

Imagining a 'Pacific Spring': Resistance and Power in Fiji and the Pacific

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Abstract: *The year 2011 witnessed a spate of popular uprisings against authoritarian governments and social and economic injustice. These protests did not go unnoticed in the Pacific Islands, with some people wondering whether we could also witness similar uprisings in the region. Using a lens of power relations, this paper aims to explore the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a 'Pacific Spring'. In particular, the paper examines forms of disciplinary power in the Pacific and questions the ways in which we understand and define resistance to power.*

1 Introduction

From Tunisia and Egypt to Iceland, Greece and the Occupy Movements, 2011 has witnessed millions of people taking to the streets and demanding dignity in the face of dominating power. Given the prevailing social and economic inequities in the Pacific, these protests have struck a chord with many in the region. For example, in an article in *Island Business* magazine, Nadkarni asked "can such a phenomenon as we have seen in the Middle East happen in the Pacific Islands?" (2011, p. 6). Such a question raises as many conceptual issues as it does practical ones. In particular it raises questions of how we understand power and resistance and also implies a binary in which the absence of open revolt means that there is apathy and inaction. In responding to Nadkarni's question, this paper critically reflects on how the way we conceive of power and resistance impacts on possibilities for political action. In particular the paper aims to resuscitate plurality and challenge the taken for granted assumptions about power and resistance. The paper begins with some reflections on powerlessness in the Pacific and then provides a brief discussion on theories of power. The paper then analyses the Arab Spring protests through the lens of the latter of these

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theories and concludes that reflections on power and resistance in the Pacific as activists and researchers in the region can facilitate spaces of freedom and resistance.

2. Beginning with Powerlessness and Struggle

In the absence of any formal data collection for the PhD project of which this paper is a part, below are some reflections on some stories of struggle that the author has picked up in informal conversations in Fiji. In short, these discussions highlight feelings of powerlessness that almost invariably are summed up in one phrase: "But we can't do much".

Example 1: At a seminar on domestic violence at the University of the South Pacific, a lady spoke about her personal experiences of violence at the hands of her husband. She told the story of a time when she sought help from the women in her neighbourhood, only to be told by these women to go back home and be the "good, faithful and committed wife" that her culture and religion demand of her.

Example 2: In October 2010, hundreds of petrol station attendants lost their jobs because the Fuel Retailers Association of Fiji claimed that they could not afford the proposed wage increases being discussed by the government¹. Apart from the isolated one or two comments in the news by non-government organizations², there was no observable protest - from the workers themselves, or for that matter any of the other industry workers who struggle to live with meagre wages and whose industries were also in the throes of dealing with the Wages Decree.

Example 3: In the middle of 2011, a seminar was held on the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) at the University of the South Pacific, organized by the Drodralagi Movement. The seminar was well attended,

¹ <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=157595>

² <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?ref=archive&id=157666>

with people standing outside trying to peer through the open louvered windows and be apart of the event. There were some very impressive speakers outlining some key underlying issues for homophobia and transphobia and a large display of solidarity between audience members. However, during question time, the most common question raised was "So what can I do?" Thus despite high levels of solidarity and conscious awareness of discrimination and violence a sense of powerlessness still remained.

In these examples we can identify many elements of Foucault's understanding of disciplinary and dispersed power, including the effects of the exercise of non-state power, including through traditional and religious discourses; the creation of normative subjectivities such as the "Fijian, Christian woman", or the wage worker; struggles with traditional views of power; and perhaps a sense of powerlessness caught up in the struggle to define what is "political action". By unsettling taken for granted knowledges, discourses, and views of power and resistance, the activist-researcher in the Pacific can begin to explore spaces for freedom and resistance to emerge. This task can draw on genealogical methods as well as learning from those most affected by power in order to incite local struggles against the modern power system (Pickett, 1996). Genealogically, this can be achieved by investigating how taken for granted and normalizing discourses of power that limit the conditions of possibility for resistance are historically and socially constituted. For example, the technologies of power enacted during British colonialism in Fiji are instructive. Using Foucauldian concepts of power and resistance to reflect on the tactics and strategies used to counter resistance to colonialism, one can readily identify the appropriation of indigenous discourses and structures, the creation of normative subjectivities, and the institutionalization of "traditional" Fijian culture. Such tactics acted as a form of disciplinary power aimed at "policing" (in the general sense of the word) Fijian people at the level of their everyday lives in the village. These technologies of disciplinary power were a vastly more

efficient means of policing and disciplining indigenous Fijians than earlier acts of punishment and direct physical conflict with dissidents. Thus, there was the creation of a political anatomy, which was also a mechanics of power (Foucault, 1977). Halapua elaborates on this political anatomy more precisely when he states that during the colonial period in Fiji, "the Council of Chiefs and the administration created a social framework which the Methodist Church, from a variety of motives, helped entrench and legitimize" (2003, p. 5). Importantly, this political anatomy continues to subjugate and limit the possibilities for social and political action in Fiji today despite an end to colonial rule (albeit not due to any civil based revolution).

To be precise, such historical analysis does not mean to suggest that tradition and religion, for example, must be overthrown in a struggle of liberation. Indeed, such a view only further reinforces traditional views of power that act to subjugate and limit the conditions of possibility for resistance. Rather, the point is to highlight how within the constructs of "traditional culture" and "religion" we can identify discourses, knowledge, rituals, and practices that serve as tactics for the exercise of disciplinary power that govern the conduct of people. Here it is important to recollect that such discourses, knowledge and practices have been and can be appropriated for the purposes of both dominating power and resistance to that power. For example, religious discourses and practices provided the basis for establishing millenarian movements as forms of resistance to the exercise of colonial power across the Pacific.

In learning from those affected by power, the challenge for the researcher-activist in the Pacific is to recover and maintain plurality by highlighting diverse grievances and uncovering acts of everyday, hidden resistance to power. As Scott (1991) observes, the most subordinated people have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Therefore the observable public transcript gives an incomplete picture of both power and resistance. Rather, by

identifying the hidden transcripts often found in disguised form in public or located within safe spaces out of the public eye, we can begin to challenge taken for granted constructs of what is "the political" (e.g., not the privileged realm of the state, but realm of peoples everyday lives), and deconstruct the open-revolt/apathy binary that underlies assumptions of inaction against social and economic inequities in the Pacific. Additionally, such research acts can provide alternative strategies and processes for exploring non-violent conflict in the region.

One final point must be made about researching power and resistance. Foucault (1982) claims that power is everywhere because it comes from everywhere, and therefore no social institution, discourse, space or act escapes relations of power. This idea, combined with a discussion on plurality of resistances within the social network calls upon the researcher-activist in the region to be critically aware of moments when resistance becomes power and therefore becomes problematic itself (Samaddar, 2010). Indeed, following the fall of Mubarak during the uprising in Egypt in 2011, the slogan chanted during the revolution — "The people and the army are one hand!" — was dramatically reversed. In other cases, this can be most evident in legal-rights frameworks of resistance that limit creative power. Perhaps less evident however are issues of power within civil society and local resistance groups. For example, Scott (1990) claims that pressures for conformity and "appropriate" action within subordinate groups places further restrictions on possibilities for resistance. This important issue is playing out in Fiji in 2011. The NGO Coalition for Human Rights has taken a particularly anti-government stance in Fiji which has resulted in the circulation of a "Bush-like" discourse of being either "with us or against us". Any person or organization engaging in any way with the military-led government has been considered an enemy of the Coalition. This is not simply rhetoric; members of the Coalition and other civil society groups have faced suspension and exclusion from the Coalition, as well

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as aggressive posturing from the group for taking an open stance towards the government.

Such actions reinforce polarising binary understandings of resistance and power by using a conceptualisation of power that locates power at the top of the military-led government. Conceptualizing power in this way consequently limits understandings of resistance to liberation struggles aimed at overthrowing authoritarian regimes. Additionally, many everyday acts of resistance that are not aimed at overcoming this institutional power are subsequently excluded from analysis. However, the NGO Coalition for Human Rights is not alone here. The myriad of online forums regarding the political situation in Fiji further create conditions that limit our understandings of power and resistance, and correlatively limit the field of possible actions for resistance. A case in point occurred recently on the "pacwin" listserv when an organization posted comments made by the Fijian military-led government to the United Nations Security Council regarding women, peace and security. The response by a small group of pacwin members was swift, with the organization being labelled a mouthpiece for the government and serious questions asked about the motives of the organization. In these examples, discourses of representative democracy and state sovereignty are appropriated by these groups as a means of claiming legitimacy as the "saviours" or "liberators" from an evil dictatorship. The critical point here is that, just as was observed in the Arab Spring, certain groups within civil society and the Fiji Diaspora are constructing homogenous notions of who or what counts as "political action" by restricting the discourse of power and resistance in order to fit their own goals and objectives.

3. Conceptualizing Power

The concept of power is highly contested (Sadan, 2004). The theories of Gene Sharp (1973) have been most influential in the Arab Spring movements, and indeed in the Colour Revolutions just one decade prior in Eastern Europe.

Sharp's conceptualization of power critiques sociological notions of power which view power as being centred at the top of a fixed, unchanging power structure. In particular, Sharp re-imagines the "monolithic model" of power as theorised by Weber (1947), where people occupy or hold power through their position at the top of the structure. The model assumes that the people are dependent on the good will, support and decisions of the power holder and that the ruler determines how this power is to be exercised (Sharp, 1973). Although it is possible for rulers to change in this model, the structure of power stays in tact (Helvey, 2004).

Sharp (1973) theorises an alternative view of power he called the pluralistic model, which views power as residing among the people throughout society, with the political leader only able to exercise power which the people permit. Power in this model finds expression in organizations and institutions that create pillars of support for political rulers. The core of Sharp's theory is obedience or consent, with people exercising power either through obedience or disobedience, or consent-dissent. Although Sharp's theory increases agency for resistance, the central focus on consent and the state somewhat disarms the strength of his pluralistic theory, almost slipping back into a monolithic view of power. This has led to his theory having severe limitations outside of overthrowing authoritarian governments; for example, it lacks application to patriarchy or capitalism in which asymmetries are not simply a matter of oppressor/oppressed relations. Therefore we need a more useable model of power that can better conceptualise the plurality of power and resistance and provide a framework for action against social and economic injustices (McGuinness, 1993).

A potentially more useful theory of power comes from the works of Foucault (1977, 1978, 1982), particularly his work on how modern forms of disciplinary power operate throughout society and its impacts on people at the micro-level of their everyday lives. In contrast to traditional views of power, Foucault argues that the operation of modern

forms of power is "ensured not by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control methods that are employed on all levels and in all forms that go beyond the state and its apparatuses" (1978, p. 89). This last point also distinguishes him from Sharp who tends to locate the struggle for change as directed towards the state and its apparatuses. Additionally, unlike Sharp, Foucault does not see power as a simple manifestation of consent; in fact, in direct contrast, Foucault (1982) suggests that the condition for power is freedom. He describes power as located within a context of multiple and complex force relations acting throughout the social network. More specifically, Foucault (1982) sees power as activity aimed at shaping, guiding, or affecting the conduct of some person or persons. Therefore, power is something that is exercised as action upon the actions of others, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or future (Foucault, 1982).

The close relation between power and resistance is evident here, and underpins Foucault's notion of power as relations of agonism, in which power relations are at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle. Foucault argues that power relies on multiple points of resistance that play a variety of roles in power relations, such as adversary, target, support or handle. This also gives resistance a critically important element of multiplicity, as there are no a priori points of resistance or rupture within the social network (see Laclau, 2005):

"There is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable' others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial" (Foucault 1978, p. 96).

As relations of agonism and reciprocal struggle, the aim of dominating power therefore is to fix relations by determining the field of possible actions available to the other. Thus power relations of dominance reflect relatively stable mechanisms in which one can direct, "in a fairly constant manner and with reasonable certainty, the conduct of others" (Foucault 1982, p. 225). For Foucault therefore, the condition for the exercise of power is freedom. It is the freedom of the other who faced with a field of possibilities leads to the exercise of power. As such, it is not possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination or escape. This important point highlights that the relatively stable effects of power are never final, but rather occur through repetitious acts of power within a relation of struggle. This non-finality means that there are always immanent possibilities for resistance. Thus the project of political action is not total liberation from power but an expanding of local spaces of situated freedom (May, 2004). This freedom is not something to be achieved once and for all, but is rather a permanent task that involves "the constant challenging of various forms of totalisation and closure and which social conflict and dialogue is reopened and the open ended movement of history continues" (Falzon, 1998, p. 45).

4. Reflections on the Arab Spring

In the wake of the initial euphoria of the Arab Spring protests, space has opened up to critically reflect on the emerging lessons. The notions of plurality of resistance and the reciprocal struggle of power and resistance can be readily analysed in the Arab Spring movements. For example, *Newsweek* reporter Christopher Dickey commented on Al Jazeera's *Empire*¹ that Egypt's advantage is that there is not a single strong ideological current that has dominated the uprising. Similarly, Patrick Seale commented on the same show that the whole point about the revolution was that it

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/empire/2011/04/2011421104111964650.html>

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was a multilayered, multi-stranded revolution. In contrast, David Hirst wrote in the *Guardian* that "the single focus on democracy and the virtual absence of other faction or ideological slogans has been striking" (2010, p. 1).

This example is interesting in light of power, hegemony and struggles over meaning within the discourse of democracy. The ideological hegemony of representative democracy and the nation-state present in the world today is what gives Hirst's claims of a single ideological struggle a sense of legitimacy, as well as explain why following the fall of the dictatorships the vast majority of protestors simply went home. These examples reflect what Laclau (1996) describes as an agonistic struggle of power relations within the hegemonic battlefield between a plurality of possible meanings and outcomes. Within this struggle, discourses become tactical elements operating within the social field of power relations such that the very same elements can be utilised for the exercise of both power and resistance (Mills, 2003). Thus Foucault (1978) suggests that we must make allowances for the unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also an opposing strategy, a point of resistance.

To elaborate further on the 'hegemonic battlefield between a plurality of possible meanings', consider these words by the Finance Minister from the Tunisian interim government spoken at a conference in 2011:

"So when the revolution started in Tunisia, in the first few days their demands were jobs and justice, but within 3 or 4 days they were very quickly turned into political change and political reforms because people realized that you cannot have economic development without political institutions that protect that economic development and especially protect against corruption"¹.

¹ <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/csid-12th-annual-conference>

In these remarks, one is wary of the terms 'economic development', 'political reforms', and 'protection against corruption', for if we heed Klein's (2007) warning of disaster capitalism, such terms have often been code for neoliberal reforms, and the protection of corporate interests over those of the people. More to the point however, one wonders how it came to be that after 3 or 4 days the demands of the protestors shifted "very quickly" from "jobs and justice" to "political change and political reforms". It raises serious questions about who claims to speak for whom, and leads us to share Roy's critical curiosity when she asks "When language has been butchered and bled of meaning, how do we understand 'public power' (2004, p. 5). This example again highlights the unstable process whereby discourses are appropriated and utilised as an instrument of power in order to homogenise the existing plurality and silence otherness.

The concept of plurality of resistances can be understood if we broaden our vision of time and space of the events in the Middle East, allowing the locatation of a host of grievances and everyday acts of resistance against the effects of dominating power. For example, Khalil (2007, p. 74) writes that as far back as 2003, action in Egypt to bring about social justice was growing amongst activists from "legal and illegal parties, independent political activists, human rights NGO, research centres, artists and literary personalities" as well as lawyers, journalists, engineers and university staff. To subsume the various social justice demands and actions of this diverse group of citizens under the single focus of political reform and regime change not only ignores the complexity and diversity of the issues being voiced, but also acts to limit the conditions of possibility of resistance by restricting the notion of what constitutes "politic action".

5. A Pacific Spring?

There are some important lessons here for the activist-researcher in the Pacific region, and for allowing us to critically reflect on Nadkarni's question posed at the beginning of the paper. In particular, the way we conceive of power and powerlessness as well as what constitutes "political action" or resistance have important implications for the way Pacific activists and researchers understand and respond to conflicts in the region. The hegemonic discourse of democracy claims an automatic legitimacy, and as such is being appropriated on the side of both power and resistance for clearly different aims. For example, in 2011 in Fiji there was much talk about democracy, with all speakers using the term to claim legitimacy - the Military led government claims it will return Fiji to democracy; civil society is fighting for a return to democracy; and the international community is demanding a return to democracy and basing its foreign policy on democracy's absence. However, activists and researchers in the Pacific must be critical of the academic and media romance with public mass liberation struggles for democracy that marginalize and exclude other everyday acts of resistance, and subsume social and political justice issues under the hegemony of state sovereignty and representative democracy. As Scott (1990) observes, the limitations of any field of study are most strikingly revealed in its shared definitions of what counts as relevant and in studies of resistance, it is fair to say that much attention has been devoted to organized, large scale protest movements that appear, if only momentarily, to pose a threat to the state. Therefore, it is important that in order to understand power and resistance in the Pacific, such an endeavour must be grounded in the daily experiences of struggle amongst Pacific peoples; experiences which seek and experiment with practices of freedom within ongoing contexts of violence and inequity and challenge the taken for granted assumptions about our societies.

So in returning to Nadkarni's question - can a phenomenon such as that occurring in the Arab Spring happen in the Pacific - this paper suggests two important considerations in attempting an answer. The first is that through the interplay of agonistic power relations, opportunities for social and political action can be both restricted and expanded. In order to achieve the latter, it is essential to critically analyse the ways in which disciplinary power is exercised in order to close down opportunities for resistance. Importantly, such power can be productive as well as repressive and is dispersed at multiple points throughout the social network. The second consideration regards challenging dominant perspectives on what counts as "political action" or resistance. By focusing solely on democratic struggles for liberation from an oppressive state may overlook a host of smaller, hidden acts of resistance to dominating power that are no less important. Just as the effects and exercise of power have a plurality that is dispersed throughout the social network, so too are acts of resistance. Thus on the one hand we can respond to Nadakarni by suggesting that the absence of resistance implied in his question is the result of the exercise of disciplinary power within Pacific societies that limit opportunities for Pacific peoples to take political action. On the other hand, we may also be able to respond by suggesting that resistance to dominating power is already happening; we just need to know where to look for it.

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