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**Compare and assess the accounts of power and resistance in the political thought of Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault**

In this essay, I interpret and compare Michel Foucault’s and Stuart Hall’s views on power and resistance. I will assess Foucault’s definitions through his genealogical method. I then assess Hall’s project and establish parallels and divergences between their work. As we navigate through their theories, I will question the prevailing notion that resistance is futile within Foucault's theoretical framework while scrutinizing Hall's approach for lack of systematic rigour. I conclude that Foucault's project is more valuable in understanding power relations due to its theoretical nature, while Hall's analysis is, despite its insights, too localised to be consistently applied.

Foucault’s aim was “not […] to analyze the phenomena of power, [but] to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subject” (Foucault, 1982, p. 777). This clarification is crucial to understand his conception of power as something that is “neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that is only exists in action” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 89). For him, there is no 'economic power’, just ‘power exerted through the economic sphere’. It is not something one can possess but something one can use for the subjection of the other. The exertion of power, however, does not need to be repressive as “the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power” (Foucault, 1980b, p. 119). Its productive aspect is that "we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. This is the case for every society." (Foucault, 1980a, p. 93). All put together, power is simply a network of practices where a knowledge or positional gap exists between those who produce or own the truth and those who are subjected to it. It is not inherently repressive, but it can be exerted in brutal ways. Furthermore, power itself can be used to reshape and produce new knowledge in disagreement with current beliefs.

This reshaping of the truth is precisely what I interpret as Foucault's notion of resistance. As Gutting and Oksala put it in their Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry, “where there is power, there is always resistance too” (Gutting & Oksala, 2022). The most important and influential power relations–the teacher-student, the doctor-patient, the police-citizen, etc.–are those exerted closest to us. In each of these, groups and individuals are still able to contest power either to survive or in an attempt to influence the dominant views at the time. While some believe that “the hegemonic [prevalent] positions are nevertheless always able to eliminate effective counter-hegemonic resistance” (Heller, 1996, p. 98), rendering resistance always futile, Foucault's historical method fails to accept this conclusion. His “genealogy” is a technique to map how historical eras cycled through different epistemic tools used to construct and acquire knowledge. If ‘counter-hegemonic’ positions like the suffragists or anti-slavery movements are now hegemonic views defended by our current notion of ‘truth’, it becomes clear that resistance is, like power, able to shape discourse.

Stuart Hall’s notion of resistance starts with similar principles. He “buy[s] the Foucauldian notion that itʼs not only classes that intervene; and […] the notion that one has to rethink an expressive relationship between class and ideas” (Hall, 1997, p. 31). The notion of class is important for Hall, who, as a Marxist, often articulates resistance under the language of ‘struggle’ of classes. He rethinks the relationship between class and ideas by claiming cultural resistance is “not outside [the political and economic spheres]” but also “not reducible to them” (Hall, 2016a, p. 180). Resistance, then, is the articulation of ideology through the re-interpretation and re-appropriation of ideological products designed by the dominant class with the purpose to oppress and maintain ‘hegemony’, the balanced command “of political, social, and ideological forces at each point in the social formation” (Hall, 2016b, p. 178).

One of Hall’s examples of anti-hegemonic cultural resistance is Rock Against Racism, a group of bands that decided to organise their cultural positions and present a political front against National Front (the UK’s Fascist party) sympathisers (Hall, 2016a, p. 196).. However, Hall’s ‘resistance’ was only possible because the political positions within rock were not fully sedimented i.e. the power network of the community was structured in such a way as to allow changes. Just as it would be easier to convince people in a gym to play a 90-minute match of football than it would be outside an obesity clinic. The power “rock against racism” had to ‘struggle’ against was not as homogenous as to impede change.

On the other side, Foucault avoids any concrete examples of intentional resistance since power “analysis should not concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention or decision” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 97). He is more interested in uncovering the genealogy of discourse, relying on a strong methodological rigour to clearly define its questions and its areas of interest.

Hall himself admitted that Foucault’s “discursive definition is close to the way in which [he has] been using the terms ‘ideology’ and ‘culture’” (Hall, 1997, p. 8), where power is enacted by the elites through the developments of ideology. For instance, he talks about the idea of ‘affluence’ as “an ideology of the dominant culture *about* and *for* the working-class, directed *at* them (through the media, advertising, political speeches, etc.)” (Hall, et al., 1993, p. 35). While this idea of the exertion of power to shape the societal notion of truth is similar for both authors, Hall recognises the importance of the state and the social forces actively re-appropriating their ideological instruction received from the dominant culture, where Foucault places a heavier emphasis on individual rather than class resistance.

While both see resistance as a means to shape the current discourse/ideology, they differ on the extent to which they believe this influence is possible. Foucault analysis presupposes that “the bourgeoisie is interested […] in the system[s] of control” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 102), not in the actual instances of the phenomena. For him, culture would only be interesting if it signifies success in developing individuals who, under the system's influence, self-police to maintain the 'expected' norms of behaviour. While resistance could reshape the system, its (modern) disciplinary nature would make this exceedingly difficult. In contrast, Hall defends that “the fact that the other side is not going to be overthrown does not mean that important concessions and gains cannot be won” (Hall, 2016a, p. 188). For him, a culture, class, or people can successfully resist by achieving “a certain degree of organisation” (*ibid*) and resisting, struggling, and politically articulating a shared desire.

The *concrete* notion of group formation is more articulated and developed in Hall's work. He approaches the question of power and resistance with a certain distance from theory, demonstrating a greater interest in practical political thought. Hall spends a significant part of his work discussing and understanding particular British cultural formations of his time, like the ‘skinheads’ or the ‘mods’, and how these fit into his notion of resistance to power. However, very little is said in terms of applicable theory that can be used to make sense of other periods in History. This lack of rigour does not impoverish his work but severely limits it when attempting to make sense of power more generally.

On the other hand, Foucault's work suffers from an excess of theory. He has thought in length about the oppression of many minority groups but has offered very little insight into how one could begin to improve their situation. Most of his work focused on the past: how things came to be the way they are and how they do not need to stay like that. However, an understanding of the structure one is faced against, and the epistemic developments that lead to it can offer a significant first step for the oppressed, as opposed to a more descriptive nature of their own present culture.

In addition to a more descriptive work, Hall ascribes more intentionality from the dominant class. He sees power as the source of “domination in the social formation” (Hall, 2016b, p. 155). In comparison, Foucault rejects the notion that “new technolog[ies] of power take its historical origins from an identifiable […] group of individuals” who use them to “further their interests” (Foucault, 1980c, p. 159). He defends that an intricate web of coincidences and epistemic influences led to particular structures of power that tend to discipline and shape citizens in a specific way. In much the same way humans did not consciously *choose* to be omnivores, we still *benefit* from that outcome (by having a greater variety of dietary options with different economic costs) in our present social structure. Both Hall and Foucault agree that modern power structures are more dispersed in a non-royal structure (Hall, 2016b, p. 176) (Foucault, 1980a, p. 105), and Hall believes that domination requires a certain level of hegemony from the dominant class as well as that control of media production. Under those circumstances, it is not hard to imagine a chain of influences and media manipulation that slowly influences members of the dominant class into a homogenous state. In that case, Hall's intentionality claims fail to appreciate Foucault's observation that we are all both subject to and yielders of power.

While sometimes convoluted, Foucault’s genealogical project offers a rich theoretical basis which we can use to understand society. Hall’s concrete focus on cultural formations lacks the theoretical rigour to open it to generalizability. While both accounts have their strengths and weaknesses, Foucault’s lies closer to a framework of understanding power relations, which fail to be philosophically interesting in Hall.

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