



ROME AND RESISTANCE

JOLOWICZ (D.), ELSNER (J.) (edd.) *Articulating Resistance under the Roman Empire*. Pp. x+303. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £85, US\$110. ISBN: 978-1-108-48490-9.

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This volume is a well-timed and necessary book. Some 25 years ago C. Ando (in *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* [2000]) made consensus an indispensable category in the historical interpretation of Rome. The ultimate reason for the strength of Roman rule was its success in creating political, social, economic and cultural ties between the various subjugated populations. This made possible integration into a unity which, in turn, allowed and encouraged cultural diversity.

Obviously, Roman victory on the battlefield did not instantly create consensus. In the second half of the twentieth century some scholars argued that some provincials were stubbornly opposed to Roman rule. This opposition did not have to manifest itself only by force of arms, as in the Jewish revolts. Opposition to Rome could use other instruments, especially words. Lucian of Samosata was considered an anti-Roman writer (A. Peretti, *Luciano. Un intellettuale greco contro Roma* [1946]). The recourse to the past was understood either as an instrument of open opposition to Rome or, at least, of political escapism in the face of an unpleasant present under Roman rule (e.g. E. Bowie, 'Greeks and their past in the Second Sophistic', *P&P* 46 [1970]). P. Desideri (*Dione di Prusa. Un intellettuale greco dell'impero romano* [1978]) argued for the robustness of the political criticism of Dion de Prusa's speeches. Finally, S. Swain (*Hellenism and Empire* [1997]) came to offer a balanced perspective on the relationship between Greek intellectuals and empire. Swain emphasised the function of culture as an instrument of social pre-eminence and privileged relationship with Rome. Shortly afterwards, the focus was shifted to consensus, with resistance and opposition being relegated to the background. This is why Jolowicz and Elsner's book is a necessary work. It attempts to refocus the vision of these other dark sides of the Empire as well as to understand how resistance was articulated under Roman rule.

The editors have gathered a collection of ten papers, to which must be added the introduction, written by the editors, and the epilogue, by S. Goldhill. From the outset, it is clear that the intellectual challenge is formidable. In their introduction Jolowicz and Elsner tackle the task of defining 'resistance' and turning it into a useful category for historical analysis. The results show the difficulty of the endeavour.

'Resistance may be a natural response to restriction' (p. 4); 'resistance occurs in response to restriction. It embodies gestures that speak to a fundamental human desire for liberty, constituting emancipatory actions that respond to domination and try to move the subject toward freedom' (p. 9). In my opinion, this is a politically marked interpretation, a story of masters against subjects seeking freedom in the face of the restrictions imposed on them. This interpretation marginalises two fundamental facts of Roman history: social conflict, at local, regional and imperial levels, and Rome's capacity for integration. The populations conquered by Rome had their own social structures of domination, which Rome often transformed, even in favour of individuals. Resistance to Rome, or to any other power that imposes 'restrictions', is the resistance of oligarchies in order not to lose their positions of domination. Rome's intervention transformed the pre-existing rules of social, political and cultural domination, favouring some and

disadvantaging others. The cases proposed in the chapters are examples of the resistance of different oligarchies in different places and times.

A second general reflection should be added: what was the nature of the ‘restrictions’ imposed by Rome? Undoubtedly, they were many and affected different orders of political, social and economic life; Greek intellectuals were aware of them (Plut. *Mor.* 824C). However, Rome was not a power fuelled by nationalism or totalitarianism. For this reason, some current concepts about the nature of resistance do not have direct applicability to Rome. Under Roman rule, a great diversity of cultural practices flourished, only occasionally conflicting with the interests of the ruler. Neither the languages, nor the local rights and customs, nor the gods that inhabited the empire suffered systematically from Rome’s restrictions. Quite the contrary: Rome was able to incorporate countless provincials into its political organisation and to enrich its cultural heritage with a multitude of elements of regional and provincial origin. This reciprocal acculturation was not without opposition on both sides – and this is where resistance could also be invoked. Members of the Roman oligarchy resisted the integration of the people and cultural traits from the provinces, while members of the provincial oligarchies resisted the detriment of the social foundations of their power by the grace of Rome. The dialectical relationship shaped Rome’s changing identity.

The editors focus on cultural resistance. To address it, they take up two important postmodern theoretical concepts: the ‘figured speeches’ of F. Ahl (‘The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome’, *AJPh* 105 [1984]) and the ‘hidden transcripts’ of J.C. Scott (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance* [1990]), instruments labelled as ‘technologies of resistance’. Thanks to these technologies, it would be possible to criticise the enemy through indirect references, which are well understood by those who participate in these codes, but which are formally innocuous and difficult to sanction. However, when these technologies of resistance generate discourses with such figurative or hidden messages that they require deep exegetical work to recognise them, were they effective technologies? Were they even instruments of resistance?

The contributions are organised in four parts. The first is devoted to ‘Language and Identity’; it includes the chapter by K. McDonald and N. Zair, ‘Linguistic Resistance to Rome: A Reappraisal of the Epigraphic Evidence’. It is a study focused primarily on the Western world. Rome did not prohibit the use of local languages, although Latin was the main language of public life in the Empire. The Roman Empire was a multilingual empire, even if not all languages had the same public or political status. Of course, language could be used as an instrument of resistance. The Bar Koshiba rebels minted coins with Hebrew slogans, but used Greek to conduct the war. McDonald and Zair conclude that ‘it is rarely clear whether the language itself was a means of expressing resistance’ (p. 48).

The second part, ‘Genres of Literary Resistance’, comprises four contributions, addressing a well-established topic: is Greek literature of the imperial period, in whole or in part, a manifestation of resistance to Rome? D.L. Norman, in ‘Courtroom Rhetoric in Imperial and Late Antique Philosophical Dialogues’, discusses the new judiciary form of rhetorical debates as a substitute for real courts. W. Guast, in ‘Greek Declamation and the Art of Resistance’, returns to declamation as a means of resistance, thanks to the re-enactment of a (safe) spectacle of resistance. E. Almagor, in ‘Plutarch’s Parallelism and Resistance’, tries to show the potentially subversive nature of Plutarch’s parallel lives, which would function as ‘distorted mirrors through the device of irony’ (p. 110). Jolowicz, in ‘A Glitch in the Matrix: Aphrodisias, Rome and Imperial Greek Fiction’, emphasises the absence of the present in Greek novels, an absence that has already been considered an expression of a will to oppose. He dwells on a final reference

that Chariton makes to ‘Phrygian pirates’. Jolowicz suggests that this is a malicious reference to the Romans (pp. 115–17). His arguments are sound from a literary point of view, though they require detailed scholarship. And the question remains: was this an effective, or even useful, method of resistance?

The third part, ‘Identity Negotiation’, encompasses two studies focusing on Lucian, a central personality in the topic of opposition or resistance to Rome. N. D’Alconzo, in ‘Portraying Power: Lucian’s *Imagines* and Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*’, contrasting the two literary works, concludes that Lucian’s *Imagines* may only have been intended to entertain and that his supposed ‘resistance is ultimately in the eye of the beholder’ (p. 157). A. Ellis-Evans, in ‘Satire and the Polis in Lucian’s *Timon*’, analyses the satirical character of the *Timon* and its censure of the attitudes of Herodes Atticus. The plot is superb: the criticism of a local oligarch, who was held back in his aspirations to tyranny by his fellow citizens and by the emperor himself, at a tribunal in Sirmium. I would like to emphasise the profound criticism that is contained in the idea of the misanthropic *polis*, possibly a critique of the process of the oligarchisation of Greek cities under Roman rule.

The fourth part is devoted to ‘Religion and Resistance’. The Sibylline Oracles are the object of H. Van Noorden’s analysis, ‘Anti-Roman Sibyl(s)’: she concludes that their ominous tone is more a matter of literary genre than of political or religious resistance. I. Rutherford, in ‘Traditions of Resistance in Greco-Egyptian Narratives’, analyses how Egyptian accounts of resistance against successive invaders, from Pharaonic to Ptolemaic times, were reused by the lords of the day to vindicate themselves. Finally, L. Niccolai, in ‘Julian the Emperor and the Reaction against Christianity’, discusses Emperor Julian’s confrontation with the Church, which he calls ‘Resistance from the Top’: had the Church become a stronger power than the Emperor and capable of imposing its domination?

The book cannot be read without paying special attention to the epilogue by S. Goldhill, entitled ‘Resisting Resistance’: ‘If one message emerges loud and clear from the chapters of this volume, it is that resistance is a necessary but impossible term’ (p. 239). The difficulty is profound and concerns both the concept and the methodology of analysis. Goldhill insists that ‘the literature from Rome is an anomaly that is not suited to the modern study of resistance within colonial theory’ (p. 243). Other avenues of approach need to be sought. Goldhill proposes six fields of analysis: resistance from outside to Roman authority, of which the best example would be the struggle of some Jews against Rome. The second is resistance from within, i.e. the Romans, members of the political elite willing to oppose imperial rule. A third form of resistance would be resistance from above, i.e. how members of the Roman oligarchy opposed the integration of the provinces. Goldhill points out that resistance born of social conflict is not something that can be left aside. It is resistance from below to which attention must be paid. He also points to the importance of ideal models of society, of utopias that aim for a society without conflict. The last of Goldhill’s points is the tendency to internalise resistance, to locate it in the inner life as opposed to the development of public life.

As mentioned, this is a necessary book because Jolowicz and Elsner have brought ‘resistance’ back into the historical debate. *Articulating Resistance*, as a pioneering book, has broken new ground that needs fuller and more complex developments.

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