

## **Politics of place: The meaningfulness of resisting places**

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### **Abstract**

The meaningfulness of the physical place within which resistance is nurtured and enacted has not been carefully considered in research on space and organizations. In this paper, we offer two stories of middle managers developing resistance to managerial policies and decisions. We show that the appropriation and reconstruction of specific places by middle managers helps them to build autonomous resisting work thanks to the meanings that resisters attribute to the place in which they undertake resistance. We contribute to the literature on space and organizations by showing that resistance is a social experience through which individuals shape physical places and exploit the geographical blurring of organizations to develop political efforts that can be consequential. We also suggest the central role played by middle managers in the subversion of these meaningful places of resistance.

### **Keywords**

Meaningfulness, middle managers, place, resistance, space

### **Introduction**

Does *where* resistance is carried out matter for understanding politics? This question has been tackled through the concept of free space. In particular, there has been burgeoning interest in how free spaces – small-scale settings outside the control of dominant elites – may facilitate voluntary participation and ‘generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization’ (Polletta, 1999: 1). Interest in the emancipatory potential and explanatory power of the concept has been particularly acute in studies of social movements and institutional and societal change. Early studies of the significance of free spaces in

understanding political mobilization discussed, for example, the role of the Southern black church in the American civil rights movement (Evans & Boyte, 1986; Morris, 1984) and of ethnic community group meetings in accounting for working class mobilization in nineteenth century Chicago (Hirsch, 1990). However, as Rao & Dutta (2012) observe, there has been relatively much less attention on free spaces within organizational hierarchies. One prominent exception is the work of Kellogg (2009) whose in-depth empirical study of top-down institutional change in two hospitals reveals the importance of free spaces in providing the opportunity for cross-positional relationships to develop in order to overcome resistance to the proposed changes. But the relational focus that is operated by Kellogg does not provide for understanding of the influence of the particular physical places in which people engage in discussions and dissent.

The free space concept is useful for stressing the significance of contexts where individuals can develop oppositional identities because they are not interrupted by hierarchical control or particular authoritative expectations; but it does not directly address how the meaningfulness of these contexts for resisters impedes or facilitates resisting activities. Free spaces are more often than not analyzed through the structural isolation from control by the powerful (Evans & Boyte 1986) but research still lacks specificity about the “how, why and when certain patterns of relations [and cultural practices]” (Polletta 1999: 8) produce and sustain oppositional practices. It is therefore timely to reverse the question and ask how the very “infrastructure” of free spaces (Futrell & Simi 2004) can explain the impact of resisting activities in hierarchical settings like a bureaucratic corporation. By infrastructure, we mean in this paper the very place where resisting activities are carried out. We refer to place as a physical area offering shelter, stability, attachment and meaningful symbols to people (Tuan 1977); place is a centre of security for people and we are interested in this paper in how it can also impact the richness and creativity and, ultimately, the efficacy of resisting processes.

In order to understand the influence of the places of resistance on resisting activities, we analyze two processes of middle managerial resistance in big corporations. We argue the choice of specific places has been particularly influential on the outcome of these resisting processes. Therefore, we focus on the importance of the very place where resisters meet. In doing so, we also highlight how resisters “travel” from one resisting space to another, depending on their needs to avoid certain forms of corporate control but, above all, depending on the meaningfulness of the place they choose; we study resistance as a lived spatial experience. This paper makes several contributions: first, we show that the physical location where resistance is done matters because it is seen by resisters as a transgressive choice involving the violation of corporate spatial rules that is integral to the resisting process. Second, we show that place is meaningful for people engaged in resisting and that their sense of the potency of their resistance may be heightened by their personal connection to the place where they choose to do the resisting work. Third, we elaborate and extend understanding of the notion of “transitory dwelling places” (Shortt 2015) to suggest that changing location depending on circumstances significantly affects the resisting process.

We present evidence from middle managers on how they have responded to the tensions and contradictions of managing in contemporary organizations that feature both centralizing and coercive forces of bureaucracy and hierarchy on one side, and expectations of entrepreneurialism, collaboration and innovation on the other side (Adler 2006). We report how middle managers have actively resisted their own senior managers and subverted espoused corporate objectives and practices through the choice of the specific places where they undertake the resisting work. Resistance in such circumstances creates the opportunity for the emergence of meaningful places where middle managerial power can be truly exercised. We suggest the intrinsic variety of resisting places and their respective contribution to the development of resistance.

## **Spaces as materialization of power and resistance relationships**

While in recent years there has been a burgeoning interest in organizational spaces, especially their relationship to power and control (Clegg and Kornberger 2006), scant attention has been paid to how these spaces are used by employees to develop resisting activities within organizational boundaries. Relating space and resistance is not new since it follows from an ontology of resistance as a largely situated social practice. But the spatial meaningfulness of resistance has, we argue, been relatively neglected in research on middle managerial resistance. Indeed the latter research has rather concentrated on discursive forms of resistance (Laine and Vaara 2007; Musson and Duberley 2007) notwithstanding *where* it happens. To address this gap, we reflect on some of the ways through which middle managers exploit the geographical blurring of organizations (Fleming and Spicer 2004) and appropriate places to devise strategies of resistance to senior management decisions that they cannot construct in official places. We acknowledge that organizational settings are embedded with power but contend that they are also places where corporate power can be contested (Taylor and Spicer 2010). We highlight that this contestation is experienced through appropriation of concrete places that are transformed into resisting places. We draw on the notion of “dwelling places” (Casey 1993) to suggest that temporarily inhabiting specific places permits the development of creative strategies of resistance because the place where the resisting work is being done is meaningful to resisters. Casey (1993) proposes that dwelling places can encourage “transient use of spaces” and that they have “everything to do with what and who we are” (Casey 1993: xiii). This perspective highlights the significance of place in the everyday lived experiences of individuals (Shortt 2015), especially of places “on the margins” (Casey 1993). It shows that it is particularly helpful to grasp the importance of seclusion and the withdrawing from social interactions and “structural obligations” (Turner 1982: 27) for people to find solitude and experience safety valves (Scott 1990). Liminal places of that sort are also seen as vectors

of anxiety because they imply a social separation (Beech 2011). Overall, research on these places at the margins emphasizes their richness as part of social life: for instance, Iedema et al. (2012) show how corridors in hospitals provide ad-hoc places for people to engage in vivid conversations and exchanges.

However, beyond the social richness of work life and the generation of helpful safety valves in places located below or beyond managerial radar, scant attention has been paid to the meaningfulness of places for the development of projects of resistance to managerial decisions and policies. Where does middle managerial resistance happen? How does the *where* of resistance impact the eventual outcome of resisting activities?

Research has largely highlighted the capacity of middle managers to entertain dissenting projects. Because they are so central in the change process, their potential to exercise a negative influence is often emphasized (Dopson and Neumann 1998). They can be footdraggers, or saboteurs (Guth and McMillan 1986). Scarbrough and Burrell (1996: 178) depict the overall view of middle managers as being “costly, resistant to change, a block to communication both upward and downward”. For instance, middle managers are seen as barriers to participative practices (Musson and Duberley 2007; Hernandez 1993). Literature also provides insights about how middle managers resist by responding to attempts at managing their subjectivity (Musson and Duberley 2007). Similarly, Laine and Vaara (2007) suggest how middle managers resist corporate hegemony by initiating strategy discourses of their own to create room for manoeuvre in controversial situations. These discourses are analyzed as dialectical battles between competing groups, thus showing the discursive character of middle managerial resistance as it involves battles over agency and identity (Laine and Vaara 2007: 31). Maitlis and Lawrence (2003) have demonstrated that failure in strategizing results from the interplay of discursive elements and political behaviour of

middle managers. In these studies, the focus is on the role played by language in the construction of power and resistance relationships; the analysis of textual elements discloses subtle “power effects” (Laine and Vaara 2007). Dialectical battles are also analyzed by Mumby (2004; 2005) permitting us to see how discourses define subjectivities and also the use of specific discourses as part of the struggle over power and hegemony in the workplace: “Analyses explore how social actors attempt to ‘fix’ meanings in ways that resist and/or reproduce extant relations of power” (Mumby 2005: 24). In short, middle managerial resistance is seen as embedded in discursive politics that are central to organizational strategizing. These politics help middle managers to distance themselves from management-initiated strategy discourses in order to maintain viable professional identity in the midst of increasing pressures (Laine and Vaara 2007; Hassard, Morris and McCann 2011). However, despite their rich insights, these works do not analyze the influence of the very physical location where these discursive political activities are being accomplished.

Indeed, until recently the places that management happens in and through have been portrayed as neutral settings (Taylor and Spicer 2007: 325). However, places are more and more central to organization studies (Dale and Burrell 2007; Clegg and Kornberger 2006; Tyler and Cohen 2010; Shortt 2015), not least because they materialize power relations (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015). Factories have long been considered as settings where industrial workers are concentrated to ensure better surveillance and control by entrepreneurs. Scholars have also argued that the construction of specific spatial arrangements around factories such as company towns (Andrew 1999) are means to ensure absolute control over the workforce, extending company reach beyond the work sphere. The most well-known spatial arrangements within organizational boundaries are the Fordist assembly line and the Benthamian panopticon, both of which materialize the relations of power embedded in

places. Therefore, place is connected to the managerial ability to physically locate the employee (Jacques 1996) but the flipside of employee invisibility to management has rarely been at the centre of researchers' attention. That is why it is interesting to study strategies of resistance based on the occupation of places that are sometimes beyond the reach of managerial control.

Indeed, inhabitants of organizational places often use them in deviant ways, as they move around in ways that do not necessarily match the prescribed paths (De Certeau 1984). They also use transitory places to give sense to their everyday life at work (Shortt 2015). However, by focusing on how people are controlled through the configuration of organizational spaces, research tends to overlook the various strategies through which employees resist regimes of power, including through the appropriation and reconstitution of places as areas of dissent (Hjorth 2005). In other words, research overlooks the intrinsic meaningfulness of places for specific individuals in their attempts to overtly contest managerial policies. Recent mobilizations around movements like Occupy or Indignados show well the connection between the unexpected and deviant use of certain symbolic spaces and the development of resisting capacities (Juris and Khasnabish 2013). In other words, place can also be lived as a meaningful experience of resistance rather than of exclusive control or as merely offering transitory corners "for conversations without organizational conventions" (Shortt 2015: 638). For instance, research clarifies how people may "rescript" organizational spaces through their deliberate misappropriation and misuse (Cairns et al. 2003); Hjorth (2005) also shows how they can be transformed into spaces of play where emancipatory ideas can be explored.

However, the instantiation of resisting activities in places is not central to these accounts (Willmott 1993). They describe experiences of subversion, of deviance, of alternative uses of

place, but they do not clarify whether the meaningfulness of places permits resistance to be productive beyond the capacity of resisters to occupy them. Our objective is to extend the understanding of the place/resistance nexus by suggesting that the nature and efficacy of resistance can be a direct product of the meaningfulness of a given place for the individuals involved. Tyler (2011) has recently highlighted the role of place in shaping the lived experience of tainted work; she considers the meanings attached to particular types of work as well as the specific locations in which they are embedded. But these insights are focused on the production of identity through place. The notion of *where things happen* is disregarded in its capacity to significantly shape resisting capacities (Juris 2008; Polletta 1999).

## **Method**

Our study focused on two middle managerial episodes of resistance because they highlight specific usages of places, as well as the clear intention to develop overt confrontation to senior management.

### *Data sources*

The first case is located in a publishing company spanning four countries in Europe and specializing in the professional sector. The company headquarters are in Holland and the story takes place in the French subsidiary. The company comprises more than 4000 employees, of which 800 work in France. The case highlights the resistance of Philb, 45 year old head of a team of 12 journalists and editorial assistants in charge of a journal specialized in drugs and pharmacy. Philb has been heading the team for eight years when we interview him in 2008. The interview was set up following the recommendation of one of his friends who had attended a presentation given by one of the authors of this paper in Paris at a union

meeting. He agreed to meet the researcher because his resistance against the marketing department had lasted for several years and Philb was wondering whether he should keep on fighting or leave the company. In short, the issue of the conflict is fundamentally related to the vision of what constitutes a good journal. For Philb it is an “object that helps pharmacists to make better choices in terms of managing their shops, of choosing the right drugs and brands, and follow online training sessions, as well as a space where they can express themselves about their problems” (Interview, October 2008). Philb does not make editorial compromises, which can sometimes lead him and his team to criticize big pharmaceutical companies. The journal is one of the most profitable products in the company but some senior managers begin to worry about the “tone and positioning of the journal at the beginning of the 2000s” as it was put by the VP in charge of Marketing and Communication in an interview given in 2011 after he left the company. The conflict is basically about watering down the content and inserting much more advertising in each issue so as to improve further the profitability. The decision to modify and influence the editorial content of the journal is dated by Philb as a meeting in October 2002: “it was official that we were part of the journals that despite their success should toe the line of big companies. Critique was not the point anymore”. This policy is unacceptable to Philb who starts a process of resisting against editorial practices that he disapproves of.

The second case takes place in an international furniture company. The company comprises 5000 employees; headquarters are in Sweden. The episode of resistance that we study is located in a factory where 330 employees are working, in the East of France. The case highlights the resistance of Swed, the Factory manager, a 38 year old engineer at the time of the interview in 2009. Swed was participating in an executive education programme in the business school where one of the authors works; one of the teachers in this programme

mentioned the research on resistance to him and Swed suggested talking about the two year long conflict with the VP in charge of production he had lived through when he was factory manager. After a series of audits conducted in all 15 factories in Europe in 2005, a decision to close three of them was taken at a board meeting in December 2005. Swed's factory was one of them, despite the fact that it was proven to be second in the ranking of the most profitable production sites: "The decision came down with a short note and that was just a shock down here, nobody would understand, even the head of France was puzzled but that was it" (Interview May 2009). However, the decision was not accepted by Swed, but he could not reach top managers to discuss matters. He therefore decided to engage in a process of resistance against the decision so as to try and save the factory and demonstrate the quality of the work done in his unit.

Our data comprise ten in depth interviews conducted between 2008 and 2011 with the two middle managers, six team members (4 of Philb's team, 2 from Swed's team), as well as two senior managers targeted by the resistance. This dataset was constructed based on initial recommendations by Philb and Swed. They were not working in the companies anymore but had kept contact with some of their former colleagues. The two senior managers accepted to meet us in 2011 after they themselves had left their respective companies. One was the Marketing VP at the publishing company; the other was the Head of France at the furniture company. These were therefore purposively selected rather than randomly sampled interviewees.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit data on individual, situational and organizational elements affecting middle managers and team members' pursuit of their work. We therefore also addressed the informants' subjective sense of "work ethos" (Weber 1968)

that is to say their view on what constitutes a quality job, an achievement, as well as the mindset necessary to accomplish the job properly. For instance, Philb mentioned that he had been trained as a pharmacist “to respect certain values, like respecting the genuine need of the customer, never overselling drugs or drugs that are just not needed...” He adds: “The goal of managers is selling more and more useless information in the journal which is opposed to how I see an interesting journal”. To address our research question focused on the role of places in the resistance, we paid particular attention to the narratives our informants related when asked to think of the resistance as unfolding across specific spaces (“where did you meet to discuss matters?” “What were you doing in these places?”) and to provide examples of when their dissenting action became more central in their job (“what time did you spend in working on the conflict itself?”), more effective (“when did you feel you were making progress or winning over the other party?”), and whether this could be linked to spatial dimensions of where they were actually doing the resisting work (“why did you choose this place?”; “why did you decide to move outside of the company boundaries?”).

### *Data analysis*

A story-telling approach was followed in the interviews, emphasizing the interviewee’s own experience (Vaara 2002), so as to understand the meaningfulness of the places for individuals. We let the interviewees talk as much and as freely as possible about the managerial decision that was targeted by their resistance, as well as about their experience of the resisting process. The interviews also included specific questions focusing on their work, visions of corporate strategy, the strategy of their unit, and the problems associated with it, in order to provide a wider organizational context for the specific incidents under investigation. On average, interviews lasted for two hours, all were tape recorded (except the two

interviews with senior managers during which we took extensive written notes), and fully transcribed.

In the first stage of analysis, we focused on the overall opposition that middle managers and their team expressed with respect to corporate management decision. Our goal was to understand the concrete reasons why they would strongly disagree with the decision and why, beyond disagreement, they would decide to do something about it. In the second stage, we focused on actual strategies of resistance and the specific role of places in the shaping of resisting activities. We noticed in both cases the recurring theme around the existence of “meeting places” systematically used to discuss matters and that all interviewees involved in resisting mentioned having created occasions to generate ideas, energy, fun and cohesion. This does not mean, however, that the entire struggle is linked or explained by this physical location of resisting practices. Rather this focus reflects our desire to emphasize and single out the most central element developed by our interlocutors when talking about the resistance, which was where the actual resisting work was being done. In this sense, the focus on the geography of resistance emerges inductively from the analysis.

### **The stories**

#### *Philb and the Marketers*

Philb is a pharmacist; he chose the publishing industry over dispensary because he wanted to “think about the future of the profession” and saw drugs and medicine as highly important “in a society where health and diseases are more business matters than matters of justice and ethics”. He presents himself as “pushed by the need to help people thinking, understanding their choices.... With pharmacists, talking ethics rather than molecules is key”.

Although he is able to frame his job as a “technical journalist” in terms of integrity, integrating his values into his work had proved to be a prolonged struggle over several years at the time of the interview in 2009. He discovers progressively that with new managerial norms and objectives, keeping his journal in the area of “strong content, debates and controversies, criticisms and sharp chronicles...” was more and more an “unfathomable contradiction”. His struggle over the years was between “volume of publicity” and “content”. Philb describes repeatedly this struggle between his team (12 people out of which eight are journalists) and the company management, personalized by the figure of the marketing department: “I have been rapidly stigmatized as a rebel, a grumpy moaner, a blockhead...but I was just working for certain ideals, and they were shared by my colleagues, and they were opposite to the goals of the marketers”. This was confirmed by Marc, one of the journalists: “Philb, when people talked about him, it was either a hero or a zero, he was just not pleasing the management and we were 100% with him”. Philb therefore had recruited exclusively new journalists or even freelance journalists who genuinely shared his vision for the journal. Building a strong and cohesive team was his initial way to combat his own senior managers when the pressure to change the journal began, a moment that Philb situates in October 2002, when for the first time Marketing managers decided to modify the journal content by freely adding advertisements. Philb says: “...that was soon the condition to produce the journal I was proud of, that we were together, that we discussed everything, headlines, topics, pages, that we also knew that we resisted against the marketers and all those who wanted to put more and more publicity that they wanted to dissimulate behind this notion of ‘commercial information’.... And the team was always behind me, supporting me when I had to oppose aggressive attacks or whatever attempts to destabilize the journal...the team was also a space where personal concerns could be discussed... we were scared but together...of course we did not work as managers wanted us to work, we had to create boundaries and sort of zones

where nobody was allowed to step into”. Philb saw indeed the production of the journal as more and more “conditioned by the production of solidarity and by places where we could talk together without fearing to be listened to but above all, where we felt at ease, and where we had some pleasure to be”. Odile, another journalist, expresses her profound bewilderment in front of what will be a constant battle against another department, backed up by senior management: “working in such hostile conditions was just shocking because the journal was a cash cow because we were working as we wish and we knew what our readers want because we are in close contact with them, but still the others would harass Philb at each editorial meeting to put more crappy stuff”. The senior manager we interviewed (Jay) in contrast insists upon the fact that “this journal was working well but that was also because we were supported by external constituencies like pharmaceutical groups. Philb could never accept that there was a common interest to keep some critical content and have the big guys happy with the journal anyway, he was not a man of compromise” (Jay, October 2011).

*Meeting places* The actual resisting work done by the team in a sort of organized way started initially in January 2004 in an office situated at the basement of the company building. Philb says: “of course, the official editorial meetings held on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor were moments when we were kind of silent. When I went back to the first floor after these meetings, where my team was working, every week we moved in the basement in a 20 square metre office that some guy from maintenance was officially using for putting electrical stuff: no daylight, nothing else than a long rectangular table, but he agreed to let us having a couple meetings here every week where we would discuss how to avoid doing what the marketers wanted us to do”. Luc, another journalist, says that these were great moments “where we were sharing ideas but also a feeling of doing something a bit deviant, like teenagers lying to their parents! We had great fun also because the room itself was really not a workspace, that was such a

mess with electrical stuff everywhere, and we all brought our computers and pens as if we were in a regular office because the objective of these meetings was to take notes, each of us, about the articles we would decide to work on and publish in the forthcoming issue”. Cath, a young freelance journalist, even mentions that the very fact that the place was really not comfortable and not equipped at all gave to the meetings a kind of transgressive dimension: “I mean we could barely sit sometimes, sometimes we were 15 in this cubicle, we were physically close; and we knew we weren’t allowed to be there, that was even funnier!” This meeting room was to be used for almost two years by the team; it served as a resisting space where they devised strategies in order to avoid putting certain advertisements in the journal: they were using information from the production department about what requests were coming from the marketing unit so as to choose what should be deleted or not in order “to keep a balance between content and commercial information” (Cath). Using the room was permitted by complicity with an employee but also by the geographical blurring of the building: “Nobody really knows what happens in some corners of this building, you would be surprised to see the volume of space that is simply not used or not known by management in this company! Why not take advantage of it simply to have a place dedicated to these discussions?” (Philb). Philb also recalls that having a place was important because they would sometimes invite production people to share views about deleting adverts: “sometimes we invited one of the heads of the production line, to ask him to not do what marketing wanted the journal to publish. This followed another decision to suppress one of our articles that was criticizing a well-known pharmaceutical company for selling drugs that were proven to be useless. The bosses were outraged by the paper because the company is a shareholder and one of our Dutch bosses is a board member. So the production guy promised to suppress a four page advertisement in the next month issue because he thought we were right. That created a big mess but they understood that we wouldn’t renounce our content like snapping

of their fingers”. (Philb). Inviting colleagues from other departments also meant, for Marc, that “the room was our room, we would invite people to meetings, and I stress invite”. Jay recalls that for the board, this kind of attitude was not acceptable: “either you accept you are under control and you do a quiet job, or you don’t and you do something else; that was pretty simple, the company could just not survive without the money given by diverse companies”.

After a year, senior management heard that the basement office was being used by the team to create alternative editorial content and build complicities. Marc remembers that they were all wondering who could have spread the news: “that was not the maintenance guy, he was with us; but still after a while, it is difficult to remain hidden all the time, when almost the whole team was moving and disappearing from the offices for two or three hours, someone could have wondered... so what we did is that some of us would remain and occupy the regular offices so as to shift attention...” (Marc). Odile even adds that “it was surprising anyway that we could work in this room for such a long time without any problem, so when there was this leak we were prepared to leave”. After almost two years, the team had to find another place to come together. But Gilles, another journalist, remembers that it was “a bit sad, we were surprisingly attached to this crappy room, this is where all things started in a sense”.

The consequence of this necessary change of place is that Philb suggests the team continue the meetings outside of the company: “we did two things: first we had a monthly dinner at one of the team members’ home, well that was often at my place, because I wanted to keep the energy and the pleasure to be together, and we also found later a café nearby, two blocks away where we could have a deal with the tenant and occupy a back room for a couple of hours every week so as to work out content, I think it started in April 2006” (Philb). Moving

away from the company transfers the space of resistance to a place of leisure and conviviality where people are not supposed to work on their computers to write articles. The interest is also to have two actual places to work on the journal outside of the company. Odile remembers: “that was somehow weird to work at 6 or 7 in a café on a given article, yes that was weird, but at the same time, being in a café was showing to us that work could be compatible with pleasure, having some drinks and be more efficient together working concretely on the editorial of each issue, because the place was a café and not any office”. When he learns about these meetings, Jay admits: “I was puzzled, but admiring at the same time, these guys would not give up! And to be honest, there was nothing we could do against that, they were free to go to any place together, what’s wrong with that? We would not put a microphone in all the journalists’ computers!!”

*The enjoyment of interaction rituals* The process of resistance initiated by Philb is also interesting in that it connects the choice of physical places with the invention of particular interaction rituals (Goffman 1967; Lawrence 2004), that are shaped because of the type of place in which the process and substance of resistance is worked out. Philb himself says that “to continue mobilizing people to come over and do extra work, we needed to provide more than drinks. I thought about that when sometimes the feeling to struggle for peanuts emerges in a discussion, we needed to enhance the pleasure and above all, to create special meanings for everyone to understand why s/he was doing more, why we were overworking”. For instance it was decided that each meeting would be led by a different person and that the name of the meeting leader would be chosen by drawing lots. Odile says: “that created a funny moment and what is more important, that obliged everyone to be ready for the meeting in case of she would be chosen! We needed to have fun but also to be efficient” For Philb, this system was simply maintaining attention and focus. But it was also a moment of play,

and jokes could be made about those frequently chosen and those who would escape systematically: “there was one of my colleagues, G. over the whole period, let’s say, almost three years, he was chosen only once... there was a joke about the luck being with us because G. leading a meeting would be such a mess!” (Philb). Over time, therefore, people increasingly came to associate the places with moments of fun and “happy conversations about sometimes anything but work” (Luc). At the same time, rituals were targeted in order to focus energy on the task itself: being nominated as meeting leader meant that people had to prepare seriously for each meeting: “each time I was team leader, I felt a bit stressed and at the same time excited. This was particularly as a simple journalist expected to make suggestions for the next editorial. We were working in this nonhierarchical atmosphere, and we needed to be more creative, more interesting for the readers in order to continue” (Marc, journalist).

Another interaction ritual was the obligation to bring things to drink or eat to each meeting; after a while the tenant of the café understood the importance of the place for the team and accepted that they could bring their own sandwiches, “as long as we would buy some beers and coffees from time to time” (Luc). Philb adds that “the tenant kind of became a friend; he was keen on knowing whether what we were doing was working or where we were going I guess he felt like being part of it. His café turned out to be our café so to speak”. When they did not show up for one reason or another for a week or two, the tenant would call Philb on his phone to check everything was fine. Thus the choice of place is tightly connected to the construction of rituals that build and maintain the collective sense of the team; this promotes the meaningfulness to people of the very place in which they meet, and thereby helps the team to continue resisting against managerial pressures. The place here is not only important because it is “free” and relatively isolated from the company gaze, but because it pushes team

members to invent means to maintain and strengthen their common focus (Collins 1988) and because they have also an experience of enjoyment (Contu 2014) that enhances collective creativity.

*The end* At some point in 2008 Philb took the lead in a collective protest uniting ten (out of 15) journal editors in the company, because he thought that “maybe we could have extended, spread out this spirit of cohesion outside of our team”; the ten journal editors each decided not to publish their journal for the first time in the history of this company. But “that was indeed the end of my story here...that was too much... I was stigmatized as a radical leftist who wanted to destroy the company...the pressure was growing”. Before he finally left the company in April 2010, he organized a meeting with his team in their café. During the meeting, team members stood up and gave warm thanks and gifts to their “courageous leader”. Philb is now editor in chief of the National Journal of Pharmacy and Drugs in another European country. Four out of eight journalists had left the journal by 2010. When asked about this, Jay just says: “that had to finish like that. You cannot work against company interests for too long. I admit these guys liked their job but they had to accept new rules of the game”.

#### *SWED and the factory closure*

When, on December 13, 2005, Swed receives the two page note announcing the closure of his factory, he is first shell shocked, sharing the news with only two members of the executive team to avoid spreading panic: “the procedure was awkward, the content was outrageous, and that was like a nightmare: how could they justify this decision while our factory was doing extremely well? And without any dialogue, although dialogue was not the most salient characteristic of this company...” Swed cannot accept this news. He immediately sends an

email to the senior manager in charge of factories in France (called Blu in this paper). His boss responds thus in this laconic email: “I don’t know what to say, I am as surprised and shocked as you are. I will try to get information asap. Cheers. B.” (email, December 18, 2005). But he will never send an explanation, becoming unresponsive to any message addressing this issue. When we interviewed him in May 2011 he told us “there was nothing much to add. I really tried to get an explanation, but I ended up thinking that some guy at the top wanted to kill Swed, that that was a sort of personal challenge. Why? I will never know” (Blu).

The challenge is key for Swed: he decides to defend the factory. He informs his board two weeks after (plant board meeting minutes, January 6, 2006) that the factory is supposed to be closed in six months and that they have to hurry if they want to contest the decision. The board, as well as all the plant’s trade unions, decides to support the resistance. Swed starts sending messages and trying to get in touch with the top manager in charge of the factories worldwide. This person is rarely available but Swed manages to obtain a phone call late January 2006 to clarify the reasons for the decision. He says: “the discussion was surreal; the guy was making as if that was not really decided, but that the company was making losses and had to take drastic steps; he never replied when I asked why they would close a profitable factory, he said that was not the only one... amazing”. From this moment on, Swed decided to establish a file in which he recorded the performance of the factory and ask the executive board to give clear arguments or renounce their decision.

*Building the file* Max is a unionist. He remembers that the factory was “sort of changing in terms of the internal relationships, rapidly the boss would become closer and closer to everyone, as if he felt he had a mission. The meetings that we had several times a week to

write the file were more and more engaged, we had to look for facts and figures, for procedures, for how the work was done in the workshop, we were all convinced that we could force the company to renounce the decision”. Swed creates a task force of eight people in February 2006, two unionists and six experienced members of the production and accounting department. The objective is to “demonstrate objectively and softly but coldly that the decision is wrong; if they would not listen we would inform the local press and politicians and the civil society. What we had to do is write a smart and exhaustive report about the performance of the factory” (Jaco, task force member).

The meetings start in early February 2006 and last for more than three months, on average four times a week. “That was a lot of work”, says Swed, “but we built a cohesive team and we had a lot to show”. The personnel of the factory are regularly informed of the work being done. This results in the activities of the task force being learned of in the company: on March 14, 2006, the Swedish board sends a group of six inspectors for an auditing mission: “they would come to find what was wrong with us and with our products, that was clear from the beginning, they also wanted to check what we were doing, we could not maintain the meetings as they were here all the time under the pretext of organizing meetings and interviews with staff” (Swed). The auditors stay for more than four weeks and write a report that Swed gets later in June 2006. Blu remembers that he was not even consulted for this auditing mission: “that may look strange, but things went out of control, I learnt incidentally that this auditing team was sent to V [name of the city]. I just had to shut up, but Swed was taking inordinate risks here”.

*Moving away from the factory* The presence of the auditors triggers the decision to organize the meetings in another place. That is in Swed’s house, where a room is organized and

equipped with computers, a projector and several seats to keep on working on the file. The house, at first a private place, is not considered as an escape from social responsibilities (Preston-Whyte 2004: 350); on the contrary, people see it as a marginal place where a serious job has to be accomplished. As Jaco puts it “we were not only away from the company, we were in a private place, the boss’s house, that would mean to me I was here for a clear purpose, I wanted to get it right”. Max the unionist says: “that was a strange feeling to go to the boss’s house several times a week, having drinks there and working as if we were students preparing an exam! But the place entailed also, for me, a special responsibility to get things done”. The meaning of this place is therefore partly related to the status of its owner: the factory manager. The place offers not only a safe space of work but creates a feeling of working for a just and significant cause: “we were attacked by a group of executives who did not care at all about local facts and the work being done and so on (...) and being often at the boss’s house generated a sense of personal relationships, that was not only working to defend the factory, but doing that with friends, in a very energetic and enthusiastic atmosphere, because we were in a private place” (Jaco). The place creates more intimate relationships because it is a previously private space that is put at the disposal of the resisters, which in turn generates more intensive commitment to the resistance. Swed says: “I think it was a good decision to have them all at home. We felt closer and the energy that the guys were putting into building our case was all the more intense that they sort of felt a physical relationship being created here... the room smelled our solidarity I could say”. Jaco insists: “Swed offered his home to save the factory, that is how I see it, so I felt connected to the place as an obligation to succeed”. Blu says: “Swed informed me of the decision. I could not help but smile and tell to myself that these guys had some kind of mission to accomplish... I did not dare intervene here, that was their battle after all, but I would have loved being a mouse and observe one of their gatherings!”

*The enjoyment of interaction rituals* As in the previous case, although the resistance unfolded over a shorter period of time, the resisting group was sustained by creative rituals. For instance, meeting hours were always the same: 7 pm to 11 pm on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays. Everyone left the factory at different times to avoid the suspicion of the auditors or other employees and would meet up at Swed's, three kilometres away. The basic interaction ritual was that all the resisters would have dinner together three times a week: "we would start with a brief of what remained to be done with a drink: we called that moment the 'drief', for an hour then we would have dinner and analyze accounting figures, or weekly production charts" (Jaco). Another ritual was based on "auditing stories": members of the task force would share funny stories that they were told by other employees (for instance, those having interviews with auditors or having to work with them), about the company auditors. Swed says: "that was an important moment because that helped to step back physically but also mentally from the factory, we could laugh at those guys here at home, that meant we weren't at work anymore and could do something else or differently". In other words, sharing jokes about the auditors would serve as the link between being elsewhere, and doing something else (resisting), that would not be allowed in the space of the factory. In discussing the space for resistance, people do not mostly insist on the significance of the absence of control, but on the creation of a special relationship with the place. Max says: "I started to like this place, not because it was a nice place, but we were welcome, we could feel like at home, and anything could be done as long as it was related to the project". Jaco adds that "the stories told at the beginning of each encounter were the proof that we had some power by simply enjoying being together in the same place; what I mean is that they were invading the factory, they were five or six in their suits, but could not prevent us from being together elsewhere and from talking about their ridiculous job around a glass of wine". This seems to be different from a mere catharsis or a "safety valve" as research on infrapolitics

would argue (Scott 1990). Indeed, the ritualistic story telling is also helpful in shaping the agenda of the meeting because stories are not told randomly. Swed: “the stories we told were also supposed to help us in our work. For instance, I would tell stories about the meeting I had today with two auditors and the questions they asked. Knowing that they were focusing at some point on issues of quality of the 2007 chairs collection for instance would allow us to invent stories about auditors sitting in bad quality chairs that we had intentionally produced for them; but that would also help us to know what we should pay attention to in our own argumentation and what was threatened in our production plans”. The meaningfulness of the place is therefore both symbolic and connected to a sense of the enjoyable potency and efficacy of the activity; resisting in the manager’s house is both very unlikely, and provides a feeling of being at work, of being in a place where a serious job has to be done.

*The end* Eventually Swed has the opportunity, in October 2006, to attend a board meeting in Sweden. The 40 page written report that has been established by the task force was sent in June 2006, after Swed got the auditing report that confirmed the closure decision, mostly based on the supposed lack of cooperation among departments within the factory. He spends 20 minutes with the board, only to learn that the factory will not be closed after all. He says: “I am unsure whether the actual content of our report had any influence on the decision. I don’t know why they renounced; they saved face saying that the company was doing better and that only one factory in Italy would be outsourced in Romania...but I was there anyway, with them big bosses, that was not another simple note, they told it to me face to face, which means that our action had created some concern at the top”. Despite this outcome, Swed decided to leave the company: “it is just as if I had accomplished a final mission, so I had to leave the place... I miss our meetings!” He organizes a farewell party at his house because “symbolically that was the place where things had been made possible after all... When I

informed certain colleagues in the factory who were, say, committed to the success of our project, that the VP who started the mess was ousted, I felt a moment of silence when some would not dare talk because they would have cried for sure!”

Swed is now VP for production facilities in a big US multinational company. He lives in South Korea. When we asked about the eventual victory, Blu says: “that was well deserved. Sometimes corporate bosses cannot impose any decision; that is a good lesson to teach in your school! But we have lost Swed, he was a great guy, that is a great loss”.

## **Discussion**

Now we address the question asked at the beginning of this paper: Does where resistance is carried out matter for understanding politics?

While there has been a growing interest in the relationship between space, work and organization in recent research (Dale 2005; Kornberger and Clegg 2006; Tyler 2011), the notion of place as “a meaningful location” (Cresswell 2004: 7) in understanding organizational politics has been relatively neglected in this literature (Delbridge and Sallaz, 2015; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015). Yet analysis of practices of resistance requires a better theorization of place because, as our data show, it is not a neutral backdrop; rather places are constitutive of experiences of resistance (Polletta 1999; Rao and Dutta 2012). Place is not something “that is done to workers” (Halford 2004:3), rather it enhances specific social processes in which workers can be active constituents. This is particularly the case for resisting places that are not pre-given neutral settings but rather emerge as such through a series of activities and strategies that are enacted by resisters. These places are fundamentally transformed by the way in which they are used and occupied, through temporary

appropriation. As Tyler reminds us, “places constitute the material setting for social relations enabling humans to produce and consume meaning through the emotional and subjective attachment people have to a particular locale” (Tyler 2011: 1480; Creswell 2004). But how this meaningfulness helps individuals to carry out effective resistance is less well understood. And this is precisely what our cases suggest is happening: people not only find a physical place to do the resisting work, but they also develop a particular subjective relationship to the place, be it the secret basement meeting place, the café or the boss’s house. While Tonkiss (2005) identified cafés as ideal settings for informal encounters, and social exchange, the performance of resistance has not been fully theorized as related to the particular places where resisters meet up and work together. Our research suggests that the chosen places have in themselves a particular influence over the quality of the resisting work being done. Understanding the relationship between resistance and settings requires that we focus attention on the meaningfulness of the place for individual resisters as well as on the connection between the choice of place and the social relationships that resisters develop in that place.

Our data highlight processes that show that the creation of a resisting place is a social experience as much as a political experience; it requires continuous interactions among resisters, constant work, frequent meetings, repetition of discussions and creation of rituals, as well as practices of enjoyment related to all these activities (Contu 2013). These mechanisms show that resistance is imbued with specific physical and social connotations precisely because of *where* it is carried out. Moreover, our study shows that this connotation is not only, nor even primarily, related to the fact that resisting places are uncontrolled or remote from usual corporate workspaces. The likely efficacy of resistance is at least partly informed, we argue, by the meaningfulness of the resisting places to those involved: resisters

experience what they are doing as something special because the place in which they do it is also special to them. The places are used in creative ways (Taylor & Spicer 2007) because they offer moments where intensive conversations about a specific task to be achieved can unfold more naturally than in corporate spaces, all the more as resisters work on unauthorized issues. The forbidden element of the task creates a collective energy to do the job very well. The chosen places are therefore neither work nor non-work, neither liminal (Shortt 2015) nor purely “dwelling places” (Casey 1993) temporarily occupied for enhancing identity work; a more nuanced view of the use of place is required here because the places studied in this paper are sites of high expectations in terms of the quality of the work being done. Resisters subvert places, boundaries that constitute corporate routines and control (Bell & Forbes 1994), but they do that with the objective of producing autonomous work in order to contest specific managerial decisions and to win over management. We confirm that resisting places are charged with emotional meanings and associations like the places described by Shortt (2015), Casey (1993) or Munro and Jordan (2013). But they are also places where power is being produced because this is vital to the activities of the resisters. Places offer transitory territories for conversations without organizational conventions (Shortt 2015: 638), but they are not undefined places where workers experience being undefined themselves. On the contrary, they are actual sites of work where specific norms are being produced by resisters in order to accomplish a specific task: alternative social norms and transitory social identities of resisters can be constructed, in a clearly defined physical location and for a specific political purpose. In these places, workers create social experiences that are used in order to seriously focus on their collective task.

Therefore, such places are areas of privacy that are appropriated for the purposes of the teams. In the case studies we highlight, privacy is not primarily a way through which

corporate control is avoided; it is a means to enhance performance of resistance rather than a breather from the usual managerial expectations of occupational performance. These resisting places are selected for a “chosen” performance; they are “resisting factories”, autonomously transformed by resisters, producing meaning for them. We show that the role of middle managers in selecting these places and using these to mobilize resistance was a central feature in both cases. Accordingly, we argue that a focus on places enriches our understanding of the role of middle managers in workplace politics because it shows their unique capacity to coordinate resistance as project leaders: the choice of place, the stimulation of meaning creation through place-related rituals and practices of enjoyment, as well as offering up their own private place of life for resisting activity, is part of their role as team and project leaders. This combination of meaningful leadership devoted to a meaningful cause in a meaningful place is crucial to capture how middle managerial resistance can be consequential. This also suggests that part of middle managers’ legitimacy in the contemporary workplace could well derive from their capacity to stimulate political engagement about contentious work issues.

Through the study of the role of physical places in middle managerial resistance we make several contributions. Overall, we have demonstrated that the physical location of resistance matters for different reasons. First, although this insight is not new (De Certeau 1984), our study shows that the transgressive dimension of the choice of places develops a powerful collective energy: the resistance highlighted in this paper is based on the actual violation of corporate spatial rules, because resisters subvert the use of places and use places that are not supposed to be workspaces for their resisting work. The transgression of managerial expectancies regarding the proper use of space at work is integral to the process of resistance. The path to productive resistance in our stories is in the violated spatial rule; *doing forbidden things in places that should be used otherwise enhances the efficacy of the resisting work*. By

triggering this spatial transgression, middle managers go well beyond the usual image of compliant and conservative employees. Second, we show that the transgression of place is connected to the meaningfulness of the place for the resisters as they engage in doing forbidden things. We show that the resisting processes studied in this paper are not produced first from the social isolation depicted by free space theorists (Evans and Boyte 1986) or theories of liminality (Shortt 2015). While being isolated remains an important component of the politics of place, the *meaningfulness* of the place for resisters is more important than the existence or absence of control or of specific organizational expectations of performance; our research suggests that resisters actually move relatively freely from one “dwelling place” (Casey 1993) to another and do so on the basis of the meaning of the place as much as the degree of visibility to the corporate gaze. Using the house of the factory manager becomes more meaningful than the fact that the house is away from the corporate boundaries. Therefore we offer a more nuanced view of the influence of place on political efforts, moving from the mere question of control over places to the issue of the meaningfulness of places. Here again, the specific role of middle managers is highlighted: their capacity to offer solutions to problems of spatial control is integral to their legitimacy. Resistance is all the more effective, and resisters all the more engaged, as the middle manager is able to help workers to be collectively creative regarding the political use of place. This also nicely fits with the very definition of what is an “entrepreneur” in the workplace: someone finding creative solutions to problems. Thereby we show that middle managers do not only coordinate resistance: they are *doing* resistance themselves, working creatively on work-related problems, and inventing alternative uses of places with their team.

This permits us to complement research on organizational space that has mostly focused on the study of dominant spaces that embody corporate culture and mainstream work practices.

We highlight the political use of places as lived experiences of meaning creation through resisting acts. This is, we argue, all the more important in the case of middle managers because they are still seen as conservative servants (Jackall 1984) or fully subjected to company rules (Hassard et al. 2011): indeed, in our examples, the spatial licence is taken by those who have integrally absorbed the proper spatial rule as part of their very identity as company-committed employees. Their transgression is thus even more politically impactful because it changes their view of the corporate culture which can lead them to career changes, such as exits from the corporation in our two case studies.

A related contribution is to show that resisters take advantage of the spatial blurring of organizations (Fleming & Spicer 2004), and of the blurring boundaries of organizations resulting from contemporary flexible working practices and the emergence of hybrid workspaces (Wapshott & Mallet 2012) to create meanings at work that are different from corporate expectations. This study of resisting places thus suggests that the very physical porosity of organizational spaces is likely to enhance resisting initiatives and permit the development of alternative meanings related to work. This result contradicts research defending a rather defeatist perspective on work struggles, arguing that work would not be a political issue seized by workers to develop explicit political efforts (Fleming 2013). Rather, our study highlights that the possibility of using “transitory dwelling places” (Shortt 2015) can enhance the development of novel forms of intra-organizational struggles at the level of middle management. Overall, our research complements resistance studies by showing that a meaningful use of specific places can permit workers to be politically engaged in work issues that matter for them. It goes against defeatist perspectives on resistance that suggest that the recalcitrant worker would disappear from the workplace (Gabriel 1999) or would simply develop “decaf resistance” (Contu 2008), partly because the game of power would be

unwinnable. It highlights how resisting work (Courpasson et al. 2012) can be effective when it is closely connected with, and undertaken in, a meaningful chosen place.

This study has several consequences. First, it should lead resistance scholars to further analyze geographies of resistance, emphasizing the numerous entanglements of places that are integral to the workings of resistance (Sharp et al. 2000). It confirms that place matters for work issues (Tyler 2011). But it also moves organizational spatial studies from analyses of places of privacy, identification, liminality, to how places can enhance political efforts, a domain largely under researched. Focus on the structural isolation and removal from management control has prevented scholarship from acknowledging the relationship between meaningfulness and political engagement such as those represented by resisting activities. Second, the study confirms that places are meaningful locations (Cresswell 2004, Shortt 2015, Munro and Jordan 2013); however spatial scholarship should include more than the social and personal experiences permitted by the use of liminal or secluded “dwelling” spaces (Casey 1993). Places are also presented in this paper as important sites for the autonomous construction of efficacious processes of overt resistance. This is important because it permits us to engage with recent pessimistic accounts of post-recognition politics (Fleming 2013) suggesting the rise of exiting strategies from the workplace issues: if people continue to engage in the invention of meaningful places at work, this also suggests the importance of research striving to understand the motives that push individuals to continue seeing work as a political matter worth engaging with. And the significance of place in this dynamic.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have sought to champion a place-based perspective on organizational politics. We have purposefully elaborated this perspective because research has been focused

on dominant spaces, thus neglecting possibilities of alternative and transgressive uses of places for political motives. We have shown that places matter for political efforts at work not only for reasons of social isolation and remoteness of control, but rather because they offer settings where meanings are constructed. We have studied resisting places as work areas where a specific task can be accomplished in enjoyable conditions, rather than as dwelling regions where liberation from “structural obligations” can be envisaged (Turner 1982). Further research is needed to better understand how and why resistance needs particular physical features beyond the remoteness of corporate control: for instance do liminal or dwelling places like those highlighted by Shortt (2015) such as toilets or backstage rooms, or those analyzed by Iedema et al (2014) like hospital corridors, constitute potentially consequential resisting places, and if so under which specific conditions? Acknowledging the importance of the meaningfulness of places for individuals is crucial to understanding the current transformation of workers’ political tactics within more fluid and blurring organizational boundaries.

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