Review forum

Resistance, space and political identities: the making of counter-global networks by David Featherstone

Stories of resistance and connection
Resistance, space and political identities is an ambitious book that insightfully and provocatively extends and develops the key theoretical and political concerns that have become a feature of David Featherstone’s work. This commitment to telling stories of resistance and contestation draws from struggles past and present, ranging from eighteenth-century radical democratic collectives like the London Corresponding Society (LCS) to contemporary counter-global social justice alliances like the Inter-Continental Caravan (ICC). Through mobilising these and other stories of ‘unruly alliances and flows’, Featherstone seeks to guide the reader through ‘the geographies of connection that have shaped resistance and contestation’ (p 27). The empirical grist for these chapters is derived from various eighteenth-century Atlantic subaltern political networks, including the Whiteboys and the LCS, which, Featherstone argues, undermine pervasive assumptions of resistance as bounded or defined by nationalisms through their overtly cosmopolitan and transnational character and agency.

Part three (chapters six and seven) extends this relational approach to contemporary ‘counter-global’ struggles. The case of the ICC is powerfully invoked to demonstrate that counter-global networks need not form a totalising opposition to ‘Empire’, indeed it is the very heterogeneity of the ICC that is celebrated by Featherstone, arguing that alliances and friendships can be formed to great effect over shared interests in spite of apparently different political ‘identities’ and ‘trajectories’. This focus on the generative potential of counter-global politics is a feature of the book and is articulated most passionately and forthrightly in the book’s concluding chapter. While the book’s theoretical and empirical implications are duly explored and summarised, this chapter also serves as a space for considering the political implications of the preceding argument, where the productive potential of counter-neoliberal global political networks are championed.

The passion and optimism that pervades Featherstone’s writing makes for a genuinely energising read. In this respect, his work addresses Gerry Kearns’ (2008) recent call for a ‘progressive geopolitics’ that focuses on more than conflict, force and states by critically attending to the political potential of relations defined by, among other things, friendship and solidarity. This work is also, given the ongoing crisis undermining the neoliberal global system, a timely addition to the literature, foregrounding a much-needed geographically inflected approach to reshaping global networks in more just and accountable ways. The effect of this argument is cemented by the invocation of the ‘usable pasts’ featured in part two, which serve to highlight the ongoing, produced and contested nature of global networks that are constantly undermined by the appearance of counter-global networks showing ‘other’ ways of ‘organising’ social relations.

Criticisms that can be readily levelled at Featherstone’s approach in this book are few, but there are aspects of his thesis that are bound to draw the critical attention of certain elements of its potential readership. Some, most obviously those who work with David Harvey’s dominant critique of neoliberalism, will find fault with Featherstone’s emphasis on ‘thinking relationally’ about political agency and resistance. They might argue that such an approach ignores the (seemingly) patently centred nature of power and agency in contemporary global capitalist relations. There might also be a case for highlighting the ways in which ‘spatially-stretched relations’ can take on less progressive forms than those foregrounded here by Featherstone (see Massey et al. 2009). Others still might find Featherstone’s mobilisation of the terms ‘subaltern’ and ‘elite’ as exclusive political identities problematic, indeed a more detailed discussion in which these key concepts were more comprehensively defined would have been a useful inclusion.
Furthermore, and perhaps the most significant limitation to the political potential of Featherstone’s book is the lexicon and format in which it has been conceived. While not suggesting that the book is not a successful addition to the academic literature on resistance, its political ambitions are, to an extent, limited by this form. Sadly, the vitality of the generative central thesis of this book might be lost on the novice reader, who would find the material difficult to navigate. Rather than being a criticism, I would like to position this as a compliment to the author, who has managed to construct a thesis of significant wider appeal that would certainly attract a diverse readership should it be presented in a more accessible way.

It is on this note that this review should end, emphasising the potential of Featherstone’s work on resistance. This is a book that demands the attention and engagement of geographers, and others ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ academia, working on the intersections between social movements, political identities and the neoliberal state, ultimately offering a productive and uniquely positive approach to understanding and acting on the issues raised by such concerns.

William Hasty
University of Glasgow

References

James C L R 1937 The Black Jacobins Allison and Busby, London
Kearns G 2008 Progressive geopolitics Geography Compass 2 1599–620
Massey D, Human Geography Research Group, Sophie Bond and David Featherstone 2009 The politics of place beyond place: a conversation with Doreen Massey Scottish Geographical Journal 125 401–20

In the space of resistance: network, subaltern, and relationality

Accounts of social movements and subaltern resistance, whether in geography or beyond, are often characterised by a persistent presentism. Partly as a result of our concern with the new and the now, and partly due to an oddly impoverished historical imagination outside of historical geography, geographers have tended to neglect the complex relations between present and past. In this book, David Featherstone powerfully demonstrates how different forms of exclusionary and exploitative globalisation have been repeatedly called into question over time through a range of organisational practices and subjectivities that are stretched across large distances. In doing this, he has provided a politically important, theoretically rich, and empirically lively account of the relational geographies of subaltern struggle that draws attention to the always generative forms of solidarity that alter identities and politics.

The various resistance movements Featherstone sketches – ranging from movements as distinct as the Atlantic connections around the radical London Corresponding Society in the late 18th century to the contemporary anti-neoliberal Inter-Continental Caravan – offer a range of theoretical and political resources through which we might understand how subaltern political identities are formed, contested and reworked. Rather than conceive different instances of resistance networks as simply ‘of their time’, the relational spatialities and identities at work in and through subaltern political movements demands a re-theorising of resistance itself. Featherstone uses historical examples not simply to show that translocal resistance is not new, but to show how a conversation between historical and contemporary instances can prompt new theoretical insight. As Featherstone convincingly shows, these subaltern resistance movements are not defensive, localised responses to the logics of capital accumulation, but are productive forms of collective experimentation that provide sightlines for new ways of ordering globalisation. Similarly, these movements cannot be reduced to nation-centred political cultures or imaginaries, but instead offer alternative geographies of connection that contest the very conditions producing globalisation.

The book is in three parts. Part 1, ‘Networking the Political’, develops a relational construction of the political that serves the rest of the book. Chapter 1, for instance, on the relational construction of place and political identities, argues through the work of Raymond Williams and David Harvey, amongst others, for a relational construction of ‘militant particularisms’. Williams conceived of politics as grounded in some form of specific set of local conditions that are used to forge out generalisations and universals – militant particularisms, which can be both progressive and conservative. Featherstone offers a compelling and important account of militant particularisms as relational constructions that bring together different routes of activity. He shows that the formation of political agency is often forged out of ongoing negotiation with connections to elsewhere, meaning that what are often assumed to be ‘locally bounded’ knowledge, politics and identities are often ‘the meeting up of diverse trajectories and routes of political activity’ (p 35). One implication is that rather than worrying over how to analytically divide a politics of bounded place versus a politics of cosmopolitan space, a more expansive politics of resistance can emerge, as Featherstone’s approach suggests, through examining the processes, spaces and outcomes through which resistance occurs in practice. As he goes on to argue in Chapter 2 through the useful notion of ‘maps of grievance’, the expression of this resistance is always open to challenge and reworking – the power relations within and between movements are performed through forms of inclusion and exclusion that make, interpret and contest solidarities – and this reworking has no necessary spatial template.

One question that kept recurring here for me was whether the language of network is necessarily the most appropriate and useful for conceiving the spatialities of translocal resistance. The term has become an enormously important technology of organisation for counter-global movements (Juris 2008), and it is central to how a great deal of geography describes relational space. But, as Alwba Ong has suggested, the notion of network, including in many of its actor-network theory interpretations, can imply a rigidity and fixity that accompanies its concern with how ‘a fully fledged system [becomes] geared toward a single goal of maximization’ (2007, 5). In this context, perhaps the generative, processual, and often dynamically open and contested geographies of translocal social movements can be described through other grammars of connection, such as assemblage or mobility?

Part 2, ‘Geographies of Connection and Contestation’, examines the themes of labour, democracy, and subaltern nationalism through close and nuanced consideration of Atlantic networks of trade, labour and politics. Featherstone traces through vivid,
detailed writing how mobile geographies of connection shape political networks and identities, for instance in the ways in which the Whiteboys, an Irish agrarian secret society operating in the 18th century, linked Ireland, London and Newfoundland through changing labour connections. The chapters that make up this section of the book reveal how different spatial and temporal flows and connections structure political identities and practices: whether in relation to labour, democracy or subaltern nationalism, Featherstone carefully reveals the relational and contested nature of these flows and their constitutive political formations.

Part 3, ‘Political Geographies of the Counter-Globalization Movement’, turns to contemporary counter-globalisation movements. Chapter 6, for example, draws in particular on Ernesto Laclau’s reading of popular logics to examine the agency of movements through particular maps of grievance. The chapter argues, contra Hardt and Negri’s account of multitude – which, Featherstone persuasively argues, serves to mask the tensions and exclusions of counter-global movements – that different forms of populist logic shape political agency and identity within these movements. In Chapter 7, a detailed account of how the contested and multiple politics and identities of contemporary movements occur in practice is provided through the case of a set of translocal connections that constitute the Inter-Continental Caravan, involving West European activists against genetically modified seeds and Indian farmers. This chapter, as with the book as a whole, refuses to gloss over the complexities and ambivalences of translocal resistance, but instead highlights their constitutive role in the multiple spatialities of political solidarity.

Given how heavily the term is used in the book, it would have been useful to have heard more about how Featherstone conceives the notion of ‘subaltern’. For example, Chapter 1 describes subaltern political activity as inventive of ‘new forms of relations between different associations of human and non-humans’ (p 33), and while this generative and creative sense of what subaltern agency does is powerfully expressed throughout the book, more could have been given on exactly what subaltern means and what it conceptually affords. To take a different example, while Chapter 5 provides a fascinating account of ‘subaltern nationalism’ as produced through distanciated geographies of connection and mediated by relations of class, race and gender – in this case in the ways in which nationalism was contested and pluralised through the political activities of Irish and English sailors in the late 1790s – more could have been made of what specifically the category of subaltern might offer. For Vinay Gidwani (2008), subaltern connotes a space of transgressive practice of thinking and connecting, and this would seem to connect well with Featherstone’s emphasis on the generative nature of resistance. In contrast, for Gayatri Spivak (1993) the subaltern is, amongst other things, a category of shattered selves – and denotes people whose exploitation is such that thinking, speaking and acting has effectively been denied them. This reading of subaltern seems explicitly at odds with what Featherstone is implying. It would also be interesting to hear more about what the specificity of translocalism is for how we think the category of subaltern. Similarly, the notion of ‘cosmopolitanism’ is used frequently and sometimes its meaning is taken to be self-evident. But these cavets notwithstanding, Featherstone has written an excellent and often passionate account of the relational geographies of counter-global resistance that makes important contributions to debates on social movements, resistance and space; it will become a landmark text in the political geographies of resistance.

Colin McFarlane
Durham University

References
Gidwani V 2008 Capital, interrupted: agrarian development and the politics of work in India University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN
Juris J 2008 Networking futures: the movements against corporate globalization Duke University Press, Durham NC
Ong A 2007 Neoliberalism as a mobile technology Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 32 3–8
Spivak G C 1993 Outside in the teaching machine Routledge, London

Response
In Silencing the past Michel-Rolph Trouillot reflects on what he terms ‘the uneven power of historical production’. Trouillot challenges the silencing of the Haitian Revolution and the related failure of racism, slavery and colonialism ‘to become a central concern of the historiographic tradition in a Western country’ (Trouillot 1995, 98). He foregrounds the ‘interplay between inequalities in the historical process and inequalities in the historical narrative’ (Trouillot 1995, 44–5). One of the key projects of Resistance, space and political identities was to interrogate the geographies through which uneven historical processes are constructed. It sought to challenge attempts to silence and marginalise past geographies of connection. By recovering such geographies of subaltern connection, I contend that possibilities are opened up for the making of political presents and futures.

Will Hasty and Colin McFarlane have written careful readings and critical engagements with Resistance, space and political identities. This response engages with two key issues that arise from their reviews; I have elaborated on some of the issues raised in McFarlane’s discussion of grammars of connection elsewhere (Featherstone forthcoming). Firstly, I reflect on what is at stake in thinking subalternity in spatial terms. Secondly, I engage with the challenges of gaining political traction for alternative understandings of globalisation.

Both Hasty and McFarlane probe in different ways what is at stake in relation to the geographies of subalternity. McFarlane suggests the need for greater analytical clarity in the usage of the term subaltern and Hasty queries the usage of ‘subaltern’ and ‘elitist’ as exclusive political identities. McFarlane correctly avers that my use of the term has more affinity with Vinay Gidwani’s account of subaltern as space of ‘transgressive practice of thinking and connecting’ than Spivak’s usage as a ‘category of shattered selves’. I think they are both right, however, that I could have usefully defined this term more explicitly and positioned myself more carefully in relation to the proliferating work that invokes subalternity.

I sought to position subalternity as bearing on the oppositional forms of agency crafted through subaltern geographies of connection and contestation. The book owes much to the work of Ranajit Guha, one of the founding members of the Indian
Subaltern Studies collective, and his commitment to recovering marginalised forms of political agency, even as it critically interrogates some of the problematic spatial imaginaries, such as the construction of the subaltern as inhabiting an ‘autonomous domain’, through which Guha’s work was structured. It is also influenced in diverse ways by Antonio Gramsci’s formulation of the subaltern in the Prison Notebooks, but again gestures to a spatial reworking of this account. Gramsci’s work, especially his essay ‘Aspects of the Southern Question’, has important, and neglected, resources for thinking through the formation of subaltern geographies of connection (Gramsci 1978). This offers politically productive possibilities for thinking about the relationalities through which subaltern political agency is constructed.

This attempt to think through the relational politics of subalternity has strong affinities with recent work in geography that has mobilised or interrogated the term. Sharad Chari has suggested that there is a key tension between scholars ‘for whom the main point is to demonstrate irresolution, and for those who take on the representational risks in order to forge provisional solidarities’ (Chari 2011). He contends, drawing on Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s work, that far from being an ‘atavistic space of doubt’, subalternity can be refigured as about the ‘active determination of society and space’ (Chari 2011; see Gilmore 2008). It is this generative world-making possibilities of subaltern political activity that the book emphasises and charts. This stress on the politically generative character of subaltern political activity challenges the reduction of subalternity almost to a sense of ‘bare life’ that structures Spivak’s account of ‘shattered selves’.

To engage with such world-making processes the book mobilises an account of subaltern political activity that actively de-centres the national. Again McFarlane is right that I could have been more specific about my strategic mobilisation of the term cosmopolitanism to challenge nation-centred accounts of political movements. I used a focus on subaltern articulations of cosmopolitanism to foreground dynamic trajectories of subaltern political activity strongly influenced in this respect by the work of the radical historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker. The relationalities constructed through such activity exceed, unsettle and challenge attempts to confine subaltern politics within particular national or nationalist framings of resistance. In this regard Hasty’s critique of the ways in which elite/subaltern politics become too easily counter-posed is apposite. Elsewhere I have developed a more differentiated understanding of the contested relationalities generated between subaltern, middle class and gentleman reformers through the London Corresponding Society (see Featherstone 2010).

Hasty generously suggests that while the academic style of the text clearly limits the appeal of the book, the political arguments it develops have the potential to have wider resonance. This bears on the challenges of critically engaging with and shaping the terms of debate over seemingly abstract political issues such as globalisation. ‘Common-sense’ understandings of globalisation have been decisively shaped through top-down accounts by elite groups and policymakers who have uncritically celebrated what they construct as the opportunities provided by globalisation (see MacKinnon et al. 2011). There are, however, very different practical and unofficial knowledges of global processes that offer much more situated and contested understandings of globalisation. These have the potential to be drawn on and articulated in popular discourses. A key challenge is finding ways in which geographical work can inform and engage with such discourses in ways that generate political traction and efficacy.

The current political conjuncture defined by the re-invigoration of harsh right-wing political projects through responses to economic crisis emphasises the urgency of gaining such traction. A key struggle is emerging over how to contest the hold of the political right over the post-crisis narrative. There remain political possibilities opened up by the failure of neo-liberalism even on its own deracinated terms. There can, however, be no simple expectation that the prolonged misery and uncertainty caused by the aftermath of the crisis will necessarily yield fertile ground for left alternatives. In this context alternative understandings of globalisation have the potential to nourish antagonistic articulations of the crisis and to shift the terms of political debate in progressive directions.

David Featherstone
University of Glasgow

References


Featherstone D J 2010 Contested relationalities of political activism: the democratic spatial practices of the London Corresponding Society Cultural Dynamics 22 87–104

Featherstone D J forthcoming On assemblage and articulation


Gramsci A 1978 Selections from political writings, 1921–26 Lawrence and Wishart, London


Trouillot M R 1995 Silencing the past: power and the production of history Beacon Press, Boston MA

Area Vol. 43 No. 2, pp. 231–234, 2011
ISSN 0004-0894 © 2011 The Authors.
Area © 2011 Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers)