

Situating and progressing resistance leadership research

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Abstract

Resistance leadership is a vital concept that gets to the heart of the power dynamics of organizations and societies. This interview, conducted by one of the special issue editors, Owain Smolović Jones, with two key figures in critical leadership studies, Keith Grint and David L. Collinson, provides readers with an orientation to this area of research. It does so through offering definitional clarity, expanding on the concept's value and summarising key ideas. From this basis, the value of resistance leadership is explored in relation to the climate crisis, inequalities and other key contemporary issues. The interview concludes through offering readers advice on how to pursue compelling and impactful research on resistance leadership.

Keywords

Resistance leadership, critical leadership studies, leadership dialectics, power, identity, gender, leadership romanticism, climate change

Introduction

Resistance leadership is a vital topic, one that is central in explaining how and why certain forms of dissent generate change while others wither away (Grint, 2024; Sinha et al., 2021). Yet it is also one that is chronically under-researched by critical leadership studies (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Perhaps part of the reason resistance leadership has not been studied in the depth and breadth it

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merits is that researchers feel intimidated by its knotty complexity and contradictions (Collinson, 2005); or because it can seem like a taboo subject within universities that have an increasingly functionalist and corporate orientation (Smolović Jones, Briley & Woodcock, 2022). Regardless, resistance leadership is a vital topic for understanding the power dynamics and injustices of our world, as well as key moments of progress towards equality and excellence.

At the heart of contributions to knowledge of resistance leadership are the Founding Editors of this journal, David L. Collinson and Keith Grint. Upon designing this special issue, the editors wanted to offer an orientation to this area of study, helping to identify key ideas, tensions and possibilities – and they asked Collinson and Grint to act as guides. In the following text, they are interviewed by a special issue editor, Owain Smolović Jones.

The interview begins with *an exploration of the meaning and value of resistance leadership*, building up from there to explore key concepts introduced to the field by Collinson and Grint. Resistance leadership should be approached critically, as a practice capable of inflicting injury as well as justice, hence the warning in the interview not to approach it as a good in itself, something reflected upon as a tendency to *romanticise*. From this basis the interview explores the relevance of a resistance leadership orientation to the climate crisis, the multiple inequalities that grip our world and some key contemporary events. The interview concludes with Grint and Collinson offering advice to researchers interested in studying resistance leadership.

Grounding resistance leadership

Owain Smolović Jones (OSJ): Resistance leadership is a growing area of study, although it remains under-researched, hence why we were keen on having a special issue dedicated to this topic. I was interested in getting your views on how you define and deal with leadership and resistance together as concepts.

Keith Grint (KG): First, we need to assume, as Gallie (1955-56) insisted, that some key terms – in our case resistance and leadership – are essentially contested (see Grint and Smolović Jones, 2022). There is not going to be an objective definition but I don't think you need an agreement. You need to know how people understand the terms in research and practice. Second, the concept of leadership presupposes resistance. The only reason leadership is needed is because there is already an assumption of resistance. You can't have one without the other. I don't know of any example of leadership that doesn't attract any kind of resistance because if that was the case, there would be total consensus. There would be no need for leadership and no need for resistance – in fact, such words would seem strange and exotic because we would not be able to locate them in our experiences of the world. So even now, when we have 99.9% of all the scientists agreeing that climate change is real and urgent, we don't have a total, 100% consensus, and the consequence is that some level of resistance is going to be involved.

However, I think there's a kind of romantic assumption in a lot of the literature that resistance is necessarily morally good and beneficial. Actually we know that a lot of resistance is the opposite of that. So resistance to action on climate change, to anti-racism, embodied most obviously by Trump and his movement, are examples of what I would call, at best, morally dubious forms of resistance. Similarly, leadership is often approached as an assumed good, which is equally problematic.

OSJ: An implication of what you said is that the notion of management assumes the presence of resistance as well, so I'm wondering what the difference would be between managing and leading resistance. Perhaps the difference is that resistance leadership – but also leadership to resist resistance – are concerned with shaping the parameters of meaning and people's emotional investments in a way that management is not.

KG: That depends what you mean by management and what you mean by leadership. If management is about the deployment of resources to undertake and resolve what we call tame problems (Grint, 2005), then it's a different category of behaviour than leadership. It's more likely to be involved with the technical control of resistance: for example, an employer who could manage the resistance of fast-food deliverers through using an app; or a trade union organizer who could control resistance through adopting a range of digital technologies. Leadership would be more concerned with the human and symbolic aspects of resistance (Grint and Smolović Jones, 2022). Although in practice both management and leadership flow into one another so it can be difficult and not necessarily helpful to pick them apart.

David L. Collinson (DC): It also depends what we mean by 'resistance': an ambiguous term that can be understood and enacted in various ways. Critical perspectives tend to view resistance as subordinates' *responses* to power asymmetries, control practices and surveillance systems. Fundamentally, they view dissent as a bottom-up reaction to the exercise of power and perceived unfairness. In this sense oppositional practices can be seen as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985): practices intended to challenge prevailing power dynamics and intersectional inequalities and to re-interpret these processes for the benefit of those in subordinate positions. Since power frequently produces resistance, an understanding of the latter also requires an appreciation of the former. Critical perspectives tend to view power and resistance as inextricably linked, often producing paradoxical and unintended consequences. Some critical perspectives see power and resistance as mutually reinforcing and contradictory dialectics. These approaches cast power-resistance processes as dialectical struggles, stressing the ever-shifting push-pull among contradictory tensions in the dynamic interplay of organizational life (Collinson and Fairhurst, 2024; Fairhurst and Collinson, 2023).

Opposition in organizations may be expressed in many forms and embody various meanings. Even the very definition of resistance itself – how, why and indeed whether particular practices are viewed as acts of resistance – can be a source of conflict and contestation. Workplace dissent might be overt and/or covert, collective and/or individual, formal and/or informal, and rational and/or emotional. Perhaps the most obvious organizational examples are strikes, output restriction, whistleblowing and working to rule. Other workplace resistance practices include countercultures, go-slows, 'foot dragging' and work avoidance, role distance and indifference (a mental strike), absenteeism/lateness, theft, sabotage, resignation, insubordination, humour, satire and sarcasm, and protest outside organizations from, for example, customers, clients, patients, shareholders or citizens.

The motivations for resistance can also be many and varied. My own research suggests that resistance is more likely when subordinates believe leaders and/or managers are exercising control in unfair or dictatorial ways, when they perceive leaders and managers to be 'out of touch', when they detect discrepancies between leaders' statements and their practices, and/or when they believe their own views have been marginalised, excluded and/or dismissed. Where employees are concerned to avoid sanctions, they may disguise their resistance and 'cover their own tracks' (Scott, 1985). Disguised dissent is particularly likely in contemporary contexts of intensified surveillance. Under the gaze of authority, individuals are increasingly aware of themselves as visible objects and consequently may respond with various impression management strategies (Collinson, 2003). Disguised dissent incorporates self-protective practices that sometimes blur the boundaries between resistance and consent.

Given this diversity in how dissent can be enacted and understood, as well as in its underlying motivations, it's quite surprising how little resistance has been researched. There are many possible reasons for this, including the methodological challenges of trying to identify subterranean

oppositional practices that are sometimes concealed and disguised to protect resisters from discipline and sanction. Another reason could be the neglect of followership in leadership research more broadly but in recent years that's been addressed a lot more. However, even the growing literature on followership is fairly muted on issues of resistance: a lot of these studies have fallen into the same essentialising trap as leader-centric research, trying to identify and define the good or effective follower.

The neglect of resistance in leadership studies could also be connected to disciplinary divides between psychology and sociology. While psychology has tended to be the dominant discipline in leadership research, industrial sociology has a rich history of empirical research on worker agency going back to [Gouldner \(1954a and 1954b\)](#), [Roy \(1959\)](#), [Goffman \(1968\)](#) and other sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s. These studies revealed how organizations are typically characterised by an 'underlife' of informal cultures, sub-cultures and countercultures. They showed how those in subordinate positions could reinterpret workplace rules for their own advantage, how they might manipulate incentive schemes and find spaces and niches for themselves to make repetitive, tightly controlled and deskilled work a little more bearable. These important messages about workers' creativity and agency have been largely overlooked in the leadership and followership literature.

KG: I think that's right and it's also because leadership as an academic topic has been dominated by a business perspective, which sees the management of change as the primary function of leaders and therefore resistance as a primary mistake to be overcome, to be transcended. There's something wrong with people who resist and therefore leadership's role is to remove obstacles or to replace the resisters to ensure that resistance is defeated. Resistance is an error. It's either a misreading of the situation or a direct defence of personal interests against the 'real' interests of the organization or group.

DC: Yes, there are many examples of how those in power can try to discourage and suppress resistance and dismiss its relevance and legitimacy, sometimes seeking to portray opposition as irrational or deviant and to discredit dissenters themselves. A recent case is the number of journalists in many different countries who, in attempting to speak truth to power, are being threatened, attacked and even killed. In Europe, 'strategic lawsuits against public participation' (Slapps) are increasingly being used to silence journalists from speaking out on issues such as climate change, money laundering and other forms of corruption ([Farrington and Borg-Barthet, 2023](#)). UK government departments have secretly blacklisted experts who criticise government policies or politicians. Monitoring the social media activities of critics, departments have compiled dossiers on outspoken experts whose invitations to speak at public events have subsequently been withdrawn ([Fazackerly, 2023](#)).

Similar blacklisting practices were evident in the US McCarthyite show trials of the 1950s. Without any supporting evidence Senator Joe McCarthy alleged there were 250 'card carrying communists' working in the US State Department. 'McCarthyism' became an adjective to describe unsubstantiated public accusations of disloyalty or subversion, primarily designed to suppress opposition. Similar false narratives are currently espoused by ex-president Trump, particularly in his insistence that the 2020 US election was 'stolen'. In another attempt to suppress resistance and to negate alternative voices Trump recently threatened to 'root out' political opponents on the left who 'live like vermin' ([Wehner, 2023](#)). This dehumanising language echoes Hitler's attacks on the Jews (who Hitler called 'vermin'). The suppression of resistance is typically a primary concern of authoritarian leaders who seek to construct their so-called 'strongmen' identities in part by being tough and indeed brutal towards political opponents and dissenters ([Ben-Ghiat, 2020](#)). Suffice it to say here that such strategies of suppression designed to undermine resistance are many and important to research.

Resistance orientations in the work of Collinson and Grint

OSJ: David, you started your study of resistance in the context of manufacturing in the late 1970s. And you've been doing quite a bit of work to update your theorising in more recent years, with Suzanne Gagnon (Gagnon and Collinson, 2017) and alone (Collinson, 2020). I wondered, though, if you could provide a basic overview of your approach to studying resistance and the typology of forms of resistance that you identified initially.

DC: My interest in resistance was prompted by research at a Lancashire lorry manufacturing company (pseudonym Slavs) that had recently been taken over by an American multinational. Just before I began the research in 1979, Paul Willis published *Learning to Labour* (1977/2016). This book examined the counterculture of a group of English working-class kids, known as 'the lads', who rejected studying at school and its dominant values of equal opportunity in favour of manual work which they believed better expressed their own sense of masculinity, independence and autonomy. Willis's analysis of the lads' counterculture situated their resistance in its wider contexts and illustrated the dialectical relationship between power and resistance: how the exercise of control can spark opposition. Subsequent research has developed this focus on control-resistance dialectics in various ways (e.g. Edwards, 1979; Fairhurst and Collinson, 2023; Mumby, 2005; Mumby et al., 2017).

Willis' ideas about school countercultures were very relevant to the dynamics I found at Slavs. They have informed my own work for example on resistance (e.g. Collinson, 1994/2000), class inequalities (Collinson, 1999), men and masculinities (Collinson et al., 2023; Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996, 2005; Hearn et al., 2024), identity/ies (Collinson, 2003) and humour (e.g. Collinson, 1988, 2002) as well as significantly influencing the book *Managing the Shopfloor: Subjectivity, masculinity and workplace culture* (Collinson, 1992). Willis made many important contributions, but there are three I would like to highlight here.

First, he revealed the importance of working-class countercultures as resistance practices. This might seem fairly self-evident now, but Willis' book was itself a kind of act of resistance against the structural determinism that was influential at that time. For example, Harry Braverman's (1974/1998) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* critiqued capitalist forces of scientific management, deskilling and management control. But Braverman tended to see workers as becoming passive appendages of the machine and didn't consider worker subjectivity or resistance. As a craft worker himself who'd personally experienced deskilling it was perhaps understandable that Braverman would be particularly sensitive to this process of degradation. By highlighting the importance of working-class countercultures and locating these in their asymmetrical conditions, Willis demonstrated that workers are active agents and not simply passive objects of structural forces, power asymmetries and control practices.

Second, Willis emphasised the importance of masculinity and how the lads valorised being a man and being working class. The lads' identities and their self-esteem were constructed through a counterculture celebrating a macho masculinity that prioritised working class independence, honesty and authenticity and which looked down on women and on those boys and men who in the lads' view were conformists. These insights about men and masculinity at work were developed by feminists such as Cynthia Cockburn (1983) who examined how trade unions in the printing industry privileged men and family breadwinner masculinities in ways that often marginalised or segregated women print workers. At Slavs the men on the shopfloor were older than the lads Willis studied but I could see the importance of a similar, albeit more heterogeneous counterculture that privileged and valorised working-class masculinities.

Third, Willis also addressed some of the contradictions of the lads' counterculture. He showed that the lads' resistance and rejection of school authority had unintended and counter-productive

consequences. The paradox was that in celebrating manual labour and working-class life as expressions of masculinity, independence and freedom, the lads actively sought out the very factory jobs that were likely to entrap and subordinate them for the rest of their lives. Willis was saying that the lads didn't need a gun to their heads, or to be frog-marched down to the factory, because the counterculture they created in response to their social and economic positioning led them to actively embrace these kinds of manual jobs and the masculine identities the work appeared to confer. Paradoxically, the lads' counterculture was both oppositional and subordinating.

Workers at Slavs typically adopted instrumental and defensive orientations to paid employment that privileged male family breadwinner identities. They enacted various output restriction strategies and psychologically distanced themselves from the organization, prioritising family and leisure over paid work (Collinson, 1992; 1994/2000). The shopfloor counterculture celebrated highly masculine, working-class identities that valued honesty, authenticity and 'doing things with your hands'. It dismissed managers as being deeply untrustworthy. Trade union officials also sought to maintain a distance from managers. One insisted: 'Managers live in a different world to us. They think differently and act differently. We want to keep separate from them'. Another argued: 'The further away management are the better. We've nothing in common with them.' I referred to this kind of counter-cultural opposition as '*resistance through distance*'. While this defensive distancing rejected management's claims that the company worked cooperatively as a team, it wasn't particularly effective in generating organizational change. It tended to reproduce workers' material and symbolic insecurities and to reinforce the organizational status quo in which workers had little voice or influence over decision making.

This raises questions about the possibility of more effective forms of resistance. In subsequent research on equal opportunities and sex discrimination (e.g. Collinson, 1994; Collinson et al., 1990) we found various examples of women's more proactive resistance that effectively challenged and overturned decisions by leaders and managers. The UK Sex Discrimination Act had provided women with a legal basis to question organizational decisions and practices. Even so, challenging those in power and trying to render decisions more transparent, accountable and equitable typically requires a great deal of confidence, courage, resilience, endurance and indeed persistence. I therefore referred to this kind of more proactive opposition as *resistance through persistence* (Collinson, 1994). The women protagonists in these cases built their opposition on strong relationships of mutual trust, a collective sense of solidarity and sometimes significant trade union support.

In more recent times we've seen the emergence of the '#Me Too' Movement: a great example of the transformative potential of (women's) resistance through persistence (from both inside and outside organizations). There are also some interesting cases of effective resistance through persistence from outside organizations. For example, after twelve months of failing to convince United Airlines of its responsibility for damaging in transit his expensive Taylor acoustic guitar, musician Dave Carroll wrote and recorded a satirical song, 'United Breaks Guitars'. Posted on YouTube with accompanying spoof video, the song became a massive hit, the largest in Carroll's career (Carroll, 2009). Within 12 months the video had received 9 million hits, and sales of Carroll's other recordings significantly increased. In what became a public relations disaster for United Airlines, Carroll appeared on nearly every major news outlet and chat show in the US and Canada. He also became a very successful public speaker and trainer in effective customer service practices (Speaker Agency UK, 2019). This case highlights the potential effectiveness of persistence in resistance from outside the boundaries of organizations. It also demonstrates the value of storytelling, satirical humour and music as creative modes for expressing dissent and the potential impact of technologies like YouTube in facilitating viral critiques of corporate policies and practices. Individuals resisting

from outside organizations may have more autonomy to challenge decisions because they're not as controlled (as employees) by the need to sell their labour and protect their earnings.

Suffice it to say here that strategies of resistance and their relative effectiveness in generating organizational change can vary greatly.

OSJ: Keith, can you situate your study of resistance a bit more for people reading this. It's immersed in fascinating military and historical settings. So what drew you to these settings as significant for understanding resistance and leadership?

KG: I probably need to go back to my childhood to frame this properly in the sense that I was expelled from school when I was 18. It was allegedly for resistance and I think that set me on a course and of course it also screwed up my A Level exams, so I didn't go to university for 10 years and I spent most of that time in various jobs, mostly for the Post Office and I became a full-time trade union official for the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) as it was then, the Communication Workers Union now. And at that point I did an Open University degree. Then I studied politics at York University and that changed me, introducing me to more historical frames. Then my doctorate was on the history of UPW between the world wars. There is something about extreme cases that I find fascinating. If you can articulate examples of people resisting in the past, under extreme conditions, then it undermines the legitimacy of people in the present under far less pressure responding fatalistically, saying that they did not have a choice or that there was nothing they could have done. For example, when you study the resistance of some Germans to the Nazis, you see that they risked everything. By definition if you don't resist then you comply, so there's an interesting dynamic about the way people frame their patterns of behaviour. This realisation led me to some material on the Second World War and then a focus on mutiny. Mutiny is an extreme case of resistance because the penalties are just horrendous and most of the mutineers I've studied end up at the wrong end of a rope or firing squad. Yet they still do it, knowing that this is probably going to happen. There is something I find fascinating about power being based on compliance rather than being a possession.

I published the book on mutiny a couple of years ago (Grint, 2021). Now I'm writing a book on resistance generally, but which tries to challenge conventional thinking or oversights in relation to resistance. When you encounter mainstream discourse on slavery, for instance, you hear a lot about Britain being the first to resist and abolish the slave trade, which is complete nonsense. The first people to abolish slavery were the then enslaved people in what became Haiti, and that in itself is an interesting example for a couple of reasons. First, because agency is routinely removed from enslaved people – freedom is portrayed as something given to them – and yet there are so many accounts of Black slaves successfully resisting. Second, because successful resistance is often achieved through violence, a fact that is routinely under-played. Without the violence of the civil war, I don't think the Americans would have abolished slavery. So there is something alarming and intriguing about the connection between resistance and violence. With all that understood: Why would you do it? Why would you risk yourself? Why would you not resist? And where is the leadership in that resistance dynamic, on both sides?

OSJ: So what is it about leadership that enables resistance?

KG: One of the things that leadership does is coagulate general concerns and various forms of discontent and pushes them in a particular direction that is more unified. Such leadership acknowledges that people have legitimate complaints and channels them in ways that are active, offering a way of resolving those complaints. Let's take the example of slave ships. Resistance on them was quite common - but not successful resistance. Something like one third of all slave voyages had some kind of resistance, not very many were successful. So there's something interesting in recognising the importance of *puer robustus* which is an old Latin term for awkward people, and

resistance leadership can happen when these people feel a moral obligation to do something, usually at great risk to themselves. It's usually the case in the examples I've been studying that no more than about 10% of the population is involved in resistance of some kind and the rest of the population sits back and waits, often for very good reasons that people decide they don't want to risk their lives. It's only at the very end of resistance, like that of the French or Dutch resistance to the Nazis, where all of a sudden so many more people get involved because then the dangers are being removed and it seems like a more romantic notion. But when resistance is really risky, I am fascinated by what tips people over into resisting. Often it's some personal issue that compounds with the general injustice – their parents have been killed or endangered, or whatever the case may be. Quite often people resist because of an emotional response and it's not something that has been pre-planned as such. Something specific triggers people, tips them over, they make a decision, and then once they've made the decision, it's virtually impossible to roll it back. Then you become part of the resistance, you rationalise what you're doing and you see where it goes.

Importantly, in the absence of leadership, anger does not transition to resistance. In the resistance movements in the Second World War, for example, in the absence of leadership, nothing very much actually happens. And then when it does happen, there are still people with enough explanations about why they don't want to get involved. They're neither supportive of the occupiers nor supportive of the resistance until it becomes safer to do so.

OSJ: I'm wondering if there's anything in particular from one another's work that's influenced your thinking and how that has progressed your theorising on resistance leadership.

DC: Keith's focus on the social construction of leadership was important for unpicking the essentialism of psychology-dominated leadership studies (Grint, 2005). The distinction Keith draws between tame and wicked problems is also very helpful, as is the differentiation he makes between constructive dissent and destructive consent (Grint and Smolović Jones, 2022). Constructive dissent emphasises how conflict and disagreement can be highly creative and transformative features of organizational cultures: resistance does not necessarily need to be controlled, suppressed or eliminated. Yet, leaders and managers often fail to see any value in resistance. When leaders and managers (and politicians) write off opposition as illegitimate or misinformed, rather than adopting a listening orientation, they miss an opportunity to learn about their organization and thus to produce more effective strategies and practices. The TV show 'Undercover Boss' is a great example of the value of those in senior positions listening and learning from employees working at the frontline, and subsequently changing corporate practices as a result (Lambert and Holzman, 2011).

Destructive consent is also important. People can be reluctant to challenge even the most immoral and corrupt behaviours in organizations. So when we're looking at resistance practices we also need to contextualise these in relation to conformity pressures, and to recognise a broad spectrum of behaviours. Although early studies of charismatic leadership tended by implication to celebrate follower conformity, I would argue that conformity - when people stop thinking for themselves – is a major problem in organizations and for societies. The Nazi extermination of six million Jews combined with their other mass atrocities and the explanation from those involved that they were 'just obeying orders' is a stark reminder of the potentially horrendous consequences of conformity. The Holocaust prompted researchers and writers like Milgram (1963) and Fromm (1977) to critically analyse conformity. The former highlighted peoples' willingness to obey authority while the latter pointed to individuals' fear of freedom and preference for the perceived security of being told what to do and what to think.

There are of course enormous pressures in organizations on people to conform, consent, comply, acquiesce and in general to not resist in any way. Ira Chaleff (2015) has written about the need for intelligent disobedience and for encouraging people to voice their concerns. This is an important

contribution to resistance leadership studies but speaking truth to power is easier said than done, especially in the US where there are so few employment protections, where if you speak up you can lose your job, your home, and your healthcare. When examining oppositional practices, we shouldn't underestimate the many organizational pressures to conform and the barriers to speaking up, but we should also recognise that consent can be destructive, and dissent may be constructive precisely in the way Keith outlines.

KG: I would start with the dialectical approach of David (Collinson, 2005, 2020), which has helped leadership studies get beyond binaries – either you're for the revolution or against it as opposed to favouring some parts but not others. There was also something David wrote about the dialectics of humour in particular (Collinson, 1988, 1992) that struck me as important. I can remember when I was a trade union official, the amount of effort a postman or postwoman would put into mocking or playing jokes on managers was significant. Superficially it looked like something emboldening for the worker but actually it helped the status quo to endure because it did nothing meaningful to remove the problem. Very often we engage in contradictory behaviours and it would be unusual if there were no contradictions present.

The other concept that comes to mind that's been particularly important for my work is Prozac Leadership (Collinson, 2012). This is the insistence on excessively positive messages in leadership even when the realities are anything but positive. In this way the top of the organization can create a culture where everything has to be positive but this also means that the organization is cushioned from understanding what's actually going on. Subordinates don't think that the organization can cope with the truth; they use honeyed words so that things don't look quite as bad as they are in reality. For example, during the war in Iraq, either the messages of things going wrong did not make it to the top or were ignored somewhere along the line. Prozac Leadership is a really important way of understanding why it is that the top of an organization so rarely knows what on earth is going on at the bottom. Even when I'm teaching chief executives this idea, they can look at me like I don't know what I'm talking about – because obviously they know everything and have all relevant sources of information – whereas others (their subordinates) will be smiling because they recognise Prozac Leadership as such a significant problem.

On romanticising resistance leadership

OSJ: I think that neatly brings us to romanticism and the dangers of romanticising resistance leadership in particular. I wondered if either of you could outline what this means and how it can manifest, perhaps with an example from contemporary life.

KG: The work that the three of us have done together on the romanticism of leadership (Collinson et al., 2018) problematised leadership beyond the well-known critique associated with romanticising individual leaders as heroes and the source of success within organizations. What continues to concern me, however, is an assumption that individuals don't make any difference. I think there are enough examples of individuals doing positive things for us to take a step back and get away from this binary that leadership can either be found in individual heroes or in collective groups who are conceived in heroic terms – because actually it's usually a mix of leaders and groups that make the difference. Martin Luther King is a good example (Grint, 2001). It's unlikely the civil rights movement would have progressed in quite the same direction without him but he is not responsible for the civil rights movement's successes. He's part of the response but he's not the only part. We have to bear in mind that it's not an either-or choice.

I have always been struck by the argument made by Jo Freeman (Freeman, 1972) about the tyranny of structurelessness. She studied the world-changing work of feminists in the US in the

1970s and argued that they tried to generate a movement that would be non-patriarchal and non-hierarchical, situated in the collective, but the consequence of not having any procedures to organize such systems was that powerful individuals ended up taking control. Rather than removing patriarchal hierarchy you replace certain elements of it. So there is an irony to bear in mind, which is that just because we have collectively been critical of the romanticism of individual leaders does not mean to say that individual leaders are unimportant. You need to bear in mind the context in which they operate and that they can't do things on their own. Looking at the US or UK recently, most of the discussion is about Trump or Boris Johnson or whoever is in charge at that moment, which is unhelpful, yet it is doubtful whether America would be in the same situation if Trump had not been in control. We need to be wary of romanticising the collective, which is a key point we made in the paper.

DC: Yes, I agree. For good or ill individuals in positions of power can have a considerable impact. Although we need to be very wary of romanticising individual leaders and their contribution, this does not mean we should dismiss their influence and impact (e.g. [Zachara-Szymańska, 2023](#)). Equally, we need to guard against romanticising resistance. Marxist writers such as [Beynon \(1973\)](#) and [Nichols and Beynon \(1977\)](#) have tended to impute a radical intent to workers' resistance that may overstate the case. I talked earlier about the value and importance of Willis' work but even his analysis of school counterculture tended to take for granted the lads' statements and their underlying subjectivities. Although he critiqued class and gender inequalities and located these in their structural and cultural contexts Willis didn't really theorise identity construction and the subjective search for validation and security ([Collinson, 1992](#): 80-82).

To de-romanticise resistance I think we need to incorporate more critical theories of subjectivity into our understanding of power-resistance dialectics. In so doing we can address how, why and with what consequences individuals (and groups) may seek to secure particular identities and search for respect and dignity in their own and others' eyes ([Collinson, 2003](#)). From this perspective the lads' oppositional culture could also be at least partly explained in terms of masculine identity-security seeking strategies and the desire for validation through group membership (rather than as 'partial penetrations of capitalism' as Willis contends). Exploring links between critical perspectives on identity and resistance practices, Suzanne Gagnon and I (2017) highlighted another oppositional strategy. *Resistance through difference* to a global leadership development programme was informed by employees' sense of differentiated identity based on nationality, race and culture. But there's a lot more work to do here, especially in relation to, for example, non-Western, decolonial, transnational and indigenous perspectives that situate identities in their temporal and spatial contexts ([Hearn, 2024](#); [Ozkazanc-Pan, 2024](#)). Critical perspectives on identity can open up new ways of thinking about both power and resistance.

De-romanticising resistance by problematising identity dynamics also enables us to acknowledge and address the recurring issue of fragmentation in resistance practices. The subjective tendency to differentiate and elevate self over others can undermine collectivism and solidarity in resistance. [Mounk \(2023\)](#) has recently critiqued 'the identity synthesis' which he contends is widely espoused in various progressive and critical perspectives (e.g. postmodernism, postcolonialism and critical race theory). In the 'Identity Trap' he argues that encouraging people to focus on (rather than question and deconstruct) their ascriptive identities results in a tendency to prioritise difference and exacerbate divisions which in turn leads to unequal treatment and 'progressive separatism'. For Mounk, social justice causes should reject, not embrace, identity-focused politics.

There's a satirical example of identity preoccupations in resistance movements in Monty Python's 'Life of Brian' ([Jones, 1979](#)). Members of 'The People's Front of Judea' are so preoccupied with highlighting their differences from 'The Judean People's Front' and 'The Judean Popular

People's Front' (who, ironically, they dismiss as 'splitters') that they undermine their potential to collectively resist the Roman occupiers, as 'Reg' the leader of the group (John Cleese) states: 'The only people we hate more than the Romans are the Judean People's Front'.

OSJ: I've been thinking a lot about the process of building agency for resistance leadership, which seems crucial to me, because it's about understanding how people who have been marginalised in some way are able to lead themselves out of this subordinated position (Sinha et al., 2021). It seems essential to me that we explore this process in thoroughly de-romanticised ways that involve grappling faithfully with the possibilities and limitations of agency.

DC: Yes, I would make the case for exploring resistance leadership through a dialectical lens rather than in binary terms – the relationships between agency, subjectivity, asymmetrical structures, intersectionalities, power and resistance are typically mutually-reinforcing and interdependent, whilst also often being paradoxical and contradictory.

KG: One of the ways to think about agency in resistance leadership slightly differently is to consider social movements, because they have a very different understanding of what agency might be and how you mobilise it than political parties or trade unions. I am intrigued by the work of Marshall Ganz in the US (2010) because he helps us think about what mobilises people to resist. How did you get people to take up their own agency and engage in some big movement? It's worth thinking, if you don't have a pre-existing structure, you're not part of a union or political party, how do movements mobilise? What is the process by which you start a social movement?

Resisting the climate crisis

OSJ: These issues are particularly relevant to how leadership happens around the climate crisis.

KG: The climate crisis is a good example of the power of language and the material effects it can have. The term – climate change – is interesting because it points to the importance of language in shaping resistance. Quite recently I was reading a report about a guy called Frank Luntz, who was in the George W Bush administration and it seems as though he has a lot of responsibility for shifting the terminology from 'global heating' to 'climate change'. His argument to the president was that 'climate change' would be less frightening to his supporters. So it's really interesting how language can mobilise or demobilise people. 'Climate change' is one of these phrases that maybe leads to people having a false sense of security: that it's an issue for future generations. Whereas 'climate emergency' means that we have to get off our backs and do something. We know that the language around climate is important because of all of the money and time that heavily polluting companies spend trying to persuade us that actually things are going to be ok and that they are putting in so much work to help the world go carbon neutral. It's also naïve for those leading climate resistance to think that showing people facts and data about the situation will be enough to persuade people to live differently – it won't be.

Time is an important factor here. How we conceive of time is important for leading resistance. If we talk about time in terms of what needs to happen over the next 20 or 30 years, well many people will think it's irrelevant to them because they won't be around anymore. Instead, you need to get to a position where time is conceived of in a cyclical way, this notion that now is the time because if it isn't the time, something bad will happen very soon – like tomorrow morning. My thinking on this is influenced by my daughter's work as a police officer who has specialised in understanding and tackling domestic violence. Her dissertation on policing domestic violence (Barrow-Grint, 2016) shows how women victims of domestic abuse talk about time in a linear way, setting deadlines for the future – 'his birthday', 'the new year', or 'after he has done some counselling on managing anger' – as the time when they will make a decision about leaving or reporting him to the police. But

the abuser has a cyclical view of time – there is no end point, just a cycle. So there is no right time other than now – now is the time – and communicating that persuasively seems crucial to me for leading resistance on climate change.

DC: There are also important gender dynamics around climate that need to be considered in studies of resistance leadership. Usually it's white, affluent men who control the corporations that pollute the most, for example, in the fossil fuel industry, in meat production or the war industry (Aavik, 2021, 2024). Equally, there are important examples of women leading resistance in relation to climate change, with Greta Thunberg perhaps being the best known. In general, contextualising resistance leadership practices in time and space is important because the spatial and temporal dimensions will differ across the world, and will shape how people resist, what they view as appropriate resistance and when to resist (see Smolović Jones, 2022; Smolović Jones et al., 2022). These are significant questions for future research. Resistance leadership can change how time and space are conceived.

Resisting inequalities

DC: The gender dynamics of time and space in resistance leadership are also relevant here. The #MeToo movement has challenged how certain men, like Harvey Weinstein, can control organizations and make them threatening and intimidating places. When Weinstein was in a position of dominance it probably seemed inconceivable that such senior men, this kind of male harassment and violence, and the non-disclosure agreements women victims were forced to sign could be successfully challenged. But they have been, particularly through women's tenacious and resilient resistance, often working under extremely difficult conditions. This kind of resistance through persistence is evoked very effectively in the recent film *She Said* (Shrader, 2022), which brings to life the dogged and ethical ways in which the women journalists investigating Weinstein uncovered and exposed his gendered practices of coercion and domination. Their leadership enabled issues of sexual harassment to be re-examined and challenged in a range of different workspaces around the world. The #MeToo movement has fundamentally changed the ways in which gender, sexuality and harassment are understood and addressed.

It's somewhat paradoxical that alongside this very effective form of women's resistance to sexual harassment, we have also seen the re-emergence of 'great man' leadership theory in the guise of so-called strongmen populist leaders in countries like America, Belarus, Brazil, Hungary, India, Russia, Turkey and so on, enacting and advocating a crude masculine authoritarianism as a legitimate kind of leadership (Ashcraft, 2022; Collinson, 2024).

OSJ: These men and their movements are contradictory in a sense because they try to portray themselves as the strong ones and yet their language is soaked in self-pity and a sense of victimhood. They evoke the language of resistance as if they are locked out of power. I think this is a good example of how the boundaries between power and resistance can be ambiguous. You have people in a marginalised position trying to gain some justice and recognition, and people in power protecting their privilege or right to dominate by claiming resistant positions and often adopting resistance tactics. It's a dynamic that I explored with Scott Taylor, Nela Smolović Jones and Emily Yarrow (Smolović Jones et al., 2021) in our study of resistance to gender equality initiatives. We called this kind of resistance oblique resistance, because those who resist know they can't openly oppose equality, so instead adopt manipulative and sneaky tactics to deflect attention from the central issue and reassert power. Nela Smolović Jones (2023) followed this up by exploring how men and women in positions of power can protect patriarchy by gaslighting those who resist them, claiming the status of victims. This thin-skinned victim identity projected

by powerful white men can tell us a lot about resistance and power. I wondered if you had some reflections to offer.

DC: Yes, I agree. This is a recurring dynamic in the contested and ambiguous nature of power-resistance dialectics. Those in senior positions sometimes try to re-define their strategies of control and domination as legitimate acts of ('heroic') resistance. For example, populist leaders often position themselves as 'heroic warriors' who are 'resisting the liberal establishment' on behalf of the people. Equally, leaders may seek to disguise, deflect and de-emphasise their power and control, while simultaneously overstating subordinates' agency. As a result, power asymmetries tend to disappear from view and resistance is re-defined as unjustified aggression. In our research on workplace sexuality and sexual harassment we found that perpetrators often sought to position themselves as victims and to re-define victims as perpetrators. Alongside the tendency to 'blame the victim' (Ryan, 1971), perpetrators often tried to 'claim the victim' for themselves. Claiming victimhood can be a way of trying to legitimise, obfuscate and/or conceal the exercise of power and control. Just like in *Alice in Wonderland*, reality is turned upside down.

The role of resistance leadership studies for contemporary times

OSJ: We recently saw waves of strikes sweeping through the UK. In many ways they are inspirational and perhaps a sign of people discovering more agency at work. It's also reasonable to say that several of these industrial actions and campaigns have faced significant challenges. Can you offer some insight from a critical leadership perspective?

KG: There are challenges of leading resistance in contemporary economies, with a lot more low-paid and temporary work, but then you see some of the developments of resistance within Amazon or Starbucks that have managed to be successful. There were similar dynamics in the late 19th century and early 20th century, in factories for example, people with short-term or no contracts at all, and it was hard to organize a trade union movement in the absence of a settled labour force. All the evidence from history is that you get sparks of success but that the long-term project is much more difficult. Trade unions need to focus on new workers but also need to adapt to the times and consider whether what they're offering is actually working. Resistance movements in general are bad at stepping back and reconsidering: are we getting closer or further away from a deal? I'm always in admiration of people who make sacrifices to fight for what they believe in or for a better deal at work but there's also a lot of rationalisation that goes on in the face of an approach that is not working. There is a role for research in helping unions and other resisters see their leadership within a broader system.

OSJ: In a UK context I wonder whether, since austerity and then Brexit, people in general have become accustomed to things decaying and not working properly, to inconvenience. Things like the post not arriving on certain days or the trains not working become normalised. But then in my more optimistic moments I think that even if a particular strike action has not won in the here and now, they can help in giving other people a sense of agency, open them to the possibilities of resisting. There are ambiguities at play.

DC: Yes, I agree. We need to keep in mind that resistance in all its many forms can have very positive and transformative effects for both organizations and individuals. By engaging in oppositional practices people may express themselves and their relationships, their values and knowledge, creativity and sense of community. Studies can explore subordinate agency without romanticising resistance and automatically imputing a revolutionary intention or outcome to oppositional practices.

OSJ: Another visible manifestation of resistance in contemporary life is in relation to the climate crisis, which you've already discussed in terms of making sense of climate change temporally and spatially. Combining those insights with what you've both said about the capacity for critical leadership studies to help resisters be more purposeful and strategic, do you have any thoughts on the more militant and direct action turn of climate crisis resisters?

KG: Let me start by saying that I support more substantial action on climate change and understand where climate resisters are coming from. Critical leadership studies could also have something important to say about how resistance is channelled and directed. There is something in here that needs to be poked with a big stick, which is to consider whether gluing yourself to a road or doing something in an art gallery is beneficial to the cause and I'm asking this not just because of the data at the moment suggesting that these tactics put people off. It's less to do with what they're doing and more to do with who they're doing it to and where. I've looked at the tactics of trade unions in the Japanese railways of the 1960s and 1970s, who were quite militant and often went on strike. But what they did was simply stop taking fares. So all the trains ran but no one had to pay anything. What it did was generate a massive consensus of support from rail passengers, who direct their animosity at the owners of the railways. There were similar instances with bus workers in Australia, in Melbourne in particular. If you focus and target climate resistance in a different way, then there's a strong possibility that you might get greater support and actually make more of a difference.

OSJ: I suppose there's a dialectical reading of resistance in the sense that you had these big Extinction Rebellion occupations and protests in 2019, which generated a wave of interest and awareness. As a result, you get all of these local councils and politicians formally declaring climate emergencies but then a few years later and the action from these same politicians is minimal. So you could say that in reality people in general may say they think there's a climate emergency but their actions do not match their words, because, to paraphrase Greta Thunberg, if they genuinely thought that life on the planet was in imminent danger, they wouldn't be behaving as they do – both the politicians and voters. Perhaps this is a good example of both power and resistance generating unexpected effects, with direct action leading to political deceit, which then generates more radical forms of direct action.

KG: An alternative way might be to think about who the target is. For example, when Bill Bratton became New York City Police Commissioner in 1994 the subway was not regarded as a safe mode of transport by commuters, but police officers seldom used it and drove to work. Bratton made them travel by subway and understand the problem first hand – so they had the motivation and understanding to sort the problem out (Sims, 1990). Most British government ministers will travel around in private cars, helicopters or jets with protection officers. They won't go by train or bus, so won't experience the transport problems the rest of us face. If people in Parliament are also inconvenienced, then they might start thinking about things differently.

OSJ: This reminds me of a running joke I have with an educationalist and friend, Tom Welch, around what we call trickle-down socialism. The premise is something like this: You don't need to design detailed policy demands on issues of great importance. Instead, you strategically remove perks from politicians, such as the subsidised transport, energy, food and housing they receive, and soon enough you would have these same politicians devising universal solutions. It's a deliberately flippant joke but trying to get at the same thing, which is the importance of strategically clever leadership of resistance.

KG: Yes, it's about redirecting power. There are too many targets available, so you choose them with purpose.

DC: Yes, I agree with Keith. It's important to keep in mind that protests can have unintended, counter-productive consequences. Having said that, targeted forms of public resistance that are

creative and imaginative can grab people's attention. Just Stop Oil has used similar tactics to those of the 20th century suffragettes, such as attacking famous paintings like the Rokeby Venus and Van Gogh's Sunflowers and disrupting sports events like Wimbledon. These protests have attracted media attention. While Just Stop Oil has acknowledged that they were inspired by the suffragettes in their attack on the Rokeby Venus, they also emphasise that their own protests are more peaceful than those of the suffragettes (Coyne, 2023).

Advice on researching resistance leadership

OSJ: My final question is quite a big one. What kind of advice do you have for someone reading this who wants to start doing research on resistance leadership? The advice could be interesting theory to read, methodological issues or something else entirely.

KG: On the reading, *The Sage Handbook of Resistance* (Courpasson and Vallas, 2016) is a good source to start with. I am drawn to James Scott's (1992) analysis of resistance that is sub-surface and he makes the case that it does not need to be overt to be effective or meaningful. One of the most powerful books I've ever read is Primo Levi's *If this is a man* (Levi, 1987), which is about trying to understand how difficult it is to resist and why you simply can't say that all resistance is good. An interesting book that speaks to the disappointed rebel in me is Arthur Koestler's *The Gladiators* (1999), which is about the Spartacus rebellion. In the book he talks about the divisions within the slave army, between Spartacus' group and the Gauls, led by Crixus. At some point after several victories over the Romans, Crixus decides he doesn't want to escape from Italy. What he wants to do is sack Rome, so he pulls all the Gauls out of the slave army and heads towards Rome, and then his army's destroyed. But what that does is weaken Spartacus' slave army so much that eventually Spartacus is destroyed as well. What Koestler is talking about is his 'law of detours': the problem facing all revolutionaries - to become ruthless for the sake of pity. Either Spartacus could crucify Crixus to stop the Gauls from leaving, which would undermine the whole point of the rebellion, because he would be eating his own, or he could allow him to go, which would destroy the movement. Either way, you've had it. There's something in there about the way resistance movements always have this problem in front of them: do they organize themselves to mirror the opposition, which often undermines the point of the resistance; or do they maintain that more democratic and free persona, which means that they are quite likely to be destroyed by their opponents? The dialectical tension never really goes away.

DC: In addition to Keith's recommendations for further reading, I would also mention the useful overviews in Jermier et al. (1994), Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) and more recently Mumby et al. (2017). Kondo's (1990) ethnographic study of gender, identity and resistance in a Japanese factory is particularly insightful. Challenging conventional binaries, she contends that there is no such thing as an entirely 'authentic' or 'pristine space of resistance', or of a 'true resister'. Observing that people 'consent, cope, and resist at different levels of consciousness at a single point in time', Kondo (1990) questions the meaning of the term resistance and warns about the dangers of imputing an invariably subversive or emancipatory motive or outcome to resistance. Her critique of binary thinking raises important questions for future studies of resistance leadership.

Kondo's ideas have overlaps with research on tempered radicals (Meyerson, 2021). Tempered radicals are often women in senior positions who are committed to their organization but also to a cause that is fundamentally at odds with the dominant workplace culture. Eschewing direct and overt confrontation, which they believe is unlikely to be effective and could even be counter-productive, tempered radicals work more quietly through subtle, low-key practices to achieve positive change by sticking to their values, asserting their agendas, leveraging small wins and

mobilising others. They work within systems and cultures in ways that avoid jeopardising their careers. Seeking to maintain a delicate balance between pursuing change and avoiding marginalisation, tempered radicals also have to cope with various tensions between potentially opposing personal and professional identities. I do think these more nuanced and dialectical approaches to conceptualising and enacting resistance offer valuable directions for future research.

In terms of further empirical studies, I would encourage more work on how resistance can challenge organizational decision making in constructive and empowering ways. Whistleblowing is an important focus that could be explored in more detail (see [Kenny, 2019](#); [Munro and Kenny, 2023](#)). The leadership of resistance movements is currently under-examined. More studies addressing online organizing for resistance would be helpful (e.g. [Bloom et al., 2021](#); [Vachhani and Pullen, 2019](#)). This in turn raises important questions about resistance leadership in relation to new forms of organizing and organizations, and also new technologies like artificial intelligence. Can the owners and designers of AI be effectively challenged to create systems, models and algorithms that are more open, inclusive, ethical and empowering?

There's a lot more to be done in relation to understanding how contemporary inequalities reflect and reinforce resistance leadership dialectics. Critical perspectives on leadership can learn a great deal from post-colonial research, including better understandings of resistance with regard to apartheid, slavery and racial segregation (e.g. [Ladkin and Patrick, 2022](#); [Liu and Baker, 2016](#)). I would encourage critical studies of resistance leadership to explore the impact of various inequalities and their intersections in reflecting, reinforcing and sometimes transforming power-resistance-identity dialectics (e.g. [Liu, 2021](#)). As we discussed earlier, class cultures and economic divisions can fundamentally shape power-resistance dialectics, but unlike several other inequalities, these are typically not addressed by employment legislation. There are good arguments to suggest that in studying resistance practices we should build on the sort of work Willis was doing in examining class cultures and their important intersections with gender, ethnicity, age etc.

KG: Yes, indeed. We started with David talking about Paul Willis' (1978/2016) *Learning to labour*, which is an ethnography. One of the things we know about resistance is a lot of it is covert and dangerous, not necessarily physically dangerous, but dangerous for your mental health, for your financial health. These dynamics suggest that we need more ethnographic studies and fewer surveys, fewer interviews. We need researchers to follow around resisters, as employees, activists, organizers or whatever role they need, and gain insight from these perspectives rather than from this outside, detached perspective. Instead of learning to labour we need to know more about learning to resist. How does that actually work on the ground?

DC: Keith's point raises an important methodological issue. How can and should we research resistance, particularly subterranean, disguised and concealed oppositional practices? In my research at Slavs, shopfloor workers were unlikely to complete a questionnaire survey. It was only by being present and interacting on the shopfloor that I could begin to appreciate, for example, the oppositional nature of humour in routine, everyday interactions and the rich, predominantly oral communication dynamics between the workers. Without witnessing the joking dynamics, I wouldn't have understood their significance (and wouldn't have asked about humour in a survey).

So yes, I agree with Keith, more ethnographic studies of resistance leadership would provide empirically rich and nuanced accounts of control, resistance and identity dialectics. Ethnographies can shed important light on the influence of particular local, regional and global contexts and indeed how perceptions of these contexts are themselves open to conflict and contestation. Equally, as Kondo's work illustrates so well, ethnographic studies can reveal the subtle strategies that subordinates may use to express their opposition, and how they might draw on their knowledge, skills

and experience in ways that simultaneously enact, but also conceal, their resistance. This is not to suggest that followers will invariably engage in dissent, or that opposition is necessarily effective. Like control, resistance can have unintended and contradictory consequences. But it is to argue that ethnographic studies are particularly well placed to address such issues and to raise further questions about what specific practices might constitute resistance and about who resists, how, why and with what consequences.

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Keith Grint has been Professor Emeritus at Warwick University since 2018. Between 1998 and 2004 he was University Lecturer then Reader in Organizational Behaviour at the Saïd Business School, Oxford University, and from 2004 to 2006 he was Professor of Leadership Studies and Director of the Lancaster Leadership Centre, Lancaster University School of Management. Between 2006 and 2008 he was Professor of Defence Leadership, Cranfield University, and Professor of Public Leadership at Warwick Business School from 2009 to 2018. His books include: *The Sociology of Work* (1991); *Management: A Sociological Introduction* (1995); *Fuzzy Management: Contemporary Ideas & Practices at Work* (1997); *The Arts of Leadership* (2000); *Leadership*,

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