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# Honorable Surrender: On the Erosion of Resistance in a University Setting

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## Abstract

This article addresses the temporality of resistance in the work context. We focus on the challenge of increasingly diminishing professional autonomy in higher education institutions as well as the vulnerability of staff subjected to academic managerialism. A case where a lecturer is exposed to the requirements to revise grading by senior administration is investigated. Power is understood from the “target’s” perspective and viewed as the *erosion of resistance*. We introduce the concepts *honorable surrender* and *smoothers* to capture the process of giving up of resistance. We argue that these concepts are of special significance in autonomy-espousing work contexts where multiplicity of power resources are employed to subordinate employees and influence their professional identities. We contend that *de-subjectification* is key in understanding the erosion of resistance.

## Keywords

power and politics, education, careers

## Introduction

While more than enough may seem to have been written on the topics of power and resistance, evergreen in social science and organization studies (Clegg, 1989; Costas & Grey, 2014; Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Hardy & Clegg, 1996), much remains to be said, including about the interplay between the two and the temporal elements of this interaction. Professional contexts, supposedly governed by autonomy and professional norms more than by formal hierarchy, offer interesting spaces for understanding contemporary forms of power and resistance. We especially focus on contexts and situations where one’s professional identity is at stake and both resisting and non-resisting could produce identity-related damage. Following recent calls for more consideration of temporality and process sensitivity in resistance theorizing (Costas & Grey, 2014; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016), a key element to our conceptualization is the realization that the struggle sometimes ends. More specifically, our study focuses on the process of giving up the resistance and how the actor may move between resistance and compliance.

The conflict between institutional compliance and professional autonomy is increasingly present in modern academia (Knights & Clarke, 2014; Lund Dean, 2018). Being highly compliant feels bad, while standing up for beliefs and showing integrity may be costly. Some report academics’ “passivity in complying with managerialist demands” (Clarke & Knights, 2015, p. 1883) and limited resistance (Ryan, 2012). Yet, in other cases, as reported here, there are frictions or

clashes between the academic and managerialist modes of operating (Bristow et al., 2017; Tuchman, 2009) or institutional logics, as referred to by some (e.g., Juusola et al., 2015; Reay & Hinings, 2009). This article examines an in-depth case of an imposed re-grading incident at a distinguished business school. It involves a young lecturer, Esteban (henceforth E), who had recently transferred to the institution after having been a lecturer in two Business Schools less exposed to market forces and a business logic than his new workplace. We present a processual account of events to reveal the increasing power resources employed to subordinate E, his decreasing resistance in light of a managerial artillery of subordination mechanisms, and the attempt to manufacture a new, perhaps weakened, professional identity that, despite resistance, inevitably in part shaped a new “appropriate” member of the university. We highlight the internal struggle between continuing resistances and admitting defeat and its consequences for one’s professional identity. To this end, we introduce the concept of *honorable surrender* to explicate the need for reconciliation of the opposing dynamics of fight or flight response in face of

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increasing exposure to power and the concept of *smoothers* that facilitate that surrender.

This article aims to understand the interplay between power and resistance with specific focus on the temporality of the latter. We argue for a *multi-perspective view of power*, taking the interplay between different power elements—coercive, agenda setting, ideological domination, and subjectification—into consideration. The article seeks to understand *power as the erosion of resistance* through the notion of honorable surrender. One element here is the display of subjectivity (showing a stand, exhibiting integrity) followed by the withdrawal of subjectivity (external forces being central, following imperatives). More specifically, we draw attention to contexts in which both capitulation and continuing resistance are experienced as problematic and the subject needs to navigate between unwelcome further outcomes of both. We expand the resistance theory by reflecting upon the temporal aspect of power struggle and the want to find an acceptable way out that will safeguard one's professional identity (central in the context of higher education [HE]) as well as one's standing and prospects within the organization.

## Power and Resistance in Higher Education

Most researchers (e.g., Bedeian, 2002; Clarke & Knights, 2015; Mumby et al., 2017; Parker, 2014; Ryan, 2012) draw a rather dark picture in which various forms of power increasingly weaken academic autonomy with little to no resistance. This lack of resistance can be understood as a consequence of a few influential administrators controlling resources (Bedeian, 2002) as well as increasingly declining collegiality, otherwise a potential source of support in resistance (Courpasson et al., 2011). This is not to deny that there still are power struggles in many settings, in particular involving senior academics and administrators (Tuchman, 2009) as well as some resistance from juniors (Bristow et al., 2017). Yet the size and scope of administration has generally weakened the position of modern academics (Jump, 2015; Seery, 2017). To set up the stage for our empirical case, we first briefly discuss the multifaceted operationalization of power and its enactment within an academic context, to then move toward the discussion on resistance.

### On Power

The four major perspectives or “faces” of power (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Lukes, 1978): formal/coercive power, agenda setting/restriction, ideology/domination, and subjectivity regulation provide a useful framework for this study. While Lukes only refers to the first three, we add the fourth, typically associated with Foucault (see Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Hardy, 1994). *Coercion* is the direct exercise of power to

achieve certain political ends by getting someone to do something. This type of power is for the most part episodic, aiming at securing specific behavioral outcomes. *Agenda setting* is about putting things on—and preventing them from appearing or removing them from—the table and framing them in a specific way (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Power is then much about gatekeeping or controlling the agenda. *Ideological domination* is how social order is made to appear inevitable, natural, and/or simply “good,” and thus unquestioned. If subjects accept the proposed “truths,” this exercise of control bears imprints of power, making individuals comply without much consideration or protest (Marcuse, 1964; Therborn, 1980). Finally, *subjectification* “seeks to determine an actor’s very sense of self, including their emotions and identity” (Fleming & Spicer, 2014, p. 244). Through social definitions of what is normal and what characterizes a subject in a specific category, the individual is being imprinted with the sense of “normality.” The discourse defines and constrains the individual, becoming produced as a specific type of subject regulating himself/herself (Foucault, 1980; Grey, 1994; Knights, 2009). In the work context, this form of power is often linked to one’s professional identity.

Career is related to (managerial) power in different ways (Cameron & Blackburn, 1981; Kenny, 2018). The career-oriented academic can be highly sensitive to not only the power associated with the academic peer community but also, and increasingly, in relationship to managerial demands (Angervall et al., 2017). He/she is an easy target for coercive power as all risks to jeopardizing career progress will be avoided (Archer, 2008). Agenda setting effects, such as career issues linked to tenure and promotion, guide people’s priorities, often blocking other ways of dealing with academic life and its development (Petersen, 2011). Ideologies circling around prestige and superiority, gaining recognition, and highlighting and celebrating “career” over other concerns, strongly influence academic values and priorities (Archer, 2008; Kenny, 2018). The instrumentalization and careerization of academia is then very much an issue of power, where career and rewards take the upper hand and ideals such as autonomy, scholarship, moral commitment, and meaningful work become less valued and not so important for how the world is seen. Traditional academic ideals then become of less significance as a source of resistance. Similarly, subjectification of the career-defined subject means developing templates for progress for carefully assessing the individual in fairly definite ways around performance measurement regimes, formal criteria, and promotions that lead the individual to define himself/herself in terms of rank and progress (Cameron & Blackburn, 1981; Drennan, 2001). One’s professional identity is central to subjectification. The key here is the self-definition around a career trajectory and a future self. Power is built into this notion, leading to self-regulation with a strong sensitivity to external signals and feedback (Grey, 1994). The power here

is not so much external forces as the regulating pressure of a career discourse and its self-disciplining effect (Petersen, 2011). As we will see, however, sometimes this regulation of subjectivity becomes a matter of weakening or eroding a clear sense of self, rather than producing a distinct template for the subject.

The multifaceted perspective on power serves as a backdrop to our case. Our analysis considers the range of forms of power in operation, while stressing the importance of their interplay (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). As described by Vaara et al. (2005, p. 601) we can link “. . . ‘observable’ events of ‘power’ or ‘powerlessness’ with ‘naturalized’ social and organizational practices, techniques and structures of domination constituted by them.”

### *On Resistance*

There is a wide set of views and accounts of work resistance (Hodson, 1995; P. Prasad & Prasad, 1998). Yet there is no agreement as to what is supposed to be counted as resistance (Mumby et al., 2017). Many classifications of resistance tend to address the more explicit areas of workplace behavior (see, for example, the work of Hodson, 1995; Tucker, 1993), quite different from those views emphasizing subjectivity, with an interest in the “inner” distancing from managerial efforts to control (e.g., Thomas & Davies, 2005). The literature often considers wide themes and classifications of resistance and less so actual episodes stretched in time (e.g. Bristow et al., 2017). The work of Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) and Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) are among the rare accounts that implicitly take the temporality of resistance into consideration. Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) presents a chronological account of resistance narratives, discussing the longitudinal process of multiple resistance attempts and tactics. Yet in the context of workforce bullying, the author suggests that employees continue opposition until admitting defeat and exiting the organization. But often the dynamics are less “linear” and more complex. This is partially addressed by Kärreman and Alvesson (2009), indicating a kind of “dance of resistance.” By reflecting upon the idea of “counter-resistance,” the authors describe processes by which the impulse to resist becomes countered and neutralized. Yet while the concept of counter-resistance focuses on regulating, silencing, and minimizing internal urge to oppose, it does not help us in understanding situations where the drive to resist is strong and the professional identity of individuals is endangered by remaining resistant. Situations like this are many in professional contexts in which resistance can be interpreted as uncooperative, obstructionist or hostile. Here continued insistence on resistance may be costly.

In the context of HE, what is perceived as dysfunctional managerialism is likely to evoke resistance (Mainardes et al., 2011). According to Bristow et al. (2017), resistance among early career business academics is a complex, multi-faceted,

and evolving phenomenon, but their study shows only weak and “hidden” expressions, illuminating the absence of standing up against people or regimes of power. This resistance might be an unavoidable outcome of the continuous tensions between fulfilling one’s career aspirations and finding meaning in one’s work (Knights & Clarke, 2014, p. 45). Anderson (2008, p. 266) shows that much resistance in the context of HE is represented through minor “everyday” or “routine” actions manifested through discursive practices that employ academic values against managerial colonization. Within the discursive turn in the conceptualization of resistance (Mumby, 2005) a wide array of discursive practices have been identified, ranging from irony (Fleming & Sewell, 2002) and “bitching” (Sotirin, 2000) to mimicry (P. Prasad & Prasad, 2000). Numerous scholars in this tradition link resistance to identity work and show how engaging in resistance serves as a reinforcer of efforts to secure a professional identity (e.g., Knights, 1990; Knights & McCabe, 2000). The resistance addressed is often implicit and “safe” for the “resister,” more oriented to self than to actually change things or directly challenge those in (formal) power. Contu (2009) refers to this as *decaf* resistance. If resistance is a source of positive identity and the prospect of “safe,” *decaf* resistance does not work due to a clash between power and resistance and difficulties in avoiding behavioral compliance, what happens then? How can one resolve a conflict between maintaining a desirable identity expressed and maintained through resistance and overcoming the undesirable identity issues triggered through either continuing the confrontation or complying? The prospects of appearing as a troublemaker with an uncertain career prospect or as a person just giving in and sacrificing traditional academic ideals and identity are both problematic and result in a dilemma difficult to handle. In this article we take a close look at the interplay between forms of power and resistance in the context where both compliance and resistance contribute to undesirable professional identity. We highlight the episodic and processual element of this interplay and stress the importance of a constructive resolution to this tension.

## **Method**

### *The Case*

At an international conference, one of us met E, a somewhat frustrated colleague. We talked about events in HE institutions and the importance of doing more close-up research about these, at a time when HE, in particular business schools, becomes more and more similar to other organizations. E then offered us his experience and we saw this as an informative case, with potential for broadly relevant insights. Our research project focuses on an analysis of an in-depth case of enforced compliance about grading in a Business School setting. We agree with Clegg (2008, p. 157) that

“only case study can provide the fine-grained contextual detail necessary” for nuanced, theoretically informed understandings of power.

Our case is situated in an up-market business school. The school is heavily dependent on fee-paying enrolments. Global rankings and student satisfaction are, therefore, very important and influence various administrative processes from enrolment, through course set-up, to grading. Staff performance is assessed based on both teaching and research, and underperforming lecturers (assessed through student evaluations) are requested to review their curricula. In this type of setting, business schools are often under pressure to make students satisfied, potentially undermining academic values (Locke & Spender, 2011; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). More generally, in HE, there is a strong shift from faculty to managerial and administrative control (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Tuchman, 2009). Many universities now comprise more administrators than faculty members (Jump, 2015; Seery, 2017).

The school in our study employs a wide range of administrative staff who maintain numerous bureaucratic processes, which are believed to secure student satisfaction, as well as assure uniformity of processes, which are assumed to improve the school's functioning. With clearly defined responsibilities in various areas, the school preserves a relatively hierarchical structure.

We predominantly rely on two data sources. First, we analyze email correspondence between E, a junior university staff member, and one of his superiors. We focus on the central piece of this correspondence in the case we describe. Second, interviews with E. The first interview happened a few months after the event and was just a lengthy informal conversation about the incident described. We then approached E again to ask for his permission about showcasing the incident in our study. The second interview account, therefore, presents a more thought-over reflection upon the events. We followed a conversational approach to interviewing (Kvale, 1996), in which we allowed for a free-flowing stream of thoughts, interpretations, and feelings, taking into account the contextual contingencies of our case. We asked (a) what happened, (b) how did/do you understand this and (c) how did/do you relate to this. We then tried to mobilize E's (considerable) analytical and reflexive capacity and asked for reflection beyond pure descriptions of experiences.

As a supplement to the focused work, we have also informally talked with members of E's school, not in order to get formal data, but to understand the local context and thus situate the experiences and responses of E.

### *Camouflage*

Our choice of data can, of course, be seen as one-sided, but the sensitive nature of the material made it impossible to approach E's superiors. It also calls for careful camouflaging

of case details (Lee, 1993) as research on sensitive topics can pose a threat to informants. From the perspective of the study's focus on power as the employment of forces aiming at erosion of resistance, E's perspective is central and the data allows tracing both (a) the operations of power that come through very clearly in the email correspondence (we are not interested in senior people's considerations or motives, as much as their “productive” acts as they “hit” the target) and (b) E's responses, interpretations, and feelings in the resistance breakdown process. We purposefully camouflage informant's data, including the geographic location of his institution. We involved E throughout the data analysis process by consulting him regarding our interpretations of events and his words to assure that our analysis accurately reflects his perspective. Finally, we have sought ethics approval for this project to assure protection of the individuals involved.

### *Learning from Specific Episodes*

While the study of an episode in an organization may be seen as narrow, we think there is potential to learn much from in-depth studies of specific material, in particular if the process is taken seriously (Stake, 2000). In fact, numerous influential papers in organization studies rely on a sample of one individual (e.g., Costas & Fleming, 2009; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). We followed their conventions and attempted to showcase as much of the data as possible to allow for alternative interpretations. While we study an episode, we take a processual approach to our investigation, capturing phenomena such as evolving thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and changing relationships (Langley, 1999, p. 692), often overlooked in management research that predominantly focuses on mapping broad patterns, asking people about general experiences (e.g., Bristow et al., 2017; Knights & Clarke, 2014).

Given the focus on an episode and small volume of empirical material, our article is not easily pigeonholed into the standard categories of an empirical article with some theoretical conclusion or a theoretical article with an empirical illustration. We believe there is a space for a combination, not privileging either ideal type. Generative, rich but limited data may work with theoretical ideas in a careful dialogue, in line with abductive ideals (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009) and the notion of considering data as a critical dialogue partner (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Theoretical ideas, such as the referred views on power and resistance, may not so much be strictly applied, but carefully considered and then revised by a case, viewed through, more than domesticated by theoretical considerations, and employed also as a trigger for new insights and ideas. In our case, the empirics is thus central, partly in its own right, as a careful but somewhat limited description. At the same time, a broader and bolder idea generation, inspired by the case, is a second, equal part of the contribution.

## Attentive Hermeneutics

We engaged in hermeneutical interpretations in order to trace newly emerging themes, including the interplay between expressions of power, resistance, and the studied individual's struggle with integrity in the process. Hermeneutics focuses on uncovering the hidden meaning behind what is apparent (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 246). It allows tracing the ongoing efforts to preserve asymmetric relations within organizations (Phillips & Brown, 1993). We work with hermeneutical circle movements between the whole of the case and look carefully at details, letting the interpretations of the whole and part influence each other (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). By simultaneously looking at the text, the organization, and the specific circumstances of the situation, we aim to extrapolate the unspoken "common sense" implied by actors. In line with Prasad and Mir (2002) our analysis followed a four-step approach. First, we identified text to be studied (a letter to E) and chose a textual method of analysis. In our case, we employed directed data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281) with the four-dimensional taxonomy of power (coercive, agenda setting, ideological, and subjectivity regulation) guiding our interpretations. Second, we paid attention to the socio-organizational context in which the text emerged (subordinate-supervisor interaction in an up-scale business school). Third, a pre-understanding based on close familiarity with the power and resistance literature as well as with the institutional setting was then supplemented with emergent understandings following from in-depth readings of the case, with an ambition to uncover the hidden meaning behind the literal text. Finally, we close the circle by proposing a conceptual interpretation of the text within its context. Given the use of pre-understanding and the inclination for us as researchers to take side with the academic in the case, it is important to show, consider, and counteract the "biased preference" in research commitments. While social scientists are seldom neutral in their investigations, we try to seriously consider also the management side of the case studied, bearing in mind the need to oversee and sometimes legitimately intervene in grading matters. Nevertheless, with the focus on resistance and its corrosion, E's perspective as opposed to objective assessment of the situation is central for our study.

## The Episode

### Phase 1

After grades were formally released, E was approached by a senior administrative person (henceforth SA) to explain the rationale behind some of the grading assigned to students in one of his courses. It was suggested that someone else should reassess the grading. Assuming SA was asking for clarification, E responded by detailing all aspects of the grading as well as pointing out several errors in assumptions made by the administrator. In a brief response SA insisted on having

an external assessor confirm the grades, suggesting that after such external assessment the grades would most likely be revised. E's direct supervisor (henceforth DS) was included in all the communication and SA addresses him to identify the external assessor.

### *First interview with E*

It was my first encounter with SA, and I thought it was worthwhile to express clearly how I went about the grading. I thought there was a misunderstanding as some of the arguments raised in the initial email from SA were incorrect. Consequently, I felt angry when, after I'd sent my explanation to SA, he did not acknowledge his mistakes or respond in any way to my comments. His disregard to my arguments upset me more than the fact the grades were to be changed. I felt strongly about protecting my integrity of the initial grading and not giving in, more than I feared about the grades being changed by someone else. I thought this integrity is what academic work is valued for. I also felt higher obligation to the students than to SA. I was unfamiliar with the function of SA and, as I found out later, I heavily underestimated his position within the University.

### *Second interview with E*

The systems I worked in before were giving me much more professional autonomy. I never had to explain my grades and if I was asked to give a student another "chance" there was no pressure for me to comply. Consequently, I assumed this process to be one of consultation and not imposition. While I didn't feel well about the lack of cooperation from SA, I genuinely wanted to collaborate to understand the system and not to violate the norms. I wanted to maintain my self-image as a fair grader; as an academic with professional attitude, who takes his grading job seriously; and of a constructive, collegial member of the organization. I believed these qualities were crucial for building a successful career at my new institution.

We here see how E takes a strong subject position as a true academic, emphasizing his self-understanding, values, and integrity.

### Phase 2

At this stage DS became directly involved, requesting a meeting with E. In the meeting DS demanded that E re-grade students' work. E reiterated his view that he followed the predefined criteria and that, therefore, re-grading is not possible. Moreover, E claimed he had an important 24-hour deadline coming up and could not commit to re-grading. Parts of the meeting were heated as E claimed to have done things correctly but may have misunderstood local conventions, which he indicated were difficult to grasp. E offered to revise the grading criteria for next semester to make sure that students' outcomes were more likely to reflect the institutional expectations of which he had been unaware.

Since the workload was modest, DS stated that he was going to re-grade the papers. Later that day E received an email of over 1,300 words from DS, which is presented further almost in its entirety (bold as in the original email; we have underlined some elements for emphasis).

Esteban –

Thank you for your time today to discuss the grading for the course.

I gratefully appreciate your assistance.

Thank you also for taking on board some of my advice and also agreeing to adjust the matrix of assessment criteria for the semester 2 delivery. (. . .)

Thank you also for speaking so freely about the grading issues this semester and sharing some of your views. I have had time to reflect on some of your comments and I would like to take this opportunity to respond to one aspect of your comments regarding, shall we call it, “grade ownership.”

Specifically, in the context of your grades you stated that when you issue a grade of X% that it represents a quality aspect. While I applaud such enthusiasm, it dawned on me that you (or me or any other academic) are not the “owners” of the grades. So I think it may be useful for you to understand the role of SA and how grades are issued at our University, because as a relatively new staff member, this may not have been explained to you.

If anyone “owns” the grades it is the Dean. SA has been given delegation by the Dean with respect to matters such as grading. We, as academics, make a recommendation to SA for a grade. SA considers this and approves grades for final approval by the Dean.

I am aware that you have explained your case to SA, and I have also had the opportunity to listen to your comments supporting your judgement. But the fact remains, that despite your explanation, SA is still unconvinced and has directed that the manuscripts be remarked. If he does not approve it, then the Dean will not approve it and the students will suffer through the delay in getting their grades.

Also, the Dean will start asking questions as to why these grades are the way they are. You and I both want to avoid such a conversation.

I have now had the opportunity to read each of the four papers. (. . .) However, despite me saying that I will remark the papers, I am unable to form a view as to the relative merit of each paper. (. . .)

**I have arranged for the papers to be returned to you by internal mail. You may wish to collect them from the outgoing mail tray early on Thursday rather than chance them being caught up, lost or delayed in the internal mail.**

I would be grateful if you could kindly revisit the grading for each of the four reports and submit a change by the end of the day on Thursday.

**It is important that these grades are finalised by Thursday close of business.** (. . .)

I would like you to identify which is the single best paper and then rank each paper successively. I would also like you to use your judgement and the recent feedback to apply a revised grade for each paper given the step variance between each paper.

This task should not take you long to complete. The grades have to be finalised by no later than this week and we have been directed by SA to reassess them.

Esteban, I don’t want you to feel put out by this request and I would appreciate if you could continue to deal with this matter in a timely and professional manner until the grades are ultimately approved and released to students.

If I may make a comment, candidly and in no way is this intend to be condescending. . . As a new staff member you have made good impressions with senior colleagues and I can certainly see your career being further entrenched here at our University while there is confidence that you can work with the various management teams. This grading issue is something that has visibility right now at the Dean level and I believe it is in your interest to very quickly and proactively arrest this situation before this has any chance of being misconstrued or interpreted from a distance as being obstructionist. Look, this paragraph was hard to write and no doubt as you are reading this it is coming across as totally condescending and acquisitory. Please do not interpret this way; perhaps it is brevity or my shortness of time.

So what do we need to do. . . Four grades, 36 or so pages, uniquely ranked in order of quality, and revised grades input by the end of day Thursday. Holding aside any emotion you may have about this matter for now, it is a reasonably simple task that only you are able to do given the projects backgrounds, and I think it should take no more than 30 minutes.

Once this is done, I will make some time very soon for us to talk through this issue again if it is helpful for you to reflect on and have the chance for any more comments. I am very keen to incorporate your superb ideas, not just into this subject, but also into other courses we teach and make sure this is done in a way that meets to diverse (and sometimes conflicting) requirements of all the university stakeholders.

Thanks again for acting on this so promptly.

. . . .

Regards,

DS



*First interview with E*

Initially, the 24-hour deadline became a very good excuse to avoid the re-grading. I felt that it was protecting my integrity without coming across as too obstructionist. I felt the pressure was too high for me to just remain “resistant.” Before our meeting I thought that DS and I were on very good terms. I realized though, that our relationship was good as long as I was following his agenda. I immediately felt this email was a threat to my career at this school. I also realized there was no point fighting any longer. . . . I felt that I had no choice. I was new in the institution and my conviction was that more resistance would only work against me. Yet, I still was struggling with not wanting to completely give up my integrity. So, while I had a feeling of personal satisfaction that the DS was unable to differentiate the reports, I had the need to externally protect my self-image as a fair grader. Consequently, I couldn’t accept the arbitrary grading system outlined by the DS and I proposed a new scheme which I outlined in my response to the DS and which was yet another way to try to protect my professional integrity.

*Second interview with E*

I wish I discussed the issue with someone else earlier on. This was a part of organizational setup that was alien to me and I realized that my independent resistance did not lead to anything. I lost my grounding. I did not want the issue to escalate any further. I felt that the system “won” and I would have to comply.

From the perspective of time I am surprised how much effort the DS took to write up this email. It must have taken him more time than the re-grading would have had or even asking SA to simply accept the original grades. I guess the DS was trying to play an obedient member of the system himself. I think he was also afraid I would continue resistance.

Here, E feels that he has “no choice,” that “resistance did not lead to anything.” There is a sense of a “system” so strong that compliance becomes self-evident, making it impossible to hold on to the identity-based position.

**Phase 3**

The following day, all three parties met to discuss the current situation and, more importantly, to agree on future directions.

*First interview with E*

I remember entering the meeting with both confidence and hope. I was hoping that SA would understand my position and accept my explanation so that we could collaboratively work together in the future. I was surprised and angry with the way SA responded, raising his voice numerous times and not being open

to hear any arguments. I left the meeting really disappointed as I failed at both making the case for the grades and maintaining positive work relationships.

*Second interview with E*

Throughout the process, I celebrated the small battles I won along the way. I felt I protected my integrity by initially refusing to re-grade the papers or by not accepting the imposition of either SA or DS. Only now, I see that these victories were absolutely meaningless and that at the end of the day I became quite a functional member of the system. For example, I changed my educational approach to make sure it yielded results closer to what was expected, and I also became one of the people who would advise the newcomers to comply with the grading expectations.

Yet, I actually never asked what would have happened if I did oppose SA’s assessment. When I shared my story with one of my colleagues, he smiled and said: “You don’t oppose SA. Nobody opposes SA.” Through later conversations with colleagues, I learned that the underlying assumption is to conform to the system. Despite its dysfunctionality, we all get frustrated by or joke about, to my knowledge nobody does anything to change it. And to be honest, I have not done much either.

. . . Several months later I learnt about DS’ “contribution” to my promotion assessment. The incident has been used to undermine my career prospects and present me as difficult to work with, non-collaborative, and strong headed. The fear of exclusion materialized.

Here the resistance inclination has more permanently eroded, that is, there is an effect outside the specific struggle in the episode. E feels that he “became quite a functional member of the system,” at least in the respects addressed in this process.

**Power in Action**

In most other organizational contexts, this intervention and the final response described earlier would be probably seen as unremarkable. A simple instruction to do what one’s boss asks is a common rule in corporations (Jackall, 1988). In this case, many hours of work are involved, in particular for E, and also for DS. The email from DS mobilizes a wealth of mechanisms and resources of power, making resistance difficult. Before we elaborate on our study’s contribution to the resistance literature, we present our brief interpretative analysis of the role of power in the case discussed.

**Formal Power and Coercion**

In this case, formal power is mobilized in a strong way, given the university context and the scale of the matter. Hierarchy

is emphasized, where E is placed down at the bottom of the pyramid and made a subordinate, in a way quite different from what one would expect from a traditional, non-managerialist university. E is a long way from where the “ownership” belongs—the term signals a reinforcement of legitimate right. There is strong signaling that bureaucracy is privileged in relation to knowledge or professional judgment (in contrast to E’s previous employment). Visualization of hierarchy means the underscoring of subordination and the corrosion of a platform for resistance. SA is constructed as the ruler, to be obeyed. Further, there is a strong warning, if not threat, about career consequences.

### *Agenda Setting Power*

The key for many issues of power is how the agenda is defined—what is included and what is left out (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). In the case, there is a shift in agenda from E’s effort to reason to pure compliance; from an issue of professional judgment and reasoning to one of formal hierarchy and power. The agenda is about bureaucracy and E’s ignorance of how the organization works—the dean owns the grades and this has been delegated to SA.

Important here is to consider this as a specific construction—one built around the downplaying of academic professionalism and framing the institution based on hierarchy and managerial prerogatives (Delbridge & Sallaz, 2015). Here, power operates through the way in which “agendas are set in organizational life by shaping the anticipated outcomes of various behaviors” (Fleming & Spicer, 2014, p. 243).

This is, of course, not self-evident, as the grading is still in the hands of E and he can pursue the conflict without any formal or legal consequences. E could push his argument that the issue is about academic judgement, that his expert judgment should be respected, and assert his agenda as the legitimate one. Yet resistance in this context is seen by E as challenging since his position within the system comes with limited agenda-setting power credibility.

### *Ideological Power*

Ideological power means both the celebration and persuasion of beliefs, values, and norms so that they appear as facts or fact like. DS indicates that E has not understood the norms at the school. E speaks “so freely” and expresses “enthusiasm,” DS writes, but this may also indicate that E has overstepped the line and acts immaturely. By pointing out to E that he is not the owner of the grades, DS is attempting to make E accept clues on correct or appropriate norms and understandings. The underlying ideological conflict—academic professionalism versus managerialism—is set aside. The issue is “de-ideologized” and presented as a matter of “facts.” An effort is made to re-frame existing hierarchical relations as inevitable and acceptable. A general ideology of compliance with managerial hierarchy is propagated and reproduced: an

ideal of being complaint, getting along and not doing anything “stupid” is practiced and reinforced. People, including E (he somewhat shamefully admits), enact the corporate ideology, although without necessarily buying into it—a form of cynical consciousness (Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

### *Subjectivity Regulation*

By implying that E is taking “on board some of my advice” and “agreeing to adjust,” DS frames E as an advice-taking, rational, and agreement-oriented person, thus opening up a more or less consensual situation about the template for being. Inclusion is used here as a mechanism, supported by references to “our university” and “we.” Collegiality and organizational identification are here underscored. This is, however, played out against exclusion as E is considered as only partly belonging to “our university,” or, as perhaps not worthy of membership or, even less, a good career. Being ignorant or obstructionist, not demonstrating sufficient collegiality or respect for legitimate hierarchy are hinted at. Failure to “get it” may shift the impression from moral position to cognitive failure, a sign of rigidity rather than integrity. E’s compliance/non-compliance is also (re)framed as a matter of social identity, being part of “our university,” that is, an expression of normalization. Key issues for E of integrity, professionalism or autonomy are avoided or implicitly marginalized by DS. They are even indicated to be career stoppers. E gets the direct hint from DS who sees E’s career “being further entrenched here at our University while there is confidence that you can work with the various management teams.” E needs to show the right ability to work with people, that is, being compliant, and not doing things that could be “misconstrued or interpreted from a distance as being obstructionist.”

E’s place in this is underscored. As a good, junior member of staff, he carries out work in “a professional and timely” manner. This hints at a thin identity, not the thick one typically associated with academics and other professions (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016) with strong values in terms of knowledge, status, integrity, and autonomy. Subjectivity is thus loosened up or weakened. There is an effort to make E embrace a more flexible subject position, not so much as a part of using power to subjectify (develop a specific sense of prescribed self) as much as being open for managerial requirements. Professional identity is eroded, curtailed by managerialism. The desire to belong in both symbolic (professional identity-related) and material (remained employed) ways restrains the will to resist.

### **The Temporality of Resistance: A Process of Erosion**

The use of the variety of modes of power undermines resistance. Based on the case, we see some interesting aspects of power operations that lead to E refraining from further

resistance and adapting to “normal(ized)” organizational membership. Viewed from one angle, power is the active use of various forces and mechanisms, but from another perspective, as our case indicates, it is the *process of erosion of resistance*. The temporal aspect of this process is of special importance in this case. In non-totalitarian regimes people may always resist. Power often triggers resistance. In particular in professional settings, where status, commitment, and autonomy are common, there is almost an identity imperative or a duty to show some resistance—or at least play stubborn in relationship to management and bureaucracy. What happens however if protecting one aspect of professional identity through active resistance, simultaneously leads to negative consequences in terms of risk for career sanctions as well as for the being defined negatively by superiors? There is thus a conflict between the two key identity sources: professional values and a desired positive career trajectory. How is this dilemma addressed? What reconciliation is there? There may be many opportunities but there is an interesting lesson emerging from the case of E.

### Honorable Surrender

E's story is one of an *honorable surrender*. After putting up clear resistance and then experiencing overwhelming forces and high costs, E feels that he has done what he could to maintain his integrity. Despite capitulating, E has reduced shame and guilt. E perceives victory in the “small battles” and having suffered some damages as sufficient to maintain a sense of self-esteem and dignity, which made behavioral compliance acceptable. Compliance is here a *gradual process* of becoming convinced that *enough* has been done for giving up the struggle. At the end of the story, however, E views this as rather meaningless. E's attitude is one of cynical consciousness (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). He sees through a dysfunctional system, but he—like others—complies. Furthermore, he recognizes that his career prospects were measured against his professional convictions. He believes, that despite compliance, his promotion is directly affected by the incident. The damage then is double: fading professional identity and simultaneous harm to his career prospects within the institution. At the same time, the clear effort to temporarily resist saves the ego and the strong forces eroding resistance make it acceptable to comply. When talking to E he still seems feeling comfortable about himself and his job.

More interestingly, from a longitudinal perspective, E's celebration of small victories and having suffered made him, at first, overlook the fact that he became an active perpetuator of the system he initially opposed. Upon reflection, post honorable surrender, he revises his view, re-constructing the surrender as somewhat less honorable. His remark “I also became one of the people who would advise the newcomers to comply with the grading expectations,” indicates that compliance has not only got the grip over him but that he

also, at least in one key respect, reproduces this, adding to compliance as organizational normalization. But this is not part of his subjectivity as much as routinized, compliant behavior almost “outside” the self. It is thus an expression of a *de-subject*, that is, a fairly passive, imperative, and convention—following individual within a specific domain, more than an outcome of subjectification, that is, a specific, constituted self being, the active bearer of a way of being. At the same time, E has preserved a critical outlook and is reflexive about this, thus not having been completely normalized. These findings reinforce the criticality of processual investigation of the evolving dynamics of power and resistance, where moments of experienced resistance may be re-interpreted as really lacking this quality. Resistance is thus sometimes more fluctuating not only in terms of behavior and subjectivity but also in the various constructions and re-constructions of one's doing in the power/resistance area. The individual then may move between being a subject, in our case subjectified by academic identity, and a *de-subject*, following system imperatives without much subjectivity (a sense of being a particular person, with identity and emotional commitments) being involved.

### Smoothers

The combination of experiences of cost and having saved self-esteem through sufficient demonstration of resistance is important where there is a cultural expectation of discretion. Power is then partly the use of means *to undo obstacles* to subordination and convince the opponent that giving in is not too costly in terms of identity loss or experience of shame and guilt. Power then partly works through hinting at a road away from resistance by demonstrating superior force as well as a smooth ending of the struggle. The notion of honorable surrender is crucial to maintain the healthy levels of professional self-esteem, preserving a sense of status, respect, and autonomy, even though in the case of E these qualities are not fully accomplished. In our case, honorable surrender is made possible through a skillful employment of *smoothers*, facilitating the de-subjectification (from the integrity protecting academic).

DS offers lubrication for E's route to compliance, although behind his smoothing is “the stick.” Smoothers have a key role in the enactment of power in contemporary settings. Similar to the use of a multitude of forms of power, there is a use of a plurality of smoothers, producing an erosion of resistance through making retreat less painful and the de-subjectified position more acceptable. Smoothers in the case are the legitimacy of hierarchy (although this is debatable); the hearing procedure (E having a voice); flattery—promises to incorporate “your superb ideas,” “you have made good impressions with senior colleagues”; DS's instructions on how to do the re-grading and reference to 30 minutes work, references to E's ignorance about local norms (providing an

excuse for giving in); indications that E may come out as obstructionist, being a cognitive failure more than a moral hero; warnings about possible future career consequences, and so on. There is a combination of subjectivity addressing and de-subjectification elements. All these can be seen as facilitating ways out of a resistance mood. DS feeds into E's possible self-construction of a respected academic, having preserved honor and dignity, but even more so a sense of the issue at hand being something non-personal, bypassing subjectivity.

Of course, there is ambiguity between power as an active force and smoothers as facilitators of power through aiding the discontinuation of resistance. But mobilizing force against your protagonist and showing a retreat route are not the same thing and arguably, the concept of smoothing adds to understandings of power/resistance. In the case, SA demonstrates very little of understanding or use of smoothers (with the focus on obedience), while DA, also being a fellow academic, engages in smoothing.

*Smoothing may be viewed as the softening power that opens the possibility of honorable surrender*, a type of giving up that is vital in work contexts built around the notion of professional and intellectual autonomy. The softening of power possibly reinforces its effect, leading in our case to a mix of significant de-subjectification and a minor element of subjectification (subject confirmation). DS' signaling of reflection, consideration, and careful phrasing makes it, in an academic context, somewhat easier to accept without resistance. So are all the promises of taking E's views seriously "later on." There is an anticipation of E responding very negatively so a wealth of signifiers intended to provide "feeling rules" and a sense of dignity is provided. Again, the temporal interplay between power and resistance is key to understanding the analyzed process. The resistance then is a moment, as a temporary act, making the compliance in a later stage feasible.

### **Power, Resistance, and Professional Identity**

The case allows for some further exploration of the specific operations of *de-subjectification*. E is told how the grading should be done so that the desired outcome will be produced. This undermining of professional autonomy and respect may have mixed effects of making E feel put down (following instructions means a lack of discretion) but possibly also liberated (following instructions reduces identity involvement as the instructions rather than "I" appear to be the agent). This "doing" and not "being" is an element of de-subjectification, that is, framing the subjectivity to shift from traditional academic to, within a specific domain, a follower of rules and routines. It is a major part of the process of identity regulation in an active, "rich" sense (with a strong definition of self) as (temporarily) emptying or parking E of "too much" identity. The person fitting into a bureaucratic system can be

seen as an individual "thin" on identity, thus disinclined to mobilize much resistance associated with identity. Of course, people may develop a bureaucratic subjectivity, willingly following and enforcing rules, but this is different from what we refer to here as de-subjectified rule embracement. The key point of the case is not regulation of E from a person with strong academic identity to a bureaucrat, but to loosing up the former—de-subjectifying—so that he will comply with instructions.

Rather than the "right" subjectivity or a template for being, we have *a case of self-reduction or moving out of subjectivity*. This creates more space for "substantive" or "hard" media of power—bureaucracy, material consequences—to make a difference. In other words, rather than making people define themselves in a specific way, and act accordingly, they are persuaded *not* to focus on who they may be, but follow "external" media instead of what is personally meaningful. Outer forces rather than self and identity then become central. Alvesson and Robertson (2016) talk about identity minimalism. De-subjectification is an alternative mode of doing power, rather than subjectification or identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The latter refers to efforts to control people so that they adapt to another template of academic identity, something different from de-subjectification. Following the move from academic to managerialism/market logic (Juusola et al., 2015), altering one's professional identity and behavior to create an "appropriate" organizational member—subjectified or de-subjectified—is a crucial mechanism in securing the desired organizational logic (Berman, 2011) and minimizing resistance. Temporality is again at stake not only from the perspective of identity threat but also from the perspective of long-term embeddedness of an individual in a given system. Smoothing and consequent honorable surrender enable not only subjective safeguarding of one's identity but also protecting reputation in a career context. From a temporal perspective, removing oneself from the situation, in long-term led to the disassociation even from the "decaf" (Contu, 2009) version of resistance, that is, without (substantive) effect. It is not until the time of the research interview that E realizes that his small victories were meaningless. In fact, one could speculate that the negatively loaded intensity of the resistance process we described, generated an even more compliant organizational member, who now seeks to protect others from similar experiences by enacting and partly advocating compliance.

We see power operating in two interrelated ways in encouraging a discontinuation of resistance, smoothing (a) as opening up for and confirming honorable surrender, feeding into a degree of (temporary) positive identity construction and (b) offering de-subjectification, where identity is viewed as non-issue in the situation (constructed as a matter of behavior or as acceptance of overwhelming powers one cannot reasonably resist).

## Contribution and Conclusion

This article contributes to the understanding of the micro-dynamics of power and resistance in settings where managerialism is expanding, while academic status and discretion are undermined (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015). Needless to say, power is exercised in a multitude of ways and academic life varies widely. However, the case presented here is far from exceptional. In fact, a comment “We all are Estebans” made by one of the participants in an international conference, where we presented an earlier draft of the article, met an overwhelming cheer, indicating the broader relevance of the case. Consequently, the themes of power and resistance are increasingly relevant for the understanding of contemporary university settings and other professional contexts more broadly.

A key contribution of the article is about the interplay between power and resistance seen from a temporal perspective. One thing is an expression of resistance in a specific moment or as a general orientation, another is what is happening over time in a situation where power/resistance unfolds in a dynamic process. Power is of relevance where there is a choice and the outcome is not given. Power presupposes resistance—actual or potential. Resistance and resisters surface in “moment-to-moment co-constitutive moves” that emerge when one’s identity is endangered (Harding et al., 2017). The experience of having no or limited choice, or there being no reason for a choice, is crucial for the ultimate—or temporal—victory of power. In the case E says, “I felt that I had no choice”; this is not only a negative experience but also one that lessens the burden of a choice. The institutionalized significance of career and sensitivity to negative effects on it makes a “choice” to be experienced as a “non-choice.” Identity is left out of the picture, there is no salient, clearly experienced subject responsible for a (non-)choice.

Identity preservation is a strong source of resistance, particularly in professional contexts where identity basis is one of status and respect of knowledge. This may make people take a stance—the ego needs to be protected. The *erosion of resistance* means then loosening up this need—an *honorable surrender* is an element here. This is a special aspect of power resistance, different from engaging in a battle, putting of a fierce resistance, and then losing. It is a matter of ceasing the fight/resistance because the potential resister is persuaded to not resist, without fully accepting a specific prescribed ideology or template for being. A culture of not standing up, including constructions of strong hierarchical power, and normalization of career considerations, lowers the bar for when surrender is not too threatening to self-esteem. Emergence of such culture has been signaled in the critical work on the “dean’s disease” and the reflection upon the academic “yes-sayers” in dysfunctional HE contexts (Bedeian, 2002).

A second contribution is the concept of *de-subjectification*. Much power literature emphasizes subjectification, that is, how people are, through technologies of power and self, being tied to a specific template of being (Foucault, 1980; Clarke & Knights, 2015). De-subjectification is about “untying,” loosening without effort to prescribe and secure a specific sense of self. Erosion of resistance is partly a retreat from subjectivity and ideological commitment. It is also partly letting go of the self and moving from a subject to de-subject. The self has had its moment, now it is ok to move on and comply. Here *smoothers* are sometimes invoked to make it easier to depart from a stance of resistance, where people are not so much compliant, accepting an agenda, being convinced by an ideology, or accepting a prescribed subjectivity, but are persuaded to abandon or soften an alternative, resistance-producing one. It means a partial or temporary dis-engagement in a specific sense of a prescribed identity fueling resistance (i.e., de-subjectification). Cynical consciousness—pretense to be cognitively capable of resistance but “realizing” that this may be difficult and demanding—leads to behavioral compliance, although there is a recognition of problematic conditions (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kunda, 1992). Compliers then comply while preserving a misleading sense of autonomy and insightfulness so that they feel less concerned by compliance. “Playing the game” is a popular metaphor for contemporary academics (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Butler & Spoelstra, 2012), indicating a low(ered) degree of integrity while preserving a sense of “this is not really me” and therefore not identity-threatening. To avoid too much of the latter there are, at least in the aforementioned case, two requirements: enough signaling of identity and sufficient experienced pressure (and/or “positive” appeal for change). This may lead to erosion of resistance. Yet, as our analysis indicates, even the cynicism might eventually fade away with honorable surrender likely to produce a fully compliant organizational member.

A third contribution shows the operations of multiple forms of power and its ambiguities in institutions of HE where there are restrictions of coercive powers and subjects need to “buy into” the non-doing of resistance for power to work. Power is sometimes less re-shaping of subjectivity or binding individuals to a specific, subjectivity-defining discourse, than the un-doing, bypassing or erosion of distinct forms of subjectivity and identity. The case exemplifies that subject-forming is a complicated and difficult enterprise and that we need to consider a long-term interplay of more than one face of power in “real cases.” Contemporary forms of power do not only mean a move from sovereign to disciplinary forms of power (as Foucault and other post-structuralists argue): the entire spectrum of forms of power is mobilized and combined in different ways, meaning an interplay between (force or agenda-setting) push and (ideological or subjectivity-targeting) persuasion as well as smoother-guided pulling out. This may imply a certain

weakening of dominant theoretical foci but a gain in terms of better grasping of “real” events and practices. Such repositioning could counteract the reductionism sometimes following from the ambition to predominantly make a theoretical contribution more than to understand and address organizational phenomena.

The aforementioned findings are of special relevance in light of increasingly escalating transformation of business schools from traditional sites of education and research to academic capitalist organizations, where administrators are capable of purposively enforcing new managerial forms of work (Archer, 2008; Drennan, 2001). The neo-liberal university being strongly into branding, competition, and market-orientation leads to a rise of managerialist and bureaucratic control. The findings are relevant for academic staff in institutions undergoing such transformations, but they are also of special relevance in light of the increasing mobility of the academic workforce as assumptions held in institutions in one place, such as academic autonomy, can differ significantly from those held elsewhere. There are possibly wider theoretical implications for the understanding of professionals in general, who are increasingly exposed to the forces of stronger managerial and hierarchical control in large health care systems and big professional service firms. Traditional ideas of professional identity and professional norms as sources of self- and collective control as well as resources and drivers for autonomy, self-governance, and resistance may need to be re-thought on a broad scale. De-subjectification may be central here. In this way the current study—and the emphasis on temporality, power as working through the erosion of resistance and honorable surrender—has potentially wide implications.

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