

Ethics of Resistance in Organisations: A Conceptual Proposal

Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar¹ · Fahreen Alamgir²

Received: 6 November 2016 / Accepted: 29 June 2017 / Published online: 5 July 2017
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Abstract This study suggests a conceptual proposal to analyse the ethics of resistance in organisations, drawing on Foucault’s practising self as a refusal and Schaffer’s ethics of freedom in opposition to the legitimacy of managerial control and the ethics of compliance. We argue that ethics is already part of such politics in the form of ethico-politics on the basis of participation in political action in organisations. Hence, the practising self as resistance in the face of the status quo of managerial power in an ongoing dialectical process with others and for others comprises our conceptual proposal as an ethics of resistance. Acknowledging dialectics as the driver of the continuous reconstruction and co-construction of politics and praxis, we propose an ethics from the bottom up with a critical and radical perspective. Our contribution is based on opening up an ethico-political space for those who are ignored or suppressed in the ethics and organisations literature.

Keywords Ethics in organisations · Power-resistance dialectics · Ethico-politics of resistance

Introduction

This study expands the discussion on ethics and politics within the critical organisation and ethics studies by taking resistance in organisations as the case. In response to calls to bring politics back to ethical realms (Jones et al. 2005; Rhodes and Wray-Bliss 2012), scholars who study ethics and organisations in the domain of critical management studies (CMS) emphasise ethicality in practice in relation to others and in relation to the individual’s own self—that is, they examine the ethical subjectivity of individuals as a source of political action. Politics is conceptualised herein as “the means one has available to respond to the ethical demands one takes up by seeking to change the way things are organised, and is the conduct through which ethical subjectivity arises” (McMurray, Pullen and Rhodes, p. 546). Indeed, this discussion, to which we would like to contribute, is a very recent effort in the domain of CMS in which the political potential of ethical subjectivity in organisations and the relationship between ethics and resistance are analysed (McMurray et al. 2011; Pullen and Rhodes 2014).

In particular, we examine resistance and its content against managerial control as a rational and political action (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Carroll and Nicholson 2014, p. 4; Collinson and Ackroyd 2005; Jermier et al. 1994a; Thomas et al. 2004, p. 2), and we argue how resistance becomes a manifestation of ethics within everyday struggles in the workplace. We consider demonstrations in the form of strikes, sit-ins, whistleblowing and alternative resistant or distant subjectivities in which resistance has ethical content in response to a managerial ethics of compliance and conformity implemented through various control mechanisms in organisations (Rhodes and Harvey 2012; ten Bos 2003). Hence,

✉ Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar
o.n.alakavuklar@massey.ac.nz
Fahreen Alamgir
Fahreen.alamgir@monash.edu

¹ School of Management, Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

² Department of Management, Monash University, Clayton, Australia

our research question is as follows: How can we theorise an ethics of resistance when the rising dominance of work in our lives—in which the imposition of excessive managerial control through enforcing targets to be achieved and (self-)surveillance over employees occupy not only bodies but also souls and lives (Deetz 1998; Fleming 2014)—is evident within the reality of precarious working conditions and work (Sennett 1998; Standing 2011)? In our effort to develop a conceptual framework, we argue whether and how resistance reflects ethico-political aspects. Here, we use “ethico-political” as a key term that refers to a relationship in which ethics becomes the driver of political action (Pullen and Rhodes 2014) and take it as a basis for developing our conceptual proposal. Accordingly, following Willmott (1998) and Wray-Bliss (2009), we define ethics as the process of participating in power relations via actions of resistance to reconstruct organisational relations while questioning taken-for-granted assumptions in regard to the nature of managerial control.

For our conceptual proposal, we draw on arguments from Foucault’s practising self and Schaffer’s ethics of freedom. In particular, we would like to advance Foucault’s “care for self” as a social practice in the form of a dialectical struggle by introducing resistance as an ethical imperative. We argue that the practising self as resistance in the face of the status quo of managerial power in an ongoing dialectical process with others and for others comprises our conceptual proposal as an ethics of resistance.

With this conceptual proposal, our purpose is to contest the legitimacy of managerial control and the ethics of compliance over those who are exposed to exploitation, oppression and abuse of power in organisations. By aligning our aim here with the ethical promise of CMS, we propose an ethics from the bottom up with a critical and radical perspective for those who would like to challenge and change dominant organisational practices and established power relations for the sake of emancipation and liberation (Foster and Wiebe 2010). Hence, our contribution is based on opening up a space of discussion within the domain of critical organisational and ethics studies in regard to the ethico-political nature of resistance in organisations.

In the following, we begin with a critical review of the relationship between ethics and organisations. Then, we introduce the theoretical background on which we rely to develop our conceptual proposal as we suggest a critical position for ethics by taking resistance in organisations as the case. We conclude by discussing the praxis of an ethico-politics of resistance in organisations and our contribution to critical organisation and ethics studies.

Ethics, Organisations and Critique

Moral uncertainty has been one of the main concerns to be “solved” and “overcome” by organisations inherently driven by the modernist ideals of rationality, reason and control (Burrell 1997; Reed 1996). Considering the rising power of corporations in a neoliberal world as well as systemic and structural crises and business scandals, it can be argued that ethics, as a field of study, has become a domain in which managerial ideals infiltrate for the purposes of social legitimacy and control (Hanlon and Mandarini 2015; cf. Fombrun and Foss 2004; Laufer and Robertson 1997). The appropriation of an ethical culture through promoting ethical leadership, the instrumental implications of ethical conduct, and thus making managers responsible for sustaining ethicality in organisations, are criticised and regarded as approaches of acquiring legitimacy of managerial conduct and as an instrument of domination for ensuring the alignment of the ethical subjectivity of employees (see Jones 2003; Roberts 2003; Painter-Morland 2015).

The critiques of such appropriation, institutionalisation and instrumentalisation of ethics are already well known. Among them, we can count the limits of normative claims that foreclose political aspects of organisational life (Bridgman 2010; Marens 2010; Parker 2003) and narrow down the reality of ethical situations (Clegg et al. 2007a) and ethical subjectivity (Clegg et al. 2007b, p. 111; Kelemen and Peltonen 2001); the universalisation of ethical principles that serve the interests of the privileged group (Wray-Bliss 2009, p. 269); and the negligence of established power relations in the organisational context while implementing ethical programmes (Gordon et al. 2009; Helin and Sandström 2010).

Apart from critique, critical scholars have also been extensively engaged in exploring ethics and ethicality in organisations and organising processes while reflecting upon their own research practices. For instance, Rhodes (2016) calls for a democratic business ethics in the sphere of civil society that would question the sovereignty of corporations. Similarly, arguments include the capacity of CMS and its (limited) ethical claims concerning research practices (Brewis and Wray-Bliss 2008; Collins and Wray-Bliss 2005; Wray-Bliss 2003); the construction of research identities and the emergence of ethical issues due to a lack of sufficient self-critique (Reedy 2008); the anti-sovereign ethics emerging from denaturalising the seduction of leadership that is supposed to be the “rightful locus of ethical regulation” (Wray-Bliss 2013, p. 87); the contested position of human resource management that supports the managerial function of line management and unpacks its critical potential while facilitating ethical engagement in

organisations (Greenwood 2002; Jack et al. 2012); and the promise of approaching ethics with a critical agenda to transform organisations (Prasad and Mills 2010). The underpinning assumption within such critical studies is that without acknowledging and uncovering power relations (see Alvesson 2008; Fournier and Grey 2000), the study of ethics is misplaced.

From our perspective, with some exceptions (McMurray et al. 2011; Pullen and Rhodes 2014), what is particularly missing within this discussion about ethics and organisations is the ethical position of organisational actors who challenge, subvert and resist managerial control, which can also be exerted or reinforced through the ethical claims of organisations. Drawing on Courpasson (2016, p. 96), we argue that resistance has come to imply a more ethical stance since, as a subjective matter, it questions the basis for participating in political causes and accepting the place of an obedient subject in a given institutional context. For us, it is essential to unpack the ethico-political nature of this stance. That said, as we argue below in detail, we refrain from having a romanticised view of resistance concerning how resistance is a complex and potentially contradictory process (Deetz 2008; Hardy 2016). Instead, in relation to the managerial nature of the ethics and organisations literature, we observe an opportunity to suggest a prospect for bringing politics back to the ethical realm and to propose an alternative, radical and political dimension of ethics (Prasad and Mills 2010; Rhodes and Wray-Bliss 2012, p. 40).

Theoretical Background

In their call for the ethical register of the social sciences, Ezzamel and Willmott (2014) explain the difference and relationship between ethics and politics:

‘Politics’ involves mobilising resources (material and symbolic) to establish, maintain or transform realities, whereas ‘ethics’ concerns the practice of engagement in this ‘political’ process. Social practices...are inescapably ‘political’ but the moment of the ‘ethical’ is one of participation—compliant or transgressive—in those practices (p. 1034, note 4).

This process of participation already begins when an employee signs the contract with the employer that forms the basis of exchange relations, and in fact, compliance with managerial decisions and subordination are taken for granted. Accordingly, we approach resistance as a political process that aims to transform the established power relations in an organisation. The mode of participation in this process and its ethical formation of subjectivities require further elaboration and conceptualisation (Kelemen and

Peltonen 2001; Kornberger and Brown 2007, p. 510). Along these lines, as Willmott (1998) notes, here, an ethical approach is suggested that is not philosophically limited to the essence and not fixed to a determined universal foundation. Wray-Bliss (2009, p. 272) captures the core of such an ethical philosophy as

...an ethics that is radically questioning taken-for-granted notions of natural or good practices, that provokes uncertainty rather than complacent moralism, an ethics that must be intimately connected to questions of politics and power, that is, an ethics that refuses an individualistic notion of the sovereign moral agent whose ethical conduct is divorced from her or his participation in wider power relations.

This notion is very similar to what Pullen and Rhodes (2014) define as the ethico-political, and it is a position that we would like to advance with the case of resistance in organisations. In particular, they argue about the embodied experience of everyday life wherein compassion, care for others and the self-configuration of policies interplay in the form of ethics, creating an opportunity to challenge the normalised normative social relations shaped by the managerial agenda. In the following, we sketch a conceptual proposal to analyse this ethico-political process of subversion and resistance.

Ethics of Resistance: A Conceptual Proposal

Resistance is perceived, and argued, as a form of power that challenges, confronts or contests the limits of control (which is never total) (see Foucault 1978, pp. 94–96; Lukes 2005, pp. 150–151). Just recently, with the new spirit of capitalism, we observe an instrumental appropriation of the critical capacities of employees by the business discourse (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Fleming and Sturdy 2009). Nevertheless, resistance maintains its political (and ethical) position as an inevitable and undeniable reality of organisations in relation to efforts to challenge the existing structures presented as the status quo, contesting the meaning of work and simply creating a space for individual discretion and values (Ackroyd 2012; Fleming and Spicer 2008; Symon 2005). It is also evident that both the study and practice of resistance have been changing in response to the socio-economic and cultural transformations that we experience in different parts of the world (Centeno and Cohen 2012; Harvey 2007). Although the gaze of organisational scholars may be upon individualistic and cynical resistance, leading to more studies of the everyday struggles or subjectivity of resistant actors (Contu 2008; Thompson and Ackroyd 1995), it should be noted that collective action remains a common manifestation of

resistance, as in the recent cases of air traffic controllers in France (Morris 2016), garment workers in Bangladesh (Safi 2016) or glass workers in Turkey (Hurriyet Daily News 2014).

An overall assessment of resistance studies demonstrates that employees resist for different causes with various levels of organising structures, including the individual, group and organisational levels (Clegg 1994a: p. 289; Fleming and Spicer 2007). Although resistance is defined as a “reactive process where agents embedded in power relations actively oppose initiatives by other agents” (Jermier et al. 1994b, p. 9), we would like to emphasise the common characteristics and rely on a broader definition of resistance from a critical perspective. Therefore, resistance is related to the power mechanisms in organisations and how to subvert this power so that there may be favourable effects for those who are symbolically, economically or structurally subordinated in organisations (Fleming and Spicer 2007, pp. 30–31).

Since control in organisations is never total, there will always be fragmentation(s) and gap(s) in the hegemonic structure (Clegg 1994b, p. 163), leading to a continuous dynamic relationship of ongoing struggle in which “power and resistance are often indistinguishable” (Fleming and Spicer 2007, p. 58). Hence, rather than a deterministic duality and contrasting perspective, it is helpful to frame the resistance–power relationship in a mutually constitutive dialectical relationship (Ashcraft 2005; Jermier et al. 1994b; Mumby 2005; Zoller and Fairhurst 2007). Whereas management aims to control actual work relentlessly, “the tensions created by this very control push certain actors to resist and consequently to reconstitute the social conditions in organisations” (Courpasson 2011, p. 9). Therefore, resistance becomes a dynamic and organic process that interacts with, changes and becomes intertwined with managerial control. It may create multiple potentials or open up new spaces for change that organically and simultaneously emerge out of each other. Although the consequences may be unknown and costly with the efforts of resistance, resistance can still meaningfully challenge managerial control for change (Courpasson 2016). Consequently, resistance may accommodate consent and resistance simultaneously (e.g. Ashcraft 2005; Kärreman and Alvesson 2009; Nentwich and Hoyer 2013) because the dialectical relationship also helps people “reconstruct organisations and establish social formations in which continuous reconstruction is possible” as a part of praxis (Benson 1977, p. 18). Hence, we argue that organisations are places where continuous political reconstructions/co-constructions and struggles occur along with the dialectics of power and resistance. In fact, this dialectical process forms the core of our discussion on the ethics of resistance because there is a certain ontology of the becoming,

emerging and transforming self each time as a result of the continuous interaction between managerial control and resistance.

In many studies of resistance in organisations, it is stated that any type of resistance (conscious/unconscious, collective/individual, overt/covert) to managerial control potentially assists employees in interrogating the power and control mechanisms in organisations, which may plant seeds for micro- and macro-emancipations (Ashcraft 2008; Huault et al. 2012). Either through small acts of “reinscription and reproduction of the discourses of change” (Thomas and Davies 2005, pp. 684, 701) or by having a future orientation (Costas and Grey 2014; Deetz 2008), resistance can potentially be creative and generative for positive favourable outcomes (Courpasson et al. 2012, 2014). In opposition to the efforts of managerial control to impose an ethics of compliance for the sake of managerial interests, promoting political values that may create favourable effects in the interests of resisting subjects with the imagination of a different or alternative future makes resistance a noteworthy political action—in other words, a praxis. However, it is also argued that some actions of resistance may have a very limited impact on established organisational power relations. In some cases, resistance may even work to ossify control regimes or already serve the interests of the powerful (Burawoy 1979; Knights and McCabe 2003). Acknowledging the complexity of the motivation of actors for resistance and the contested nature of the anticipated gains (i.e. resistance as a safety valve), it is fair to say that these political values and the idea of gains as a result of ongoing struggles give resistance an ethico-political basis.

Practising Self Through Refusal and Care for Others: Ethics as Resistance

Foucault details his views on the ethics of care and the idea of practising self in the series of books that constitute *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978, 1984, 1985, 1986). For Foucault, freedom is the kernel of ethics; thus, it is important to practise it. He problematises “how to live” (Foucault 1984, p. 348) in the grid of power/knowledge discourses that would determine what is right, acceptable and normal. By aligning an ontology of becoming with the practice of the ideal of the “art of living”—that is, with the “art of existence” (Foucault 1985, p. 10)—an agency is capable of forming and crafting the self as a form of resistance. In other words, it is a type of ethico-political subject in pursuit of a “grand refusal to be what we have become through so many exercises of power” (Knights 2016, p. 113).

Drawing on Foucault’s arguments, research on the self, resistance and ethics unpacks how such practices create potentials to be the “other in relation to/oppose to/in

contrast what discipline or domination demands” (Crane et al. 2008, p. 315). It is the remaking of the self by the self while reflexively taking care of ourselves and having “the courage to be (y)our own authority without obedience to another” (Koopman 2013, p. 537) as well as constructing “our own morality” (Bardon and Josserand 2010, p. 507). Hence, the agency is not a passive recipient of the discourses; instead, in the process of becoming a resistant self and in practising “care of the self”, the agency continuously problematises and re-problematises the given and taken-for-granted morality of the society/organisation while also making the seemingly “true” problematic (Bardon and Josserand 2010, pp. 505, 507–508). This ontology of becoming may produce active ethical agencies while continuously enabling the reconstitution of self (Crane et al. 2008, p. 304; Ibarra-Colado et al. 2006) and suggesting the possibility of rethinking a politics of resistance as an ethico-political act (Newton 1998, pp. 434–435). Here, this notion of the self is not based on a fixed and sovereign moral agent who has essentialist characteristics; instead, it is a product of refusal as a part of ongoing participation in wider power relations and pursuing possibilities of change within the prevailing social order (Chan and Garrick 2002, p. 693; Knights 2016). Hence, such a project is based on a continuous interrogation of political agency and power relations rather than attempting to define a detailed programme of action or reform (Barratt 2008, p. 525). It is the ethical moment wherein the subject confronts different forms of power and decides to resist, challenge and (if possible) transform the given context and established relations.

Following Foucault (1985), Munro (2014, p. 1132) notes that in the face of power and discursive regimes, subjects can actively work on their selves and, in particular, craft themselves or practise selves for counter-conduct (i.e. resistance). This means a responsible transformation of the self for the sake of pursuing an ethical life and resistant forms of subjectivity. In other words, within this process, resistance as politics becomes an ethical practice of the art of living and crafting the self in opposition to managerial control that can challenge the given complacent structure demanding increasingly more compliance—which current workplaces continuously reinforce (e.g. an employee is expected to accept lower wages, adjust his/her life to longer working hours along with contractual labour, attend corporate gatherings on weekends by compromising the work-life balance and get used to the colonisation of their life by the organisation for which he/she works). From a Foucauldian perspective, then, the ethics of resistance is directly related to challenging and contesting the structures and relations of control and domination while constructing the self and a new morality and problematising the given power mechanisms in organisations (Crane et al. 2008, p. 304; Skinner 2013, p. 918; Weiskopf and Willmott 2013).

Foucauldian ethics provides a powerful analytical tool for explaining subjective self-formation and the reconstruction of an own ethics of resistance, as opposed to an ethics of compliance. Hence, the “art of living” does not simply become an example of ethics; simultaneously, however, it also embodies resistance for employees as they practise their freedom and reconstruct their own authority and ethics for anticipated favourable effects. Manifestations of resistance, then, involve practices of the self, and efforts are expended to take back the self from the colonisation of managerial control, particularly, following Munro (2014), with the idea of “forming alternative organisational subjectivity” through ethical self-transformation. As organisational subjectivities confront managerial control that limits the “self”, they practise their selves with “practices of resistance”, which may also take “micro-exercises of power as a point of departure” to challenge structural domination (Bardon and Josserand 2010, p. 508).

However, one can also argue how such an ethics may suffer from a hyper-individualised focus. Rendtroff (2014) argues that Foucault’s practising self is not only a concern for the self but also a social practice of engagement with politics; “the concern for the self may imply concern for the Other because this care defines what it is to be human... It is important to show how this concern for the self implies the transition to a social life together in the community” (p. 162). In other words, care for the self does not occur in a vacuum, as Foucault argues; “care for the self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others... the one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others” (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987, p. 118). Consequently, practising self becomes a continuous ethico-political action that is related not only to the self but also to others.

At this point, we find value in the ethical framework developed by Schaffer (2004) because it helps us contextualise the idea of practising self—how is this practising self who is concerned for others maintained? How may this type of ethico-political action become part of an ongoing dialectical praxis? As a contribution to and advancement of Foucault’s ethics of resistance in the form of social action, Schaffer’s (2004) framework emphasises a collective and militant ethics with others and for others and helps us acknowledge the complex dialectical relations in the workplace. In particular, the ethical requirement of the constant challenge to the status quo (which we observe in different forms of managerial control) as an imperative is important for our proposal because, we argue, it drives the dialectics of power and resistance and helps us understand the ongoing and processual nature of struggle.

Additionally, the imperative for ethical resistance (which we explain below) can be considered a key for opening up possibilities for an alternative praxis for others and with others.

Ethics of Freedom and Resistance

In his book *Resisting Ethics* (2004), Scott Schaffer develops the idea of ethics of freedom against the backdrop of existentialist and postcolonial theories by drawing on arguments by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu and Gramsci. To conceptualise our arguments, we explain how Schaffer develops his position and why it is relevant to critical organisation and ethics studies. By referring to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Schaffer argues how we live in a social order that reinforces ethical inertia (and associated oppressive mechanisms) and how this condition locks us into social relations that reproduce what is already there. This argument forms the basis for justifying why we need resistance and how we can imagine a different future by challenging the status quo of inertia. Then, borrowing concepts from Bourdieu's habitus and Gramsci's hegemony, he argues for the potential of decolonising the habitus from the hegemonic position of the (ethical) inertia of complicity. This framework helps Schaffer build his arguments based on the process of actions of resistance and how such actions should consider "others" who also share the same habitus. Then, Schaffer applies this theoretically dense framework to two different case studies of social struggle to argue for the potential of ethics of freedom—the Algerian struggle against French colonialism as a negative case (i.e. transforming colonial power relations but being unable to sustain the struggle in line with its initial principles) and the case of the Zapatistas against the Mexican government as a positive case (i.e. an ongoing processual revolutionary movement "for others" and "with others"). What is apparent in this framework is his commitment to those who have managed to transform oppressive power relations in an ongoing, inclusive and processual manner, as in the case of the Zapatistas. Following his trajectory, we argue that ethics of freedom complements the emphasis on practising self as a social practice and helps us explain the dynamics of the dialectical nature of resistance. What, then, are the themes relevant to our conceptualisation of an ethics of resistance?

First and foremost, ethics of freedom challenges the established status quo and taken-for-granted assumptions and opens up space to confront the ongoing imposition of a normative ethics of compliance and the managerial performance orientation in organisations. Furthermore, it acknowledges the nature of ongoing struggles, as we already observe in different organisational contexts, in the form of "dialectical discursive struggles" (Fleming and

Spicer 2007). As a final point, ethics of freedom elaborates on the social aspect in which resistance is for others and with others for the sake of legitimate claims. In the following, we unfold each of these claims.

Schaffer (2004) argues that status quo, well-established and solidified norms expect individuals to adjust themselves to the existing societal structure. In this context, ethics, shaped in line with these imposed norms, means maintaining the same beliefs and structures surrounding the existing power relations without questioning. "We have been trained to act in ways that perpetuate systems of inequality, exploitation, and oppression. In order to change the social order so that these systems no longer exist, we must act against inequality, exploitation, and oppression in our own forms of praxis" (Schaffer 2004, p. 255). On this basis, then, allegedly being a moral person would mean sustaining the status quo and well-established norms in a society. Such a morality would mean retaining the inequalities and injustices present in society and the inability of individuals to self-actualise (i.e. practising self, in a Foucauldian framework) (Schaffer 2004, pp. 81, 83). Hence, it becomes an ethical obligation and an imperative to resist, although the existing social order may condemn those who resist as unethical (Schaffer 2004, p. 257).

In relation to this point, Schaffer further claims that to self-actualise themselves, as an ethical imperative and as praxis, individuals are to resist such ethical beliefs that preserve and sustain the prevailing mentality (Schaffer 2004, pp. 87–88). Ethics of compliance, ethical codes of conduct or managerial regimes are examples of this type of mentality. The ethical response of resistance, then, may be to continuously disrupt such managerial control tools that help fix the status quo for managerial aims (Zoller and Fairhurst 2007, p. 1353). Hence, by nature, ethics becomes a political action; a process of participation and a challenge to established power relations. However, in relation to overcoming the status quo, ethical resistance should be a continuous, ceaseless process. The end of the struggle may eventually bring the escalation of new institutionalised rules and norms that may potentially form a new oppressive status quo, leading to new confrontations and actions of resistance (i.e. dialectics). As Schaffer (2004) argues, "...in order to maintain the ethical orientations to others and to the development of concrete freedom, one must always be in a state of resistance" (p. 98). According to Schaffer (2004), from these confrontations, self-actualisation may bring more freedom—"there is no end to freedom because once freedom does take itself as its own end, it is no longer free, but institutionalised, objectified, and a slogan—in other words, inert" (p. 268). Hence, ethical resistance as a processual praxis means resisting the status quo and resisting the stable "safer" status and identity that emerge from the constitutive relationship between power

and resistance (Bloom 2013). Hence, “resistance must serve as a “permanent provocation” not only against power but also against itself” (Bloom 2013, p. 236; also see Hardy 2016); thus, the struggle against established power relations should renew itself.

Ethics of freedom also helps us elaborate on the social aspect of resistance. Although self-actualisation against an imposed status quo seems similar to an individual struggle, the nature of resistance involves a sociality (Schaffer 2004, p. 99). Identities, structures or social practices do not have fixed positions, and the fluidity of the relationship between these elements brings social consequences in respect to ethico-political decisions, actions or changes. Therefore, in response to unfair practices, if there is to be an action of resistance, then it should be a responsible action that should also involve others (Schaffer 2004, pp. 30, 72). It is also argued that although someone may choose not to take action, he/she is nevertheless responsible since not taking any action may have an impact on others as well (similar to the responsible care of the self, as argued above). Hence, resistance emerges with others and for others (Schaffer 2004, pp. 253, 258). Only in this manner can we talk about an individual and a collective action that would seek freedom in opposition to the status quo of oppression.

We observe this principle of “with others and for others” in resistance studies as well; the effective resistance of individuals brings benefits for legal rights that may protect the interests of others (Collinson 1994) or transforms organisations to be more inclusive and responsive to demands of justice (Courpasson and Clegg 2012; Courpasson et al. 2014). Recent whistleblowing cases (such as those of Edward Snowden or Bradley Manning) are also clear examples of the principle of “for others, with others”, considering the phases that the whistle-blowers have been through as individuals (i.e. practising self as refusal), the ideals that they defend for others (i.e. democratic transparency) and the support that has been given by other social movements (also see Weiskopf and Willmott 2013).

Following Schaffer, we argue that along with the neoliberal dogma, there is a complex web of discourses that reinforces the current status quo of injustices in social and organisational life. For instance, arguments of freedom of choice and the entrepreneurial self can be used to justify the precarious working conditions that people are made to choose (Vallas and Cummins 2015). Wellbeing programmes are introduced and are being promoted to overcome workplace-related stress and anxiety, while exploitative managerial practices remain unchallenged (Cederström and Spicer 2015). Businesses are labelled as ethical, sustainable or responsible while they, in fact, invent and maintain a strategy of overproduction and higher consumption by exploiting the environment and human nature, given that we find that the notion of growth

is still considered a rational approach to the economy (Banerjee 2008; Rhodes 2016). In brief, superficially, the market and businesses (seemingly) can find solutions to their own social and organisational problems, and there is no need to challenge this status quo. However, what is disguised within these discourses and practices is the neoliberal capitalist nature of work relations, which leads to more social, economic and environmental injustices. Embedded within these relations, we argue, are the inherent tensions leading to actions of resistance in different forms (which we argue in the next section). The demand for ethical compliance with this type of managerial status quo and the negligence/marginalisation of resistance are part of a political process in which discursive struggles emerge as those who are symbolically, economically or structurally subordinated in organisations aim to subvert them (Fleming and Spicer 2007).

Consequently, our conceptual proposal for an ethics of resistance comprises practising self as a refusal of the imposed status quo in an ongoing dialectical process for others and with others. In the following, we explain how we observe such an ethico-politics of resistance in praxis.

Ethico-Politics of Resistance in Praxis

To explicate the variety of actions of resistance in organisations, we rely on three different theoretical resources. We examine: first, labour process theory (LPT)—this theory emphasises the structural control mechanisms over labour (Braverman 1974; Edwards 1979) and thus analyses class antagonisms in the workplace (Burawoy 1979; Knights and Willmott 1990; Thompson and Smith 2009). Second, we consider Foucauldian-inspired (e.g. Foucault 1980, 1982, 1991) studies. These studies, which focus on managerial discourses, resistant subjects and the identity work of employees (Ezzamel et al. 2001; Knights and Vurdubakis 1994), argue that resistance, as a form of positive power (Burrell 1988; Clegg 1998), is based on desubjectification (Hoy 2004, pp. 84–92). Finally, we explore the quotidian and individualised nature of actions of resistance (Prasad and Prasad 1998, 2000; Scott 1990) in which resistant subjects struggle to detach themselves from the colonisation of their identities and subjectivities by managerial control. The latter is argued as an extension of the debates between the Marxist-LPT and poststructuralist positions (Commisso, Comisso 2006; Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Thompson and O’Doherty 2009, pp. 113–114). In such studies of quotidian struggles, resistance is considered an indication of autonomy (Collinson 1994) and is often perceived as a cynical behaviour (from a psychoanalytical lens) that risks reproducing the (neo)liberal ideology (Contu 2008; Fleming and Spicer

Table 1 Resistance in organisations

Theoretical background(s)	Subject/actor in the organisation studies	The aim of the theoretical approach	Examples of actions of resistance
Labour process theory	Mainly blue-collar employees, the proletariat, collective subjects	To understand the confrontational antagonisms of structural and managerial control processes in the presence of labour capital conflict	Strikes, sabotage, lowering production, slowing down work, sit-ins, appropriation of work, time or resources
Adaptation of Foucault's arguments (power/knowledge, surveillance, subjectivity) to organisations and management	All employees; however, mainly white-collar employees in the organisation studies literature, including managerial groups but with various sub- and supra-identities, individual subjects	To reveal the domination and power mechanisms in organisations; to demonstrate how (in)direct managerial control uses knowledge and inconsistencies with the discourses or tools such as the org. culture and the micro-political components of subjectification	Reversing managerial discourses, desubjectification, creating alternative discourses
Daily routines/anthropology, psychoanalysis, humour, rhetoric, parrhesia	All employees; however, mainly white-collar employees in the organisation studies literature, including managerial groups, individual subjects	To understand how and in which subtle ways employees resist (or comply with) any types of direct/indirect managerial control, mostly with an individualistic reflex, overtly in the case of whistleblowing	Irony and humour; hidden transcripts, cynical view on organisational and managerial processes while complying

2003; Zizek 1989). Nevertheless, resistance, within this domain of studies, is also argued as an act of disruption because it disrupts “particular versions of reality” by using, for instance, rhetoric as a resource (Symon 2005, p. 1645) or by equating resistance with humour (Rodrigues and Collinson 1995; Taylor and Bain 2003; Westwood and Johnston 2011). Overall, although employees seem cynically compliant with organisational requirements and objectives, the struggle seems to keep and retain the autonomy of selfhood and identity (Fleming and Spicer 2003). Hence, resistance may be covert and implicit. Nevertheless, Fleming (2016) argues how these recent quotidian conceptualisations of resistance have now become naïve and limited, given the emergence and salience of broader issues related to social justice all around the world. As an ethical issue, Bloom (2015) also addresses the need for crafting resistant identities that are removed from the given limits of the organisation so that possibilities and rediscoveries emerge in different realms of struggle (also see Spicer and Böhm 2007).

We can add whistleblowing as an exemplar of individual resistance (Rothschild and Mieth 1994) and as one of the strongest political activities in organisations against managerial authority and control (see De Maria 2008; Perucci et al. 1980). The individualisation of the resisting subject is also noteworthy in this strand of resistance studies due to the decline of the visibility of collective militancy and the rise of the neoliberal fantasy of the free employee who has choices regarding his/her destiny (Gabriel 2008). The summary of this literature can be found in Table 1.

By referring to different forms of actions of resistance, as argued above (including but not limited to strikes, the creation of alternative discourses, daily struggles and whistleblowing), what can we say about the praxis of the ethics of resistance? In fact, acknowledging the political differences of each theoretical resource and the situated nature of ethics, we argue that the ethics of resistance as an explanatory framework is the common denominator of them all in different ways. Although the reality of resistance is much more complex than what we intend to argue below, for the sake of clarity and simplification, we would like to discuss the ethics of resistance on the basis of each theoretical resource. In this manner, we also lay the groundwork for demonstrating the bases of an ethico-political praxis in regard to different forms of actions of resistance.

For instance, in terms of strikes, the ethical call comes in the form of the exploitation, alienation and deskilling of labour (Braverman 1974; Sennett 2006). Those who resist practise their selves in the due process of a strike as a refusal of the status quo of a managerial control that aims for extraction of more surplus value. As class identity (the workers, the proletariat, the labourers) comes to the fore and emerges as a result of practising self (Özügürü 2011), they resist with others and for others to have their own control over labour processes. Given the assumptions of the theoretical resource (i.e. LPT), it is an ongoing dialectical struggle between labour and capital to have more control over the work and to have better work conditions or a fair wage.

With regard to creating counter discourses, the ethical call comes in the form of protecting the subjectivity and distancing self from the status quo of a managerial agenda that aims to control not only the labour but also the identity of employees (Kondo 1990). The process of desubjectification itself becomes practising self as refusal. As argued above, it is the ongoing dialectical and discursive struggle leading to the creation of “resistant selves” (Collinson 2003), which never ends. It is an ever-shifting identity struggle. However, the seemingly individualistic gains may confront and contest the limits of managerial control, disguised under different technical and social mechanisms (also see Erkama 2010; Thomas and Davies 2005), so that the praxis of resistance can open up possibilities for others and with others to reconstruct established power relations.

In daily struggles in the workplace, where life itself now becomes the target of managerial control (Fleming 2014), practising self as refusal comes in the form of cynicism, humour or counter-rhetoric. As managerial control increasingly aims to expand within the realm of the workplace and the private life, the ethical call comes in the form of creating spaces for autonomous zones, sometimes even escape zones from the status quo of the imposition of work (Parker 2015). Again, such types of daily ongoing struggles may seem individualistic and naïve; however, for instance, humour in the workplace can still be transformative of power relations for others (Taylor and Bain 2003), or counter-rhetoric may illuminate the inconsistencies of workplaces that limit the potential of the self (Symon 2005).

In the case of whistleblowing, the ethical call comes in the form of witnessing unjust or unfair organisational practices. It can be argued that whistle-blowers are exemplars of practising self (Weiskopf and Willmott 2013) since whistleblowing is a process of becoming—from being an ordinary employee to being a whistle-blower who challenges authority. A whistle-blower is someone who questions the status quo of usual practices, and commencing with the awareness of the malpractice, the endless ongoing dialectical struggle begins for the whistle-blower, the organisation and society. It is apparent that in such cases, there is a sacrifice of oneself for the rights of others, which also gets the support of others (e.g. democratic civic organisations) (Scheurman 2014).

These examples are all common actions of resistance and political actions since they challenge the managerial status quo and aim to co-construct organisational power relations in a dialectical process. Therefore, the formation of a new, resistant “self” argues “that is enough, ridiculous, unacceptable, unfair, too much” in regard to being exposed to overwork, unjust practices, another managerial regime or (self-)surveillance (i.e. the status quo in different forms). This is the moment when we observe the

emergence of ethico-politics of resistance that maintains the ongoing struggle with a dialectical praxis aiming for transformation, most likely with others and for others.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we suggest a conceptual proposal for an ethics of resistance within the scholarly discussion on ethics and organisations, which is dominated by a managerial agenda and an ethics of compliance (Painter-Morland 2015). In response to the lack of representation of other organisational actors within this discussion and concerning the limited discussion about the relationship between ethics and politics, by taking resistance as the case, we open up an ethico-political space for those who aim to subvert established power relations. Following the statement “if ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind” (Critchley 2008, p. 13), we aim to demonstrate how resistance as a political action is driven by ethical calls.

Pullen and Rhodes (2014) argue that the ethico-political nature of resistance resides in the idea of corporeal generosity; hence, ethics, as an unfinished project, can be observed in our embodied experience of open relations with others in organisations in response to a rational-managerial enclosure of difference. In our proposal, we take the essence of this argument further and unpack how we observe ethico-political dynamics in contemporary actions of resistance as a form of non-managerial difference that challenges the status quo of managerial control, which imposes an ethics of compliance.

Refraining from a romanticisation of resistance and acknowledging its complex dialectical relationship with power, in line with the ethos of CMS, as a contribution, we suggest a radical ethico-political stand for those who resist in organisations in different ways. In particular, in response to our research question, we conceptualise a solid ground to demonstrate the ethico-political nature of resistance by advancing Foucault’s argument of practising self with Schaffer’s ethics of freedom. In doing so, we do not suggest a universal, normative or predetermined ethical framework or argue that resistance is always right (Hardy 2016; Schaffer 2004). Instead, given the situational and contextual nature of organisational ethics embedded in power relations (Wray-Bliss 2009), first, we relate the ethics of “practising self as refusal” as resistance to the status quo of managerial control—which we observe in different forms in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Then, we suggest how the ongoing dialectical nature of workplace struggles (as a derivative of the ethical imperative to resist the status quo) and the concern for others with others make resistance an ethico-political action. We contextualise this conceptual proposal by referring to different forms of actions of

resistance in which an ethical subjectivity may continuously emerge, challenge and co-construct organisational power relations and themselves. Hence, we do not here suggest a final solution or a conclusion; instead, we argue how a different ethico-politics, which is already embedded within the politics of resistance, can contest the managerial appropriation of organisational ethics and lead to a reconstruction process of power relations as a praxis.

With this conceptual proposal, given the assumptions of the theoretical resources that study resistance, as argued above, our focus is on resistance in organisations. Concerning the origin of these studies, it can be also argued that the literature on ethics and politics is already dominated by cases from/assumptions of the Western world. We are aware that resistance takes many various forms in different non-organisational contexts, sites and geographies (Courpasson and Vallas 2016); hence, the ethico-political nature of such actions, processes and structures may be significantly diverse. Therefore, future research is required to understand how different radical conceptions of the ethico-politics of resistance may be possible in other contexts as well (e.g. Prasad and Prasad 2003; Scott 1990). We hope that our proposal, which draws on arguments from critical thinkers, also inspires future critical studies so that the ethico-political base of resistance can be further expanded to challenge the dominant assumptions that shape not only organisational relations but also the social and economic relations that create injustice.

Acknowledgements The conceptual proposal suggested in this study is a significantly improved version of a chapter from the first author's PhD thesis (Alakavuklar 2012). The former versions of the study were presented in the University of Leicester Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy (CPPE) Annual Meeting (2012) in the UK and in the fourth Organisation Theory Workshop (2013) in Ankara, Turkey. The first author would like to thank to PhD supervisors Ömür N. T. Özmen and Şükrü Özen for their support. The authors would like to acknowledge Stephen Dunne, Norman Jackson, Erkan Erdemir, Ralph Stablein and Craig Prichard for their invaluable friendly reviews of the earlier versions, and section editor Raza Mir and anonymous referees for their very helpful guidance in the review process.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This study does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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