

In this paper I want to consider the problem of resistance and agency and to look again at how we understand the challenge of social movements and the impact they have on governmental regimes.

1.

I would like to start with a little art appreciation. The Soviet artist El Lissitzky's 1919 poster 'Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge' is a powerful metaphor for the Russian Civil War and for the class struggle expressed in the Bolshevik revolution. Two forces face each other in combat; the reds progressive, the whites reactionary. The red wedge drives forward; it is the dynamic of history, a movement for progress.

2.

These two opposing blocks appear again in the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci's 'war of position' fought in the trenches and fortifications of civil society where both sides seek to establish themselves as hegemonic powers. The dominant bloc is counterpoised by a force outside itself; hegemony faces counter-hegemony across the barbed wire of the frontline. The state and capitalist society may present itself as the general will of the people and cast a spell over civil society to secure its consent but the working class movement is unaffected by this charm and fights on for liberty undaunted.

3.

This conflict model appears again in the rise of the so-called new social movements in the late 1960s. Social movements are imagined as the free

mobilisation of the forces of progress, opposing the weight of conformity, prejudice and injustice. Movements wage campaigns of collective action, recruiting supporters by spreading the word about the justice of their cause, and they batter away at the forces of reaction. And no matter how many campaigns and causes are fought, the French social movement theorist, Alain Touraine (1981) believed there were only two social movements, the dominators and the liberators; face to face, the opposing forces of history.

4.

The concept of social movements conveyed by the image 'Beat the whites with the red wedge' has been criticised by theorists working in the shadow of Foucault's theory of governmentality. The idea that resistance can exist outside of power, that the red wedge can face the dominance of the whites across a no man's land contradicts Foucault's maxim that power is 'always already there'. Barbara Cruikshank (1999) addressed this fallacy in the 'Will to Empower', a message dedicated to those on the left who organise community struggles and hope to empower the oppressed to fight their enslavement. Mitchell Dean (1999) has lambasted the liberatory pretensions of social movements, and the belief in progress and history they present as 'the meta-histories of promise'.

5.

The Spanish painter Miro may never have intended his work to serve as a new pictorial metaphor for social movements, but it seems to provide a useful illustration through which to reinterpret the red wedge as a force inside the

dominant white block – now less a block and more a disparate cloud. The red wedge is now encompassed by the hegemony of the whites; it is part of that power relation, and unable to escape it; it owes its existence to the domination that has given it birth. In this image, social movements cannot escape the corrosive effects of power relations and, for that reason, they cannot be conceived as progressive or liberatory.

Yet if the red social movement is constituted as regulated subject by the white power that surrounds it, it is still able to resist: it is still red. The red circle is repudiated and abject; it is buried deep within the white hegemony; yet it is threatening in its very exclusion. How do we understand this resistance? In 'The Handmaid's Tale' Margaret Atwood says; "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light." Yet when Foucauldian scholars try to theorise resistance they either appear to deny it any possibility or they return to a type of voluntarism. Nikolas Rose locates resistance in the conflicting effects of overlapping identifications enabling subjects to negotiate their own identity. Yet we see clearly that dominant discourses can reinforce each other, that discourses around gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class construct a regime of regulation that attains near universal status.

6.

To theorise resistance within this highly regulated matrix, I want to turn to the feminist philosopher Judith Butler. Butler resists the lure of voluntarism and she has a particular concern for what she calls 'domesticated' social

movements. In the gay movement's demand for same-sex marriage, and in the pro-censorship campaigns of anti-pornography feminists, she sees the tensions inherent in social movements that are situated inside power, whose members are conditioned by the weight of dominant power relations and are deprived of all but the most expedient agency by the regulatory matrix that surrounds them. Butler's concern stems from an optimism grounded in a specific theory of resistance from within power. It is those themes of agency and resistance within domestication that I want to explore in the case study of the UK tenants movement.

7.

Tenants' organisations first emerged in the UK as campaigning bodies in the 1860s and a history of militant collective action, often erupting into bitter rent strikes, shapes a narrative of a social movement that campaigned for public housing in the demand for the social wage. A momentous tide of militant tenant action immediately prior to, and during the First World War culminated in the Glasgow rent strike of 1915 and the imposition of rent controls on the private rented sector (Melling 1983, Castells 1983, Damer 1997/1992), and has been persuasively portrayed as laying the foundations for the development of council housing (Damer 2000: 94).

8.

The depiction of a militant UK tenants' movement in the 1960s and 1970s has been related to the development of the so-called 'new' social movements that were characterised in Britain by campaigns of service users against the

bureaucracy of the welfare state (Mouffe 1988). Community and social work professionals inspired by a Marxist theorisation of the welfare state sought to direct and encourage these movements.

9.

Chantal Mouffe (1988), however, warns against seeing social movements as being necessarily a progressive force and argues that the opposition of these groups to the welfare state was easily articulated to the newly emerging discourses of neo-liberalism and that these movements could be assimilated into the new hegemonic project of the Right (Hall 1988). The discontent of welfare state service users was articulated to the cause of neo-liberal hegemony and tenants achieved recognition as consumers, while entering into the discourse of participation that increased their subjection.

10.

The wide reaching social policy of participation, or user involvement, emerged from this discourse around the failure of the welfare state and became an essential strategy in the restructuring of welfare services along market lines. In the field of housing, the rise of a discourse of participation allowed the demands of tenants for decision-making power over their housing service to be articulated to a 'new social settlement' (Malpass 2005: 167). Today a wide menu of participation opportunities is offered social housing tenants through the resident involvement strategies of their housing providers. Tenants can take places on the management board of social housing companies; take over the management of their estates; lobby independently through associations and federations as well as take part in a familiar menu of voice options

through focus groups, panels, and satisfaction surveys. For some tenants, participation has meant the opportunity to select repair contractors, design the delivery of services, make public spending decisions, plan their future accommodation, manage budgets and staff, and take social housing into community ownership (Clapham & Kintrea 2000; Cm 6630 2005).

11.

Alongside the development of this 'participation culture' (Housing Corporation 2007), the social housing sector has been intentionally residualised through the effects of housing policy that has turned it into a stigmatised and unpopular tenure, abandoned by those with resources to buy, and means tested to provide a welfare safety net for the poorest and most vulnerable people in society (Kemeny 1995; Malpass 2005). While tenants' organisations pursued the vision of participatory democracy in the new models of housing governance, they gave their support to a welfare settlement that radically reduced the size and status of the social housing sector, increased its exposure to market forces, reduced democratic accountability and centralised budgetary decisions (Pierson 1994, Cooper & Hawtin 1997, Malpass 2005). Participation itself became a hegemonic concept that secured universal support, but as a dominant discourse it was stripped of its assertions of direct democracy, and of its endorsement of lived, practical experience against professional knowledge or bureaucratic process. Participation was foreclosed as a hegemonic discourse to a consumer relation between landlords and tenants over service standards.

12.

The existence of something that can be called a tenants movement today is a result of its constitution through the performance of participation within the constraints of a particular relationship of power. It is only the formal recognition by government and registered housing providers of a national, regional and local structure of tenants' organisations that permits the phrase 'tenants' movement' to be used. We know of a network of more than 10,000 neighbourhood, city, borough-wide and landlord-wide tenants organisations but those are only the ones that meet landlord recognition criteria and that landlords have authorised as legitimate organisations (Bines et al 1993; Cole et al 2000; Aldbourne Associates 2001).

13.

Tenant organisations may appear to have their own agency but they are given voice by the structures of tenant participation and that recognition is contingent on the continued performance of a regulated identity. We can only understand the contemporary tenants' movement as a regulated subject that has been constituted by the dominant discourse of participation. The argument I advance is that tenant participation is an identificatory process. Participation is 'done', there are constrained ways of doing it, and by doing it tenants are constructed as regulated subjects. Yet paradoxically, by doing participation, the tenants movement can turn power against itself, and recover agency and resistance. I want to go on to explore that assertion through Judith Butler's theory of the performative.

14.

Participation is the process through which the tenants' movement is granted a prescriptive agency that enables it to take part in a market relationship with social landlords and housing agencies. Enacting participation through repeated negotiations, focus groups, consultations, and board meetings bolsters the identificatory project that constitutes the tenants' movement as a regulated subject. By citing the regulations of participation in everyday practice tenants reproduce and renew their identity and their subjection through what Butler called 'a regularised and constrained repetition of norms' (1993: 95). But identity must be constantly renewed and performed in daily life, and the outcome cannot be completely determined in advance. The iteration of an identity may not produce an exact copy each time and has the potential to cite the possibilities that were excluded in its construction. Participation depends on tenant agency to maintain its identifications but it must incur the possibility that, in the application of that agency, different meanings and excluded identities might make an unexpected return.

15.

In the dominant model of participation the mobilisation of a social movement around the category of housing tenure has been legitimised. Collective action has been harnessed to the consumer relationship between landlords and tenants. This tenants' movement is constituted in the identity of the 'responsible tenant' and its mobilisation and organisational growth is achieved through the expansion of this identification. This repetition of a regulatory project strengthens the consumer status of tenants' organisations and it



increases their ability and potential for effective collective action. In carrying out the regulated performance of participation, tenants cite excluded concepts of direct democracy, and harness their demands for voice to the traditions of a militant history. Participation allows them to champion their lived experience against the power of housing professionals and generates antagonism that reclaims the combative role of a social movement. The tenants' movement as constituted by participation mobilises against the regime that normalises it, developing its potential to construct new identities and articulate excluded definitions of participation while it renews its own subjection (Butler 1997: 93).

16.

The development of a National Tenants Voice by the UK government in 2008 provides a vivid illustration both of the domestication of the tenants' movement and its ability to continue resistance from within power. The idea of a Tenants Voice was initiated by the National Consumer Council who called, in its submission to Martin Cave's (2007) review of the regulation of social housing, for a new organisation that could act as a 'voice' for social housing tenants modelled on the consumer watchdog organisations established in the privatisation of British public industries (Chilton & Mayo 2007). While the National Consumer Council advocated an extension of choice and competition in the social housing sector, tenants' organisations who responded to the Cave Review argued for increased democratic accountability in public service provision. The model of a National Tenants Voice advocated by tenants was of a national trade union for tenants, democratically constituted with regional branches and elected officials, with

the authority to intervene against landlords and resolve complaints (Bandy et al 2007).

17.

A National Tenants Voice Project Group was established by Communities and Local Government in February 2008 with representatives from national and regional tenants' organisations, and the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) sitting alongside the National Consumer Council, and with tenants taking the majority of places. By the time the Project Group issued a consultation paper on its proposals in July 2008, not only had the National Consumer Council been removed from the negotiations, but a shade of antagonism had crept into the imagery of a National Tenants Voice conceived by the group. In the project group's proposals (NTV Project Group 2008a: 2) the National Tenants Voice was to be 'rooted in the tenants' movement, with close working links with representative tenants' organisations' and, while still imagined as a consumer watchdog with an advocacy and research remit, the new body would help build and strengthen tenants organisations and be guided by a belief 'that tenants are citizens of equal worth' (2008a: 3). The National Tenants Voice was now to be an independent organisation rather than operating as part of an existing agency, and would have a governance structure that was accountable to tenants, led by tenants, with guaranteed places on its National Council for the national and regional tenants' organisations.

18.

The final report of the National Tenants Voice Project Group '*Citizens of Equal Worth*' (2008b:14) made clear the subtle changes to the way a consumer watchdog role was to be envisaged. The core purpose of the new organisation was 'to increase the opportunities for social tenants to have a strong collective influence over the policies that affect them' although Communities and Local Government had initially insisted that the National Tenants Voice should not take any representational role (CLG 2007a). The consumerist vision now reflected a strong collective component as its watchdog role served a 'movement', an imaginary of shared aims and interests that found its way into legislation when the proposal to establish the National Tenants Voice was included in the '*Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill*', put before Parliament in December 2008. Clause 25 of the Bill defined the role of the new organisation as 'representing or facilitating the representation of the views and interests of social housing tenants in England'.

19.

Tenant organisations appear to have substantially amended the direction of a National Tenants Voice to strengthen their influence as consumers while generating a strong collective base. The outline of a collective identity has now been embodied in legislation, and a new articulation of democratic values has been conjured from the consumer model of participation. The development of the National Tenants Voice could then be seen as an

illustration of resistance through reiterative agency, of turning power against itself.

A contentious tenants' movement emerges from within the prescribed processes of tenant participation as power that is turned against itself. The agency and resistance of a tenants movement is therefore a dynamic relation of power within housing policy that cannot be completely contained, but neither can it emerge triumphant and liberating. The resistance of social movements, then, is what Butler called 'the ideal of possibility' (2000: 162). It is the failure of hegemonic power to impose identity as a permanent injunction on the subject that allows power relations to be subverted and challenged (Butler 1993: 95). Resistance offers the possibility of change; the possibility that a different sort of hegemonic regime may evolve.