

## DECOLONIZING CIVIL RESISTANCE\*

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*Western scholars dominating the field generally suggest that civil resistance struggles involve public contention with unjust states to expand political rights and civil liberties. We argue that this perspective is an example of Eurocentric universalism, which has three blind spots: it tends to ignore struggles seeking to subvert rather than join the liberal world system, as well as coloniality's effects on nonviolent action, and emerging subjugated knowledges. We propose going beyond these limitations by learning from social movements focusing on human dignity, material self-sufficiency, and local autonomy, especially in the Global South. Our essay examines two classic decolonizing thinkers (Gandhi and Fanon) and two contemporary decolonizing struggles (the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Abahlali in South Africa). Each emphasizes coloniality, constructive over contentious resistance, transformations in political subjectivity, and emancipatory visions that go beyond Western ideals. We call for further research on the many different stories of civil resistance across the worldwide coloniality line.*

Strategic nonviolent action was invented, reinvented and refined in a score of different conflicts throughout the twentieth century. . . . Even though these events occurred in different parts of the world and in different decades, they are *essentially the same story*. . . . In each of these conflicts, ordinary citizens joined civic campaigns to seek decisive change, in favor of rights, justice or democracy. Strikes, boycotts, mass protests, civil disobedience and other tactics were used to challenge the legitimacy of the existing system and to drive up the cost of its maintenance (Ackerman and Rodal 2008: 112, 115; emphasis ours).

From its inception as an academic field, North American and European scholars have dominated discourse in the study of civil resistance, defined as campaigns by civilians using nonviolent action methods against authorities with military capacities (Ackerman and Kruegler 1994; Martin 2005; Roberts and Ash 2009; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Schock 2013). These Western scholars would generally agree that, despite differences in detail and context, civil resistance struggles are “essentially the same story.” This story basically says the following: whatever the circumstances, populations are capable of undermining the power of undemocratic rulers if they withdraw their consent. History and research show that nonviolent tactics and strategies are more likely to be effective than violent means. Successful nonviolent insurgents are goal-oriented, unified, well-equipped, disciplined, and rational in their battles with ruling regimes, forcing opponents to meet their demands for social change. In short, common sense in the field emphasizes the instrumental pragmatism of nonviolent activists around the world, downplaying cultural differences and moral visions. It takes for granted that civil resisters win by progressing toward Western forms of liberal democracy (Ackerman 2007; Sharp 2010).

As long-time contributors to the field ourselves, we find this reduction of civil resistance to a singular grand narrative problematic. It generally ignores that what seems “civil” and “nonviolent” in the West, might reproduce an “uncivil” and “violent” world system ruled by Western liberal democracies (Wallerstein 2004; Chabot and Sharifi 2013). It also denies the

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possibility of *many different stories* of civil resistance by subjugated groups subverting the modern world system's ruling logic, which seeks to globalize Western brands of liberal democracy despite its dehumanizing consequences. In our view, the grand narrative of Western civil resistance scholars is an example of "Eurocentric universalism" (Go 2013: 32), normalizing the idea that particular theories and worldviews coming from Europe and North America are universally valid for understanding nonviolent action. While we do not deny the academic value of research in the field for some cases, we contend that its main concepts and perspectives are limited as well as limiting.

More specifically, we argue that "the same story" of civil resistance studies produces three glaring blind spots. First, it overlooks a growing number of civil resistance movements seeking to *challenge* rather than *join* the contemporary world system, which is based on Western understandings of capitalism, the state, and individualism. Although oppressed groups around the world are increasingly trying to create alternatives to modern Western societies, civil resistance scholars continue to focus almost exclusively on struggles that target authoritarian states and strive for liberal democracy.

Second, it ignores how Western colonialism in the past and global coloniality in the present affect civil resistance movements. Anibal Quijano (2000) introduces the concept of *coloniality* to examine the pervasive colonial logic of domination that emerged in the sixteenth century and persists today, and juxtaposes enlightened Western civilization to non-Western people's lack of civilization. Coloniality was the structuring force that produced intersecting systems of violence and hierarchy to allow the Western core of the world system to exploit and dominate non-Western peripheries, with race as most visible category of distinction. Other hierarchical systems included capitalism (for corporate control), the state (for military and bureaucratic rule), patriarchy (for heterosexual male supremacy), Christianity (for spiritual domination), science (for epistemic privilege of instrumental reason), and individualism (for universalizing the modern subject) (Grosfoguel 2008; Mignolo 2011). Since the 1990s, the prevailing form of coloniality is *neoliberalism*, a mentality and mode of governance promoting a security state with a minimal social agenda and free-market capitalism as the guide for all human relationships and social institutions (Steger and Roy 2010). We claim that the current colonial logic of domination strongly influences nonviolent action practitioners and researchers across the globe, seducing many to believe that there is no alternative to the *colonizing* model of capitalist liberal democracy. Yet the same logic also motivates oppressed rebels to wage *decolonizing* struggles toward new ways of life.

The third blind spot results from the field's strong preference for instrumental-rational nonviolent action and its lack of attention to the *subjugated knowledges* of marginalized communities that refuse to be governed by coloniality and experiment with decolonizing modes of being (Vinhagen 2015). For Michel Foucault (1980: 81-82), subjugated knowledges are "historical contents" that have been buried by Western social sciences, and that established scholars and intellectuals tend to see as unscientific, particular, and unruly in comparison to legitimate and reliable knowledge. In his eyes, though, the disorderly, specific, and concrete aspects of these subordinated ways of knowing make them especially valuable for critique aimed at revealing potential alternatives. Like Foucault (1980: 81), we hope to excavate and accentuate "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" articulated and practiced by popular struggles excluded from the mainstream of civil resistance studies.

To expose and illuminate these subjugated knowledges, our essay examines two classic decolonizing thinkers (Gandhi and Fanon) and two contemporary decolonizing struggles (the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Abahlali in South Africa). Why are we focusing on these revolutionary intellectuals and movements? Contrary to today's scholars in civil resistance studies, both Gandhi and Fanon concentrated on confronting *coloniality* instead of primarily targeting the national state as the central source of oppression and liberation. Consequently, they recognized *constructive resistance* toward gaining autonomy and transforming social relationships in everyday life as crucial in the longterm, and regarded *contentious resistance* through public challenges of authorities as secondary (although often necessary in practice). They also

stressed the significance of transformation in *political subjectivity*, asserting that dignity of the oppressed is what truly matters in the end. And finally, they outlined visions of *human emancipation* that go beyond modern Western ideals of freedom and democracy. The ideas developed by Gandhi and Fanon, and the applications by the Zapatistas and Abahlali of similar ideas, have significant implications for scholars in civil resistance studies (our focus in this article), but also for students of social movements. We claim that insights from our cases imply strong critique of the emphasis on contentious over constructive politics, strategic rationality over dignified subjectivity, and Western over decolonizing views of human emancipation, which prevails in both fields (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Jasper 2004). While interest in anticolonial movements is growing, the task of decolonizing social movement studies remains incomplete (Choudry, Majavu, and Wood 2013). Scholars of civil resistance and social movements need to do more than just redirect their attention to new cases of decolonizing struggles. What we learn from subjugated people's decolonizing civil resistance also has implications for the concepts, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and definitions we use to research civil resistance.

While neither Gandhi nor Fanon saw their ideas come to fruition, the Zapatista and Abahlali movements are putting many of their concepts into practice today. The Zapatistas in rural Mexico are arguably the first rebellion against neoliberalism. And the Abahlali shackdwellers in urban South Africa are defying a neoliberal postapartheid regime that achieved state power through "successful" civil resistance, demonstrating that the removal of oppressive rulers often does not enhance the well-being of the oppressed. Both struggles emphasize constructive resistance, new political subjectivity, and visions of human emancipation that are not Eurocentric. And both produce subjugated knowledges that resonate among other decolonizing insurgents.

Our article consists of four main sections. Section one discusses the decolonizing thought of Gandhi. Although scholars in the field idolize Gandhi for his pioneering work on nonviolent action, they commonly ignore his deep critique of Western civilization and relentless dedication to Indian decolonization. Section two turns to the decolonizing thought of Fanon. Nonviolent action researchers rarely refer to Fanon, because of his reputation as a proponent of anti colonial violence "as a cleansing force" (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 94). Careful reading of his work, however, shows that he primarily wanted to end the total violence of colonialism, while supporting popular struggles by "the damned of the earth" to create new societies and new individuals guided by love of humanity. Without denying the flaws of Gandhi and Fanon, we show that their insights remain valuable today. Section three depicts the Zapatista movement led by poor indigenous people and peasants on the edge of Mexican society, and section four sheds light on the Abahlali movement on the outskirts of South African cities. The prevailing approach in civil resistance studies either reduces the Abahlali movement to a civil rights struggle seeking concessions from a neoliberal state or ignores it because its forms of collective action do not appear in Gene Sharp's authoritative list of 198 protest methods (1973). And it completely overlooks the Zapatistas due to their initial appearance—to outside observers—as just another military uprising. Without romanticizing these decolonizing struggles, we feel that civil resistance scholars need to explore their original contributions instead of neglecting them for not fulfilling academic definitions of nonviolent action or seeking regime change. Each of the four main sections starts with a brief discussion of coloniality, before examining concepts of contentious and constructive resistance, political subjectivity, and human emancipation. Finally, the conclusion highlights what we call "the coloniality line" as a crucial subject for future research on civil resistance and social movements.

### GANDHI AS DECOLONIZING THINKER

Gandhi's clearest statement on the colonial logic of domination appeared in the *Purna Swaraj* Resolution, approved by the Indian National Congress on the last day of 1929. It asserted that the British Government of India had deprived the Indians of their human rights and capacities for freedom, compelling them "to alter it or to abolish it" (Purna Swaraj 1929). Since British

rulers had destroyed India economically, politically, culturally, and spiritually, the resolution called on the Indian people to “sever the British connection and attain *Purna Swaraj*, or complete independence.” Economically, British rulers were expropriating India’s wealth, land, and resources; politically, they were humiliating and disempowering the Indian people; culturally, their modern system of education was undermining Indian people’s ways of life and making them dependent; and spiritually, their military was suppressing Indian people’s will to resist and take care of each other. Gandhi concluded that Indians could no longer submit to British rule without sacrificing their dignity, but also emphasized that nonviolent noncooperation and civil disobedience were “the most effective way of gaining our freedom. . . [and] establishing *Purna Swaraj*.” Clearly, Gandhi saw confronting colonialism in all its guises as the Indian independence struggle’s main purpose (Wolpert 1999: 204).

#### *Contentious and Constructive Resistance*

While civil resistance scholars usually express admiration for Gandhi’s political strategy of *satyagraha* (his concept for disciplined nonviolence in the pursuit of truth), they often overlook his contributions as a decolonizing thinker and leader. They fail to recognize that he was primarily committed to ending British rule and struggling for Indian people’s *swaraj* (self-rule). In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi (1909) argued that genuine political self-rule was only possible if Indian people gained the capacity for self-rule in their private lives and local communities. Instead of merely confronting the colonial state, he opposed the colonizing impact of modern civilization on Indian society as a whole, regarding it as a highly contagious (yet curable) disease. Gandhi was afraid that removing the British without transforming modern institutions and mentalities would eventually lead to Hindu tyranny instead of British tyranny, with disastrous consequences for the poor majority in India. For him, true decolonization required not only political, but also economic, cultural, and spiritual *swaraj* (Terchek 1998; Parel 2009).

Politically, Gandhi was deeply suspicious of the modern state and its centralized bureaucratic institutions. As an inherently violent institution, it prevented human beings from developing their sense of power and ability to take charge of their own destinies. In his view, therefore, decolonizing struggles should not primarily target or depend on the modern state for personal and social transformation. Economically, Gandhi was a fierce critic of capitalism and its immoral glorification of private property, competition, profit, and wealth. He wanted decolonizing struggles to fight for a decentralized economy that fulfilled basic human needs, produced social wealth, and promoted cooperation and self-sufficiency (Parekh 2001).

Culturally, Gandhi was concerned by modern rationality and its preference for instrumental reason over practical wisdom. His understanding of practical wisdom focused on the ongoing search for virtuosity and mastery in transforming self and society, emerging from experiential knowledge, prudent judgment, and keen sensitivity to contextual details—not from general theories, laws, rules, explanations, and models. He stressed the need for cultural transformation in order to sustain anticolonial and decolonizing struggles over decades in the face of colonial repression, temptation, and division. This transformation required a different kind of knowledge, set of skills, and intuitive ability to respond to concrete situations in creative ways, acquired through long-term reflections on experiences, experiments, and exercises with *satyagraha* and *swaraj*. Although he valued reason, he criticized objective science as the omnipotent source of valid knowledge, excluding other moral and experiential forms of knowledge. He therefore stressed that it was crucial for decolonizing struggles to prioritize local knowledge in popular education. And spiritually, Gandhi emphasized that individuals had to transform themselves by learning to control antisocial passions and engaging in loving service of other human beings. Inner decolonization of the individual was the starting point for outer decolonization in society (Parekh 2001; Parel 2009; Chabot 2015).

To guide people and local communities in efforts toward achieving complete *swaraj*, Gandhi (1945) developed and wrote a booklet on the constructive program. In it, he outlined

his nonviolent approach toward inner and outer independence of “every unit, be it the humblest of the nation, without distinction of race, colour, or creed” (Parel 2009: 169). The constructive program primarily focused on challenges *within* Indian society such as supporting religious unity, removing untouchability, ending substance abuse, building local economies, improving health care and education, and addressing gender inequalities. It did not mention civil disobedience until the very end and Gandhi made clear that while “civil . . . disobedience is not absolutely necessary to win freedom through purely nonviolent effort my handling of civil disobedience without the constructive program will be like a paralyzed hand attempting to lift a spoon” (in Parel 2009: 178, 180). Contrary to most of today’s scholars, Gandhi explicitly prioritized moral-political constructive over pragmatic contentious politics (Sharp 1973; Burrowes 1996).

### *Political Subjectivity*

Along with spiritual *swaraj*, Gandhi also emphasized subjectivity as central to decolonizing struggles. He saw individuals as interdependent and multidimensional beings, rather than as the sovereign rational actors of Western liberal philosophy. In his view, all human beings owed their existence to others and benefitted from the world far beyond their contributions to it. People therefore had a right and duty to perform services to others and a responsibility to fight dehumanizing systems of oppression. Each individual not only had a body and a mind, but also had a spirit and a moral character. The body was distinct and contained the five senses, along with unruly and insatiable desires. The mind included intelligence and consciousness, giving the individual tools to understand and affect the world, although never in fully satisfactory ways. The spirit was a person’s particular manifestation of the universal cosmic order. And the moral character represented the unique dispositions of individuals, producing the glimpses of truth that guided their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Because all human beings were part of the same cosmic order and led by partial glimpses of truth, no human beings were morally justified to force others to betray the integrity of their individuality. Each individual’s subjectivity emerged with a moral project toward self-discovery, shaped by (and shaping) that individual’s relationships with others and the world (Parekh 2001). For Gandhi, nonviolent action was integral to people’s moral way of being in the world, not just a pragmatic political technique (Sharp 1973; Burrowes 1996).

Gandhi knew that violence was inevitable, but he insisted that human beings were capable of confronting the violence they encountered and experimenting with contentious as well as constructive forms of nonviolent action. Far from presenting *satyagraha* as a generic and universally applicable model, he stressed that the choice of nonviolent action should depend on the specific social contexts, practical wisdom, and subjectivities of place-based practitioners. And most importantly, civil resisters had to enhance oppressed people’s capacity for self-rule: “Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny?” (Parekh 2001: 61). For Gandhi, improving the plight of the poorest was at the heart of the Indian independence movement (Terchek 1998).

### *Human Emancipation*

According to Gandhi’s vision, a free society would confront domination and violence wherever it appeared, while opening up possibilities for loving service and moral-political quests for autonomy. He believed that a free society would favor epistemological pluralism, gaining insights from multiple forms of knowledge and multiple cultures. Contrary to modern forms of liberal democracy, Gandhi imagined a configuration of small, autonomous, self-sufficient, and self-governing communities that would take care of local responsibilities and cooperate translocally whenever necessary, guided by political ethics of equality, mutual aid,

and voluntary association (Parekh 2001). These self-sufficient communities would be organized as a decentralized and interdependent federation, with a structure of “ever-widening, never-ascending circles” in which the center would be “the individual always ready to perish for the village” and all parts would share “the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units” (in Parel 2009: 182). Although he acknowledged that his utopian ruminations would probably never be fully realized, he saw them as maps to guide us, sketches toward creating societies and ways of life “in which the last is equal to the first or, in other words, no one is to be the first and none the last” (182).

### FANON AS DECOLONIZING THINKER

As a psychiatrist in French Algeria, Fanon was a firsthand witness of coloniality’s devastating human consequences. From regular encounters with patients, he learned that colonialism was an inherently violent system, shaping every aspect of life among colonized natives as well as colonizing settlers. He observed that the “colonial world is a compartmentalized world . . . a world divided in two” directly and perpetually controlled by police officers and soldiers bringing “violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject” (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 3-4). While the Algerian part of town was dirty, chaotic, and poor, the French part of town was clean, orderly, and wealthy. This bifurcated situation undermined colonized people’s psyches and made them envious of what the colonizers had. It produced separate social spaces in which French whites treated Algerian blacks as nothing more than dangerous bodies, causing inferiority complexes, loss of cultural roots, and lack of political agency among the latter (6). Similar to Gandhi, therefore, Fanon recognized that the colonial logic of domination and violence destroyed Algerians politically, economically, culturally, and psychologically (Gibson 2003; Fanon 2004 [1963]; Nayar 2013).

#### *Contentious and Constructive Resistance*

Western civil resistance scholars generally dismiss Fanon as merely an apostle of violence, irrelevant to studies of nonviolent action. They ignore that he did not glorify violent rebellion, but did not see another way for the colonized to recuperate their sense of self. (Similar to Gandhi, he preferred courageous violence over cowardice.) In his mind, violent contentious action was primarily a social project, aimed at rehumanizing native blacks and reclaiming political spaces. For Fanon, decolonization was primarily about confronting and changing colonialism from the bottom up, transforming “spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors” and creating new social orders in which “the last shall be first and the first last” (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 2-3). While he condoned violent decolonization in Algeria, he recognized the political limitations of violence, noting that “hatred is not an agenda” (89), and favoring constructive struggles to decolonize the mind and rebuild native cultures.

Although Fanon saw the need for national independence from French rule through contentious struggles, he focused primarily on decolonization of the mind and liberation from inferiority through constructive civil resistance—much like Gandhi and his concept of *swaraj*. He argued that after its initial military phase, the decolonizing movement had to prioritize growth of its “fighting culture” by forging new social relationships, autonomous from the colonial logic and system, and using subjugated local knowledges for cultural and political transformation (Gibson 2003: 127-156). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, for example, he sketched a decentralized, participatory, and democratic politics aimed at promoting the people’s political will and capacity for self-rule. He opposed the Western notion that “the masses are incapable of governing themselves” and declared: “you can explain everything to the people provided you really want them to understand” (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 130-131). He stressed the significance of autonomous local spaces and meetings, while insisting that poli-

tical organization and mobilization had to make people realize that “everything depends on them, that if we stagnate the fault is theirs, and that if we progress, they too are responsible” (136-138). In short, the purpose of constructive work was to enhance the dignity, self-sufficiency, and creative potential of the colonized people of Algeria, not to benefit Algerian elites who wanted to replace French rulers.

In *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon specified his ideas on radical mutation and fighting culture by examining the role of women and independent media in the Algerian revolution. He discussed how Algerian women contested both French rule and Algerian traditions by constructing alternative meanings and uses of the *haïk* (veil), thereby enhancing their political agency as well as challenging traditional family structures (Fanon 1965: 60). He also explored how the *Voice of Fighting Algeria* radio station allowed revolutionaries to inform, empower, and unify the Algerian people, while providing an alternative to Radio-Alger as “the instrument of colonial society and its values” (69, 83). So although Fanon did not produce a detailed constructive program, he did make clear that genuine independence was grounded in lived experiences and local communities rather than just in new institutions and rulers of the state.

#### *Political Subjectivity*

According to Fanon, decolonizing subjectivity emerged along with contentious and constructive struggles for independence. He believed that *black consciousness* (as an expression of cultural pride among African natives) enabled the colonized self to transcend the psyche imposed by Western colonialism; to gain critical self-consciousness as an individual; and to become aware of the self’s connection to local, national, and transnational communities. He saw national culture as the “collective thought process” of people within a country and paid special attention to popular education toward decolonizing the mind. But while Fanon recognized that cultural nationalism could serve as the unifying force, he opposed the narrow and competitive nationalism of the West, favoring open and cooperative nationalisms among peoples struggling against colonial suffering and for human dignity. Fanon regarded the political subjectivity of peasants—including those forced to move to the outskirts of cities—as particularly significant for decolonization. Although rural people were often traditionalist, conservative, and marginalized from national politics, they had “nothing to lose and everything to gain” by using any means necessary to end all forms of colonialism (Fanon 2004 [1963]: 23). They knew from practical experience that merely replacing French with Algerian rulers would not reduce oppression or liberate them. Fanon acknowledged the need for political organization and mobilization by urban intellectuals, but he warned against the denial of cultural traditions among the rural masses. He was therefore a fierce critic of former Algerian revolutionaries who became corrupt rulers after national independence, taking away land and dignity from poor Algerian peasants (Fanon 2004 [1963]; Gibson 2011; Nayar 2013).

#### *Human Emancipation*

Fanon emphasized that decolonizing struggles had to pursue new visions of human emancipation, untainted by the racist hierarchies and abstract universalism of Western humanism. While known as a proponent of violence, he was mainly concerned with the emergence of a *new humanism*, founded on mutual ethical recognition and peaceful relationships among all human beings. Fanon’s humanism relied on four major arguments. First, he claimed that anticolonial struggles allowed natives to retrieve the self-awareness and cultural strength that colonialism had denied. Second, he suggested that decolonized ways of thinking produced ethical recognition of difference, generating a deep sense of responsibility for the lived experience and suffering of individual or collective others. This duty to respond to people regardless of location, nationality, and racial category opened up possibilities for an inclusive

humanism, characterized by solidarity with the world's "damned of the earth" (Fanon 2004 [1963]). Third, he was convinced that genuine ethical recognition could only emerge from formerly colonized people. Genuine decolonization not only emancipated the colonized from dehumanizing victimhood, but also the colonizer from dehumanizing complicity with colonial domination. And finally, he stressed that decolonizing civil resisters had to move beyond the colonial logic and violence at the heart of Western humanism:

So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies [that] draw their inspiration from her . . . For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man (315-16).

In his view, the most oppressed people in the colonial world—not "enlightened" thinkers in the colonizing West—had the potential and duty to make other worlds possible (Fanon 1965).

### THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT AS DECOLONIZING STRUGGLE

Gandhi and Fanon never saw their dreams for societies in which "the last shall be first" fulfilled. And after the antisystemic movements of the 1960s, the possibilities for revolutionary history making seemed to have evaporated. But then on January 1, 1994, indigenous rebels in Southern Mexico suddenly appeared on the world stage to contest the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the neoliberal coloniality associated with it. Threatened by extinction due to NAFTA's probusiness reforms, 5,000 armed insurgents in the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) seized numerous towns and seven cities in the rural province of Chiapas. In their first declaration, written by spokesperson Subcommandante Marcos, the Zapatistas forcefully said "Ya Basta!" (Enough is Enough!) to neoliberalism and its beneficiaries, stating that they lacked the most basic human necessities and therefore declared war as "our last resort, but also a just one." They requested that fellow resisters in civil society at home and abroad "support this plan that struggles for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace" (de León 2001: 13).

Identifying the Zapatistas as a "liberation army," civil resistance scholars generally do not recognize their struggle as relevant for the field. Yet while the Zapatista army initially used its rifles to be seen and heard, it quickly shifted its focus from armed means to civil engagement and community building. In our view, the Zapatistas are an early example of *transition* by a liberation movement from armed to civil struggle, a global phenomenon of great significance for civil resistance scholars (Dudouet 2015). Our field has much to gain from careful examination of the Zapatista movement's learning processes, cultural creativity, and practical knowledge since it came into the public in 1994.

#### *Contentious and Constructive Resistance*

To confront today's colonial logic of domination, the Zapatistas initially used a contentious strategy known as *the fire*. After successfully fighting the Mexican army and gaining global attention on the first day of 1994, the Zapatistas soon retreated into the mountains, where they struggled to survive the daily grind of poverty and repression by the Mexican army. Fortunately, their courageous attacks against the defenders of neoliberalism inspired countless expressions of solidarity from fellow rebels in Mexico and abroad, which protected them from massive annihilation by government forces. But while most supporters acknowledged the validity of their cause, many opposed their violent methods (Muñoz Ramírez 2008; Khasnabish 2010).

The Zapatistas therefore added a civilian organizational structure and turned to a contentious nonviolent strategy that Marcos called *the word*, without relinquishing their military capabilities. This strategy led to various communiqués, meetings, and dialogues with the government and civil society, and even marches of silence to demonstrate their lack of voice. It



also produced a new political perspective and counterdiscourse known as “Zapatismo,” in order to reclaim and radicalize political concepts undermined by neoliberal coloniality—especially democracy, liberty, and justice. For the Zapatistas, *democracy* refers to the capacity of people and the power of communities to govern themselves, not to electoral politics and formal civil rights involving the liberal-democratic state. *Liberty* represents the freedom to self-organize and self-determine social spaces according to the material needs and cultural practices of local communities, not just the absence of external limits and intervention. And *justice* implies respect for indigenous cultures, equal recognition of all social differences, and appreciation for everyone’s dignity, not merely legal definitions of fairness based on abstract universalizing understandings of individuals. By turning words into weapons, Zapatismo resonates among rebels in Mexico and around the world (Marcos 2006).

While “the fire” and “the word” remain part of the Zapatista movement, the constructive practice of *autonomy* in everyday life—or, in Gandhi’s terms, the struggle for *swaraj*—is its backbone. Neoliberal discourse defines autonomy as the freedom of isolated individuals to make rational choices in a capitalist economy and under a democratic state. This thinking is also common among civil resistance scholars. For the Zapatistas, in contrast, autonomy means regenerating the culture of self-determination lost during 500 years of colonization; creating forms of self-organization on reclaimed land; and making collective decisions about their own economy, politics, culture, and resources—without relying on the state or capitalism. When visitors enter autonomous municipalities in Chiapas, therefore, they often see signs saying: “You are in Zapatista Territory in rebellion. Here the people rule and the government obeys.” To prevent infiltration by the Mexican state, the Zapatistas focus on their capacity for *material autonomy*—for economic self-sufficiency—to provide solid ground for *political autonomy* in and among their “territories in rebellion” (Marcos 2006: 77-93; Muñoz Ramírez 2008: 308-311).

To realize self-rule without depending on the state for approval or handouts, residents of Zapatista municipalities run their own institutions to provide for basic human needs, including health clinics, schools, and cooperatives. They participate in local assemblies, where they make decisions about concrete issues and elect unpaid representatives to Autonomous Municipal Councils that are responsible for resolving local concerns. Since 2003, the Zapatistas rely on a complex organizational structure with *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (good government councils) to govern autonomous municipalities in five regional *Caracoles* (political and cultural centers). The good government councils coordinate regional autonomy, resolve disputes, distribute resources, and protect community well-being, whereas the political and cultural centers serve as gateways to civil society. The Zapatistas apply their own ethical principles to facilitate selfgovernment and deal with challenges without relying on modern Western ways of thinking. The principle of “to command obeying” (*mandar obedeciendo*) for example, urges leaders to listen and respond to people’s voices without giving in to elite pressures. The principle of “asking while we walk” (*preguntando caminamos*) promotes reflective action that does not get carried away by grand, homogenizing visions of the future (Holloway 1998: 164, 175). And the principle of “walking at the pace of the slowest” prevents impatient vanguards from telling people what to do, while favoring consensual decision making that prioritizes the concerns of the most subjugated. Although autonomous municipalities face myriad problems, including resource shortages and sexism, they are in many ways fulfilling Gandhi’s emancipatory vision of self-ruling villages expanding like oceanic circles and reinforcing the dignity of each individual (Marcos 2006).

### *Political Subjectivity*

When the Zapatistas screamed *Ya Basta!* on January 1, 1994, they asserted their dignity and political subjectivity. Dignity, as Holloway (1998: 160) explains, comes from the refusal to accept the dehumanization caused by colonizing neoliberalism and the refusal to continue acting as if “there is no alternative.” After years of watching children die of preventable diseases and watching adults give up hope, the Zapatistas learned to listen and talk to indigenous people,

gaining insights from their unique worldviews and experiential knowledge. They also learned from other struggles for survival and autonomy, gaining political subjectivity from the realization that they shared one “No” but were constructing many “Yesses.” And as their political subjectivity expanded, they discovered new ways to imagine and experiment with “Other Politics”—politics based on dignity rather than the state—and new connections with other political subjectivities (175-176).

Two transformations in political subjectivity stand out. First, despite the high proportion of female leaders in the Zapatista movement, the conditions of Zapatista women have been far from ideal. In response, female militants developed the “Women’s Revolutionary Law” in 1993, articulating the specific rights of women “regardless of their race, creed, color, or political affiliation” to participate equally, assert autonomy, and enjoy protection from abuse and suffering (Khasnabish 2010: 74-81). Although sexism remains, Zapatista women’s courageous display of political subjectivity has brought significant change. Second, the Zapatistas have recently founded “The Little School” (*La Escuelita*) as a community-oriented alternative to colonizing educational institutions. The Little School is an open space where members of the community learn together, and where hundreds of students come to live with a local family, following the daily routines and helping with the daily tasks. In the process, they learn to see the world “from below,” experiencing how selforganization works and how the Zapatistas practice liberty. Thus, the little school not only validates existing political subjectivity, but also stimulates the circulation of Zapatismo (Zibechi 2013).

### *Human Emancipation*

Several years after the Zapatista movement began, Subcommandante Marcos wrote a letter reminiscing about how he once looked up in the sky and saw a star break away and fall, leaving “a brief and fugitive trace.” He realized that this symbolized what they were: “Fallen stars that barely scratched the sky of history with a scrawl.” At that moment, he also knew what they wanted to achieve: “To open up a crack in history” (de León 2001: 212). The Zapatistas have shown that, despite the wealth and policies of neoliberal elites, freedom fighters all over the planet are standing up to the colonizing “new world order” and creating decolonizing “pockets of resistance . . . [o]f all sizes, of different colors, of varying shapes” (Marcos 2001: 568). These pockets of resistance “open cracks in history,” expanding local and translocal possibilities for human emancipation. Locally, the Zapatistas envision the continued growth of today’s autonomous communities and dream of a world in which “the children are children and their work . . . as children is to play and learn” (Holloway 1998: 188). Translocally, they picture dignity and autonomy spreading outward, beyond current borders and conditions: “The Other is necessary for there to be dignity. Because we are always Ourselves in relation to the Other. And the other is Other in relation to ourselves.” (Zapatistas 2001: 2). The Zapatistas believe that dignity (not state politics) energizes their place-based struggles and reflects the kind of future they wish to see: “Therefore dignity is tomorrow. But tomorrow cannot be if it is not for everyone, for those who are We, and for those who are Other. . . . Therefore dignity should be the world, a world where many worlds fit”(2). While the Zapatistas realize that changing the world might be impossible, they know that they can open and expand the cracks of history by making and forging connections with new local worlds.

## **THE ABAHLALI AS DECOLONIZING STRUGGLE**

Coloniality plays a particularly tragic part in South Africa’s transition from apartheid to rule by the African National Congress (ANC). While the ANC government led by Nelson Mandela ended legal racism, it eagerly adopted neoliberalism to promote freemarket capitalism and state legitimacy, and favored voting over popular insurgency to promote liberal democracy. The human consequences have been disastrous, especially for the poor people in shantytowns. Shack

dwellers in the Kennedy Road settlement on the outskirts of Durban were initially strong supporters of the ANC, which had promised to “address the concerns of the poorest of the poor living in squatter camps” (Pithouse 2006: 1). By 2005, however, it became clear that the local municipal government, like the former apartheid regime, wanted to clear slums and force residents to move to urban peripheries rather than provide decent housing and basic services like toilets, water taps, and electricity. It is in this twenty first century colonial context that the Abahlali shack dwellers movement was born (Pithouse 2007; Gibson 2011).

### *Contentious and Constructive Resistance*

On March 19, 2005, Kennedy Road shack dwellers finally had enough of broken promises and dehumanizing living conditions. When bulldozers came to dig up land by their settlement to build a brick factory instead of housing, they gathered at the construction site, prevented the workers from proceeding, and contacted the local councilor to explain what was happening. The politician came the next morning with police forces and called for the arrest of these “criminals.” The following morning, about two hundred shack dwellers set up a road blockade with burning tires and prevented the riot police from entering their land, after which some were arrested. Several days later, they held an illegal march on the police station, where they suffered brutal attacks by police officers using dogs and tear gas—just like during the apartheid era. During a mass meeting that afternoon, Kennedy Road activists relinquished their trust in the existing political system and committed to open defiance of ANC authorities, despite the suffering and sacrifice this implied (Pithouse 2007: 4; Gibson 2011: 157).

Durban’s shack dwellers at first focused on *contentious* civil resistance against local representatives of the state, because “getting into the streets” was the only language the latter understood. They embarked on numerous legal marches in opposition to local councilors, involving as many as 5,000 participants. Soon other shack dweller settlements joined the fight for land, housing, services, and communal autonomy, leading to the formation of the Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) movement—literally, the movement of “people who stay in shacks.” Since then, the Abahlali have taken charge of governance in settlements, prevented evictions, and improved material conditions (Pithouse 2007: 4). But while the Abahlali movement demands government services and asserts the right to stay in the city, the neoliberal state does not control or determine its politics. Instead, the movement encourages “the poorest of the poor” to gain autonomy by speaking their own minds, forcing others to listen, and creating social spaces for decolonizing forms of political thinking and being (Gibson 2011: 172). To produce alternative ways of life, shack dwellers engage in *constructive resistance*, or what they call *living politics*:

[A] politics that . . . arises from our daily lives and the daily challenges we face. It is a politics that every ordinary person can understand. It is a politics that knows that we have no water but that in fact we all deserve water. It is a politics that everyone must have electricity because it is required by our lives (Zikode 2009: 39).

Although they recognize that some situations call for contentious politics, they also realize that ongoing constructive work by “every ordinary person” and in response to “the daily challenges” is at the heart of their movement.

Abahlali’s living politics, also known as “Abahlalism,” has produced a unique praxis of decolonizing struggle with three basic characteristics. First, it calls for *direct democracy* within and among settlements. Members elect local leaders who are accountable to local communities, nurture cultures of respect, and facilitate rather than direct meetings. At such meetings, all participants can bring up issues concerning their basic needs and say what they want to say in ways they want to say it. As Pithouse (2006: 27) explains, “the fundamental political principle must be that everybody matters. In each settlement each person counts for one and in a broader movement the people in each movement count equally.” The leadership of women is partic-

ularly significant. Women are not only prominent in the Abahlali office, but also run constructive projects like crèches, kitchens, sewing cooperatives, and community gardens. Many women exemplify the courageous love and care necessary for living politics, whereas men tend to play it safe and prefer compromise (Nimmagudda 2008; Zikode 2009).

Abahlalism is also inextricably linked to *autonomy* as a way of life. On the one hand, shack dwellers seek independence from state and party politics, as well as from civil society associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) imposing elite knowledge on them. Whenever they engage with the state, they elect negotiation teams that report back and are accountable to Abahlali communities, minimizing the danger of cooptation. And from the beginning, they have declared, “No Land! No House! No Vote!” On the other hand, shack dwellers expand autonomy by opening up social spaces where they share stories of suffering, think critically about situations, and experiment with alternative practices in specific contexts. Considered “out of order” by mainstream elites, these spaces within and across settlements allow living politics to remain grounded in poor people’s everyday life and to reinforce direct democracy. Abahlalism insists on recognizing the particularities of each location and settlement, while expanding the movement’s capacity for *solidarity across difference*. It avoids relying on exclusive identities like race, nationality, and religion and tries to extend beyond such categories based on a deep sense of equality. Direct democracy, autonomy, and solidarity across differences strongly shape the political subjectivity of the Abahlali (Nimmagudda 2008; Zikode 2006).

### *Political Subjectivity*

Political subjectivity among the Abahlali emerges from subversion of the places where they live. Zikode (2011) articulates this point succinctly: “[A] living politics is the movement out of the places where oppression has assigned those who do not count.” Three aspects of political subjectivity in the Abahlali movement are particularly significant. First, it emerges from the broken promises and betrayals of ANC political leaders, not from decontextualized ideologies or vanguards. When local politicians and elites ignored agreements concerning land by the Kennedy Road settlement in 2005 and later refused to meet with them, shack dwellers recognized that they were not only mistreated, but also denied equality as human beings. They felt disregarded as “speaking human beings” living in inhumane places. The road blockades, marches, and other forms of revolt that followed originated from being ignored by their political representatives and from realizing that they had to fight for survival and dignity without depending on the dominant order. In this context, the act of making themselves heard and their dehumanizing circumstances seen also became the public appearance of their political subjectivity (Selmecci 2012: 501-503).

The second aspect of Abahlali political subjectivity involves their assertion of equality as speaking beings. Soon after the Kennedy Road blockades in March 2005, ANC elites and supporters accused a “Third Force” with anti-ANC outsiders of orchestrating the revolt of shack dwellers. Zikode (2005: 1), the Abahlali president at the time, immediately responded by stating: “Well, I am the Third Force myself. The Third Force is all the pain and the suffering that the poor are subjected to every second in our lives. . . . It is time for us to speak out and to say this is who we are, this is where we are, and this is how we live.” In other words, he made clear that while shack dwellers are mostly invisible and inaudible to politicians—except when the ANC needs them as voters during election time—they are fully capable of understanding their plight, voicing their grievances, and organizing their resistance. By putting this realization into practice, the Abahlali both demonstrate and enhance their political subjectivity.

And the third component of Abahlali political subjectivity highlights the dangers of targeting integration into the same political system that continues to abandon and reject the equality of poor people in South Africa. Instead of blindly supporting the ANC as the vehicle of Black emancipation, the shack dwellers problematize the gap between the rhetoric of freedom popularized by the liberal-democratic state and the realities of oppression in the shantytowns. Since April 27, 2006, therefore, the Abahlali movement mourns “Unfreedom Day” every year to

disrupt the Freedom Day staged by the ANC to commemorate the first democratic elections in 1994. It thereby enhances its members' possibilities for freedom by confronting the authorities and public with their lack of freedom. It also juxtaposes the logic of state politics with the logic of living politics, emphasizing that the latter not only involves hearing the cries of shack dwellers but also taking collective responsibility to reduce oppression. In doing so, the political subjectivity of individuals and social groups grows stronger (Selmeczi 2012: 506-509).

The social spaces for displaying and working on political subjectivity include local meetings and Living Learning discussions at the University of KwaZulu Natal. By actively participating in meetings, shack dwellers experience significant subjective transformations by "knowing their power" and "challenging the whole system, how it functions" (Zikode 2009: 5). And the monthly Living Learning discussions allow Abahlali members and supportive scholars to "[match] theory with the reality of the life of the people" (Robertson 2014: 187). Participants study radical theorists such as Fanon, Marx, and Freire and relate insights to everyday realities in postapartheid South Africa. Discussants emphasize the need to produce "shack intellectuals"—everyday people who think from the spaces and standpoints of the oppressed—and to encourage fellow shack dwellers to become "professors of our own poverty" (195-197). By emphasizing that "struggle is a school," the Abahlali develop their own political subjectivity and forge connections across borders with others (Pithouse 2006; Robertson 2014).

### *Human Emancipation*

For shack dwellers, freedom is a question of survival; it is necessary because of the daily situations and emergencies that they experience. Whereas the dominant understanding of freedom—accepted by most civil resistance and social movement scholars—focuses on political rights and civil liberties *within* representative liberal-democratic systems the Abahlali focus on making their own history and autonomous communities. Zikode (2009: 39-40) introduces the notion of *living communism* to think differently about human emancipation:

[A] living communism is a living idea and a living practice of ordinary people. The idea is the full and real equality of everyone without exception. The practice [implies that] a community must collectively own . . . natural resources—especially the water supply, land, and food . . . . After that we can think about the next steps. We are already taking electricity, building and running crèches, insisting that our children can access the schools. We just need to keep going.

Like Fanon, therefore, the Abahlali vision takes "our humanity seriously" and resists "all degradations and divisions" (40). Yet the Abahlali are acutely aware of internal challenges. They know that poverty within shantytowns persists, and that balancing unity with diversity is always difficult. But they also realize that only shack dwellers themselves, along with fellow damned of the earth, can create pathways toward emancipation from the colonial logic of domination.

## **CONCLUSION: CROSSING THE COLONIALITY LINE**

Over 100 years ago, sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (1903: 9) proclaimed: "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." For Du Bois, the color line was a worldwide, not just a personal and American, problem that needed to be addressed to defy oppression and enable lasting progress. He was convinced that the colonized peoples would rise up against the colonizing forces of his day to fight for political liberation and human dignity. And he urged fellow social scientists to recognize "the souls of Black Folk" as valid sources of knowledge, if they truly wanted to contribute to the ideals of democracy, freedom, equality, justice, and peace for all (Du Bois 1903). Drawing on Du Bois, we propose that *the problem of the twenty first century is the problem of the coloniality line*. While race continues to matter in the neoliberal world system, so do the state, class, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, physical ability, and

other divisive social categories. For popular struggles to liberate the human dignity of oppressed peoples, they must undermine and transform today's coloniality.

Yet scholars in civil resistance studies too often assume that rational insurgents can "win freedom" by using nonviolent strategies and methods to bring down nondemocratic regimes and set the stage for Western brands of liberal democracy (Ackerman 2007; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). They suggest that the rational purpose of effective civil resistance is to gain access to the *privileged Western side of the coloniality line*. We contend that such struggles end up reinforcing the colonial logic of domination, perpetuating the dehumanizing conditions of the most oppressed. This article therefore focuses on the subjugated knowledges and transformative practices of rebels on *the colonized side of the coloniality line*, who seek to dissolve this divide for their own survival and for the benefit of humanity as a whole. It examines Gandhi's ideas for insights on the concept of *swaraj* and how it relates to the constructive program, moral autonomy, and decentralized societies with ever-widening "oceanic circles." It explores Fanon's ideas on the lived experiences of the damned of the earth, black consciousness, and new humanism. Through Fanon we have seen how a decolonizing approach to the psychological and cultural structures that underpin, facilitate, and enforce colonial violence demands a fundamental transformation of self and society. Despite significant differences between them, both Gandhi and Fanon realized that subjugated knowledges were crucial weapons for ending colonialism and constructing alternative ways of life. Our article also discusses the subjugated knowledges produced in the midst of two contemporary struggles. It highlights the creation of autonomous communities, dignity as bridge, and "other worlds in which many worlds fit" among the Zapatistas, and the unique experiments with living politics, living learning, and living communism among the Abahlali. It is our hope that readers recognize that these concepts and practices significantly expand the language and horizon of civil resistance. Civil resistance is not just about effective strategies to reach preset goals identified by Western (neo)liberals; it is primarily about creating new ways of living, governing, and relating to others.

When civil resistance scholars only recognize the Zapatistas and Fanon as proponents of violence, and when they ignore the decolonizing aspects of the Abahlali and Gandhi, they normalize the colonizing Western paradigm. In the process, they downplay the profoundly radical ambitions of these rebellious struggles and thinkers, while limiting the range of relevant forms of civil resistance. As a result, they tend to overlook transitions between different forms of civil resistance as well as the subjugated knowledges arising from lived experiences. They also turn civil resistance into a "pure" category, untainted by anything "uncivil," which denies the inevitable complexities and ambiguities of human life. What should interest us as researchers of civil resistance and social movements is the creative use of transformative means and approaches, and the potential insight and inspiration we can draw from concrete cases or examples, not just the validity of our abstract ideal types, models, and theories.

Our article argues that researchers should consider decolonizing ideas and actions, but the larger project of decolonizing the study and practice of civil resistance has only just begun. There are many relevant thinkers besides Gandhi and Fanon and many relevant struggles besides the Zapatista and Abahlali movements. We therefore invite fellow civil resistance and social movement scholars to join our project. Despite differences in origin and emphasis, both fields share similar blind spots and would benefit from investigations of subjugated knowledges. If there is one thing that our research has taught us, it is that many different stories of civil resistance are possible and already exist. We just need to learn to see and listen to them!

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