

# Engaged Scholarship and Its Pitfalls

## Biases Towards Collective Action and Resistance

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### Introduction

Many researchers in the field of anthropology and development studies refer to themselves as ‘engaged scholars’ – and I count myself among them. We conduct research among marginalised populations and focus on their practices and perspectives, especially in dealing with the state and other governance actors and their policies, programmes, and projects. We often study grassroots organisations, popular participation, social movements, and covert and overt protests against neoliberal, capitalist, and other exploitative forms of domination. While I laud engaged scholarship, in this essay I will outline two of its pitfalls, one empirical and one analytical. First, engaged scholarship gives rise to an empirical bias if it implies that researchers are primarily looking for *collective* action, in the shape of social movements, mass protests, or widespread popular participation. This risks turning a blind eye to the more individual and fragmented practices of marginalised residents. Second, engaged scholarship seems to analyse many practices of disenfranchised populations as a form of *resistance* to the state, capitalism, or neoliberalism. While not ignoring resistance, I argue that many of people’s practices are compliant or even complicit with state policies, capitalist politics, and neoliberalist regimes. In this essay, I advocate for engaged scholarship, while also emphasising the importance of empirical openness and analytical attention to the less collective and more fragmented nature of many practices and their inherent intertwining of defiance, indifference, and compliance. In doing so, in my concluding remarks I will take heed of Asef Bayat’s (2000, 2010) study of ‘the quiet encroachment of the ordinary’.

## A Naïve Engaged Scholar

Nearly twenty years ago, I began my fieldwork on how residents of low-income neighbourhoods in the north of Recife, Brazil, were coping with the then-recently-introduced Participatory Budgeting programme and a related large-scale urban upgrading project. In preparation for this research, as usual, I had read many academic and journalistic publications on Brazil. This reading gave me the impression that, once in Brazil, I would stumble upon social movements and progressive forms of citizen participation. I was looking forward to studying how collective popular politics and organised resistance to neoliberalism were enacted in the urban periphery. Researchers had studied rural social movements such as the Landless Workers' Movement MST (Houtzager 2000; Wolford 2003), urban social movements such as the Homeless Workers' Movement MTST (Assies 1999), and progressive forms of citizen participation such as the critically acclaimed Participatory Budgeting programme in Porto Alegre and Recife (Baiocchi 2001; Leal 2003). They discussed how these social movements and participatory programmes had contributed significantly to the deepening of democracy in Brazil and beyond, in the region of Latin America (Dagnino 2003; Alvarez et al. 1998). Much research later also focused on overt protests, social movements, and large-scale grassroots organizations, both in Brazil (Feltran 2010; Caldeira 2015) and other countries in the region (Lazar 2017; Pérez 2022).

In 2003, Lula da Silva – leader of the Workers' Party PT<sup>1</sup> and former leader of social movements – became president of Brazil and would serve two terms until 2011. His presidency ushered in an era of left-leaning, pro-poor politics in the country. It was part of the Pink Tide, the turn toward 'left-of-centre' governments in Latin American democracies that diverged from the neoliberal economic model in the early 21st century. In Recife, the PT had already assumed power in 2001 and soon introduced their far-reaching Participatory Budgeting programme, which became the largest participatory budgeting programme in the world (De Vries 2016).

When I started my fieldwork in Recife's urban margins, I expected to see much of the above reflected in the daily life of its residents. However, as one can imagine, this was hardly the case. Apart from the regularly organised and well-attended Participatory Budgeting meetings – in which residents could vote for public works to be carried out in their neighbourhood – I found little involvement in collective progressive and participatory politics, not to mention social activism, among the

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1 Partido dos Trabalhadores.

residents whose daily lives I studied. Most of them were busy making a living, raising their children, and dealing with the rampant violence that resulted from drug trafficking and discriminatory police presence in the neighbourhood (Koster 2014).

One could call me naïve – and I agree I was to a certain extent. Yet it is remarkable how the literature has so often presented – and continues to display – a particular picture of politics and society that puts collective action and resistance at the forefront, in the form of social activism and popular politics. To take this further, many progressive scholars in Brazil and beyond, especially after the publication of James Holston's (2008) influential book *Insurgent Citizenship*, have begun to observe and analyse forms of collective resistance such as insurgent, transgressive, or contentious citizenship (Butcher and Apsan Frediani 2014; Earle 2017; Pérez 2022). Of course, if you look for these forms of insurgence, you will find them. I did too. At the Participatory Budgeting meetings, or at meetings on urban planning with bureaucrats and representatives of social movements, expressions of collective action and progressive, leftist politics were easy to find. In 2014, during the Occupy Estelita (*Ocupe Estelita*) protests in Recife, many activists, including David Harvey who visited the city in November of that year, joined the protest for the right to the city and opposed a new waterfront development project on Estelita's wharf.<sup>2</sup> However, these protests found little resonance with everyday life in the low-income neighbourhoods. Not a single resident I knew participated.

## A Not-So-Collective Land Occupation

In the first months of my fieldwork in Recife I discovered that a land occupation had taken place just 100 metres from where I was renting a floor. One night, a group of residents had entered a private walled property whose alleged owner lived far away. They had broken down parts of the wall and built about twenty shacks on the lot. They hoisted the flag of the MTST, the Homeless Workers' Movement. I was excited; this would be a great opportunity to study the process of collective *autoconstrução* (self-built housing) (Holston 1991) and engage with one of the most important urban social movements in Brazil.

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2 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-joFleks\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-joFleks_s) and <http://davidharvey.org/2014/12/video-david-harvey-political-economy-urbanization-recife/> (both accessed on 1 November 2022).

Over the following days I spent a lot of time with the residents. One person always had to be present at the shack in case the authorities came by to check, so there were always people around – which made the occupation a perfect place for fieldwork. The residents showed me their newly built shacks, mostly made of plywood, scrap metal and plastic sheeting. I was interested in how they organized the occupation and especially how the MTST coordinated it. However, it proved difficult to retrieve information on these topics. Aside from building the shacks on the first night, the occupation seemed to have very little collective organisation. Instead, the group seemed very fragmented, as residents did not trust each other and frequently accused each other of stealing building materials. After a few days I found out that the land occupation was ‘independent’, as they called it. Somebody had indeed raised the MTST flag, but after a week an MTST representative had visited the site and demanded that they remove it, as the occupation was not supported by the movement. There was no central coordination or organisation. The residents appeared to have seized the opportunity after a car broke through the wall of the plot a few days earlier. A drunk driver had crashed into the wall, leaving a large hole. A few residents had entered through the wall and started to build shacks, modelled on the MTST and MST occupations they had seen on television. When others heard what was going on, they too decided to try their own luck and joined that same night. Although it had seemed like a collectively coordinated action where people built shacks at the same time, there was no collectivity in the sense of joint organisation between different individuals – any more than there is between separate people who decide to go shopping during the Black Friday sale.

Although the land occupation was not part of an organised collective effort to claim the right to the city, I continued to follow it. It turned out that the owner was having trouble legally proving that the land belonged to him. Apparently, as was the case with many lots in the area, he had also once occupied it and built the wall. After a few months he ceased trying to get the land back. Now, almost twenty years later, some of the first residents still live there, but most have sold their shacks and moved. All houses are now brick and concrete. They all have two storeys and some even three. Some residents have merged two shacks into one larger house. People’s self-building practices were dispersed and fragmented – they built and modified their dwellings to suit family size and budget. No one has property rights, but tenure security is quite high as the neighbourhood is part of a municipal governance program that guarantees shelter in the absence of titles.<sup>3</sup>

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3 This programme is called Prezeis (Leite 2007).

Over the years I have studied several processes of *autoconstrução* and most of them were not related to social movements, nor were the residents involved in other forms of organised collective action (see, e.g., Koster 2020). Indeed, if we wish to understand what is really going on in processes like these, where people occupy a piece of land and build a house, we need to look beyond collective action and adopt a more open stance that also takes into account all kinds of individual and fragmented practices.

## No Resistance

Apart from their emphasis on collective action, engaged scholars tend to view the practices of the marginalised residents they study as a form of resistance. Numerous studies have shown how these practices indeed resist local and national authorities and their neoliberal or authoritarian policies, or challenge global capitalist forces. In Latin America, the broad-brush picture holds that the poor express their needs either through popular participation channels or through radical social movements and protests (Collier and Handlin 2009; Montambault 2015). Across the world, many studies discuss Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the right to the city and its appeal to marginalised urban populations (Harvey 2003; Lelandais 2014; Souza 2018; Banerjee-Guha 2010). These studies draw on Marxist or Gramscian readings of hegemony and counter-hegemony, or use Foucauldian notions of governmentality and counter-governmentality (see, e.g., Appadurai 2001). Other studies have zoomed in on more covert transcripts of resistance, in which the excluded express their discontent through grumbling, jesting, slander, and false compliance (e.g. Scott 1985).

I agree that marginalised people may take part in both public and covert acts of resistance that even coalesce into collective claims and forms of activism, such as the residents who do engage in MTST or MST land occupations. I wish to emphasise, however, that many of those who live in the margins never – or only rarely – participate in contentious acts. Moreover, their diverse practices are often indifferent towards – or even compliant and compatible with – regimes and their policies, and their needs and aspirations often result in a tendency to champion neoliberalism and capitalism. Regarding the latter, the common consumerist aspirations of residents of low-income neighbourhoods in cities across the globe are telling (see, e.g. Kolling 2016 on Salvador da Bahia, Brazil). Indeed, and logically so, residents of the urban periphery often do not oppose capitalist desires – they also want a flatscreen television, a car, and the latest mobile phone.

Returning to the land occupation, various practices of the residents can indeed be considered acts of resistance, perhaps even an expression of insurgent citizenship. Residents who had been living in low-quality, small and cramped housing, had transgressed the law by occupying a piece of land and building a new house. At the same time, other residents told me how they occupied the land to sell it as soon as there was some certainty of being allowed to stay. They wanted to use the money to buy a motorcycle or a car. These aspirations are not part of what is usually analysed as an act of resistance, an expression of insurgent citizenship, or a claim of a right to the city. Yet they were part of what was going on and what was at stake for those involved.

## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have discussed two pitfalls of engaged scholarship: an empirical bias towards collective action and an analytical bias towards resistance. For a more balanced, engaged analysis of the practices of marginalised populations, I argue that a good starting point is what Asef Bayat (2010: 45), in his work on the Middle East, calls ‘the quiet encroachment of the ordinary.’ He refers to this as the unassuming, non-collective and persistent practices of dispersed low-income and marginalised actors to acquire the basic necessities of their lives, such as shelter, public services, an income, and access to public space. While some of the practices described by Bayat (2000, 2010) can be understood as acts of resistance – e.g., street vendors flouting regulations that prohibit them to sell their products in the city centre – he approaches them as a ‘social nonmovement’ with atomised actors who often lack a shared political ideology, leadership, and organization.

I recognise the unassuming and quiet fashion of these practices. In the urban upgrading projects I studied, many residents were very critical of the plans and their implementation. Over the years, however, I witnessed only one collective resident protest, where people drew media attention by burning tyres on the road and obstructing traffic. When TV and newspaper reporters visited the area, some of the residents told their stories and complained about the authorities. I have not encountered any other incidents of public resistance by the residents. People told me that they did not have time for this – because of work or a busy family life – or that they just simply did not like to contribute to this kind of upheaval because they considered it inappropriate or even uncivilised.

I propose that engaged scholars should keep an eye on the non-contentious, compliant and even submissive practices in which people in the margins so often

engage (see, e.g. Mahmood, 2005). Being open to the more complex entanglements of reproducing and countering power relations that their practices often entail will help us engage with disenfranchised populations and understand what is at stake for them; also, when what they do is mostly non-collective and in line with the regimes and policies they face in their daily lives.

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