Against 'resistance'? Towards a conception of differential politics in international political sociology

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Abstract

'Resistance' and related concepts like 'counter-conduct', 'counter-politics' and 'revolution' continue to gain an intense interest and use. At the same time, however, we observe an intensified questioning of the concept of resistance and in particular the logic of negativity that it inscribes into our understanding of difference and its politics. Engaging with contributions that have pushed the concept of resistance and its dialectic logic of negativity to its limits in order to explore what it yields for analysing different political practices, we look for new interventions into modes of thinking about critical politics. To that purpose, we introduce the concepts of 'folds' and 'folding'. They allow for understanding how differences work not through opposition to something but through enveloping in dynamic structures of multiple connections that generate a specific social field. We speak loosely of 'against resistance?' not as a claim that the concept of resistance has or should be moved to the dustbin of history but rather to argue for experimenting in International Political Sociology with conceptions of non-dialectic critical politics that work in a perspective of co-existence in heterogeneity and multiplicity and the conditions for openness and social possibility that it creates.

Keywords

Resistance, negativity, critical politics, folds, foldings, Deleuze, international political sociology

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Introduction

Recent trends in world politics have instigated a renewed interest in the nature and relevance of various forms of contestation and resistance, as renewed debates on insurgencies, rebellions and revolution indicate (Dean, 2019; Faramelli, 2018; Lawson, 2019; Selbin, 2019). This current interest in resistance comes into International Relations (IR) and international political sociology against a background of at least half a century of intense intellectual revisiting, critique and crisis of what is called resistance and a multiplicity of practical experimenting with various modes of critical politics that do not fit the mobilisation of a historical subject or tightly coordinated and organised social or political movements. Resistance has been disconnected from totalising horizons and world histories leading to foregrounding situated and heterogeneous practices that cannot be aggregated into a global historical process.

The concept of resistance, however, limits analyses of such de-centred and heterogeneous social processes by integrating them into an opposition to a supposedly coherent order such as the world economy or neoliberal governmentalities as a condition for the production of critique (Bonanno, 2017; Coleman, 2013). Conceptualised as a negative force within a horizon of social transformation of which it is a necessary condition, resistance remains dependent on what it opposes, limiting the possibilities of affirmative and creative politics, in particular under conditions of highly dispersed agency (Hoy, 2004). The intensification of interest in resistance and related concepts goes hand in hand with an explicit questioning of whether the concept of resistance can indeed be the default or baseline concepts through which to organise a critical analytics of the politics of difference as they are actualised today (Checchi, 2021). The latter has invited experimenting with reconceptualisations of 'resistance' that push the concept to its very limits and with creating new conceptions of non-dialectic critical politics that work in a perspective of co-existence in heterogeneity and multiplicity and the conditions for 'openness instead of closure of social possibility' (Connolly, 1995) it creates.

In this article, we seek to contribute to this conceptual experimenting. We reflect on how resistance structures thought on critical politics and the limits it imposes to thinking the political differently. We speak loosely of 'against resistance?' not as a claim that the concept of resistance has or should be moved to the dustbin of history but rather to express that 'resistance' is not to be taken as a default concept of critical politics in international political sociology. Engaging with contributions that have pushed the concept of resistance to its limits in order to explore what it yields for analysing different political practices, we look for new interventions into modes of thinking about everyday struggles and co-existence. To that purpose, we introduce the concepts of 'folds' and 'folding' as articulated in the late work of Gilles Deleuze. They allow for a distinctive understanding of how differences work not through opposition to something but through enveloping in dynamic structures of multiple connections that generate a specific social field. In doing so, we seek to introduce a mode of thinking critical politics (a) outside of the logic of negativity, which is so central to the concept of resistance, and (b) as a continuous de-centring of political practice that operates transversally rather than dialectically.

Resistance and world politics

Resistance remains a concept that continues to be used to account for the practices that challenge entrenched social formations and policies. It is also a major concept for bringing in the agency of those subordinated by relations of domination. Resistance is to a large extent a concept that draws attention to the capacity of those with limited power to produce significant social change and that positions them as meaningfully creating life worlds in which they dwell against instituted orders (Caygill, 2013). Research on various areas of world politics has been intensely revisiting resistance in the last three to four decades to account for how global and regional policies are countered and shaped by those on the receiving end. These areas include, among others, peace building, migration and border controls, the environment, transnational movements struggling for various rights and mobilisations of colonial histories and debts to challenge instituted histories of international relations.

In the context of this intensified concern with oppositional politics, the tension between different approaches to critical politics persists. Despite the relative exhaustion of the counter-hegemonic critique of global politics and anti-globalisation mobilisations in the past two decades, calls for bringing back classical strategies of resistance have found some traction, as in, for instance, Samir Amin's proposal for the organisation of a Fifth International (Moghadam, 2019); or Dean's (2019) advocacy of the Leninist party as an indispensable instrument for revolution; or Selbin's (2019) defence of revolution as a political strategy against austerity. However, contemporary scholarly work has consistently tried to go beyond thinking about resistance in terms of oppositions to states, hegemonic projects, or world orders. Instead of conceiving resistance as a general category around which it is possible to organise critique of existing structures of domination, we find more investigations of situated practices in de-centred sites of struggle, where everyday tactics of transgression or subversion tell us more about how the subaltern cope than open demonstrations of protest or revolt (Amoore, 2005).

As we consider the interest in the politics of resistance in international studies since the early 2000s, it is useful to refer to the debates, especially in international political economy, about the role of global civil society in contesting, reforming, or transforming structures and institutions that govern world politics. Once supportive of globalisation and expanding social actions beyond state boundaries, movements, activists and scholars gradually became critical of the process of institutionalisation of a global economy that was increasingly unaccountable to political representation and to the rights of citizens and consumers, and that was widening international and global inequality gaps. If in the aftermath of the cold war Robert Cox (1992) (among others) talked about a 'post-hegemonic' order, anti-globalisation movements protested in 1999 in Seattle against what they perceived as an hegemonic neoliberalism operating on a world scale. The push towards more confrontational intellectual and political stands intensified with the onslaught of the global war on terror. For some observers in the global south, the proliferation of new forms of violence, torture and human rights abuses without any legal or geographical limitations pointed to a quasi-fascist turn in globalisation (Escobar, 2004).

In the context of this new wave of global activism, the study of the problem of change in world politics became strongly associated to movements resisting neoliberal global

governance. The privileged site of these then new experiments in the politics of contestation became global civil society. Our interest here is not to review the ensuing debate over the nature, cohesion and effectiveness of global civil society and its actors as vehicles of resistance and/or emancipation. We are interested, rather, in pointing out how the concept was crucial in defining politics as resistance to the post–cold war neoliberal order and to globalisation. The uniqueness of this mode of politics derived from its distancing from state-centred struggles for rights and democracy and its expansion of spaces of resistance transnationally. At the same time, global civil society itself came to be conceived as an expanded sphere of action, the boundaries of which were defined by its 'transformative logic' as well as by its occupation by voluntary associations engaged in emancipatory struggles, or, in other words, in a politics of counter-hegemony. Civil society was considered, then, a cohesive and exclusive space in which progressive actors resisted dominant forces (capital and institutions of global governance) of world order. This conceptualisation of civil society provided clear boundaries between hegemonic forces and 'openly declared forms of resistance' (Colás, 2002; Dirlik, 2004; Eschle and Maiguashca, 2005).

The clarity of this oppositional dynamics of resistance has since become one of the major issues of divergence among militants and scholars analysing social struggles in world politics. One major series of contentions arose from how to reconceptualise resistance considering the long process of fragmentation of the revolutionary subject – the proletariat – and the conceptions of world historical developments which this subject enacts and through which it gains its critical political significance. The focus of debate moved to the varied forms of relations and connections generated by situated movements in their struggles against globalisation. It led to rethinking resistance in terms of fragmented struggles, the critical political significance of infra-political life and the everyday and de-centred notions of counter-political subjects such as social movements and situated enactments of collective subjectivity. Some analysts, based on James Scott's work, pointed out that often contestation is imperceptible, hidden in everyday dissident practices in what he defined as 'infra-politics'.[1] It is a search for 'unexplored agency concealed behind the façade of powerlessness' (Bojadzijev and Karakavali, 2010). Literature that seeks to revalue and reconceptualise certain modes of anarchist thought in IR similarly has tried to formulate a counter-politics that operates through the material creation of de-centred and autonomous forms of life that disrupt contextual social formations through their everyday diffuse modes of existence (Murray, 2010; Newman, 2012; Rossdale, 2010). Others, for whom looking at discrete social spaces and at particular actors didn't help, focused on power relations and their contingent articulations in multiple sites of struggle in order to uncover instances of resistance (Ansems de Vries and Rosenow, 2015; Stierl, 2019). If power became more decentralised and diffused, so did forms of resistance. The issue was not just multiplications of resistances, however. The more profound challenge was in work that saw these developments as unhinging critical politics from resistance and its privileged sites of articulation such as global civil society.

For example, Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos seek to rethink control and subversion in the context of migration studies by detaching counter-politics from resistance. They start from expressing that they are 'tired of the Marxist and post-Marxian readings

of social conflict as solely organised around the state and its institutions' (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 13). It is a starting point that resembles how in the 1980s and 1990s, social movements and some of the approaches conceptualising everyday resistance addressed dissatisfaction with Marxian theories of resistance, including its reductive reading of the resistant subject as the working class. However, the latter assumed resistance was still possible (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 30–31). They hung on to the possibility of mobilising a collective with the aim of realising an alternative social and political order. They also assumed that people involved in counter-politics would see themselves as sharing a collective interest defined by a distinct identity, which included among others gender, race, class, culture and sexuality. These approaches have been challenged by observations that a significant proportion of counter-politics, including migration practices, do not generate significant collective action or coalesce around class-like organisations of identity. Instead, they operate largely through diffuse and everyday practices. Neither do they primarily address state power. They work transversally as non-cohesive, uncoordinated subversions that change sensibilities and create immediate material realities rather than rights and representations of an alternative order. When that is the case, however, analyses that focus on collective subject and movement formation either do not fully grasp what is going on or read these practices as largely insignificant fragments that wither away as soon as they have sprung up.

Similar concerns and searches for conceptualising counter-politics at and in some cases beyond the limits of resistance emerged when social movements literature had difficulty understanding the political significance of insurrectionist and occupy movements in the late 2000s and after. Carl Death draws on Foucault's notion of counter-conduct to account for the significance of these actions without requiring them to meet the standards of a social movement (Death, 2010). Arturo Escobar highlights that these phenomena link to a broader need in the social movements literature to explore conceptions of subaltern politics that are detached from references to global orders and development. He reflects on the potential of the micro-politics of new social movements to imagine alternative worlds. Escobar is concerned both with new ways of thinking counter-politics in an age of ultra-liberal capitalism as well as with forms of organisation that may allow for the emergence of creative practices of political agency. In the context of the diminishing energy of alter- and anti-globalisation movements, the challenge is in creating concepts that are less 'capitalocentric' and 'globalocentric', in other words, less derivative of large social formations against which social movements directed their strategies of resistance (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010). The latter had become increasingly defined by their opposition to global liberal governance, leading to their capture or to being circumscribed by global/local binaries that restricted their practices to homogenised spaces of resistance (Drainville, 2012). Escaping this condition required abandoning 'centralised essentialisms' as starting points from which to transcend power structures against which politics organised itself.

The challenge that emerged here lies in (a) how to conceptualise resistance in the absence of open and declared acts of contestation and (b) how to connect diffuse instances of contestation when they do not enact a global scale. One answer was to look for commonalities among actors, sites and strategies in struggles against globalisation (Mittleman and Chin, 2005). However, even if we were able to identify such commonalities, an

additional problem emerged in how to distinguish between so-called emancipatory and discriminatory (or reactionary) resistances to world order, as the rise of many right-wing movements has shown us in recent history. In light of the difficulties to 'ascribe resistance' to a group or movement, or to a particular sphere of political action (civil society) and its related practices and strategies, the residual move remained to associate resistance to opposition to the state, world capitalism, empire, or world order (Amoore, 2005: 6; Mittleman and Chin, 2005; Nederveen Pieterse and Rehbein, 2009). At this point, the differential 'resistances' would be united again from the perspective of a global order. Power re-centred around a given configuration and resistance linked to the forces united by their opposition to such an order. This mode of connecting and giving relevance to non-declared contestations re-essentialises counter-political practices through their negative relation to the given, dominant social formation. Such a move was precisely one of the key issues that was found wanting for understanding the diffuse counter-politics in de-centred power relations towards the latter parts of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century.

Critical thought in IR thus finds itself at a conjuncture in which there is an intense interest in the concept of 'resistance' (and related concepts like counter-conduct and revolution). One of the drivers is how the recognition of the fracturing of some resistant practices in heterogeneous and ephemeral actions has intensified debates about the limits of the concept of resistance for understanding a significant development in critical politics. As described above, the debate opposes those seeking to conceptualise difference and its politics beyond resistance, others reconfiguring an analytics of resistance so the concept can carry a critical politics within a shifted conceptual and practical landscape, and those that seek to re-assert more classical conceptions of resistance emphasising the need for clear-cut mobilisation of strongly organised opposition to a given order as the main way through which effective differential politics can be conceptualised.

One of the key contentions running through these debates concerns the centrality of the problem of negativity to critical politics and thought. The logic of negativity is inherent to the concept of resistance. It performs a double operation on difference and its politics: (a) the rendition of an oppositional logic and (b) an imperative to unify dispersed, heterogeneous and multiple practices into a positional pole in the opposition. The negativity of resistance invites re-asserting conceptions of global order in relation to which dispersed and unarticulated practices of contention can be positioned as counter-hegemonic, which raises questions of how to escape making contentious practices dependent on a given order. The key question we are interested in and which animates much of the work on resistance today concerns the idea that negativity has reached a deadlock. The search for conceptualising critical politics in a way that does not lock it into negativity is a main conceptual site where the concept of resistance is pushed to and beyond its limit and where openings are created for concepts of critical politics that work not through contradictory opposition but through folding and encountering. We are particularly interested in negativity because it is one of the themes where the rethinking of critical politics and the question of the limits of critique meet. As Coole has extensively argued, critical politics is tied into negativity (Coole, 2000: 2–6). It is this inescapability of negativity that we start questioning in the next sections by exploring fracturing analytics of critical politics.

Fracturing resistance

Fracturing refers to an analytical operation that displaces binary and oppositional conceptions of differential politics with conceptions of heterogeneous arrangements in which relations remain immanently multiple. Instead of exploring the formation of cohesive political spaces and identities, fracturing invites a focus on the enmeshment of different components in connective processes. It works in line with Deleuze's critique that dialectics 'placed under the power of the negative' renders thought unable to move beyond already given contradictions between pre-constituted forces which are already part of a whole (Deleuze, 2004 (1968) 1–31). Let us look in more detail at how such fracturing connectivity has been conceptualised and how it can take us beyond the logic of negativity in studies of critical politics. One major contribution has been to rethink the spatial organisation of contestations and solidarities in order to foreground place-based agencies and practices which are 'stretched' in networked – and hence unbounded – power relations.

Arturo Escobar (2012) explores such possibilities through an approach that looks at how forms of social organisation create different goals, practices and modes of agency along 'distributed networks'.[2] Because relations of domination only consolidate in diverse forms in what he calls 'peripheral polymorphy', Escobar argues there can 'never be pure opposition or resistance' but only dispersed capacities to engage deterritorializing flows of capitalism and state recapturing strategies in order to explore the creative potential of emerging experiences. As with much of the literature on resistance, Escobar is concerned with the risks of dogmatism and co-optation which so often befall social movements. Instead of looking at distinct alternative spaces for transformative forces, he looks at how different types of networks (hierarchical or self-organising) combine human and non-human elements across scales and in 'always unfolding intermeshed sites'. To be sure, he is still concerned with the problem of building resistance against changing strategies of domination and looks for creative potential in social movements operating at the borders of the modern colonial world system. What we find particularly interesting, however, is his turning away from articulating a politics of resistance as opposition to 'pre-assumed' unities or totalities such as global neoliberalism, a move which still defines most macro-political reconceptualisations of resistance in the global civil society literature (e.g. see Colás, 2004; Rupert, 2004). Instead, Escobar proposes analytics that foreground indetermination – rather than the guarantees of oppositional logics of domination and resistance. In doing so, he opens up towards an analytics of differential politics that fractures the social in networked connections that do not unify into a single, aggregated agential force but can produce aggregated effects through connectivities that are diffuse, sometimes uncoordinated, sometimes ephemerally coordinated, but not arranged into a hierarchical form that unifies them. For Escobar, stretching place-based organisations in this way opens possibilities for non-hierarchical and self-organised meshworks as potentially contributing to 'reinvent social emancipatory dynamics' through, for instance, the organisation of a world network of social movements based on the virtual and real spaces created by the World Social Forum (Escobar, 2012: 191–193).

Fracturing connectivity thus challenges the logic of negativity by stretching place-based organisations and practices into heterogeneous formations. Such connectivity also does something else, however. It displaces the negative positioning of resistance with more reciprocal entangling relationality in which differences multiply rather than congeal into reactive positioning. To further illustrate what we mean here, we dip into work grouped under the label 'Autonomy of Migration' (Bojadzijev and Karakavali, 2010) that problematises how the concept of resistance brings migrant practices into critical knowledge. Stephan Scheel (Scheel, 2019: 75–111) has argued that the autonomy of migration cannot be simply an assertion of the freedom and independence of the migrant subjects to constitute themselves along their own interests and desires. It needs to be a relational concept that places migrants and migrant practices within the regimes of control, which for Scheel is the security dispositifs in the European Union (EU). The autonomy of migration exists within the multiple everyday relations of migrants, technologies, security and border professionals and so on. Such reciprocal connectivity fractures the positioning of migrants as being external to the security dispositifs. Instead, migrant practices are immanent to and constitutive of changes in the security dispositifs. They pro-actively shape situations through the multiple relations they engage in (Scheel, 2019: 83). For Scheel, the concept of resistance is inadequate for formulating such an understanding of the autonomy of migrant practices:

> . . . insufficient consideration of resistant practices and their constitutive role in the transformations of governmental regimes is already inscribed in the notion of resistance itself. For resistance is an inherently reactive concept. (Scheel, 2019: 94)

Naming the migrant practices as resistance reinserts a dialectic in which the autonomy of the migrant can only be negatively defined as that what stands in opposition to the dominant positions.

To move away from this reactive positioning of migrants, Scheel introduces the concept of embodied encounters within which multiple appropriations shape the enactment of borders, migration, security, labour and so on. The encounters articulate migration and control practices in immanent relations of conflict but without the latter being reducible to (a) collectively enacted op-positions between migrants and citizens, migration and security and (b) a master contradiction of movement and sedentary practice (Scheel, 2019: 90–102). Instead, migrant practices are situation-defining through various encounters within regimes of control, encounters that involve 'multiple forces and actors who struggle and negotiate with one another as they seek to challenge, appropriate or recuperate other actors' practices for their own agenda' (Scheel, 2019: 82). Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos develop a similar approach that displaces 'resistance' with 'escape' and 'imperceptible politics'. The transformative force of migrant practices does not derive from mobilising for a better society in general. Instead, it works unintentionally by shifting the terrain they move through, thus creating new material realities that cannot be ignored. The lines of escape are then lines through which migration and regimes of control become folded, continuously reconstituting themselves and the terrains they enact (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 75).

The positioning logic that resistance and the 'counter' of counter-politics tend to invite becomes an issue in such situations. The key driver of change in these cases cannot be conceptualised through how people enact themselves into collective subjects through practices of (self)representation and mobilising against instituted formations. The drivers of change are in the material emergence of dispersed modes of situated living together and how they shape conditions of life in the many folds of material practices. Conceptually, it may sound a little heavy-handed, but what these approaches foreground are quite familiar developments and practices. When groups of migrants arrive in neighbourhoods of cities or villages, they get enmeshed with lived lives and material infrastructure in the neighbourhood and village. In doing so, they change the material realities of life and the site. Such a meshing is not necessarily harmonious; it involves conflicts, disputes, compromises, cooperation, exchanges, ignoring, violence, friendships and so on. Yet, the transformative force does not really derive from resistance in the first place but from the presence and mingling of people and how the multiple connectivities thus emerging shape the lives that are being lived (De Genova, 2010; Eliçabe et al., 2009).

Although these material practices and creations are seen, and sometimes self-identify as, subversive, alternative, resistant, the work they do is not interpreted negatively as against but rather positively as happenings within and through which life is lived. They are brought into knowledge as lines of flight rather than resistances. Lines of flight put things into flight; they create vacillations, fluctuations and disorganisation of situations. Unlike resistance, however, lines of flight are not dichotomously or dialectically constituted (Zourabichvili, 2012: 176). Instead, they emerge from within the differential encounters of migrants, shops, border guards, security technologies, soup kitchens and so on. Leonie Ansems de Vries uses such an approach in her work on how refugee subjectivity is enacted in Malaysia where 'refugee' is not a recognised migrant status. It exists in multiple modes through various foldings rather than a clear or formal dichotomy between migrant/refugee or refugee/citizen (Ansems de Vries, 2016). What the authors discussed in this section share is thus a concern with thinking critical politics through concepts that allow for a more heterogeneous terrain of multiple practices, events, situations that are politically and socially creative through the multiplicity of differences that exist and emerge. In other words, the differences do not need to be integrated into the mobilisation of a unified or quasi-unified force against an existing order of domination to become politically meaningful.

One of the major criticisms of such fracturing approaches to resistance and the logic of negativity is that they result in pure negativity that can be aesthetic or ethical but not political (Coole, 2000: 244). In its dialectical understanding, negativity always implies a positivity, a substantive reference to a social formation – an instituted fixity – against which collective subjects mobilise with the aim of rupturing it so a 'better' social formation can be created (Coole, 2000: 2–6). In such a dialectic politics, there can be no politics without the representations of orders of collective life and of processes to institute and reproduce them. Critical politics is then about creating and maintaining a gap between an instituted order and its limits (Coole, 2000: 43). When fractured, resistance slips from opposition into a multiplicity of differences between practices that work into, upon and across one another in a continuous flux. They fold rather than produce contradictions between substantive positions and in the folding are always becoming another.

Diana Coole characterises such fracturing approaches that foreground differences without opposition as pure negativity, a negativity deprived of any positivity. For her, it implies too vitalist a conception of life that turns worlds into processes of flux with too little inertia and turgidity that are required for life to take on social and political formations. The political gap between an instituted order that sets boundaries and creates closures within which individuals can be associated under shared rules and the opposition to it can then not emerge. For her, problematising resistance in this way leads then not simply to losing the notion of resistance but the very possibility of critical politics which for her needs to take the form of the force of contractions and oppositional placing of orders and identities that is central to dialectics (Balibar, 2001).

One way of working away from the necessity of negativity in the conception of critical politics is to show how what dialectic thought sees as pure negativity is enacted as positivity. It is a shift in point of view that takes the affirmative nature of relations between differences as a creative and political force. What defines the practice, subjects, sites are not their countering but the work they do in creating lived lives. It is a shift in perspective that is not new. For example, the situationist Vaneigem expressed a similar point of view in the late 1960s when he foregrounded the pleasure rather than the death principle to understand the revolutionary qualities of everyday life and change. It was the intensification of life rather than the resistance to oppression that defined the revolution, for him (Caygill, 2013: 174–180; Vaneigem, 1967). Although Vaneigem was a dialectic thinker, in our understanding such a fracturing of resistance asks for analytical concepts that work difference and its politics differently from dialectics and the negativity invested in it. In the final section, we propose the concept of the fold and an analytic of how folding produces a positivity of multiple and continuous morphing of structural relations as the key vehicles for such a non-dialectic reading of difference and its politics.

Thinking with folds and folding: towards differential rather than oppositional politics

How does using the concept of the fold help us to escape the pitfalls of negativity inherent in the politics of resistance? Or, to put it differently, how can we think critical politics otherwise than as contradiction and without reintroducing familiar dualisms into the analysis?

In these final sections, we further explore the conceptual possibilities of moving away from the logic of negation and engaging the problem of resistance from an approach focused on how heterogeneous forces fold and produce disjunctions – or differentiations – and, consequently, open the potential for transmutations. In other words, instead of looking at how forces opposing each other overcome the limits expressed in such opposition through struggle, we will analyse how their encounter engenders multiple effects and connections that are open-ended, instead of closed in the cycle of power and resistance, where the former is constitutive and the latter reactive. We therefore privilege the concept of force, understood as 'any capacity to produce change or becoming' as primary relative to the derivative function of power as 'the stratified dimension of the assemblage' (Parr, 2005). Force directs our analysis to the openness and temporary character of

relations between forces, avoiding the risk of essentialization usually incurred when conceived in their crystallised forms as power. Such centralization would prevent us from exploring how forces continue to express difference in the process of folding, reverting us to models of resistance solely aimed at hierarchies formed by stable, already constituted units of power (dominant/resistant). To be sure, an encounter between heterogeneous forces will register differentiations in intensities which produce hierarchies and domination, so we are not proposing to sidestep these dimensions of social relations but instead propose to focus on the fluidity of force relations. We are aware of approaches, especially Foucault's, which conceive power as de-centred and networked and how it influences some scholarship on counter-politics, as well as the place of the concept of power dispositifs in international political sociology. However, we are convinced that resistance remains captive of reactive and oppositional logics in critical politics. Deleuze marks a crucial difference between him and Foucault in a comment on resistance:

> For if *dispositifs* of power are in some way constitutive, there can only be phenomena of 'resistance' against them, and the question bears on the status of these phenomena. (. . .) For myself: the status of phenomena of resistance is not a problem; since lines of flight are primary determinations, since desire assembles the social field, it is rather the *dispositifs* of power that are both produced by these *agencements* and crushed or sealed off by them. (Deleuze, 2016: 226–227)

In line with Deleuze, we develop a process-oriented framework where dynamics of stratification and of flight are enveloped in structures of multiple connections (a virtual multiplicity) that generate a specific social field. As emphasised previously, we do not claim that resistances have no political significance, only that they should not take the central place in how we think political possibilities of emergence of new social arrangements and practices. In other words, by departing from a dynamic dominated by identity and representation, order and opposition characteristic of the politics of resistance, we engage with a conceptual framework that privileges 'difference in itself' and, from there, thinks how the intrinsic dynamism of multiplicity brings differences in relation to one another (Parr, 2005). The problem inherent in this task lies in how to enunciate these dynamics without resorting to some transcendental synthesis from where to make sense of the play of differences. Our challenge, indeed, is to think these relations as purely immanent. It is with this question in mind that we introduce the concept of the fold to think about the problem of resistance differently.

The fold, the object of one of Gilles Deleuze's later books – *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Deleuze, 1988) –, is a lesser known concept than 'machines' or 'assemblages' which have become familiar in the social sciences and humanities and have found purchase in international political sociology (e.g. Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009; Ong and Collier, 2005; Sassen, 2006). The fold is the concept through which Deleuze thinks about connections. The basic notion is that something is folded so it can be put inside another, 'enveloped'. Folds can take different shapes and forms and are rarely flat and linear, but rather crumpled and curved, expressing the complex and subtle interpenetration of material and/or immaterial elements. As illustrated in baroque architecture, folds are characterised by curved forms and blurred boundaries, as opposed to the sharper and precise

transitions of cartesian geometries. In folding, then, it is hard to distinguish where one element begins or ends, characterising Deleuze's reading of Leibniz's law of continuity, which conceived matter as formed by a 'differential continuum' of inseparable folds, instead of discrete separable individual particles. If we take the fold as the elementary component of things and their relations, we can see how the image of an 'infinitely folded piece of fabric or sheet of paper' conveys the fluidity of matter that is fundamental to thinking immanence. Difference does then not materialise into separated discrete entities, like classes, identities, parties but in multiple encounters folding sites into relations that are both continuous and different. Rather than a police force and protesters facing each other as oppositional entities, the protest site emerges from the forces exercised in multiple encounters of arresting, fleeing, shouting, putting up obstacles and so on. The folding can be traced through following a police officer and protester but what matters is not the identity of each – them representing 'the police' and 'the protesters', respectively – but the connections that emerge from tracing their movements. Like reading a football game through following the movement of the ball rather than the opposition between the teams, folds let difference emerge as continuous flows of connections. The fold, from this perspective, can be defined as 'a relationship between two or more parts of matter [or forces] . . . folded into or over each other in such a way that they become inseparable (but still distinct) . . . matter is always composite and never simple' (Tissandier, 2020: 133).[3] When matter folds, it expresses the movement of forces and their differential relations rather than those between inert matter. As such, the folding of forces produces an event – their becoming-other (Ansell-Pearson, 1997: 14). The concept of the fold allows us to see how continuous differentiation happens or, how different forces combine and mutate into something new while continuing to be part of whatever it was before. As the protests unfold, the site and connections transmute.

For the purposes of our argument, the fold opens the possibility of thinking the problem of resistance by looking at how exteriority and interiority are articulated in the production of difference, instead of thinking resistance through negation and transcendence. The dynamics of opposition relies on the clear separation of two things, or embodied forces, that engage into contradictory relation, or struggle. In this case, otherness is defined as the outside of the self who, in order to overcome the limitations imposed by such a relation, negates externality by bringing it to the interior life of a new, transformed identity. In such a dynamic, the previous state of affairs is changed through a break, an interruption, a discontinuity which guides the practice of resistance. In Deleuzian metaphysics, interiority is nothing more than folded exteriority in which the process of folding redefines the composition of forces in a way that affirms difference in disjunction, rather than a synthesis obtained in dialectical conjunction. In this case, differences are not in opposition, but in proximity, in co-existence – they are enveloped. What we see are, then, complications, relations in which boundaries are unclear, where ambivalence is always present in the flow and, consequently, the possibilities of becoming are dispersed and infinite (Widder, 2012: 24).

Following this conceptual background, our point of view in this article points to a notion of critical politics which is less dependent on modern constituent dualisms and negations and takes the conditions from which the new emerges as strictly immanent. The notion of immanence conveys a critique of the classic internalist metaphysics of the

cogito or consciousness as the source of thought and meaning. It affirms the radical exteriority of encounters and multiplicities in a plane where infinite possibilities move processes of becoming, of ongoing variation of relations. By thinking resistance through the fold, we are able to analyse the encounter of forces through the articulation of externality in interiority without instantiating oppositions that flatten differences, reducing them to power struggles. In this sense, there is never an absolute, an a priori outside that the subject aims to know – as in empiricist or negative thinking. On the other hand, there is no real inside other than the expression of the folded outside:

> The relations between forces, which are mobile, faint and diffuse, do not lie outside strata but form the outside of strata . . . The outside is not a fixed limit, but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, fold and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside of the outside. (Deleuze, 1988: 84, 96–97)

The problematization of the inside/outside relation is a key contribution of Deleuze's reinterpretation of Leibniz and the baroque through folds and folding. The concept of the fold then offers a new way of thinking inside and outside as a form of connection that organises multiplicities in open-ended and non-exclusive ways. As we have been arguing in the last few pages, even as we strive to find 'the in-between of binaries' (Lisle, 2017), a politics of resistance often leads us to focus on the rigidity of boundaries and limits – and of oppositions – since 'resistance is always aimed at molar categories and power structures', at the hierarchical stratification of coded territories. Our discussion of resistance then aims at exploring how, in the midst of the hard segmentations of boundary regimes, we can find (or map) the production of the new (Bonta and Protevi, 2019).[4]

As will be further argued in the next section, the concept of the fold allows us to free the movement of forces from oppositional logics by mapping the transversality in their trajectories and how the new emerges from the ongoing variations produced by the folding of heterogeneous things, such as strata and flows, for instance. In this sense, the fold expresses the connective membrane that accounts for the entanglement of forces and their differentiation, focusing on how crystallised relations of power (and their structures) are destabilised, subverted and transformed. If we think of politics through the distribution of opposing forces along lines that separate them in fields, camps and territories, we fall short of a critical thought capable of envisaging processes of divergence inherent in the social and political dynamics. In what follows, we try to put the analytical potential of the fold to test by examining instances of resistance in migration following the literature discussed in the previous sections.[5]

Difference-in-itself: a topology of folds and continuing flows

In this section, we explore the analytical value of the concept of the fold by showing what it does when deployed to think about movement, more specifically about how migration studies can benefit from a new perspective on the politics of encounter at the border. Critical work on borders and migration has, for some time, strived to see borders and boundaries as sites of connection more than as spatial divides. This tendency has led to innovative analyses on how flows combine in multiple ways in the

porous environment of ambivalent relations between inside and outside that characterise migration government regimes and what kind of politics emerges therein. We use this literature to draw some examples on how the fold can help us think about critical politics taking fluidity and movement as primary, a task the concept of resistance has consistently fallen short to deliver.

Our interest here is how politics can be critical of a certain state of affairs in order to produce change, not reproduction of power relations. We have seen that in folding such creative potential does not emerge from contradictions between rigid segments. A fold creates a difference within a continuous plane. Flows across the plane are organised differently by the process of folding and unfolding. Folds do not divide; they shape and reshape the continuity of the plane as a fluid interconnectivity in differences (West-Pavlov, 2009: 238). It is a distinctive way of conceptualising multiplicity and indivisibility together (Deleuze, 1988).

In our reading, Scheel's (2019) work on the encounters of migrants and consular staff shows how the conflict between people wanting to move for work, family visits, tourism and so on and the visa regime instituted to regulate and restrict migration in the EU can be understood through fluid interconnectivity and foldings. The plane of visa applications in a city is not structured around a single cleavage between migrants and consular staff representing and implementing the EU security dispositifs. The site has multiple consulates with different reputations of being lenient or strict. Consular frontline staff decisions are at times overridden by staff checking in the backrooms. Applicants use multiple methods of applying for visa. And so on. When reading through Scheel's observations, there is a plenitude of differences and encounters that between them create a visa regime.

In architecture, the fold invites creating smoothness and pliancy in which the creations are not defined by beginning and ends, angles dividing and connecting two surfaces or enclosures but develop a sense of infinity and continuity of connectivities (Livesey, 2010: 110). However, in visa applications folds do not replace resistance with smooth relations in which conflicts and disputes are smoothed over. The encounters in Scheel's work are far from harmonious. They enact suspicion, relations of control and appropriations of what is available and thus inscribe a difference between people seeking to move and the EU. Yet, by looking at embodied encounters between visa applicants and consular staff and the practices each perform, it becomes very quickly clear that reading the situation as a clear separation between a system of control and those challenging it is problematic, not because there are no differences in interests, desires, routines and so on but because seeing them as expressions of or generated by a master opposition misses how the situation is continuously shifting according to how the differences in communications, exchange of papers, collecting of evidence are folded.

Moreover, Scheel shows how retaining a master opposition between migrants and a regime of migration control co-opts an understanding of the situation that justifies suspicious framings of migrants (Scheel, 2019). In chapter 4, for example, he challenges the framing of migrants as 'cunning tricksters' and 'fraudulent', as subjects who are cunningly trying to mislead, abuse, and trick the visa procedures and rules. This framing works with a conflict between two cemented positions: the EU represented by its consular staff implementing the visa regime and the migrants seeking to abuse it. Although

such a difference is written into the risk governance, discourses and procedures, Scheel's description of various encounters between consular staff and migrants, how consular staff come to decisions, and how migrants go about their visa applications quickly shows that this difference folds into multiple other folds creating differences between consulates, between consular staff placed in hierarchical positions, between reputation of consulates and between migrants appropriating procedures in different ways. The EU visa regime in the city in North Africa, where Scheel conducted his research, emerges less as a battle zone and more as a structured but also incoherent, heterogeneous plane that invites multiple ways of applying for a visa. In such a reading, there is nothing inherently cunning about applying for a visa at a more lenient consulate when wanting to go visit family.

Although Scheel does not use the language of fold, folding and flows but opted for the categories of 'embodied encounters', 'appropriations' and 'dispositifs', reading his work through the former series of concepts helps to understand how he moves beyond the analytical spectre of resistance. However, it also brings into view how his works still seems to retain a largely backgrounded but analytically presumed opposition between migrants and the EU, despite seeking to work away from such a dyadic framing. Scheel moves away from resistance and towards a conception of autonomy by making the subjugated (migrants) part of the ongoing production of the security dispositifs, making them immanent to it. Yet he continues to speak of 'migrants' as an entity that are marginalised by and/or subordinated to the EU and its security regime. Conceptualising the relations in terms of appropriation and bodily encounters seems to work with a (backgrounded) power analysis assuming a differentiation between dominant and subjugated positionality. The conceptions of folds, folding and flows that we propose challenge such lingering representational analytics that retains a pre-given oppositional positioning of migrants and an institutional entity which Scheel's work shares with much of the work done in critical migration studies.

Folds and folding make relations between forces rather than relations between powerful and less powerful entities the primary determinants that keep the world in flight – in continuing becoming. In such an approach, the analytical focus is no longer on negativity, closures, boundaries but on the material creation of life and situations through folds that are lived. It only looks like a fragmentation and multiplication of pure negativity when working from within an understanding that enacting politics requires enacting order and its opposition and by ignoring the continuity created by flows through and across the folds. The structural dimension is not arranged around a frozen organisation which then includes an irreducible excess that is the motor of change. Neither is it organized around a grand contradiction or opposition that gives meaning to the multiple instances of conflict. Rather, the structural dimensions of life emerge as continuous morphing of interactive relations that simultaneously form and transform the collective lives people live.

Transversal morphing: form-as-change rather than change between forms

Focusing on flows and fluid interconnectivity does not imply that everything is erratic or random. Folding and the plane are not just an image of a fluid space and fluidity in it but rather a way of thinking about how flows and the folds they enact are structured without

turning structure into a solidified entity. As we have seen, the logic of negativity organises politics and change around an order that is resisted and constituted through resistance and the alternative order that resistance seeks to institute. Resistance is then a struggle between alternative conceptions of order that are incompatible, meaning the new can only be born out of the death of the old. Change is from one form to another. Folds unfolding and folding again into further folds, on the other hand, are conceptualised as a form that is change, not as solid form (or order) being replaced with another. As folding, change is conceptualised as immanent to the conception of form. Immanence refers to conceptions of form that have creativity and surprise as part of the morphing of form; it is form-as-change. The immanent is thus different from internal or 'change from within' (e.g. by seeking to transform institutions or an order from within).

There is no such thing as perfect or absolute fluidity because matter is always open to its environment and its movement disturbed by its effects (as in turbulence in air or water, for instance). As flows acquire some degree of hardness, they become cohesive, forming masses or bodies with more or less elasticity. For Deleuze, what determines the coherence of a relationship is, precisely, the folding of the infinite number of folds that compose matter and forces. The fold, as mentioned above, is always permeable; it can be understood as a 'kind of osmosis between milieu and body' (Saldanha, 2017: 196). The fluidity of flows will vary, then, according to how they are folded. If we think, for instance, of populations as constituted by different flows of bodies, we would distinguish densities, speeds, segmentations and so forth. These vary according to what kind of lines are binding flows into form. Lines can be molar and rigid; they cut, segment, discriminate, classify social formations, establishing hierarchies and linear temporalities. Molecular lines are supple and produce small, imperceptible breaks, activating intensive multiplicities and generating change. We can see, for instance, the operation of such lines in Martina Tazzioli's analysis of how flows of migrants are managed, categorised, partitioned and dispersed in border zones as authorities try to govern the movement of people. At the same time, these same migrants assemble as 'incipient' almost imperceptible and temporary alliances ('mobs') along the cracks of dispositifs of border control, in other words, through the lines made visible in small variations in those power formations (Tazzioli, 2015). The third type are lines of flight, not flight as 'fleeing from' but as 'putting to flight', creating and surprising by abolishing planes of reference and disorganizing systems, making closure impossible (Bouaniche, 2007: 197). For example, in Papadopoulos et al.'s analysis of the porosity of migration regimes in Europe, similar forms of imperceptible politics subverts, digests and incorporates the multiple practices of control and segmentation producing movements that intensify escape (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 191). Strategies of escape privilege movement, dissent and productive interference, in an attempt to avoid the traps of representation that would make them simply expressions or exemplars of fixed configurations (e.g. of 'the migrant' confronting 'the border apparatus') – inherent in politics of resistance (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 66).

The challenge of thinking in terms of folds, folding and difference is precisely to conceptualise morphing so that folding of flows do not analytically and methodologically unfold into types of flows that exist as discretionary kinds. We suggest that the analytical path should focus on how lines and flows intersect and how their exchanges are regulated (organised) by foldings. A flow can be more coded, captured, stable or rather suppler,

uncoded, fleeting according to how much striation is produced by molar and molecular lines. Lines, however, are always bundled and entangled within folds while continuously running through them. Such transversal morphing of lines cannot be read through linear cartographies but requires diagrams to map labyrinths of differential continuity. Ingold's proposal to think in terms of meshworks is one example of such an approach. Meshworks are like 'the reticular patterns left by animals, both wild and domestic, and by people (in and around the houses of village or small town, as in the town's immediate environs)' (Lefebvre, 1991: 118). Such meshworks are morphings of repetitive pathways but since they are inhabited rather than occupied, lives are lived not according to the structural configuration of the pathways but along them which makes their morphing less a configuration and more a continuous folding and unfolding of movements encountering, adjusting to, deviating from other movements (Ingold, 2011: 147–148, 2015: 22).[6]

Clearly, we find ourselves facing different problems and understandings of (counter)politics than those posed to us by logics of negation – contradiction and transcendence into the formation of new orders. The challenge lies in the conceptual and analytical task of thinking the continuous morphing of structural relations that characterise the politics of becoming within multiple planes. The concept of fold allows us to think difference and sameness as part of a continuum made of varying intensities, instead of being the expression of contradictions between opposing entities: 'there are always already pre-existing spaces of flows, internally differentiated by virtue of their fluidity' (West-Pavlov, 2009: 239). This is why the differences created through the folds are not pure negativity but have to always be thought as positivities through the affirmative force of differentiations in themselves. Rather than dialectics, we get transmutations (Deleuze, 2002 (1962) 190–191).

Folds open to conceptions of politics that work in terms of planes rather than an order of shared institutions and norms. It implies that the EU visa regime or transnational networks of movements exist through a multiplicity of encounters that continuously bear on them and matter for how lives are lived through visa applications, transnational organisation of movements and so on. Difference is then not a move from politics to ethics – of judging what is right and wrong – or the constitution of ethical subjectivities; instead, it points to a way of thinking that de-centres the enactment of instituted and instituting relations and its conflictual dimensions. It invites an analytics that brings into knowledge transformative relations that work across and into one another without requiring sustained coherence provided by a centre, a resistance, and a contradiction between them. It is a politics multiple.[7] The EU visa regime is not fragmented; it has many processes and elements to it, but they do hang together. However, it hangs together through processes of connection and encountering rather than through enacting a coherent order (a one) and an op-positionally constructed binary (a two). It is a regime of multiple encounters enacting differences and foldings of flows that are more than one or two but less than just many and that transform within continuity.

Conclusion

The article started from the observation of a continuing interest in the concept of resistance as a condition for the production of critique. Yet, when reading through various literatures on resistance and counter-politics, it becomes quickly clear that resistance

holds an ambivalent place. The logic of negativity that is inscribed into the concept of resistance limits the understanding of a wide range of critical political practices that are not self-organising through a global dialectic and binary positioning against a given order. A lot of work has gone into reconfiguring the analytics of resistance up to the point that resistance becomes something different.[8]

For us, continuing to use the concept of resistance as a default analytical driver to produce critical international political sociology of difference and its politics, has an inherent tendency to re-inscribe dichotomous and dialectic arrangements as the condition of critical politics in fractured situations that are enacted through multiplicities and folding. 'Resistance' invites integrating a multiplicity into an overarching opposition, for example, by retaining references to a grander game that is being played against capitalism or the State and sovereignty within fractured politics. To guard against this, we proposed to work more explicitly towards a reconceptualising of structure as morphing through foldings and dropping the concept of resistance as a default category for analysing critical political practice. We speak of structure not to reintroduce the question of fixed formations but to focus on transversal relations and multiplicity of foldings rather than modes of dialectic subjectivisation, subjectivity and activism.

As we have tried to show throughout the article, to think politics as folds changes how we come to understand what practices and situations matter politically and how difference is enacted non-dialectically. It also invites distinctive interferences in ongoing political debates, as we illustrated with our reading of Scheel's work and how he interferes in the policy framings of migrants as 'cunning tricksters'. By making visa applicants and their various encounters immanent to the actual morphing of the visa regime, the binary between order and fraud, which defines the category of the 'cunning trickster', fractures into a multiplicity of encounters.

Such an approach does not exclude situations in which difference will be enacted as a binary conflict. However, instead of defining 'the political' and 'the critical', binary oppositions are, in the transversal approach proposed here, a certain type of 'coagulation' or intensity in the folded surface of immanent experience. In other words, the 'dichotomous gridding' that 'imprisons experience in ready-made forms of refusal and struggle' (Zourabichvili, 2012: 175) is not the expression of an ontology in need of suppression but just a certain situation that gets disorganised by a plenitude of fluctuations leading to the unfolding of other forces. Therefore, the political analytics of the situation cannot take the binary opposition as the baseline condition for critical politics. The continuous morphing of relations implies that institutionalised connectivities always exist folded into turbulent flows, unfolding into new folds, creating lines of flight.

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Notes

1. See for instance Ryan (2015).
2. See also Featherstone (2008).
3. The fold is not a metaphor but a concept through which we think connections in new ways. For Deleuze, concepts are not abstractions (or universals) that represent a reality in descriptive of simplified manner in order to categorise phenomena. Concepts live in the plane of immanence; they are active in connecting heterogeneous elements in thought.
4. This problem receives sophisticated analyses in Checchi (2021) and Ansems de Vries (2015).
5. Efforts to overcome the problems of binary oppositions in the social sciences are certainly not new. Nestor Garcia Canclini has explored processes of hybridization in social and cultural processes when two discrete structures combine to produce a new cultural artefact. Similarly, Homi Bhabha rethinks the colonial relations of domination through the conception of a third space of hybridity that expresses mutual constitution rather than opposition in resistance. Both authors aim at avoiding the essentialization of identities often found in cultural studies and to define interstitial spaces in which ambivalence works to undermine dominant and subaltern narratives of purity. Our discussion of the fold has much in common with the notion of hybridity, most notably with the effort to avoid dialectics to think resistance and its theoretical focus on processes. However, our argument is less concerned with the cultural production of identities as a condition for anti-colonial resistance, but rather with how critical politics is conceptualised through resistance in international political sociology. As such we resort to analyses of transnational movements and migration as exemplary instances in which social forces fold and unfold transversally. Conceptually, the fold articulates differentiation of material and immaterial forces in continuous processes of folding and unfolding, without producing a third element (or a third space) resulting from the combination of two discrete elements. For Deleuze, the elements of a fold are never discrete; they are distinct yet not separable. See Garcia Canclini et al. (2005) and Bhabha (2004).
6. Two other examples are the invitation in Deleuzean work to think diagrammatically rather than in terms of formations or paradigm (Huysmans and Nogueira, 2016; Rajchman, 1999) or in Serres' work to think in terms of confluences instead of configurations (Serres and Latour (1995 [1990]).
7. In a loose reference to: Mol (2002).
8. See among others: Ansems de Vries and Rosenow's (2015) critique of logics of purity and authenticity in anti-GMO movements and their insistence on the 'security of binary choices'; Rodriguez Nunes' (2021) conceptualisation of an ecological organisational approach to contemporary social movements; Daniel W. Smith's (2016) 'Two concepts of resistance', which in the very end seems to reintroduce negativity precisely because of hanging on to the concept of resistance; recent work within anarchist lineages, such as Murray (2010), Newman (2012) and Rossdale (2015); Lilja's (2022) conception of 'constructive resistance' (Lilja, 2021); Checchi's (2021) criticism of dialectic thought from the point of view of the concept of becoming.

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