

Resistance, Disillusionment, Exiting: The Process of Individual Praxis of Resistance

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Povzetek

Prispevek oriše lok individualne prakse odpora od njenega vznika do končnih posledic. Poudarek je na posamezniku v njegovem odnosu do širšega družbenega konteksta. V prvem delu opredelimo koncept upora, ki ga nato analiziramo v filozofskih okvirih Nozickovega miselnega eksperimenta in njegove kritike pri Adamu Kolberju, pri čemer avtor uvede koncepta »razčaranja« in »izstopa«. Članek je zasnovan kot splošen oris individualnega delovanja znotraj upora.

Ključne besede: upor, individualno delovanje, Robert Nozick, Adam Kolber, izkustveni stroj

Summary

The paper traces the arc of an individual praxis of resistance from its inception to its final consequences. The focus is on the individual, as well as her relationship with the wider social context. In the first part, the concept of resistance is defined, followed by an analysis through the philosophical framework of Nozick's thought experiment and Adam Kolber's reformulation of it, wherein the terms "disillusionment" and "exiting" are introduced. The second part focuses on the collective aspect of "exiting", on its structure and the challenges which they present. The paper is conceived as a general outline of individual praxis within resistance.

Keywords: resistance, individual action, Robert Nozick, Adam Kolber, experience machine

*hoće li sloboda umeti da peva
kao što su sužnji pevali o njoj*
– Branko Miljković¹

Resistance and Individual Praxis

The role of the individual during broad social resistance carries with it a host of contradictions. Personal motivation, the means of support, as well as particular expectations regarding the outcome can vary greatly among those engaged within the same movement. The aim of this article is to propose one possible view of individual praxis through an analogy with Kolber's version of the thought experiment known as "the experience machine."

As *resistance* and *individual praxis* are concepts central to our exploration, it is necessary to first define them. As the paper does not focus on one particular type of resistance and is instead concerned with a broad spectrum of similar phenomena, we will utilize Jack Goldstone's definition of *revolution*. Although Goldstone insists that the three definitional criteria he highlights converge to *revolution*, we hold that the sheer scope of the definition more appropriately describes *resistance*. This alternative terminology is at once motivated by the claim that Goldstone's definition is over-compliant, as well as a practical consideration. *Revolution* is a concept fraught with possible misinterpretations that would only serve to muddy the waters in an article primarily concerned with the individual experiential components of general social resistance. Hence, *pace* Goldstone, the key points of *resistance* are:

- (a) Efforts to change the political regime that draw on a competing vision (or visions) of a just order, (b) a notable degree of informal or formal mass mobilization, and (c) efforts to force change through noninstitutionalized actions such as mass demonstrations, protests, strikes, or violence.²

Each of these points will be important for the further development of this article. The first point referring to competing visions of a just order will be crucial in speaking about the individual process of *exiting*, as well as its two-phase structure. The second point pertaining to mass mobilization will be relevant to the discussion of the relation between the individual and the collective praxis within

1 Branko Miljković, "Poeziju će svi pisati," in *Vatra i nista*, p. 316; "will freedom itself sing / as slaves have sung of it" – trans. Aleksandra Milanović.

2 Jack A. Goldstone, "Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory," p. 142.

resistance. However, the points concerning solely individual praxis remain even in the case where there is no mass mobilization. The importance of the third point regarding non-institutionalized actions lies in its claim that resistance is not necessarily a violent practice. The struggle of the Serbian students is an excellent example of a movement which falls under *resistance* without being based on the violent overthrow of the regime. Moreover, the definition places emphasis on extra-institutional praxis, which, for the purposes of this article, will predominantly refer to an individual's experience of *their actions as extra-institutional*.

A concept of resistance is key for understanding the individual within it. Given the scope of the definition of resistance, as well as the sheer multiplicity of modes of possible praxis, this article will focus on a particular type of individual to whom the terms *disillusionment* and *exiting* apply. In short, *disillusionment* assumes a consciousness of one's participation in resistance, as well as an understanding of the significance of that resistance, while *exiting* signifies one's dedicated practice within a resistance at large. Accordingly, the article is concerned with the experience of individuals who risk their societal and material status by participating in resistance.

Using these terms, the following sections highlight connections to the philosophical framework of the article, subsequently unifying them to address the problem of the course of resistance on both the individual and collective levels.

The Philosophical Framework of the Problem: Nozick, and Kolber's Critique

The Experience Machine

In *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), Robert Nozick formulated a thought experiment frequently referred to as *the experience machine*.³ The basic formulation has changed over time, and so for the purposes of this article I will use the following formulation provided in Nozick's *The Examined Life*: "Imagine a machine that could give you any experience (or sequence of experiences) you might desire. [...] You can live your fondest dreams 'from the inside'. Would you choose to do this for the rest of your life?"⁴

3 Lorenzo Buscicchi, "The Experience Machine."

4 Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, pp. 104–105. For the original formulation, cf. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 42–45.

The experience machine is most often employed as a critique of hedonism.⁵ Although the problem of hedonism is outside of the scope of this article, the thought experiment will still be of use to us, not least because of its structure. This structure confronts us with two alternatives: on the one hand, we have our current life, while on the other, we have a simulated life of our “fondest dreams,” a life more comfortable, happier, of higher quality, etc.

The setup of Nozick’s thought experiment is not without its flaws. Adam Kolber argues that the starting position of the thought experiment (our current life) is privileged by virtue of its being the *status quo*.⁶ In order to show the inherent bias in Nozick’s version of the experiment, Kolber suggested a reformulation which would highlight the unfairness of Nozick’s concept, calling it *the reverse experience machine* (REM).⁷

The REM and the Analogy to Individual Praxis

Kolber’s formulation is based on the following question: “Would you get off of an experience machine to which you are already connected?”⁸ The relation from Nozick’s question is reversed—simulated life is our *status quo*. It is precisely this simulated life that we actually live and which we have hitherto lived, the comforts of which are familiar to us, while the “real life” is alien to us. Departing from the current state exists in both formulations of the experiment, but in Kolber it comes at a cost to our quality of life, and its reward is exiting the simulation.

Kolber’s thought experiment can be connected with the problem of individual praxis of resistance through structural analogy. The simulated state in Kolber corresponds to inaction, while the non-simulated state of reality corresponds to praxis (of supporting the resistance). The first state can be compared with life whose comfort is derived, among other things, from a conscious or unconscious disengagement from the societal problems which are at the root of resistance, while the second state is akin to exiting from the first at the cost of risking one’s comfort, status, life, etc. A deeper awareness and consideration of societal problems, or an endangerment of one’s livelihood by the regime in the inactive

5 Buscicchi, “The Experience Machine.”

6 “The status quo bias is the phenomenon according to which subjects tend to irrationally prefer the status quo – that is, the way things currently are. In other words, when facing complex decision-making, subjects tend to follow the adage ‘when in doubt, do nothing’.” *Ibid*.

7 *Ibid*.

8 Adam J. Kolber, “Mental Statism and the Experience Machine”, p. 15.

(simulated) state may lead to one's participation in resistance (analogous to the non-simulated state).

The rationale for privileging Kolber's reformulation in building the analogy rests in the difference of the relations between the two states. While in Nozick departing from the (real) *status quo* immediately results in a simulation of "our fondest dreams," in Kolber this departure comes with risk and uncertainty. Similarly, the individual who supports resistance usually cannot know with certainty what the outcome of this resistance will be. On the other hand, the aim of resistance can be imagined in the context of Nozick's thought experiment as the immediate transition from the present state to a state which we aim to bring about through resistance.

Accordingly, on the individual level of resistance praxis we have a movement from the familiar toward the unfamiliar (per Kolber), as well as a movement from the familiar toward the desired (per Nozick). For the purposes of this article, we will mostly utilize the analogy to Kolbert and the REM, though it is important to bear in mind that in the context of resistance, behind the unfamiliar state of uncertainty there always lies an expectation of betterment, i.e., the realization of a desired state.

Disillusionment and Exiting

Differences in Comparison with REM

The key difference between the context of resistance and Kolber's thought experiment lies in the absence of a clear moment of exiting from the state of non-resistance. This difference arises from the very formulation of the thought experiment, where we are faced with a clear question: do we wish to exit or not? In the context of resistance, the situation is different—answering a question regarding our desired goals does not change the state of the world. We can imagine a person who supports resistance, i.e., answers affirmatively to the call to exit/resist, but does not wish to resist or support the resistance through praxis. Such a case would eschew the crucial component of risk from the analogy with Kolber's thought experiment. If there is no significant change in individual praxis, then there cannot be a transition from one state to the other. Due to the necessity to bring about the desired state of resistance through praxis, in the context of resistance there arises a collective aspect, which is not present in Kolber's thought experiment.

Disillusionment refers to one's support of the ideals of resistance as well as one's wish to resist. It signifies the will to risk one's position and comfort in support of resistance. In the context of the previous paragraph, it corresponds solely to answering the question—which, in terms of Kolber's thought experiment, is the only step that matters.

It is important to emphasize that disillusionment does not need to be factual. While the thought experiment clearly delineates simulation from reality, in the context of resistance we cannot say whether the ideals of resistance, or the problems which they address, are real. The question of disillusionment is one of personal experience and does not stand for an objective measure. Someone can risk their comfort in support of resistance based on false assumptions, imaginary events, intentionally false propaganda, etc. These conditions do not change the nature of the act—disillusionment takes place in these scenarios. The transition into the social context erases the clear line of demarcation between the “true” and the “false/simulated,” replacing it with a border between a lack of consciousness of societal problems and the risks of opposing them.

On the other hand, *exiting* is the process of praxis in the service of resistance, both on the level of the individual, and in the broader social context. While disillusionment represents providing an affirmative answer to the question of resistance, exiting designates praxis meant to bring about its desired state. As already emphasized, the exiting from the “simulated” state of non-resistance depends on many factors, with one of them being personal praxis. Therefore, a person who decides to take on the risk inherent in supporting the resistance is disillusioned, while her very practical support of it represents exiting. An individual act continues to grow into a collective process. The desired state of resistance cannot be brought about on a purely individual level. Here, it's important to emphasize the connection to Nozick's version of the thought experiment. Praxis within resistance tends toward the desired state, i.e., a state which is in accordance with the ideals of the resistance. To further clarify this term, we can imagine the following example: a person who works for a government agency decides to support the resistance (an act of disillusionment). Following this decision, she begins participating in demonstrations, providing financial support, taking on organizational work, etc. (the process of exiting).

Disillusionment and exiting do not need to be directly connected. We can imagine a person who operates under the auspices of resistance but does not adhere to its ideals (e.g., pursues personal monetary interest), as well as a person who supports the ideals of resistance but acts in opposition to it (e.g., because of coercion

or blackmail). This article focuses on those individuals who transition from disillusionment into exiting, thus acting on their desire to participate in resistance.

The Two Phases of Exiting

Since exiting designates a process, it is important to emphasize its beginning and its end, as well as its main phases. Considering that exiting is both an individual and a collective process, each of these points can be viewed from two perspectives. The beginning of exiting on the individual level differs from person to person. However, on the collective level, the beginning can be designated as either the first act of individual praxis or as a significant event that marked the start of resistance. In the case of the university blockades in Serbia, we could say that the blockade of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts was the inaugural act of collective exiting, preceded by individual praxis.⁹

When speaking of collective exiting, we mean the process of realizing the desired state of resistance. In this sense, exiting on the societal level is closer to Nozick's thought experiment as it lacks individual risk (which is an essential aspect of Kolber's version). On the individual level, the end of exiting represents the end of one's praxis of resistance. The duration of an individual's praxis can be an important factor in the risk to which that person exposes herself to. Accordingly, we can say that the individual has transitioned from one state into the other, but that the outcome of such a transition varies across individuals due to variance in extent of support given and associated risk involved. The termination of individual praxis need not correspond to a termination of resistance: it may come before as in the event of a violent ending, a resignation from resistance, the belief it is no longer warranted; or it may come after as in the cases of individuals believing that the struggle is not yet complete, the goals not yet realized, etc. Therefore, personal praxis depends on an individual sense of resistance and its possibilities, as well as on broader circumstances.

The difference between the individual, societal and intended aim of exiting is of crucial importance for the resistance itself. To illustrate this, let us once again take the example of the Serbian students and their struggle. The intended end lies with the meeting of the movement's stated demands. The conditions for a societal end are thus presently known to us, while the individual ending may come at any point. For instance, we can imagine a person who believes that the battle is doomed to defeat and has hence given up. Moreover, in the case of the

9 "Koji su sve fakulteti u blokadi?," *Danas*, 10 December 2024.

societal ending, there exists a danger that the anticipated end of the resistance may shift from the fulfillment of the student demands to the overthrowing of the current system, in which case the conditions for termination may be met at a different time.¹⁰

Concerning the problem of a premature ending, as well as the expectations of a resistance, it is vital to highlight the structure of exiting. In general, there are two main phases. The first phase is destructive and seen in the overturning of the existing social system or of the conditions which led to the problems which the resistance seeks to resolve. The second phase is creative and aims at creating a new system, one in line with the ideals and goals of resistance. It is precisely its two-phase character which poses one of the main challenges to the praxis of resistance—the threat of a premature ending.

Challenges

Although the two phases are deeply connected, it is common for one phase to be neglected in favor of the other. Since the horizon of each of the two is so broad, focusing on one often comes close to entirely eclipsing the other. Hence, during the first phase, where the aim is to overturn the present system, it is easy to think that this is the only or at least the most important goal, whereby the difficulty with which this goal is achieved serves to emphasize its importance. To use a banal sports analogy: to defeat the best team in a tournament semifinals does not guarantee the title, though the game itself may have been the greatest obstacle to victory. Moreover, the fact that the context of a resistance is a matter of broad social masses presents a significant challenge to conserving the *élan* of exiting during this transition from one phase into the other.

Although our initial definition of resistance explicitly emphasized the goals of the second phase (“a competing vision (or visions) of a just order”), we can very well imagine a social movement which identifies the key societal problems and urges for their resolution without providing concrete solutions. In the case of the Serbian student struggle, the student demands represent the aims of the second phase, while without them, and without anything else in their place, the struggle would be nonexistent. An excellent illustration of the second phase is to be found in the following description:

10 The significance of such a shift can also be glimpsed in the scenario which made the rounds before the big student protest in Belgrade. Cf. Mirjana Milenković, “Zašto Vučić jedini protura scenario da je subota, 15. mart, dan D za Srbiju?,” *Danas*, 11 March 2025.

Gradually, the labor movement achieved its stated goal: it was a purely political aim: election law reform. [...] *The workers had no specific wishes as to how exactly the parliament ought to be reformed*: what is important is that they no longer trusted what was then the “unreformed” parliament.¹¹

If the social struggle has definite aims for the second phase, or ideals from which these aims could be derived, its success will depend on whether it is able to sustain the overall societal *élan*, i.e., whether it can maintain the individual exitings. If a great number of individuals were to believe that resistance has ended with the completion of the first phase, which puts an end to their exiting, the chances of societal reform in line with the stated goals would diminish. On the other hand, an overdependence on the process of reform during the first phase can also lead to its failure, i.e., to a failure to subvert the current state of society.

If the overcoming of such challenges is important to the success of a resistance, the question arises: how can they be surmounted? On the individual level, the answer is to be found in the awareness of two separate, almost contradictory phases, which must be realized. From the outset, the overthrowing of the social order ought to be treated not as the end of the entire resistance, but as the completion of only one part of exiting. Moreover, when speaking of reform, we must be aware of the conditions necessary for its realization. Only in this way can we be sure to facilitate the necessary praxis of resistance. On the societal level, the answer to the question depends on a multitude of individuals. Therefore, a precise solution is a practical sociological problem of how to spread awareness of the significance of both phases of praxis of resistance as widely as possible. Considering that exiting is also a collective process, any solution to the challenges of the two-phase structure must be articulated on the collective level, while acknowledging that the praxis of the individual is an essential part of that collective. Though Kolber's thought experiment provides the basis and the terminology for analyzing the problem of individual praxis, it offers no clear solution for fully understanding the complexities of the collective aspect, as it only becomes present in the real-life context of resistance.

However, an answer to the question posed in the opening lines of this paper can be formulated: freedom will know to sing as the slave sang of it only if the slave manage to end the collective process of exiting. As such, every individual act of disillusionment must have as its aim the process in its entirety.

11 Slobodan Jovanović, *Primeri političke sociologije: Engleska, Francuska, Nemačka (1815–1914)*, p. 31. Emphasis my own.

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