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*Article*

**Empowerment and the individualisation of resistance: A Foucauldian perspective on Theatre of the Oppressed**

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**Abstract**

Waterloo, in Sydney, Australia, is a neighbourhood currently dominated by a large public housing estate. The estate is to be redeveloped to be a ‘socially mixed’ community largely comprised of private residents. Many current residents of Waterloo have organised in opposition to the redevelopment. At the same time, government and community develop-ment agencies have implemented a number of capacity building and con-sultation programmes for residents, including a theatre performance. Programmes of empowerment are increasingly used by the state and the third sector to encourage disadvantaged or marginalised citizens to ‘take responsibility’ for their own lives. In this article, I examine a performance coordinated by a community theatre group that uses the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ format, intended to allow participants to identify ways to overthrow the forces that oppress them. I use a Fou-cauldian conception of power, subjectivity and resistance to critically examine the performance in its context. I explore ways in which the Theatre of the Oppressed format was applied (perhaps unintentionally) in such a way that it reinforced a vision of the situation as immutable and unchangeable, placing the onus on residents to transform their own actions to deliver change. Such framing makes any effort at resistance appear absurd, and is anything but empowering for residents.

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**Key words**

Boal, Foucault, housing, renewal, resistance, Theatre of the Oppressed

**Introduction**

Programmes of empowerment and responsibilisation are increasingly being deployed in the management of problematised populations such as social hous-ing residents, welfare recipients and the homeless (Cruikshank, 1999). Such programmes have led welfare agencies to transform themselves from provid-ing support services to implementing disciplinary strategies to responsibilise recipients (Schram et al., 2010), and housing agencies to shift from a focus on managing properties to managing the behaviour of their tenants (Flint, 2002; Franklin and Clapham, 1997). Foucault’s work has proven useful in bringing to light the paradoxical effects of empowerment programmes, espe-cially in demonstrating the ways in which empowerment and participation programmes can have regulatory, as well as liberatory, effects (Cruikshank, 1999; McKee, 2011) and how they are implicated in an increasingly disci-plinary approach to managing tenants, focused on responsibility rather than rights (Flint, 2004). Foucault’s understanding of power as ‘everywhere’ has also helped researchers unpick the rhetoric around empowerment, reminding us that subjects cannot be liberated from power relations through participa-tion in empowerment programmes (McKee, 2007).

Foucauldian approaches have been applied to explore the types of engage-ment and participation processes common to neoliberal governance, as well as responsibiliation programmes. In this article, I apply a Foucauldian approach to an empowerment programme delivered in a space between government and citizens – the third sector. I consider what comes to light when we look at ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ through a Foucauldian lens, using this to pull apart some questions relating to power, resistance and subjectivity that arise from a community performance.

This article focuses on a theatre production staged in Waterloo, in the state of New South Wales, Australia. Waterloo, in inner city Sydney, is home to one of the state’s largest remaining inner-city public housing estates, with around 2,200 apartments. The estate is subject to a redevelopment pro-gramme, which will see the existing buildings demolished, the land leased to private developers and new residential development that will be 70% private housing. While density increases will allow for most residents to be relocated to new community housing on site, the redevelopment involves upheaval for residents. Previous research has demonstrated the significant and multiple impacts that residents experience even in redevelopment projects that allow them to return to a nearby neighbourhood, including lowered perceptions

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of safety and security (Clampet-Lundquist, 2010), severed social ties (Clam-pet-Lundquist, 2004), disruption of a ‘shared project of living’ (Manzo et al., 2008), and cultural and political displacement (Hyra, 2015). Many incum-bent residents of redeveloped areas are likely to experience displacement even in instances where they remain physically in place (Davidson, 2009).

Residents of Waterloo have engaged in several projects to resist the rede-velopment, including a number of artistic projects and the formation of an action group, aiming to call attention to their displacement and to prevent the demolition of their homes. My ethnographic research has identified that residents have struggled consistently with the question of whether or not they have any power to affect change through resistance.

The theatre production that this article focuses on was called *Tumbling* *Towers*,1and was put on by local residents in partnership with a local com-munity service organisation and a local theatre group that works with mar-ginalised communities. The two performances followed an eight-week series of workshops in which participants learnt about the production format – Theatre of the Oppressed – and shared stories, wrote a script and rehearsed scenes. The participants were residents of public housing, most of whom lived on the Waterloo estate; however, a few participants lived in public housing elsewhere nearby.

Theatre of the Oppressed is intended as a framework for activism in the-atre (Schutzman, 1990), aiming not just to deliver stories of the oppressed, but to engage actors and the audience in creating solutions and interventions that could alleviate oppression, improve situations and empower the oppressed. Its creator, Augusto Boal, wanted his method to be considered more than just theatre and performance – he called his method ‘a rehearsal of revolu-tion’ (Dwyer, 2007; Schutzman, 1990; Snyder-Young, 2011) and expected the method would offer participants ‘tools for liberation’ (Österlind, 2008). Boal saw his methods as tools that could be drawn upon by marginalised com-munities to develop and improve strategies of resistance and to recruit others through involvement in performances. Theatre of the Oppressed is intended to be an opportunity to ‘experiment’ with problem-solving on individual, group and societal levels (Österlind, 2008: 73).

There are two acts to a Theatre of the Oppressed play: the initial perfor-mance of a scripted play, and the reply, which involves interventions and is interactive. The format involves two ‘jokers’, who in the *Tumbling Towers* per-formance were staff from a local theatre company, who ask the actors to replay the scenes from the first act, then invite input from the audience about how each scene could be changed to alter the outcome. The jokers’ task is to ‘both support and provoke’ (Österlind, 2008: 77), encouraging the audience to come up with alternative actions that could be taken by protagonists to improve out-comes from particular confrontations or instances of discrimination. Audience members are invited to share suggestions about how protagonists’ actions could

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be altered and to come on stage to ‘substitute’ into the role of the protagonist to replay the scene with their suggested amendments. The purpose here is to bring the audience into the play, transforming them from passive observers to ‘spect-actors’, encouraging them to actively think and perform, coming up with possible solutions to the problems presented by the play.

*Tumbling Towers* made use of Theatre of the Oppressed not simply topresent a story of oppression and domination but to work through ways of resolving the difficulties faced by residents, apparently providing them with tools to overthrow their oppression. However, as I argue throughout this article, Theatre of the Oppressed relies on a dichotomous understanding of subject positions and the power available to them, relying on a conception of ‘the oppressed’ as powerless while simultaneously requiring them to be responsible for changing an apparently intractable status quo. This framing is particularly salient when considered against the backdrop of residents’ doubts about whether resistance could achieve change. In this article, I explore the ways in which a Foucauldian viewpoint might help us unveil the contradic-tions and shortcomings of Theatre of the Oppressed. I use Foucauldian under-standings of subjectivity, power and resistance to help shed light on the ways in which *Tumbling Towers* may have fallen short of its promise as a ‘rehearsal for the revolution’ – and to examine how it may have served to reify residents’ perceptions that they are struggling against an immutable structure. *Tum-bling Towers*, despite its liberatory intentions, reified some of the paralysingstructures that residents are finding themselves butting up against in trying to resist the redevelopment of their estate.

In the section that follows, I explain the key elements of the Foucauldian perspective that I adopt throughout.

**Foucault: Power and subjectivity**

Power, for Foucault, is everywhere: it is ‘always already there’, and one can never be ‘outside’ power (Foucault, 1988: 141). It is distributed through a ‘net-like organisation’ and is the force behind every social relation (Foucault, 1988: 98).

This conceptualisation of power as omnipresent need not be seen as pes-simistic, as Foucault drew upon a conception of power that was productive, rather than repressive (Foucault, 2002: 120). He argued that power should not be seen as a force that says ‘no’, but rather one which produces things: effects, subjectivities, actions (Foucault, 2002: 120). His interest in power’s capacity to produce particular forms of actions and behaviour led him to focus in partic-ular on governing as the ‘conduct of conduct’ – that is, governance as a process which, through structuring the field of possible actions of others (Foucault, 1982: 790), elicits particular kinds of actions from subjects without force.

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A key departure from other theories of power is perhaps that, for Fou-cault, power functions as a verb rather than a noun: it is conceptualised as an action or a capacity, rather than a structure. Heller argues that Foucault came to see power (and resistance) as a capacity – as the ability to create social change (Heller, 1996). This conceptualisation has implications for the type of questions it gives rise to: for Foucault, argue Kendall and Wickham (Kendall and Wickham, 1999), the most relevant question is not asking *what* power is but rather *how* it works.

Although he explicitly discussed resistance far less frequently than he addressed questions of power, resistance was also central to Foucault’s analyt-ics. Foucault did not see power as anything essentially different from resis-tance – rather, he saw power and resistance as two forms of the same thing (Heller, 1996: 99). Foucault saw both power and resistance as being trans-formative capacity, different only as they are exercised by subjects occupying different subject positions: power exercised by those in subject positions with more techniques of power at their disposal, and resistance exercised by those occupying subject positions with fewer techniques of power available to them (Heller, 1996: 99). Foucault argues that resistance is a potential response to *every* exercise of power, the opposite (though certainly not always equal) forceresponding to every power relation: as soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance (Foucault, 1989: 153). Heller also notes that Foucault did not imbue this transformative capacity with any kind of value judgement: power (and so, too, resistance) is neither essentially good nor bad, as it is simply a capacity (Heller, 1996).

Despite the repeated appearance of ‘power’ in his work, Foucault notes that his interest in the concept stems primarily from his ongoing study of subjectification (Foucault, 1982: 778). Foucault becomes interested in power because all subjects, in his view, are situated in power relations that are con-stitutive of the subject – subjects cannot exist without power and do not pre-exist power relations. Power, for Foucault, is defined as actions on others’ actions, and in this way it presupposes, rather than annuls, subjects’ capacity as agents (Gordon, 1991: 5).

Foucault says that power is everywhere and subjects are its vehicles (Fou-cault, 1988: 98); however, he does not mean to imply that all subjects are *equal* vehicles for power or that they each have equal access to the techniquesof power (Heller, 1996). Instead, he acknowledges that inequalities in power distribution exist, noting that some subject positions may be more powerful than others (that is, some positions may have greater access to the exercise of the techniques of power than others). Following Foucault, Heller describes the power exercised by those in the dominant positions as being hegemonic, and the power exercised by those in subject positions of lesser power (that is, with fewer or lesser techniques of power at their disposal) characterised as counter-hegemony or resistance. Therefore, while Foucault relies on a conceptualisation

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of power and resistance as the same type of force – transformative capacity – he did not conceive of power and resistance as indistinguishable, nor did he fail to see that power and resistance can have different effects (Heller, 1996).

**Methods**

This article draws on data collected through a year-long participant observa-tion of resident actions around the Waterloo public housing estate renewal. I observed over 100 hours of community meetings, forums, workshops resi-dent action group meetings and other events. I made detailed field notes of my observations in these sessions. I also undertook interviews with four key community members actively involved in organising opposition to the rede-velopment.

This article focuses primarily on the theatre workshops and performances I observed as part of the *Tumbling Towers* programme. I participated in the workshops that were held in preparation for the performance. While consent was provided by the participants in the production, I was unable to secure permission from the theatre company that was facilitating the workshops and performance to observe the workshops as part of my research. Given the final performances were public, and were filmed and shared online, the theatre company provided consent for me to observe the performances. The reflec-tions discussed in this article are drawn primarily from the field notes written after observing these performances, but I also draw upon the insights gained from the observations and interviews conducted in the broader ethnography.

I attended both performances of *Tumbling Towers*, taking extensive field notes throughout both performances. The performances were very similar, and though the specific details of the audience contributions varied slightly, they tended in fact to be most remarkable for the consistency across the two performances. The field notes taken during the performances include jottings about events and scenes in the play, and served as prompts for further field notes written after each performance. These notes, recorded immediately fol-lowing the performance, reflected in particular on the use of the Theatre of the Oppressed format and the ways in which audience members handled the interventions.

**Findings**

***The challenges of resistance***

My interest in the way that power and resistance were portrayed in this theatre event stemmed in part from the challenges I had observed amongst residents

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of Waterloo as they worked to oppose the redevelopment of their neighbour-hood.

Residents who were engaged in activism around the redevelopment were torn about *how* to engage in resistance. In particular, they struggled to resolve a question around whether to protest or to negotiate. For many members of the resident action group, participation in government processes seemed like capitulation, while, to others, negotiation and participation in government processes was the only way to achieve meaningful progress. The following excerpt from my field notes captures a discussion in an action group meeting in which these concerns were being discussed:

Simon said ‘we need to attend [the community engagement sessions], otherwise we have nothing. There could always be a trap, getting us to agree to what they’ve already planned to do. But we must attend, otherwise we have nothing.’

Catriona responded: ‘we need to be careful we don’t get caught negotiating on small things week to week but can’t see the big picture. [The Government] is pulling everyone from one issue to another.’

Then Corinne asked a question about whether by participating we are giving them legitimacy; ‘should we refuse to attend so that they can’t claim to have been consultative?’ No one really knew how to answer her question. (Field notes, Action group meeting, September 2017)

Many of the residents who believed that participation in government con-sultation programmes was the best strategy appeared to believe that the residents were powerless to stop the redevelopment, and felt that negotiat-ing for improved outcomes was the best the residents could hope for. Those who advocated for protest and refusal were concerned that participation in government engagement would be to concede that the redevelopment was inevitable:

Why are you bothering to be involved in community consultation at all if you are totally opposed to the redevelopment? (Bill, Action group meeting, February 2017)

I’m not sure why we need consultation given we don’t want the redevelopment. They [the government representatives] can f\*\*k off! [(Paul, Action group meeting, February 2017)

Of course, many residents oscillated between their positions: some weeks they would express a sense of powerlessness, while others they might be firm about their obligation to protest against the redevelopment. These questions about

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how to engage in resistance and whether they might be able to change the system were at the core of the internal challenges faced by those engaged in activism. Throughout the remainder of this section, I draw on examples from the theatre event to explore these challenges. First, however, I will briefly describe the performance.

***The performance***

The play was in two acts, each with four scenes. In the first scene, residents were invited to a meeting at which the Minister announced the redevelop-ment plans. The scene mimicked an actual community engagement meeting held in Waterloo in early 2016, including the language used at that event. The Minister provided very little information to residents but offered them a barbecue as a distraction. A character called ‘Miss Information’ appeared, and tried to distract residents using buzzwords and jargon.

In the second scene, a community developer worker attempted to provide the residents with information, but was unable to answer their questions.

The third scene saw a resident invited to a meeting with community engagement staff. The staff failed to answer any of the residents’ questions, instead providing a voluminous handbook about the redevelopment and requesting that the resident familiarise themselves with the government’s jargon to ‘help our communications’.

The final scene involved residents receiving letters about where they would be ‘relocated’ to. There was a sense of powerlessness in this scene, with residents noting that they ‘don’t have a choice’ about their future.

Each of these scenes broadly mirrored actual events at the estate, and focused on the residents’ reaction to these events. The government’s own lan-guage from actual documents was used to satirise the government’s actions, bringing humour into the portrayal.

The second act involved a replay of each of these four scenes, but with the audience interventions. The Jokers invited audience members to suggest ways in which the characters’ actions might be changed to improve the out-comes from the situation. Audience members who made suggestions were then invited on stage to replay the scene with the altered actions.

***A revolution within limits***

Theatre of the Oppressed focuses not only on telling the stories of the oppressed, but on creating an interactive space in which the audience is brought into the story as problem solvers, suggesting ways that the situation could be changed and improved. In an immediate replay of the initial performance, the jokers pause the action on stage, and prompt the audience to suggest how the actors could alter their behaviour to change the situation.

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In *Tumbling Towers*, these suggested interventions, without exception, relied on the characters representing the residents of Waterloo, but not those representing government employees and others, to change their behaviour. This was specified by the Jokers, who told the audience that they must assume that the antagonists could not change, and that only the characters represent-ing Waterloo residents could act differently – the actions of the government staff, ministers and others were not open for alteration. This is consistent with Boal’s original method, in which the behaviour of the protagonists (the oppressed) could be altered but the behaviour of the antagonists (the oppres-sors) could not (Snyder-Young, 2011). Boal cautioned that it would be ‘ide-alistic’ to attempt to change the attitudes and actions of the oppressor, and so, therefore, the emphasis is placed on ‘changing ourselves’ in order to effect change (O’Sullivan, 2001: 89).

In *Tumbling Towers*, this framing presented a major problem for partici-pants and audience – how to effect positive change in a broken system? In one scene, a group of residents tried to get information from a government staff member at a consultation event. The staff member promises that details will be forthcoming once further planning was completed. The Jokers paused the action and asked the audience for input, but noted that the actions of the bureaucrat were not to be altered. This meant that the only ways in which the situation could be transformed would be for the residents’ characters to rephrase their questions and push harder for information. In the ‘replay’, the effect of this was paralysing, with the residents continually changing their behaviour, adopting bureaucratic language, trying to beat the government at their own game, but with the system stacked against them. Thus, while the purpose was to demonstrate that characters’ actions could be changed because they had agency to stand and act against a dysfunctional system, the effect was almost the opposite of what was intended, with the characters running up against an immoveable, intractable system no matter how they changed their actions. Österlind notes that ‘the thought, or illusion, that our problems are personal is part of the general oppression’ (Österlind, 2008: 80) – bringing to mind the way in which Foucault argued that governmentalities are perva-sive and work through the desires and freedoms of subjects. By reifying this notion that oppression stems solely from – and its solution lies solely in – the personal, *Tumbling Towers* nullified a resistance that could radically reinvent or reimagine the system. Instead, it (perhaps unintentionally) presented a sys-tem as unproblematic and unchangeable, offering up only individual behav-iour as a means to improve social outcomes.

This problem does not appear to be unique to *Tumbling Towers*, and has been identified by others in critiquing Theatre of the Oppressed as a means of articulating or imagining resistance. Edkvist, providing critical input regard-ing a Theatre of the Oppressed production, notes that participants ‘try to deal with the situations in the small scale, to change [their] actions within the

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structures rather than targeting the structures themselves’ (quoted in Öster-lind, 2008: 79). Edkvist notes that emphasising the ways in which social problems and oppression are not merely personal but are ‘intertwined and dependent on cultural norms, social systems and political and commercial influences’ may be influential in avoiding a view of the oppressed as being ‘a victim to unknown forces’ (quoted in Österlind, 2008: 79). Such a perspec-tive is relevant for the residents of Waterloo given their persistent struggle with questions of resistance and effecting change. The lessons handed down through *Tumbling Towers*, while emphasising the agency of residents, tend to be rather dismissive of the potential of resistance to achieve change.

***Therapy or resistance?***

A key criticism that surrounds Theatre of the Oppressed relates to whether it is actually capable of providing, as Boal intended, a ‘rehearsal for the revo-lution’, or whether it has become merely a tool for personal development (O’Sullivan, 2001).

Increasingly, in neoliberal governmental rationality, social problems are framed as the result of individual failings and shortcomings (Cruikshank, 1999; Dean, 2010). Following from this, improvement and empowerment programmes targeted at individuals are increasingly put forward as the solu-tion to social problems and inequalities (Cruikshank, 1999).

Boal developed his methods while working with ‘illiterate farmers’ and ‘oppressed peasants’ in rural Brazil and Peru (Shawyer, 2011), attempting to provide them with tools to resist dictatorial military regimes. Reflecting on the use of Theatre of the Oppressed in developed-world contexts, Schutzman argues it is problematic to transpose this ‘third world aesthetic of resistance’ into a ‘first world aesthetic of self-help’ (Schutzman, 1990: 78). Indeed, attempting to merely transplant the model is likely to be challenging for a number of reasons. However, we should not assume that resistance is only rel-evant in third-world contexts and that it cannot take place in the first world, nor that first-world problems are all of a ‘self-help’ nature.

*Tumbling Towers* relied upon reforming the actions of individuals as apath towards improving outcomes for residents around the Waterloo rede-velopment. The problems facing the residents of Waterloo are significant, and include displacement, gentrification and the dispersal of their commu-nity. The performance, however, framed the challenges facing the residents of Waterloo as the responsibility of individuals, and emphasised working on the individual’s capacity to alter these situations. The audience was encouraged to look for ways that the individual could participate more meaningfully, how they could improve their interactions to get a (minutely) better outcome.

This framing aligns with the responsibilisation agenda in social pol-icy across the western world, and in particular in housing. Flint (2004),

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McKee (2008), Bradley (2012) and others have discussed how governments

– particularly in the UK, but also elsewhere – have used the notion of the responsible citizen as a technology of the self to guide particular action.

Theatre of the Oppressed reinforces the neoliberal figure of the self-responsible individual by placing the onus for action and change squarely upon the shoulders of the oppressed. The audience is called upon to make changes to the behaviour of the protagonist (the oppressed) which might improve the situation – the implication being that the individual is respon-sible for the problem and, therefore, that the solution lies within their own behaviour.

Returning to Schutzman’s notion that Theatre of the Oppressed becomes therapy once transplanted into a first-world context, we should understand this not as a reflection of the nature of social problems in the first world

– which do not, if we are taking a Foucauldian standpoint, have an inherent nature themselves but which are discursively constructed – but rather as a reflection on the rationalities that allow certain framings to be accepted as true. Indeed, the neoliberal construction of social problems as stemming from individual shortcomings encourages us to see the solutions to these prob-lems as lying with improvements to individual behaviour. The framing of the interventions in *Tumbling Towers* reflects the extent to which this rational-ity around individual responsibility has been imbibed even by those who are actively engaged in resisting.

***Individuals over institutions***

Ettlinger notes that, from a Foucauldian perspective, the targets of resistance should not be individuals and the institutions they represent but rather men-talities, discourses and norms which shape subjectivities and possible actions (Ettlinger, 2011: 549).

Schutzman notes that Theatre of the Oppressed ‘works to explore options at the moment of discrimination’ rather than looking for broader solutions to entrenched political, social and economic inequalities (Schutzman, 1990). Indeed, *Tumbling Towers* focused on addressing individual moments of con-flict experienced by residents, rather than addressing the broader, systemic rationalities that allow public housing residents to be turned out of their homes.

When the Jokers invited the audience to provide suggestions about improving outcomes from particular situations, the focus was on relations between two individuals. For example, in the third scene, which involved a farcical meeting between a resident and two community engagement staff, it was the conduct of the two engagement staff that became the focus of the intervention. Audience members were invited to identify how the resident’s conduct might be altered to improve the relationship and communication she

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had with these staff. This focus made it seem as though the target of resistance was these individuals themselves.

In this way, *Tumbling Towers* reduced the enormity of the challenges fac-ing Waterloo’s public housing residents – which include displacement and the dispersal of their community – to interpersonal conflicts between resi-dents and government officials, rather than looking more broadly at the ways in which such treatment is made possible through governmental rationalities and strategies. This emphasis on interpersonal conflicts ‘preserves the impres-sion that it is corrupt or evil individuals who are oppressing protagonists in an otherwise fair and equitable system’ (O’Sullivan, 2001: 92), rather than highlighting the ways in which exploitation and inequalities are embodied in the very rationalities underpinning the status quo. This framing allows the status quo to not just remain intact but to be strengthened through minor reforms that make oppression easier to bear (O’Sullivan, 2001).

***The oppressed/oppressor dyad***

Central to Boal’s method are the binary protagonist/antagonist (oppressed/ oppressor) subject roles (Hamel, 2013). All characters within Boal’s format must fit into these subject positions. These subject positions are also crucial for the interactive stage of the play – the antagonist’s behaviour is not up for alteration, only that of the protagonists, and when audience members are invited to step on stage, they must step into the role of the protagonist (the oppressed) and not any other positions.

The dichotomous relation between subjects which are oppressed and those which are oppressors is not merely incidental to Theatre of the Oppressed but is in fact an underlying principle that structures the format. Snyder-Young claims that in Theatre of the Oppressed, the oppression is ‘clear cut’: ‘antago-nists have power, protagonists do not’ (Snyder-Young, 2011: 37). In general, characters must fall into either of these two roles, and there is little oppor-tunity for addressing the ways in which characters might alternate roles or occupy grey spaces in between these binary positions.

The relationship between the characters of the residents and the com-munity development worker is illustrative of the implications of imagining subjects in such binary roles.

In the play’s second scene, the community development worker is sur-rounded by residents who are trying to get information out of her. They ask specific questions about the redevelopment, but she is unable to find the answers in the information provided to her by the government. The residents’ questions rise in volume and pitch as they move around the worker, who pro-vides no answers to their questions, and eventually calls for silence.

When this scene was replayed and interventions were invited, the com-munity development worker was pitted as the antagonist, while the resi-

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dents were the protagonists whose actions were up for alteration. This places these characters – residents and the community development worker – in the dichotomous oppressed/oppressor relation that recurs in Theatre of the Oppressed.

In the case of the community development worker, this binary relation becomes particularly confused. Community development workers are not strictly government, nor are they necessarily community. Increasingly, such organisations and the individuals who work for them have become respon-sible for delivering government agendas and are accountable to governments for funding. These organisations are increasingly administering programmes related to welfare provision and responsibilisation.

In the case of Waterloo, community development workers are in a tight spot. Though ostensibly independent, most of the local community organisa-tions get their funding from the government. They have also received spe-cific allocations of funding to employ community development staff to assist with consultation and capacity building relating to the redevelopment. How-ever, these organisations see that they have a role in supporting and assisting the community, as they have done so for decades and will continue to do so through aspects of the redevelopment process. In general, they seem to attempt not to take sides. They work to advocate for the community, but perhaps in a limited way.

These community development workers in many ways do some of the work of the state. In capacity building roles, they work to increase the com-munity’s knowledge of planning and development concepts – not so that they can successfully oppose the redevelopment but so they can participate fully in official participation processes. In many ways, the role of these development workers is to implement the work of the state in transforming these residents into responsible, active, participating citizens. Thus, they are in some ways an extension of the state, a branch that is ostensibly ‘non-government’ but that uses technologies of the self, such as responsibilisation, to do the work of government themselves.

However, they are also an extension of the community. These workers live in and around the Waterloo neighbourhood. They are known to, relied upon and trusted by the Waterloo community. They coordinate and support many of the important community activities that occur. They represent the community’s needs to the government, advocating for support and meaning-ful consultation.

This, then, raises questions for the dichotomous oppressed/oppressor roles. Foucault was interested in how individuals can occupy different subject positions, how these can be fluid and changeable, have different implications depending on the power relations they are engaged in. Further, he was inter-ested in how power – including governmental power – is not merely top-down, is not just wielded by ‘the state’ but is diffused throughout society, a

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net-like structure that flows through varied channels, that has different points of application that will look different depending on perspective. In neolib-eral contexts, non-state actors such as private companies and non-government organisations have increasingly become responsible for governing.

The community development workers undoubtedly act, at certain points at least, as agents of the state, enacting technologies of power such as the responsibilisation agenda. But placing them in the role of oppressors, with-out nuance or thought for the complexity of the position they occupy, fails to attend to the complex situations individuals find themselves in, and fails to look at how governmental power is intertwined within other institutions that do not look, from the outside, like the government. It also fails to attend to the fact that such organisations and individuals may have liberatory inten-tions, or may truly wish to advocate for public housing residents, or the ways in which the individuals who work for these organisations may resist the dominant governmentalities of community development work.

*Tumbling Towers’* refusal to consider community development workersas occupying anything other than the ‘oppressor’ subject position meant that the role that such workers might play in assisting the community could not be considered. They were, for the purposes portrayed here, part of a fixed and immoveable system. There was no room for resistance, no consideration that the community development workers might themselves occupy ambiguous roles or that they might wish to help the community. The dichotomous oppressed/oppressor relationship that is so pivotal to the Theatre of the Oppressed model thwarted any opportunity in *Tumbling* *Towers* to explore resistance or ambiguities on the part of non-state actorssuch as community development workers, or of state actors such as housing professionals.

Not only does this construction fail to account for the dynamic and changeable nature of subject positions, it also fails to recognise the ways in which subject positions may be relative – that is, the ways in which the oppressed/oppressor relation may look different depending on one’s vantage point. As noted by Schutzman, ‘such a simple division’ between oppressors and oppressed ‘misrepresents the actual conditions of people’ (1990: 79). The unambiguous dyad between the oppressors and the oppressed found here rein-forces a perception of power as a thing that may be ‘possessed’ by some groups but not others, and fails to recognise that many intersecting and overlap-ping power dynamics may be in play, potentially meaning those perceived to be oppressors in one situation (for example, housing professionals) may be oppressed in another (as employees of government intent on reforming their behaviour, as per Dufty (2011)). This also fails to recognise the possibility that they might also resist governmental technologies – when these subjects are imagined as agents who are both vehicles of and targets of state power, we see that they might become points at which resistance could occur. Indeed,

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both Dufty (2011) and Nethercote (2014) describe the ways in which housing professionals resist various aspects of centralised housing policy.

The dichotomous subject positions also raise a question that is never resolved by Theatre of the Oppressed – what happens if the oppressed suc-cessfully resisted the oppressors and overthrew them? Would they then adopt the role of oppressors, too? The centrality of these dichotomous subject posi-tions to the rationality of Theatre of the Oppressed suggests that this dyadic relation is forever present, complicating efforts to resist.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Since the government’s announcement of the project, the residents of Water-loo that have been engaged in opposition to the redevelopment have strug-gled repeatedly with the question of whether they could achieve meaningful change through their actions. Many residents believed that meaningful and significant change was possible through resistance, and encouraged others to resist the entire redevelopment project. Other residents believed that such change was impossible and that they, the oppressed, could have no such influ-ence. Rather, these residents believed, they should act within the structures established by governmental departments and advocate for their needs within these structures.

The latter of these two viewpoints stems from an understanding of the existing system as immutable, as so powerful and omnipresent as to be an unchallengeable reality. This conception comes as a result of governmentali-ties that encourage subjects to take for granted the logic of neoliberal policies and programmes, and to see such arrangements as inevitable. The effect of this is to reify the notions of structure – the powerful and well-established systems and networks of rule that determine the lives of the less powerful who are subjected to it – counterposed with agency, being the ability of individuals to act against the determinations of structure.

The structure/agency dichotomy has been something of an obsession for the social sciences throughout the 20th and 21st centuries – sociological debate has been largely concerned with whether individual agency or the social structures into which one is born will have a greater impact upon social out-comes. From this perspective, an understanding of resistance becomes focused on whether individuals have the capacity to overcome structure, which is here seen as an underlying social force limiting freedom that must be overcome through the realisation of agency (Rose et al., 2006: 100).

Foucault, however, was not interested in structure/agency debates. For Foucauldian scholars, the sociological obsession with structure versus agency is something of a moot point (Rose et al., 2006). The structure/agency debate relies on the notion of an overly deterministic structure which governs social

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outcomes for individuals on one hand, and free subjects which are absolutely able to determine their own social outcomes on the other. A Foucauldian understanding of neoliberal governmentality shows us that each individual has agency but that ‘freedom’ is not the absence of constraint but rather an invented array of technologies of the self (Rose et al., 2006), and likewise ‘structure’ is not a pre-existing determiner of social outcomes but rather the product of discursive and governmental technologies.

*Tumbling Towers* depicted a situation in which residents were powerless toaffect change in terms of governmental structures or rationalities – the only aspects of the action which could be changed were the actions of the residents themselves. By limiting resistance in this way, *Tumbling Towers* depicted ‘structure’ as an immoveable, unchangeable reality against which individuals must exercise their agency, despite this being unlikely to create change. By precluding the option to reimagine structure, Theatre of the Oppressed limits the possibilities for change to individual behaviour.

What this reification of structure and agency appears to do is convince residents that there is a ‘system’ within which resides power, and makes them feel as though they sit outside this: they come to feel that they fall outside a network of power relations to which they are merely subjected. This not only alienates them from access to the techniques of power, but also makes them feel as though the ‘system’ is out of their reach. This is what then gives rise to the notion that it is futile to resist and that residents would instead be bet-ter off engaging with the government through formal consultation processes.

A Foucauldian view emphasises imagining how things could be other-wise as the essential component of resistance (Foucault, 1982) – resistance relies on being able to see that current circumstances are neither necessary nor fixed, but rather contingent and changeable. This perspective helps us see the ways in which Boal’s approach to resistance might be limiting. Referring to the paralysing effects of these interventions in Theatre of the Oppressed, Österlind argues that the concept that ‘everything is possible; it only depends on you’ is just as misleading as the belief that ‘everything depends on the structures; you can’t do anything’ (Österlind, 2008: 80). Both are paralys-ing, for they either mean that change is wholly contingent on the individu-al’s capacity or that change is impossible no matter the individual capacity. By assuming that change relies entirely on altering one’s individual actions, the possibility of radical change to rationalities underpinning governmental action is precluded.

Österlind argues that the merging of the personal and the political in Theatre of the Oppressed is a strength, not a weakness (2008: 81). Indeed, assisting the realisation that citizens are not disconnected to politics, power and resistance is a potential strength of this approach. However, framing the political as purely personal, and the individual as responsible not only for social problems but also for their solutions, echoes the neoliberal playbook

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that would see us individualise both the causes and solutions for social disad-vantage, marginalisation and injustice. Theatre and other creative, participa-tory methods may well provide tools to help citizens identify strategies of resistance to powerful actors; however, these tools must recognise that we can-not place the burden for change upon those most marginalised in our society.

The intention of Theatre of the Oppressed as a community development tool is to clarify options and opportunities for resisting oppression and improv-ing the circumstances of oppressed people. In Waterloo, residents were in need of guidance about how they might engage in successful strategies to oppose the redevelopment of their neighbourhood. *Tumbling Towers*, though intended as a tool to guide residents, appeared to serve to reify the notion that the system was unchangeable and the actions put in place by the government were inevi-table, unalterable. Residents were looking for tools that would allow them to work through their agency to change the system, but *Tumbling Towers* sug-gested that residents should work through their agency to change *themselves*.

Many of the tools of community development, such as empowerment and responsibiliation techniques, serve to reify neoliberal rationalities concerning the responsibility of individual for managing their own life outcomes and social risk. If community development is to help the vulnerable in society work to advocate for their own interests, participants need tools which both recognise their own agency and serve to de-stabilise the dominant govern-mental rationalities and strategies, rather than to reinforce them.

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**Note**

1. Both the name of the theatre production and the names of research participants have been changed.

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