which employees

resist various attempts by the organization to colonize their subjectivities (Knights and McCabe, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005) such as through the negotiation of masculine identities (Collinson, 2003) or the opposing of performance management (Ball and Wilson, 2000). As in LPT however, the Foucauldian tradition has also been accused of having certain difficulties in ridding itself of structural determinism – in this case however, it seems to be the discourses rather than the economic structures that determine the actions of the subject (Newton, 1998). Whether or not this critique is justified, is however debatable. More recent contributions to Foucauldian organization studies have thus suggested a number of new and potentially fruitful avenues for heeding it. Drawing on Foucauldian concepts such as 'agonism' (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) and 'dipositive' (Raffnsøe et.al 2016) these studies have been quite convincing in their directions for overcoming 'received dualisms' of power and resistance, determinism and counter-agency and structure and agency within Foucauldian organization studies.

Another potential avenue for the ridding of such dualisms and dichotomies in studying resistance is the theoretical frameworks of Jacques Lacan and especially Slavoj Žižek which in later years have become quite popular within organization studies (Cederström and Hoodemakers, 2010; Contu and Willmott, 2006; du Plessis, 2015; Gabriel, 1995, 1997; Glynos, 2008; Johnsen, Pedersen and Muhr, 2009; Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015). Given that both Lacan and Žižek emphasize the desire involved in any identity construction (action/agency), the dependence in this process upon the Big Other (structure) as well as the inherent limitations of both the subject and the socio-symbolic order (Stavrakakis, 2010: 59), the utilization of Žižekian-Lacanian theory can be seen as a way to contribute to a more dialectical view of power and resistance. Furthermore, this perspective differs from perspectives like LPT and Foucault through its keen eye for the individual employee's libidinal investment in and experience of her resistance.

Thus the theoretical starting point of this paper is the introduction of the Žižekian term 'decaf resistance' by Alessia Contu (Contu, 2008), which is critically applied by employing the Žižekian concepts of cynicism, ideological fantasy and jouissance as a theoretical backdrop, and the accounts from Starbucks-baristas about informal resistance as the empirical point of departure.

Decaf: The thing without the thing

Žižek occasionally uses the term *decaf* to describe a tendency, where a thing is deprived of its potentially dangerous main ingredient (Žižek, 2003, 2004, 2010b). It still resembles the original thing, except from the fact that it is no

longer potentially harmful. This tendency can be seen in anything from everyday consumer products to politics and sex:

> On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex (...) , the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics etc. (...). (Žižek, 2003)

In the following analysis, resistance is explored with this 'decaf'-tendency as an underlying basis. This approach builds upon Alessia Contu's conceptualization of 'decaf resistance' as resistance without a cost:

> In this decaf resistance we receive a payment in the form of the illusion that we are still having the thing (resistance). However, we do not have to bear the cost that is associated with having the thing itself, which is the danger of radically changing things as we know them. (Contu, 2008: 374)

Resistance and criticism is thus often associated with a certain element of danger and is among other things referred to as a 'weapon' (Bourdieu, 2005) or something that can cause 'shellshock' (Willig, 2011). Others have emphasized how the critical practice implies the resister risking her subjectivity by staking it against a current regime of truth (eg. Butler, 2004). Resistance then, is something that threatens and potentially harms either the resister or the resisted, because both have something at stake. Decaf resistance is conceptualized in opposition to this, as a form of resistance, which neither threatens nor harms anyone, because neither the resister nor the resisted have that much at stake. It is however reminiscent of the original and dangerous form of resistance in the same manner as decaf coffee is reminiscent of regular coffee.

Methodology

In the following, this coffee metaphor is pursued into the actual by exploring work-life at Starbucks, which is the largest coffee franchise in the world, represented by more than 20,000 restaurants worldwide [1]. Starbucks is interesting, because its baristas seem to be exercising a form of resistance, which both literally and metaphorically can be characterized as decaf. At least according to the website www.ihatestarbucks.com, which has as its primary purpose to offer a forum, where baristas at Starbucks can discuss the chiefly negative aspects of their work. The website can be described as a part of the growing breed of so-called 'counter-institutional websites' that are characterized by providing

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1   http://loxcel.com/sbux-faq.html.

'(...) a space outside the control of the target organization to oppose official institutional messages, policies, and practices' (Gossett and Kilker, 2006: 64). Besides a chat-forum, the website contains a page, which states a number of reasons for hating Starbucks along with some general guidelines for using the forum. The site has existed in various formats since 2001[2] and contains several hundred pages with different threads ranging between one and more than a thousand entries. For about a year, I paid at least weekly visits to the site, and monitored the activity on the forum without participating in the discussions, which often contained specific descriptions of informal resistance.

Methodologically, this presence on the forum as a 'fly on the wall' can be described by the term *lurking,* which originates from online-ethnography, where scholars, despite the advantages of so-called 'naturalistic' (Hewson and Laurent, 2008) and naturally occurring data, usually encourage more participatory forms of observation (Garcia, Standlee and Bechkoff, 2009: 59; Hine, 2008: 262-3).

However, when the researcher is more concerned with a webpage as a 'community online' than an 'online community' which is arguably the case in this paper, thick ethnographic descriptions of the user-experience, i.e. being a part of the forum, posting messages etc., become less pertinent (Kozinets, 2010: 63-65). This of course does not imply that a more engaging approach, which might entail engaging in a dialogue with the users on the forum about the supposedly 'decaf' nature of their resistance, perhaps combined with actual 'IRL' fieldwork in a Starbucks-café, could not yield interesting results. While outside the scope of this paper, such approaches would arguably be an important contribution to the study of hidden vs. public (online) resistance and organizational life in general.

Notwithstanding, my continuous anonymous presence on the chat-forum has resulted in an extensive archive consisting of several hundred pages of accounts of criticism and resistance amongst the baristas at Starbucks. The extent to which these accounts are in fact true, and not merely expressions of different kinds of bragging or fantasizing, is difficult to determine. This, however, is less significant, as it is not the purpose of this paper to draw conclusions about

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2   During the review-process of this paper, the website www.ihatestarbucks.com has, for unknown reasons, been taken down. This has resulted in all of the threads cited in this paper becoming inaccessible online. It is unclear whether this closing is permanent or temporary. However, as part of the empirical archive, the author of this paper is in possession of print-outs of all the quotes used in this paper. Similar empirical material is also available other places online. For example, some of the popular themes and discussions from the forum, including the classic 'Who did you decaf today?'-discussion, are also taking place on the Starbucks-sub-forum on Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucks/comments/1qfkv9/whod_you_decaf_today/.

actually occurring resistance in modern organizations. Instead the purpose is to contribute to the continuing conceptual discussion about the meaning, impact and transformative potential of these kinds of resistance as well as how they can be grasped analytically. The chat-forum is thus seen as an empirical input to this discussion, which can be used to examine the idea of decaf resistance as a Žižekian inspired analytical perspective. The use of the forum as a general empirical reference is thus supported by the fact that the deliberations of the baristas have shown themselves to be able to illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of 'decaf resistance' as a Žižekian analytical perspective, as well as stimulate the conceptual development of the term.

My anonymous presence on the forum does however also raise some ethical considerations (Garcia et al., 2009: 59). Even though www.ihatestarbucks.com is a public forum which can be accessed without creating a user-profile, the discussions on the forum can still be experienced as private to some extent by the users (Hine, 2008: 265). Furthermore many of the quotes could compromise, and in some cases maybe even incriminate, their orators if their anonymity had been broken. It is however impossible to anonymize the name of the website, if one, as in the case of this article, uses verbatim quotations, because anyone can type the quotations into Google and hereby potentially find their way to the correct website and user. It should however be noted that the users have ensured their anonymity through usernames, and that the site has already been mentioned in a number of other media-outlets.[3]

A (decaf) Venti soy mocha frappucino no whip

The forum contains an account from a user, who describes how a customer comes into the café and orders her coffee – *a Venti Soy Mocha Frappucino no whip*. It is a long order, typical of the enormous selection of different coffee-variants at Starbucks. The user, who is employed at Starbucks as a barista, repeats the order twice to be sure. A *Venti Soy Mocha Frappucino no whip*. A little later, when the customer receives the drink, she asks 'what the heck is this?' and proceeds to state how she ordered a Coffee Frappucino, not a Mocha Frappucino. She then points at the barista and exclaims loudly 'this girl right here messed up my drink and I want it remade'. The barista apologizes and quickly starts

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3   Since the website is currently closed down, these considerations have become somewhat less pertinent. At the time of writing however, it is still unclear whether the closing of the site is permanent or whether the site might reopen at some point in the future. This would potentially make all the quotes used in the paper accessible again.

remaking the coffee. This time however, she uses decaf beans instead of regular beans for the drink. This is completely deliberate and is referred to as 'de-cafing' among the baristas. The user ends her entry: 'Don't point at me ***** [bitch] pay attention!'

This story can be found in the thread 'Whom did you decaf today?' which with over a thousand posts is among the longest on the forum. In addition to this form of resistance being literally decaf, because the coffee served is decaffeinated, it can also be seen as decaf in a metaphorical, Žižekian sense. Serving decaffeinated coffee instead of regular coffee is thus completely harmless and does not hurt or threaten anyone, as well as no one except the barista notices that the resistance is even carried out. This decaffeinated resistance thus acts as a surrogate for an open confrontation, where both parties have a lot more at stake. Particularly the barista, who risks losing her job if she fails to treat the customers properly.

This is due to Starbucks' so-called 'Just say yes' policy (Boone and Kurtz, 2010: 615) which states that baristas must always say 'yes' to the customer, no matter what he or she demands. According to the baristas, this policy is one of the worst drawbacks to the job as a Starbucks-barista. Thus, a user has written the following on the forum:

> (…) I despise my job I dread every time I go into work (…) and here's why:

> The customer is ALWAYS, ALWAYS right even if they are trying to rape you, steal from you, abuse you etc. (...)

Another user writes:

> (...) probably every three or four transactions, I just want to start screaming, 'We are PEOPLE! Why do you treat us this way??!' I detest the corporate culture that has led to all our customers being entitled man-babies.

These accounts can be read as signs of frustration about the humiliation of assuming the *just say yes* attitude, where one does not talk back, no matter how rude the customer is, or how degraded one feels. It is humiliating to passively accept a scolding from a customer, if one has not done anything wrong. Among other things, it is these daily humiliations that the baristas are reacting against, when they serve decaffeinated coffee to unreasonable, rude or condescending customers. As one user on the forum writes: '(...)Efff those customers who think they are so much better than us'. This lack of dignity thus seems to be the immediate motivation behind the decaf resistance, where the customer is indulged on the surface but secretly contradicted.

However it is not just the guidelines for customer care, which discontent the forum-users. A more general criticism of Starbucks as a brand is also prevalent on the forum. The forum-administrator thus explains the background for naming the site 'I Hate Starbucks' as follows:

> (...) Starbucks is not your friend. It doesn't like you. It doesn't want you to have a 'third place'. It wants your money. It doesn't do magnanimous things out of the goodness of its heart. It is trying to maximize profit and part of the way they do this is by selling a brand that 'does good things for the people that pick beans'. Even if Starbucks follows these business practices with less than 1% of the coffee that they buy.

The forum-administrator points out two central tenets of the Starbucks-brand, which are seen as false and instrumental in the sense of existing solely to disguise the aspiration of the corporation to further enhance its profits. The first tenet being the idea that Starbucks is a kind of 'third place' between home and work, where one can unwind in comfortable chairs and a relaxed atmosphere,[4] and secondly the idea that Starbucks is a socially responsible organization that cares about its employees and suppliers in the third world. The serving of decaf instead of regular coffee can thus be seen as a silent protest against having to indulge unreasonable clients, combined with a more general distaste for the Starbucks brand, which is seen as fake and pompous[5].

In the following, three interrelated Žižekian perspectives on decaf resistance are presented. Firstly it is demonstrated how the baristas' dislike can be seen as a form of 'cynicism' vis à vis the brand and values of Starbucks. Then it is explored how the cynicism of the baristas is supported by an 'ideological fantasy' which offers the subject a false dis-identification from the role as Starbucks barista. The third perspective is the concept of 'jouissance', which allows for an investigation of the element of enjoyment in the cynicism and informal resistance. Finally the paper discusses the fruitfulness of the Žižekian perspective, which is challenged with regards to conceptualizing the public dimension of decaf resistance in the form of the accounts about it online. As the argument unfolds, some additional Žižekian terms are introduced, as they are necessary for understanding the three perspectives.

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4   http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/our-heritage.

5   Part of the resistance of the baristas is initially directed toward the customers, but is simultaneously an indirect resistance of Starbucks' guidelines for customer-care. Thus Žižek might claim that baristas and customers are in a way in the same boat, as they are exposed to the same interpellations, but with different positions for resisting through consumption and service, respectively. Žižek has thus himself written about the critique of Starbucks from the perspective of the consumer (see for instance Žižek, 2009: 53-54).

Cynicism: Starbucks is a joke

The critique of the Starbucks brand on the chat-forum can be understood as targeting the 'ideology' of the corporation, if one employs a commonsensical understanding of the term such as 'system of ideas'. Žižek's version of the term, however, is somewhat different from this. Žižek has suggested that ideology can no longer be understood in the classical Marxist conception as 'false consciousness' where the diagnosis of its subjects are 'they do not know it, but they are doing it' (Žižek, 1989: 28). Additionally, Žižek rejects the classic strategy of ideology-critique that follows from this statement, where the false smokescreen of ideology must be dissolved through a confrontation with the reality, which the ideology thus far has been able to distort. Instead, Žižek adopts from Peter Sloterdijk the thesis that modern ideology's dominant mode of functioning is cynical (Sloterdijk, 2005). The cynical subject is thus perfectly aware of the distance between the ideological mask and social reality, but nonetheless insists on keeping the mask. Sloterdijk's diagnosis of the subjects of ideology thus is 'They know very well what they are doing, but still they are doing it'. The cynical reason is no longer naïve, but has developed into a paradoxical form of 'enlightened false consciousness': The subject is completely aware that the ideological universality is false and functions as a disguise for certain private interests, but still the subject does not reject it (Žižek, 1989: 28-30).

Looking at the Starbucks-baristas through this cynicism-lens, it appears to have a certain explanatory force. The users of the forum on ihatestarbucks.com thus seem to be completely aware that the ideology of Starbucks is false and only serves to enhance the company's profits, but they still put on the ideological mask as they go to work every day. The tendency in late capitalism of organizations attempting to elicit the required efforts of its members through their identification with the 'company culture' (eg. Kunda, 2009) can thus also be seen at Starbucks, where management has given the baristas the euphemistic and almost Orwellian title of 'Partners' – which is the subject of much cynical satirizing by the users on the forum. Relatedly, the baristas are acutely aware that the customer-is-always-right-mantra 'Just say yes' does not mean that the customer is in fact always right, but they still on a daily basis act as if this was the case. Thus the servings of decaffeinated coffee and anonymous internet scribblings are the closest they come to a rejection of the ideology, which they know very well is false. As a user writes on the forum:

> (...) I've only recently started to decaf. I've been with the company 3 years now, and I'm not sure how I've managed to go so long without doing it to keep my sanity. My reasoning was that yes, even though customers can be a pain in the ***, I still am there to do my job and provide a quality drink.... of course now that I've come

to the realization that working at Sbux is a total joke (...) ...well, let the games begin.

The Starbucks-ideology is a total joke, and the false consciousness has consequently been enlightened after three years. In spite of this discouraging new insight, the barista does not quit her job, but instead augments it with a new 'game' to avoid going insane, in the form of decaf servings.

From a Žižekian standpoint however, the cynicism of the baristas is not an expression of a rejection of the ideology, but the exact opposite. Even though the cynical attitude and actions can be experienced as a form of resistance by the individual employee, the idea is that the cynicism only serves to tie the employee even stronger to the conditions which she is resisting and secretly criticizing (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 69ff). According to Žižek, the ironic dis-identification from ideology and the belief in an authentic position outside its grasp, is exactly ideology at its purest (Kay, 2003: 151; Žižek, 1999a).

But wherein lies the ideological? If 'they know very well, what they are doing' but are still doing it, why not look at it as merely a matter of post-ideological indifference? According to Žižek, because ideology does not work through a distortion of our knowledge about social reality, but is somehow inscribed in that very reality – the reality of our actions. In this perspective, the Starbucks-baristas are thus supporting the Starbucks-ideology by going to work every day and playing the role as loyal employees, no matter what they might secretly be thinking or doing.

> What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called *ideological fantasy*. (Žižek, 1989: 30)

The fundamental level of ideology is thus for Žižek not the illusion that distorts how things really are, but instead the *ideological fantasy* that structures our entire social reality.

Ideological fantasy and false dis-identification

The function of the fantasy is to cover up or explain the traumatic feeling of lack, which constitutes the Žižekian subject. When the subject enters the symbolic

order (i.e. language) it is thus reduced to a symbolic mandate (woman, barista, etc.) which does not quite correspond to its own experience of itself, and therefore results in a feeling of lack within the subject (Stavrakakis, 2010: 63). The lack is given by the distance between the subject's immediate experience of itself and the symbolic title, which assigns it a certain status or authority. The frustrations of the baristas about not being seen as people, but as 'coffee-robots', is an example of this lack, which the subject will do anything to fill, in order to attain an unrealizable ideal of unity (Stavrakakis, 2010:63). According to Žižek, this lack is the basic foundation of subjectivity (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 3; Žižek, 2000: 28)[6].

Returning to the cynical baristas and the idea of standing outside ideology and resisting it through servings of decaf coffee, this notion is, as already mentioned, an expression of ideology *par excellence*, according to Žižek (Kay, 2003: 134). Specifically, it can be seen as an 'ideological fantasy', which serves to cover up the subject's basic feeling of lack. For the baristas, this happens through the idea of an 'authentic being' as free subjects, who are somehow outside the phony ideology of Starbucks. However, according to Žižek, this kind of 'authentic' or 'lack-free' being is constitutively impossible, and the ideological fantasy is hence left with trying to cover up this traumatic fact (Žižek, 2010a: 70, 88).

An often used example to illustrate the fantasmatic function is the anti-semitic fantasy of the Jew in Nazi-Germany, where the figure of the Jew is constructed as an impediment to a sublime German being and as an explanantion for a fundamental experience of lack and incompleteness. But where the Jew in the Nazi fantasy appears as the impediment to a sublime Germanness, for Žižek, the Jew is actually the filling, that replaces a perfect German condition, which does not exist. Thus, what is seen as an impediment to the fully constituted identity of a society, is actually the condition of its possibility. The fantasy of the Jew stages a desire for the sublime and makes it possible to imagine a pure, harmonious Germanness (Laustsen, 1999: 24-27; Žižek, 1997: 76, 2010a: 90).

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6 This attribution of the frustraion of the baristas to a primordial lack may fit somewhat uneasily with the phenomological everyday-experience of enduring various abuses in a job earning minimum wage. Moreover, it might also be seen as running the risk of depolitilzing power-relations. The point however is not that the abuses endured by the baristas are not the cause of the frustration, but rather, that the primordial feeling of lack is fantasmatically projected on to this frustration in a cynical fantasy, which promises autonomy, wholeness and unity of self in the ironic distaning from the organization and the abuses one endures. This again leads to a 'decaf' resistance, which sustains the very power-relations that are frutrating the baristas and causing them to resist.

If we observe Starbucks through this fantasy-perspective, we see a similar structure. The specific objects of the 'hate' directed against Starbucks, i.e. the management clichés and lack of respect for its employees, can be seen as the impediment to the fully constituted identities of the baristas as free individuals. In this way the general feeling of lack is explained and justified, while at the same time a desire for autonomy and freedom is staged. It is thus the very idea of the phoniness of Starbucks, which renders possible the fantasy of oneself as a free individual who is outside of ideology.

The sublime ideal, the object of the fantasy, can be understood as the completely autonomous subject, which only acts according to its own inner convictions, and is not subjected to any limitations of its freedom. In the fantasy, the realizing of this ideal, however, is hindered by the fact that the barista is subjected to an authority – for example in the form of the 'Just say yes!' decree, which she is forced to 'officially' obey, even though she has seen through the falsehood of corporate clichés. The fantasy also features a transgressive aspect, which consists of this authority only being respected on the surface, while the barista secretly 'knows better' and breaks the rules, for example by serving decaffeinated coffee. The fantasy thus offers the barista a secure sense of identity as the autonomous rebel who has seen through management's clichés, and knows that there is 'something more' than the claustrophobic and incomplete reality, to which she is subjected at work (Glynos, 2008: 14).

In other words, this cynical fantasy and the experience of being outside ideology, offers the barista a 'breathing space' where she can be free from the limiting restraints of work and live out her autonomous, unique self (Contu 2008: 372). This breathing space, which the subject achieves through dis-identification and resistance towards the ideology, should not be understood as a form of subjectivity, which is beyond ideology. On the contrary, the claim by Žižek is that dis-identification should be seen as an ideological practice. The standard notion of ideology, where it traps its subjects by offering them a secure point of identification, must thus be turned on its head, so that ideology functions just as much by offering a space for 'false dis-identification', a false distance towards the actual coordinates of the subject's existence (Žižek in Butler et al., 2000: 103).

This idea of a false dis-identification from ideology seems to be an appropriate description of the cynical resistance at Starbucks. On the chat forum the users thus advise each other to mentally detach themselves from work, when it becomes problematic or unpleasant. Part of this detachment consists of applying a so-called 'Ralph Wiggum expression'. Ralph Wiggum is a character from the 'Simpsons' cartoon who due to lack of intelligence remains unaffected by his surroundings and hence always greets the world with his characteristically daft

smile. This smile can be utilized by the Starbucks-baristas when faced with unreasonable customers who are scolding or nagging:

> A pleasant, dim indifference will usually diffuse the situation by giving them no further ammunition (or potentially making them rage harder because they're not getting their way by making you panic/scared/reciprocate attitude(...)) and, best of all, you can't get in trouble because you didn't do anything wrong during the altercation! And then you can laugh about it later, too.

The empty, smiling expression and the image of Ralph Wiggum is used by the baristas to dis-identify from the prohibition against talking back to customers, while at the same time upholding it perfectly.

Other studies show that this form of surface-acting of the organizations 'customer-culture' is not unusual, as the employees realize its instrumentality and purpose as a technique of control, and therefore do not internalize it as their own (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 71; Hochschild, 1983). But even though the individual may feel like she is dis-identifying and resisting, this resistance is harmless, because the individual in her actions is behaving 'ideologically correct' – i.e. doing what she is supposed to (with exception of the actions that remain outside the gaze of management). The hidden acts and thoughts of resistance thus do not constitute a real threat for the democratic logic, where the subject is constituted as the free, liberal subject, who among other things has the right to disagree. The trick is, of course, that the subject still complies with whatever he or she may disagree with (Contu, 2008: 368). At Starbucks this is exemplified by the fact that the baristas, regardless of what they may secretly be thinking or doing, are still doing their job and not talking back to the customer.

In contemporary liberal workplaces, these forms of resistance against ideology are thus already factored in, and it is precisely this resistance, which renders possible the continued reproduction of the ideology. The HR-guidelines of many modern workplaces thus warn the employees against identifying to much with the organization, as this could lead to stress and burnout (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Leidner, 1993). The distance towards the ideology is what makes it efficient.

Jouissance: Pleasurable resistance

The resistance acts of the baristas at Starbucks are not limited to serving decaffeinated coffee. In the following, we will be exploring some of the more extreme forms of resistance, and simultaneously engaging with the Žižekian concept of 'jouissance', which can shed light on the pleasurable aspects of informal resistance. The concept of jouissance, is often understood as that which

is lost and lacking when the subject enters into the symbolic order. Hence, jouissance is the imaginary and impossible pleasure that is linked to the illusion of oneness and wholeness, and which is lost upon entry (Stavrakakis, 2010: 62). Paradoxically this loss is not synonymous with the subject living its life without jouissance. Despite the condition for entering the symbolic order is the giving up of jouissance, the symbolic is to a large extent sustained by different fantasies staging the loss and regaining of this jouissance (Cederström and Grassman, 2010: 115).

The jouissance installed by the aforementioned cynical fantasy is paradoxical in the sense that there is at the same time too much and not enough jouissance – both a lack and an excess. For the baristas at Starbucks, jouissance is thus attained both in the form of a loss – if only the customers, the store manager or the big bosses at Starbucks were not such idiots, then we would be 'truly' free and able to do what we wanted. But it also comes in the sense of a surplus, as something we possess – we assume that we can actually do what we want (e.g. 'decaf' difficult customers etc.), as long as we hide this excess from the gaze of power (Contu, 2008: 375). This surplus can be understood as little *crumbs of jouissance* – little pieces of jouissance that we are able to 'snatch from under their noses' (Contu, 2008: 375). According to Žižek, these crumbs function as a kind of 'libidinal bribe' that sustains the power-relation between the inferior, who steals the crumbs of jouissance, and the superior, who silently accepts this theft, as it does not represent a threat against his position, but on the contrary sustains it (Žižek, 1997: 33-34).

Even though jouissance can be translated as 'pleasure' it cannot be equated with our common-sense understanding of the term, which is linked to balance and satisfaction. Contrary to this, jouissance is destabilizing, traumatic and excessive (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 113). Jouissance is thus experienced as a form of excessive pleasure/pain – the something extra which gives the feeling of pleasure a fascinating and often unbearable intensity (Dean, 2006: 4), like scratching a mosquito-bite. Furthermore jouissance is often linked to a renouncement of pleasure and joy (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 114). This kind of self-torturing pleasure can be used to understand some of the entries by the baristas on the chat forum such as the one below, where a user fantasizes about how he would feel if/when he one day stops working at Starbucks:

> You know (...) one of the sad things is that, a twisted little masochist part of me will one day miss having an entire shift's worth of complaints each day. But the rest of me will be glad I'll have eventually found something I fully enjoy doing (..)

The suspension of pleasure and joy, which results from the complaining customers (enhanced by the 'Just say yes*!*' policy) thus creates a 'masochistic' jouissance that functions as a supplement for the (fantasmatic) future in which the user has found 'something I fully enjoy doing' and the feelings of pleasure and joy are no longer suspended or lost.

The connection between jouissance and the denouncement of pleasure and joy is sometimes illustrated by the idea of jouissance acting as the 'obscene underbelly' to an authoritatively demanded renouncement of these feelings, which it simultaneously helps to sustain. Žižek has given the case of the military as an example of this (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 128). On the surface level there is a set of very strict rules (hierarchy, discipline, procedure etc.), which, according to Žižek, cannot function without their jouissance-supplying supplement (vulgar sexist jokes, sadistic hazing rituals etc.). If we turn towards the baristas at Starbucks, it seems there is also an obscene underbelly to the 'Just say yes!' policy. The forum thus contains several accounts of the so-called *special straws,* which have been dipped in the toilet, and the ways in which these straws make their way into the drinks of rude customers. Additionally, there are accounts of male baristas dipping their testicles into coffee cups, which are later handed to customers, as well as the 'spiking' of drinks with pubic hair. These acts can be seen as the jouissance-soaked, obscene underbelly of the customer care-law at Starbucks, which at the same time functions as this law's prerequisite. According to Žižek, the renouncement of pleasure and joy (in the form of refraining from talking back to unreasonable customers) enables a so-called surplus-jouissance (plus de jouir), which sustains the renouncement (Žižek, 2010b: 126-7; Kay, 2003: 163, 166; Žižek, 1999b: 291). At Starbucks, these informal obscenities can thus be seen as that which renders it bearable for the baristas to go to work everyday and get scolded by unreasonable customers.

But what then?

Based on Starbucks as an empirical example, we are able to conclude that the Žižekian perspective of 'decaf criticism' has a certain explanatory potential. Žižek's concepts can be applied in showing how the resistance is decaf not only in an actual sense (they are serving coffee without caffeine) but also in a metaphorical sense (they are practicing resistance without resistance). The cynicism, which is concomitant to the decaf servings, is one of Žižek's most consistent targets of critique. Žižek's aversion against the cynical attitude can be attested to the fact that it appears to be subversive and resisting status quo, while in reality it works to sustain contemporary ideology, which has already

incalculated the imagined distance towards it held by the cynical subject of late capitalism.

However, this engagement with the Žižekian perspective also prompts a couple of obvious counter-questions. Because what then is 'real' resistance? And how does one practice a criticism or resistance that is not decaf? The Žižekian answer to these questions is the 'Real act'.

The Real act, however is one of the most contested concepts in Žižek's work. It is understood as a radical act, where the subject breaks with the symbolic order in which it is placed, and acts beyond desire, in a manner that results in the symbolic coordinates around the subjects existence being radically altered (Kay, 2003: 156). To resist power the subject must give up its inner core of jouissance through which it is tied to power (Žižek, 1999b; Žižek, 2010a: 118). This 'traversing of the fantasy', thus requires the subject to 'disappear' and place its own structural lack in the place of the desired object (Hoedemakers, 2009: 194). The Real act thus entails the subject accepting its own radial eccentricity vis á vis the big Other, and no longer navigating though pre-given coordinates in the social, but instead realizing its own radical responsibility (Sharpe, 2004: 241; Glynos 2000: 15).

In continuation hereof, the Real act is an expression of a shift in Žižek's understanding of 'the Real', which in his earlier writings is described as pure negation and impossibility, but later on is given more subtle characteristics, and no longer just understood as a strict external boundary of symbolization, but also as something which plays a part in our experienced reality (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 8, 71). This in turn has political consequences, because the possibility of a 'Real act' then arises as 'that which cannot happen but happens anyway' (Bjerre, 2011:38). From time to time we catch a glimpse of it – but are still unable to comprehend (symbolize) it: 'When you do something crazy, like an heroic act, which goes against all your interests, there the real happens – you cannot justify or explain it' (Žižek and Daly, 2004: 165). This shift coincides with a shift in Žižek's political orientation (Bjerre, 2011: 37-38) which moves from an interest in liberal democracy as a way of symbolizing the Real (e.g. Žižek, 1989), towards an interest in those moments in history, where radical shifts have taken place (e.g. Lenin and Žižek, 2002; Žižek, 2008).

The Real act suspends the symbolic order and opens up the possibility for change – of actions beyond the given matrix of expectations (Dean, 2006: 188). In her discussion of 'decaf resistance', Alessia Contu argues how its necessary alternative is the radical Real act:

> A real act of resistance would be one for which we would have to bear the costs. It would be an act that changes the sociosymbolic network in which we and our way of life make sense. It would be costly because we depend on these sociosymbolic networks. To lose them, would be like losing the world. (...) This is a risk of dying symbolically and perhaps also physically. (Contu, 2008: 374-5)

If the only alternative to decaf entails traversing the fantasy and performing a Real act which results in the symbolic and maybe even physical death of the subject, the question is how useful the idea of decaf resistance is as an analytical concept. Especially given the fact that this radical act '(...) is not something that can be outlined in prescriptive formulae, nor can it be easily named in the form of an example' (Hoedemakers 2009: 195). The empirical descriptions of concrete, actual Real acts are thus very scarce and revolve around heroines in Greek tragedies (Žižek, 1998) or non-specific speculations about whistleblowing in neoliberal workplaces (Contu, 2008: 376). According to Žižek however, one should not worry about what the Real act is or whether it is possible or impossible, because it has always happened and will continue to do so (Žižek, 1996: 146-7).

But if we nevertheless insist on conceiving the Real act versus decaf as an analytical distinction, which can be utilized to characterize resistance, then it would seem that one side of the distinction covers a disproportionately large amount of the empirical identifiable resistance. Everything thus becomes decaf, because the Real act is so rare. The question is then, how useful a distinction this actually is.

In connection to this, Stavrakakis (Stavrakakis, 2010: 90) has warned against the idea of the Real act and described it as a form of 'quasi-religious' and 'leftist-speculative' idealization of the one miraculous and apocalyptic act, which leads to total transformation. According to Stavrakakis, the idea that the absolute radicalism of *the act* is the only alternative to decaf resistance and, in a broader context, also the only way to revitalize the lost bite of radical political movements, is highly problematic. What is overlooked with the idea of the Real act is thus how the dialectics between power and resistance are always characterized by multiple, diffuse and unpredictable processes, which are part of every political struggle (Stavrakakis, 2010: 90; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). According to Stavrakakis, it is not only the decaffeinated resistance that can be incorporated into the dominant order, to which it has a dialectical relationship. The same is the case with revolutionary acts that if judged by their historical effects over time, also seem to have an unmistakable decaf glare about them – as is the case with for instance certain forms of critique of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). This however often seems to work in favor of social and political transformation, which according to Stavrakakis is also the case for other acts,

which might otherwise to quickly be characterized as decaffeinated and worthless (Stavrakakis, 2010: 90).

In a sense, the distinction between real and decaf thus seems to mirror the dichotomy in much resistance research, identified by Mumby (2005: 37) and others, between the resistor as an unwitting dupe on the one hand, and a pure revolutionary subject on the other, albeit with both poles of the dichotomy subsumed in the same theoretical framework. Organizational scholars in the Žižekio-lacanian tradition have responded to this problem by seeking to conceptualize resistance acts, which are less 'grandiose' (Hoedemakers, 2009: 195) than the Real Act, but still in some way unsettle or disturb the parameters of ideological fantasy within the organization, thus situating the resisting subject somewhere in between dupe and revolutionary (eg. Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). For example, it has been suggested that certain types of humor might be able to display the inherent antagonisms of the symbolic order of the organization – i.e. claims of unity, cohesion and homogeneity – and reveal how these signifiers act as a disguise for non-identity and primordial lack (Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015: 527). A related strategy of humorous destabilization of the symbolic order involves over-identifying with it as opposed to cynically dis-identifying (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 84, Hoedemakers, 2009: 195; Karlsen and Villadsen, 2015: 526). Examples of this involve covering one's car with an excessive amount of company stickers (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 84) or taking the rules and regulations of the organization completely literally and 'working to rule' (Fleming and Spicer, 2007: 5; Kay, 2003: 136; Žižek, 1997: 29). What these strategies have in common, however, is that they are not easily conceptualized through the decaf/real-dichotomy and can be seen as seeking to 'work around' these inflexible categories.

Half-caf resistance

In addition to the above mentioned theoretical objections, one can also raise an empirical critique against categorizing every act of resistance, which does not completely reconfigure the social coordinates, as harmless and insignificant. There is thus some empirical justification behind the claim that cynicism does not necessarily have to be a reinforcer of the status quo, but can also constitute a basis for other forms of resistance that have a real impact (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995; Sturdy and Fineman, 2001). Cynicism, sarcasm and decaf resistance can thus function as a necessary forum, in which employees can gather courage and negotiate about how exactly various issues should be addressed. Once in a while on the Ihatestarbucks-forum, initial steps are also taken towards collective mobilizing and direct action, albeit on a very small scale.

The threads are usually rather short and contain a few entries where the baristas discuss the possibility of collective initiatives such as a national strike-day our collective statements demanding better pay and working conditions etc. Even though these kinds of considerations are a rarity, they might be seen as expressions of the transformative potential of cynicism and decaf resistance.

Another significant question which can be raised in connection with the Ihatestarbucks-forum as an empirical testing ground for the conceptual idea of decaf resistance, concerns the extent to which the resistance documented on the forum is actually experienced as decaf by the users – as the Žižekian perspective would suggest. For example there is a thread on the forum, in which the users discuss the consequences of the website having been cited in a news-outlet. It is discussed if the site should be shut down or perhaps changed into a forum, where it is required to be registered with a username, before being able to read and write on it. Some of the users regret their previous accounts of resistance:

> I, ah, am having posters' remorse. So, er, if there's any way I could have the power to edit? I'll be careful of how I do it, so that the threads still make sense. Kinda wish I hadn't been so candid now. And that I listened when you peeps said not to say anything about where your store is.

Even though one can make the argument that the specific concrete act of serving decaffeinated coffee can be characterized as decaf resistance in the sense that it is harmless and hardly instigates change, it is another matter when this act is recorded on a publicly accessible internet forum. From the point of view of the users of the forum, their recorded resistance is far from harmless, but on the contrary experienced as so risky and 'caffeinated' that it ought to be altered or deleted. The users on the forum thus do not achieve the pure decaffeinated pleasure, where one gets the thing, but without its dangerous main ingredient. For some, a certain dose of risk and fear is also included.

An internet-mediated account of a decaf serving thus seems to be more caffeinated than the serving itself, because the resistance no longer stays hidden, and can potentially be viewed by the whole world. While the Žižekian perspective has shown itself to have a keen eye for decaf resistance in the form of the concrete act where decaffeinated coffee is served, this is not the case, to the same extent, when the action is subsequently recorded on a publicly accessible internet forum. The Žižekian lens thus seems unable to capture the increased levels of caffeine which are apparently infused into the resistance when it is chronicled online.

A potential solution to this problem could consist in the incorporation of an analytical sensibility into the Žižekian perspective, which would facilitate the

distinction between various *degrees of caffeinatedness*, rather than conceiving it is a question of either-or. In this case one could for instance draw inspiration from the ideas originating out of the Essex-school about distinguishing between various degrees of fantasmatic attachment (Glynos, 2008; Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2008; Stavrakakis, 2010) – possibly combined with the abovementioned conceptions of humorous disruptions of the symbolic order. Furthermore, Karfakis and Kokkinidis (2011), applying the work of Sloterdijk (2005) and Foucault (2000), have suggested a distinction between contemporary *cynicism* as it is described by Žižek and others on the one hand, and the practice of 'fearless speech' and *kynicism* as it was employed in Greek antiquity, with whistleblowing being a contemporary example, on the other. While this distinction is somewhat homologous to the real/decaf distinction, it is also suggested that cynicism and kynicism should be viewed as 'two extremes of the same continuum and in-between them lies what we might call the "grey area"' (Karfakis and Kokkinidis 2011: 339). It is this 'grey area' that becomes apparent when the baristas at Starbucks post their resistance-accounts online and thereby to some extent caffeinate their resistance. Incorporated into the large coffee-selection at Starbucks is thus the possibility to order one's coffee as a so-called *half-caf* – i.e. containing half the amount of caffeine of a regular coffee. The coffee, then, is neither decaf nor as caffeinated as regular coffee. Hence, as implied above, a *half-caf resistance* seems to be part of the resistance-selection of the Starbucks-baristas, but not yet part of the analytical selection of Žižekian theory.

While the recording of employee-resistance on publicly accessible internet-forums represents a challenge to the Žižekian decaf-perspective, it also presents an obvious opportunity for the study of a hitherto hidden practice, not easily accessible for research. Latour has thus pointed out that the digitalization of ever more aspects of our lives represents a goldmine of information for social science: 'It is as if the inner workings of private worlds have been pried open because their inputs and outputs have become thoroughly traceable' (Latour, 2007).

Thus it seems that the study of IhateStarbucks.com works both as a justification of and a challenge toward the Žižekian perspective presented in this paper. A justification because the 'inner worlds' of the baristas, that become visible through the website, can be described and explained quite precisely by the Žižekian perspective. Paradoxically, this validation of the Žižekian perspective only applies to the invisible and unrecorded resistance, because the moment the resistance is shared through a publicly accessible website, it seems to challenge the Žižekian dichotomy between decaf and Real act. This happens because the recorded account of a decaf-serving seems to involve more risk and potential

harm than the serving itself. None of them however completely reconfigure their surrounding social coordinates and thereby cross the Žižekian threshold between decaf and Real act.

Conclusion

The Žižekian notion of decaf resistance is fruitful in terms of diagnosing libidinal investments in informal resistance through concepts such as cynicism, ideological fantasy and jouissance. The limitation of this Žižekian perspective, however, is that it becomes difficult in a concrete analysis to identify anything but harmless decaf resistance, since its alternative, in the form of the revolutionary Real act, happens very rarely. The perspective thus loses a certain empirical sensibility towards the internal differences between the many different forms of resistance, which are *en bloc* characterized as decaf. While the writings on the IhateStarbucks-web forum have proven to support the idea of decaf resistance to a certain extent, the opposite is also the case. The fact that accounts of the hidden resistance become publicly accessible, thus suggests that non-revolutionary resistance can still entail different degrees of risk and danger (e.g. levels of caffeine), which is difficult to conceptualize within the Žižekian perspective.

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the author

Erik Mygind du Plessis is an assistant Professor at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at Copenhagen Business School. His research interests revolve around post-structural and new materialist approaches to dynamics of power and resistance in organizations, as well as spaces where 'alternatives' to dominant forms of organizing might emerge.
Email: edp.dbp@cbs.dk