

The Paradox of Resistance

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Abstract

Political and social resistance aim at liberatory ends, those which require the disruption of “business as usual”. But resistance is also constrained by certain standards – espoused most notably by philosopher and political theorist, John Rawls – that it must satisfy if it is to be seen as justified. These standards can be manipulated to manufacture opposition to resistance, a tactic which frames an act of resistance as illegitimate even if it satisfies these standards. The specter of manufactured opposition forces actors to thread a needle between enacting resistance that is disruptive and enacting resistance that avoids this threat. I argue that this imposes a paradox – resistance that avoids the threat of manufactured opposition cannot be disruptive enough to bring about the liberatory ends towards which it strives; however, resistance that is disruptive enough to bring about such ends will not be viewed as legitimate. Consequently, this limits performances of resistance to those that will confer legitimacy on the very systems that are the subject of resistance.