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# ***The Literary Subversive: A Brief Overview of the Role of Intellectuals in Resistance***

**Dominic Steavu\***

‘And as to Rebellion in particular against Monarchy;  
one of the most frequent causes of it,  
is the Reading of the books of Policy,  
and Histories of the antient Greeks, and Romans [...].  
From the same books,  
they that live under a Monarch conceive an opinion,  
that the Subjects in a Popular Common-wealth enjoy Liberty;  
but that in a Monarchy they are all Slaves. [...]  
In summe, I cannot imagine,  
how any thing can be more prejudiciall to a Monarchy,  
than the allowing of such books to be publikely read,  
without present such correctives of discreet Masters,  
as are fit to take away their Venime...’

Thomas Hobbes,  
‘Of Those things that Weaken or Tend to the  
Dissolution of a Common-Wealth’  
*Leviathan* (1651)

This article introduces the problem of the intellectual’s role in social or political resistance to hegemonic ideologies. This is the theme that unites all the contributions in the present issue. Although resistance is often perceived as an act, it contains an important theoretical dimension by which its goals, scope, and motivations are formulated. In this sense,

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the fruits of intellectual labour can be harvested to sustain the subaltern strata of society. For some thinkers, organic intellectuals from a certain subaltern stratum also perform the task of organizing and educating members of that stratum, crucial functions in the successful undertaking of counter hegemonic activity. After a brief overview of recent Western theories on the role of intellectuals in resistance, the article calls for the inclusion of non-Western perspectives, a sample of which is offered in the present special issue.

### Theorising the Intellectual

The failure of early twenty-first century popular movements of contestation, particularly those aimed at destabilising or even toppling neo-liberalism, has been attributed to a number of conceptual factors: a lack of proper organisation, an absence of a coherent vision or a failure to articulate a valid alternative. A moot point for some as resistance should not engage in the conceptual. Most ‘mental labour’ is a tool of ideology, as argued by Marx and developed by Lukács, and ideology is the dominion of the bourgeois class. In early modern Europe, the notion of individual freedoms and rights, for instance, was devised and relentlessly promoted by the same groups of educated elites who had a vested interest in establishing global networks of free trade that could escape, through this very celebration of individuality, the federalising powers of local administrations, the Church and, most importantly, the sovereign state. Thus, in the view of classical Marxism, the products of ‘mental labourers’ or ‘ideologists’, that is, intellectuals, work to reinforce and legitimate the myths from which the dominant culture ensures its perennity, difference or class being commonly cited examples.

Yet, in the last century or so, the role of the intellectual in grass-roots resistance movements has been redeemed. In stark contrast to the initial mistrust of the proletariat towards ‘mental labourers’, later-generation understandings of progressive socio-political reform carve out a special place for the intellectual, a figure that has been re-appropriated by the working class. A rarely cited document that is quite revealing of the shift in perspective is the *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* (Manifiesto por un arte revolucionario independiente) authored in 1938 by Leon Trotsky and André Breton, and signed by Breton and Diego Rivera. This text rebrands mental labourers of all kinds, including artists and

intellectuals freed from the ideological shackles of hegemony as first-line agents of societal change:

We recognize, of course, that the revolutionary State has the right to defend itself against the counterattack of the bourgeoisie, even when this drapes itself in the flag of science or art. But there is an abyss between these enforced and temporary measures of revolutionary self-defense and the pretension to lay commands on intellectual creation. If, for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralized control, to develop intellectual creation, an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on a base of friendly cooperation, without constraint from outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far-reaching than ever before in history.<sup>1</sup>

Slightly earlier, and in a much more elaborate fashion, Antonio Gramsci had challenged the standard Marxist view of the intellectual by proposing a distinction between the ‘traditional intellectual’ (Marx’s ‘mental labourer’ and the conjectural privileged recipient of an elite education) and the ‘organic intellectual’ (who is of the whole group and permanent).<sup>2</sup> Whereas the traditional intellectual disseminates, buttresses or builds consensus around dominant orthodox ideologies, the organic intellectual arises ‘organically’ from various subaltern strata to express and provide respective groups with an awareness of homogeneity and a shared function in economic, social and political fields. Social classes, Gramsci argued, exercise power not directly, but through political and cultural mediators. These mediators are intellectuals (traditional or organic), and since their role in upholding and disseminating the given order is crucial, the subaltern strata must produce its own organic intellectuals for the purpose of organising, educating and leading its members.

The working-class administered school and the party are the grounds where such intellectuals are formed, and where their functions of power

<sup>1</sup> Breton and Trotsky, ‘Manifiesto por un arte revolucionario independiente (Manifiesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art)’: 501.

<sup>2</sup> For Gramsci’s position, see ‘The Intellectuals’. Karl Kautsky, a representative of Orthodox Marxism, is another notable thinker who considered intellectuals as a necessary and active revolutionary force.

are redefined in a way that does not separate the manual from mental labour, as class society does. Ultimately, organic intellectuals propel their subaltern stratum beyond the stasis of resistance and onward towards counter hegemonic activity. In full bloom, organic intellectuals are self-reflexive and critical ‘committed intellectuals’, crucial components of change who generate group cohesion and then, through the ensuing unity, thrust the respective subaltern stratum into agency.<sup>3</sup> By creating an autonomous community or group organisations, their participants may reaffirm control over their daily lives.

While organic intellectuals are typically depicted as journalists, speakers, activists, artisans, militants or technicians, they also include traditional intellectuals—such as professors/teachers, public intellectuals, writers, philosophers and artists—whose intellectual ‘function’, to paraphrase Laclau, serves not to reassert dominant orthodox ideology, but instead to establish an organic unity among a subaltern stratum, group or class, which would otherwise have remained fragmented.<sup>4</sup>

This special issue, therefore, focuses on intellectuals who, despite belonging to categories of activity that typically or traditionally represent the condoning of, or compromise with, dominant elites, are in fact defending moral or ideological stances that run counter to that of the ruling order. Despite thus far having framed the problem largely in terms of Western political philosophy and signalled its relevance, a secondary aim of this issue is to question the absolute primacy of this discourse. To look for evidence of ‘Taoist<sup>5</sup> Anarchism’ or ‘Buddhist Republicanism’,

<sup>3</sup> For an elaboration on the notion of the ‘committed intellectual’, see McLaren et al., ‘The Specter of Gramsci’. The committed intellectual is not altogether removed from the Sartrean figure of the engaged intellectual (*l’intellectuel engagé*).

<sup>4</sup> See Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*: 204.

<sup>5</sup> The majority of authors in this special issue have opted to spell ‘Taoism’ or ‘Taoist’ in accordance with its original Wade-Giles spelling rather than the more recent *pinyin*-inspired ‘Daoism’ or ‘Daoist’. Both spellings are equally valid, although the former best conveys and openly signals the fact that ‘Taoism’ and ‘Taoist’ are Western analytical groupings devised by Jesuits in the late imperial period to render a complex plurality of indigenous categories (*daojiao* 道教, *daoia* 道家, *daoshi* 道士 and others) under the umbrella of single simplified blanket-terms—which are now freely used as conceptual shorthands in the field of Chinese Religions. Evoking the romanisation system employed today, ‘Daoism’ or ‘Daoist’ are spellings that may occlude this history and lead some readers to believe that the concepts are autochthonous to China.

for example, as other studies have done, is in our view a flawed approach in that the premise for the inquiry uncritically presumes the existence of such phenomena as well as the ontological validity of ‘Taoism’ and ‘Buddhism’, ‘Anarchism’ and ‘Republicanism’, all of which are European constructs. Such studies seek to reinforce the application of Western categories of thought to non-Western materials, discounting the numerous counter examples in which Taoist or Buddhist sources or imagery were used to justify elitist, conservative and repressive governing strategies.

This issue is a humble first step in what is envisaged as a larger project; one that endeavours to lend a voice to non-Western and essentially premodern traditions of socially conscious writers or thinkers who privilege self-governance, an equitable redistribution of resources and/or communitarian social structures. To shed light on ‘subversive’ writings or individuals in East Asia during a period that predates the formulation of anarchism, Marxism, socialism and the idiom that is now used to interpret the complex interactions between antagonistic social forces, is to inscribe non-Western traditions into the conceptualising of resistance while at the same time broadening its boundaries. Focusing on such figures or their works may in turn reveal the ways in which non-Western ideas may have impressed upon Western discursive traditions. For example, scholars often point out that Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theses on ‘natural morality’ and the pluralistic visions of the Sienese Renaissance were at least partly inspired by Jesuit or travelogue accounts of Mongol-Chinese religious tolerance and cultural eclecticism.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of positing East Asia as a point in a European historicist trajectory, whereby non-Western experiences of contestation or egalitarian thought are always articulated in terms of Western principles of political philosophy, this special issue endeavours to demonstrate that ‘Others’ can substantially inform, shape, and indeed become preferred sources in forging the language of a global discourse of resistance. In addition to a topical focus, the temporal setting of the premodern is also crucial in achieving this goal. So far, the overwhelming majority of studies that examine instances of non-Western resistance do so in the early modern

<sup>6</sup>On Rousseau, see Pocock, ‘Asia and the Dechristianisation of History’; on non-European elements in Western art leading up to the Renaissance, see Baltrušaitis, *Le moyenâge fantastique*.

colonial or modern postcolonial contexts.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, they implicitly reinforce the impression that the vocabulary of resistance was developed only after contact with Western ideas. By turning to non-Western classical or medieval expressions and considering them on their own terms, we aspire to contribute in overturning this impression.

## Overview of Chapters

The first article in this special issue illustrates how East Asian and South Asian traditions of thought developed independent perspectives on grassroots representative forms of government in response to conflicted relations with ruling elites. Fabio Rambelli's 'The Vicissitudes of Mahāsammata in East Asia: The Buddhist Origin Myth of Kingship and Traces of a Republican Imagination' analyses the figure of the Mahāsammata, the first mythical ruler according to Buddhist scriptures and canonical commentaries. The Mahāsammata, literally the 'Great Elect' was, as indicated by his title, elected and charged with maintaining social order. This constitutes a departure from standard classical and medieval South and East Asian notions of divine kingship. The figure of the Mahāsammata has been studied in the South Asian context, but very little is known about its role in East Asian Buddhism. Rambelli's contribution considers the Mahāsammata from the perspective of sutras translated into Chinese and indigenous Chinese and Japanese sources. It provides a much-needed overview of the ways in which the Mahāsammata and the political notions that such a figure embodies were interpreted and transformed in East Asia. Consequently, Rambelli sheds light on Buddhist forms of resistance to dominant and hegemonic political paradigms, uncovering in the process evidence of a properly Buddhist variety of 'republicanism'.

In 'Self-immolation, Resistance and Millenarianism in Medieval Chinese Buddhism', James Benn probes self-immolation by Chinese Buddhist monks. Such acts are hard to interpret as sources seldom record

<sup>7</sup> China constitutes an exception in this regard as it has produced a considerable amount of scholarship on the topic of pre-modern class struggles. However, the studies in question are often more concerned with confirming Marxist (and thus Western) theories of historical materialism than they are with giving the contestatory movements they analyze their own, unmediated voice; see for example, the oeuvres of Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) and Ren Jiyu 任继愈 (1916–2009), which, it should be stressed, remain invaluable; for a sample of the latter's in English translation, see the informative Defoort, 'Ren Jiyu'.

the immolator's motivation. When motivations are listed, they often have more to do with the individual's burning desire, quite literally, to emulate the bodhisattva ideal—one that celebrates displays of extreme self-sacrifice, bodily or other. Amidst these cases, Benn teases out instances in which self-immolation was used as a critique of state policies, an attempt to bargain or negotiate certain political or social provisions with officials, or simply as an ultimate expression of defiance towards imperial authority. In the end, it is the compiler of hagiographies or biographies in which these acts are retold who determines how the accounts are presented. In Daoxuan's 道宣 (596–667) mid-seventh century *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (Xu gaosengzhuan 續高僧傳), the occurrences of self-immolation are framed by narratives in which state authority is an antagonistic presence. Daoxuan, a medieval Chinese Buddhist incarnation of Gramsci's organic intellectual, reformulates historical events in order to mobilise his readership's opinion against the state. By projecting meaning back onto past events, he informs contemporaries of issues that he feels must be addressed or at least highlighted.

Gil Raz's "'Conversion of the Barbarians' [Huahu 化胡] Discourse as Proto Han Nationalism" reconsiders *huahu* 化胡 (converting the barbarians) theory—according to which Buddhism is a variety of the Chinese teaching of Taoism adapted to the lesser capacities of South and Central Asian peoples—from the perspective of rarely considered documents. Instead of focusing on court debates, Raz probes early medieval ritual manuals of the Celestial Master (Tianshi 天師) Taoists and the literati scholar Gu Huan's 顧歡 (420–483) 'A Discussion of Barbarians and Chinese' ('Yixialun' 夷夏論). As Buddhism was making inroads into China's religious landscape and becoming increasingly influential at court, certain groups sought to limit its cultural currency by adopting the *huahu* line of argumentation. This, Raz contends, constituted an early example of sinocentric Han 漢 'nationalism', a vivid reminder that the idiom of resistance can also serve the interests of a dominant majority. The author of the article sheds light on an atypical Taoist cosmogonic narrative which, in spite of advocating the unity of and fundamental equivalence between Buddhism and Taoism, articulates a segregationist vision of the cosmos whereby different groups of people and their respective teachings do not intermingle. In the resulting cosmology, Taoism/Confucianism and the Chinese are depicted as Yang 陽 and life-affirming, while Buddhism and the 'barbarians' are Yin 陰



and life-negating. Beyond the peculiarity of their divisiveness, these cosmically-infused *huahu* accounts are further exceptional in that they were by and large directed not towards Buddhists or court audiences, but towards other Taoists, such as those represented by the Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure) corpus, who were sympathetic to Buddhist concepts and attempted to integrate them into their own teachings. Raz ends his study with a close analysis and translation of Gu Huan's pro-Han Chinese essay.

'Cosmogony and the Origin of Inequality: A Utopian Perspective from Taoist Sources' is a survey of Taoist utopias from what can be termed primarily 'philosophical' texts. This contribution examines how representative sources theorise inequality as an outcome of cosmogonic processes, and how they envision its eradication through a reversal of those processes. In the first part of the article, Dominic Steavu analyses ideal societies as they are described in the *Laozi daode jing* 老子道德經 (Laozi's Scripture on the Way and Virtue), the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang), and the early medieval writings of Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262) and Bao Jingyan 鮑敬言 (third to early fourth century). Steavu identifies a number of shared themes, such as communitarian primitivism, the condemnation of knowledge, and as a corollary, of knowledge-based distinctions, and finally, the espousal of cosmogonic reversion in order to return to a golden age of natural spontaneity. The second part of the article is devoted to the mature utopian vision of the ninth century *Wunengzi* 無能子 (The Incapable Master). In addition to elaborating on previous themes, the *Wunengzi* contributes two new ideas to Taoist utopian discourse: first, the distinction between intelligence, which develops naturally, and human knowledge, which is an artificial contrivance; and second, the conviction that an ideal society is achievable through engagement with existing political structures. In the conclusion, Steavu briefly looks at European perspectives on how social inequality emerged. He contends that European utopias may be relativised and inscribed in a broader, plural and global understanding of utopian traditions rather than constituting the yardstick against which all formulations of ideal societies are measured.

Ari Levine approaches the role of the intellectual from the perspective of cultural memory. In 'Stages of Decline: Cultural Memory, Urban Nostalgia and Political Indignation as Imaginaries of Resistance in Yue

Ke's *Pillar Histories* (Ting shi)', he examines the Song literati Yue Ke's 岳珂 (1183–1234) response to the capture of the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) capital of Kaifeng 開封 by Jurchen invaders in 1127. Reflective of an entire class of exiled educated elites' disaffection and despair, Yue Ke's *Pillar Histories* (Ting shi 程史) is a lashing critique of the dilettante emperor and idle court administration that mismanaged the empire. Most interestingly, in establishing an almost satirical domino effect of actions, policies and omens leading up to the Jurchen conquest, Yue Ke crafts an alternate history of Kaifeng and its denizens; as much as the political actors of the recent past are vilified, those of the more remote past are glorified, and the capital takes on an air of a political and social utopia—one that, as Yue Ke intimates, may be recreated in the near future. The *Pillar Histories* were thus influential in producing and perpetuating memories of Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–26) and Kaifeng, and also in crafting a new potentiality for an exemplary urban community (from a literati/Confucian perspective). Levine's study is all the more insightful in that it underscores the intellectual's considerable impact on how historical conflicts and struggles are interpreted by posterity.

Grégoire Espeset addresses similar concerns pertaining to the intellectual's role in shaping the perception of historical events. His 'Local Resistance in Early Medieval Chinese Historiography and the Problem of Religious Overinterpretation' fittingly serves as a caution against the pitfalls of misreading history by taking the intellectual's occasional ideological distortions at face value—or perhaps more egregiously in this age of heightened self-reflexivity—superimposing our own biases, consciously or not, in our work as intellectual historians. Building on Paul Veyne's critique, Espeset singles out the problem of 'religious overinterpretation' in sinological scholarship by examining how official dynastic histories relate a handful of early medieval rebellions and uprisings that contemporary analysts typically interpret as religiously motivated. He underlines that in most cases, the actors' religious beliefs had limited bearing on their seditious undertakings; religion was one factor among a variety of concomitant others ranging from the economic and social to the political and ideological. To conclude, Espeset reminds us that the primary purpose of official historiography was not to note down careful ethnographical accounts

of religious and other exotic customs, but rather to ‘chronicle how legitimate authority reacted to disruptions of public order’. In this regard, any ‘religious’ data included in these sources served solely to illustrate the ‘deviant’ (*yao* 妖) character of those involved, from leaders to the rank and file, and thereby to stigmatise ‘local resistance’ as being intrinsically ill-founded.

### The Intellectual in Action

Admittedly, many of the figures and thinkers considered in the following pages do not measure up to the Gramscian model of the engaged organic intellectual. They do, however, embody instances of social, cultural or political contestation, giving their struggles a voice and expressing their driving concerns. This special issue is thus merely a first step in a longer project, one that aims to eventually identify indigenous East Asian strategies of political, social and cultural resistance that are fully articulated and then acted upon.

If resistance is the first dimension of the function of the Gramscian intellectual, action is the second. Although the topic of the act of resistance does not fit the scope of this issue, it is nonetheless crucial to keep it in mind as a logical progression, if only in terms of potentiality, of the cases examined. Often building on the concept of the organic intellectual, other theorists have conversely proposed that conceptually formulated forms of resistance and contestatory acts are collapsed in a single function. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, expressed this in his notion of the ‘total’ or ‘universal’ intellectual, which he develops in a series of lectures published under the title *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels* (1972). Sartre elaborated on his view of the ‘true’ intellectuals as those who overspill the bounds of their primary specialties to actively engage with questions related to social conditions or programmes writ large. Foucault’s ‘specific’ intellectuals, although opposed in name to their ‘universal’ counterpart, operated in a comparable way, divesting themselves from the universalising fields of abstraction, theorising and hypotheticals, to concretely apply their competence in contexts or circumstances dictated by their specialties (hospitals, education, the production of cultural goods, etc.).

Gramsci concluded that the intellectual was an instigator or trigger of conceptual and action-based change, and that the ‘Modern Prince’—referring to the incarnation of political philosophy imagined by Machiavelli—was

the only possible enactor of societal transformation.<sup>8</sup> Pre-empting the fetishisation of individuals by turning the spotlight away from them, Gramsci argued that the Modern Prince is an ‘anonymous’ intellectual; it is not an individual or an actual person:

It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party—the first cell in which there come together the germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total.<sup>9</sup>

Gramsci’s reflection points to the belief that it is not an individual but rather the ideas of an individual or individuals, when taken up and put into action by a group united by those ideas through a shared experience, that has the most impact. This invites comparison with the words of Louise Michel (1830–1905), a French anarchist and central figure of the Paris Commune of 1871: ‘The task of teachers, those obscure soldiers of civilization, is to give to the people the intellectual means to revolt’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The Prince* (1532) is often misinterpreted as a cynical manual for political deceit, but it is perhaps more justly read as a satire of political machinations intended for a readership of commoners as Gramsci has argued. Under this light, Niccolò Machiavelli is rightly a theoretician of popular sovereignty and liberty; see the classic article by Mattingly, ‘Machiavelli’s Prince’.

<sup>9</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*: 129.

<sup>10</sup> ‘La tâche des instituteurs, ces obscurs soldats de la civilisation, est de donner au peuple les moyens intellectuels de se révolter’.

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