

4.2. Resistance patterns of a tattooed body

Cihan Ertan¹

Abstract

The body is not merely a physical and biological entity. As far as it is personal, it has also social, cultural, and political aspects. Thus, the body is at the core of social interaction. It, either temporally or permanently, can be altered and modified through variety of practices such as garments, piercing, tattoo etc. Tattoo as a body modification provide individuals a unique way to produce their own meanings within the process of social interaction. Resistance is one of the prominent meanings being produced actively by tattooed body of individuals not only by means of the image inscribed onto the body but organizing, managing, and performing of a tattooed body within a given social interaction as well.

Keywords: the body, body modification, tattoo, resistance.

1. Introduction

By locating the body at the core of the argument and considering it as an effective means for resistance, the main focuses or questions of this paper are that how can tattooed bodies be considered as a site of resistance?, what is the relationship of tattooed bodies with diverse hegemonic cultural discourses?, and how do tattooed bodies challenge these discourses when they aim to resist or even not aim to resist? In order to do so, the findings obtained from in-depth interviews conducted in Turkey with 70 tattooed people who have tattoos on diverse parts of their bodies will be analyzed.

It should be stated that this paper focuses only on the scene of mainstream consumption of tattoo as a popular cultural text. By mainstream consumption of tattoo, it is meant, but not merely limited with, the people who are not heavily tattooed but instead who have few tattoos which have primarily aesthetic meaning. Whether the tattoos of the individuals in this study are few in number and/or they merely reflect aesthetic purpose, the significant point to that paper is the ways tattooed people organize, use and/or present their bodies in varieties of interactions of everyday life through which they would able to produce their own meanings. As Storey (2014, pp. 81-94) suggested, consumption is not a linear process in which individual consumers "programmed" to consume in a passive manner; there is also a process in which individuals choose what they consume and how they consume by which they produce alternative meanings closely related to political dimension of everyday life. Besides this, consumption of popular cultural texts such as garments, ornaments, hair styles, tattoo, piercing, music, books, movies etc. are at the very heart of the production of meaning in everyday life (Fedorak, 2009) providing individuals with means through which they represent themselves to others and interact with society as a whole in the form of participating, belonging, entertaining, resisting etc.

2. Tattoo: Political voice of skin

It can be argued that there are varieties of resistance practices which may occur in different forms depending on its target and scope; and it can be performed by means of using various objects and/or individuals' own bodies as well (Hollender & Einwohner, 2004). There are abundant studies manifesting that how some mundane practices such as hair style, body building, body adornment,

¹ Düzce University, Turkey. E-mail: cihanertan1[at]gmail[dot]com

apparel, body hairs, fatness can actually be read as resistance (Carr, 1998; Martin & Gavey, 1996; Weitz, 2008; Synnott, 2002; Sweetman, 1999a; Sweetman, 1999b; Bell, 1999; Cooper, 2013). All these body of works have taken attention of resistance studies to everyday practices of individuals, broadening the understanding of resistance.

Resistance is not about only producing alternative challenging discourses with spoken words, but about reinforcing this counter hegemonic discourses by means of concrete body practices or objects. Thus, the body itself constitutes a primary space one may utilize to resist. Tattoos on one's own body can be seen as an embodied resistance since it is the concrete form of the opponent discourse toward cultural hegemonic discourses. These concretism is particularly important for resistance because it both makes the resistance more visible and thereby more influential (Lilja, 2009).

Hardt & Negri (2001, p. 216) suggested that the body practices such as piercing and tattoo, which enable to modify the bodies radically, are the signs of that "normal" or traditional ways of life, which contain traditional sexual life, family life, work discipline, etc. is being refused or resisted through body.

As Vinthagen & Johansson (2013, p. 18) indicated, the intention of a certain practice is not necessary or mandatory for resistance; what is significant to determine resistance is "only the potential of undermining power". A tattooed body itself can be considered as a resistance or a challenge regardless of the intention lying behind getting tattooed. For, it is contrary to the traditional body form which is thought pure and intact. Therefore, marking the smooth body with tattoo is a resistance to the dominant body image itself because it is to weaken the hegemonic discourse on the body and subvert the power relations in which individuals experience their everyday life.

Besides, tattoo can also be the symbolic representation of individuals' rebellion which signifies, for instance, a certain way of life, type of music, especially rock music for some interviewees. For example:

I have been interested in music since I was a child, especially rock music. Majority of them had tattoos (...) I always wanted to get tattooed (...) It wasn't important what it is; I did want a tattoo. I'm not feeling that I belong to the tattoo culture but it is directly related to the rock music which is a rebellion or resistance for me (Interviewee 6, Male, 30).

Thus, tattoo might be the mediate signifier of the opponent expressions of individuals which can be either towards the mainstream and popular tastes or towards the economical inequality and the socio-cultural organisation. It can be seen that tattoo and being a tattooed person represent a symbolic signifier which points to critical and defiant thoughts of people. For instance, one of the interviewees links his tattoos to a certain type of music and life style which contradict the social formations based on economy and policy.

I think that it has been an impact on my life when I listened to 'Imagine' from John Lennon. It says: 'Imagine all the people living life in peace. Imagine no possessions. I wonder if you can...'. I believe I can do that and I live by adopting as a principle of that money isn't that much important, peace precedes money (...) There is no rule, no limit, there is only my own rules in a world I created (...) (Interviewee 10, Male, 35).

It can be stated that tattoo might be the symbol of the opponent discourse towards the regulative, normative, and the dominant cultural discourse on the body (Fenske, 2007) which constitutes, with the concept of Berger and Luckmann, "objective reality" of society (as cited in Dreher, 2016, p. 54). Tattoo, as an interviewee pointed, can be considered as a rebellion, an objection, and a resistance oriented an external control mechanism upon the body of individuals, and also it can be thought as the indicator of possession of the body by individuals.

No one can constrain me. My mother doesn't want me to get more tattoos but I anyway will get more anyway (...) I have a principle that if there are someone in my life bringing problem, trying to restrain me, depriving me of something I like (...), I'll reject him/her. Because there is only me (Interviewee 11, Male, 27).

As mentioned, no matter of which motifs are being inscribed on the body, having a tattooed body can alone be considered as a resistance because it contains a rebellion pattern toward normative structure of society. Tattoo symbolizes the liberation of individual from social confinements becoming concrete and finding its expression through the body (Johnson, 2006). Having tattooed or a lifestyle represented through tattoo is substantially resistance oriented, because the practices and visibility of a tattooed body in public space contradict and conflict with social status quo (Bell, 1999).

One of the interviewees conceives tattoo as a representation of resistance to the disciplining and oppressive power on his body. The body, in this context, takes place at the center of the tension of the interactional relation between individual and the structure, and it is also a tool for individual to 'handle' that tension. As one of the interviewees pointed, "... majority of my relatives don't like and approve my tattoos. But, you see, I do not care, it is my body and my decision after all." (Interviewee 28, Male, 23).

The person who gets tattooed manifests his/her own initiative on the body besides getting the body inscribed with permanent marks. In general perspective, this can be considered as the expression of a challenge toward the boundary drawn around social body. Tattoo on the skin is at the heart of the constant struggle with power groups of social life which are influential on the body.

Nevertheless, tattoo is a symbolic representation of freedom and rebellion. At that point, it is not necessary to transform the body radically and visibly. Individuals construct an alternative expression of a discontent or resistance through their tattoos although tattoos on the body are not completely open to the gaze of the others. The body are being rendered an area through tattoo in where the obstacles preventing individual to express him/herself are eliminated. In this context tattoo can be read as a revolt text. For instance, one of the interviewees, suggesting that his interaction with his father is based on dominance and he is not being enabled to express himself, has embodied the resistance to that domination and built his symbolic representations over against the oppression through his tattoos. From the statements of the interviewee, it can be seen that this resistance through his tattoos is not only limited to the oppression within his family but it is also toward social repressions in general:

My political view is contrary to my father's. He is a right-winger, and espouses liberal system (...) Thus, I got 'treble clef' on my left arm, as the reflection on my body that of I am opposed to him, in order to signify that I am left-winger. Whenever there is a dialogue between us, he'd say that 'how do you think like that? Why do you think that way? What the hell is that?' (...) I should have done something so as to get out of the atmosphere where I couldn't express myself. Therefore, this time I got 'pegasus' on my left arm, the symbol of freedom. If you noticed, (pointing at Joker tattoo on his upper arm) it is a joker gritting his teeth. The reason that this joker is nervous is that I am nervous about something (...) It shows that I am reactive to certain things (...) My struggle for freedom against the things repressing me revives in my tattoos (...)" (Interviewee 37, Male, 27).

As is seen from the statement of the interviewee, tattoo is a symbolic representation of resistance oriented toward a given oppression. The interviewee above stated that he got his tattoos nonvisible parts of his body but it doesn't remove its resistance characteristic. It can be seen that the reason of that he got his tattoos on the nonvisible part of his body stems from the control of individual body, in other words from visibility strategy. That strategy, in a sense, is a tactic in everyday life through which individual exhibits his accordance to the norms in public space in terms of the body and, thus, he constitutes a space to represent his own resistance and opponent discourse. In this context, symbolic representation of resistance through tattoo can maintain its

opponent meaning although it is not being exposed explicitly within the interactions of everyday life. This reminds us public transcript and hidden transcript distinction made by Scott (1990). From that point, while the discourse that subordinated people engender in the presence of dominant is public transcript; the offstage discourse, on the other hand, that is beyond the direct view and gaze of the power constitutes hidden transcript. Hidden transcript, in this context, "is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (Scott, 1990, p. 4). From this perspective, tattoo may preserve its feature of being symbolic resistance expression even if it is hidden and close to the gaze of others. Further, it is being sometimes deliberately concealed as a strategy for being able to produce challenging discourse despite the socio-cultural restrictive interventions from family, kins, school etc., public in general.

Sometimes I roll up my t-shirt's sleeve to have that tattoo visible (...) However, I wear shirt when guests come to our house in order not to explain about my tattoos. When my father's friends come to us, they'd definitely ask about my tattoos and wouldn't approve them (Interviewee 2, Male, 22).

I am not having tattoos on visible parts of my body since I work as a government official. If I were not so, I would have had bigger and more beautiful tattoos (...) (Interviewee 27, Female, 37).

Here again, we can see both that even if the intention of having a tattoo is not motivated by being resistant, the organization of tattooed body within the broader social structure comprises a negotiation with power relations, and that it is not significant for a tattooed body being visible to be deemed as resistance; what is important is everyday practices, tactics or strategies of tattooed people by which they are able to get by disciplinary power of social structure.

(...) It is something like, 'dress decollate but don't display it completely'. My tattoo is on a place (lower arm) which can be seen easily but it can also readily be concealed (...) I am a person living in the midst of sociality so I have to care about the others. Sometimes, you may have to disguise the tattoo on your hand (...) It is like, for example, you like beard on your face but it is not convenient for you job; you have nothing to do about it and you shave it but you grow your beard or moustache on weekends (Interviewee 11, Male, 27).

There are some kind of everyday practices that contain in themselves resistance features although they cannot be seen so when they are looked at superficially. These are; coping, survival technique, and accommodation or avoidance and they should be considered as combinations or components of the strategy that provide individuals with floor on which they perform their resistant practices, rather than treating them as choices (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). In the context of tattooed body, these strategies of coping, survival techniques, accommodation, and avoidance are also important because they provide a tattooed person with breathing space; they make them invisible while they are still in negotiation with power, keep them from social sanction while they are still inconsistent with the hegemonic social order. Thus, it can be suggested that resistance has a contextuality. This contextuality involves the ways individuals adopt in order to produce or not to produce the meaning that is counter hegemonic. As an interviewee asserted, "Tattoo is not being approved if you are in a serious and formal situation, in an important place (...) I need to get my tattoos concealed in that cases." (Interviewee 3, Male, 30).

It can be seen that individuals would activate a control and prevention mechanism on social outcomes of individual action. Here, two sociologically significant points come into prominence. Firstly, tattooed body of individual is the object of social discipline. In other words, social structure has an influence on the form of the body, how to take care of it, how and to what extent to shape it, how to be represented within a given context, and also it is likely that the bodies seen "inappropriate" may be subjected to a sanction. Secondly, it seems that individual is in a negotiation with this social discipline on the body. Individual develops some kind of strategies and

tactics in order to handle and cope with this social discipline. These tactics or strategies indicate and involve the concealment or covering of tattoos in some public spaces in presence of power. This strategy of concealment of some tattooed people doesn't mean neither that they submit to dominance of power relations or that they are in a collaboration with power. It can be acknowledged that there seems to be a collaboration; however, collaboration in itself here is a significant part of the everyday strategy of people (Ortner, 1995). To resist a given system requires, almost everytime, to seem being in a collaboration with it and actually it is the creative way of the resister to appear as if she follows the logic of power which it is conceptualized as accommodation (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013).

Tattoo, in addition to this, can become a symbolic representation of ideological positioning through which an individual is able to present him/herself to others within the conflict organizing around different life styles, thoughts, ideologies etc. As is seen from the example below, tattoo constitutes an alternative way for individuals to express themselves in public space. Within the frame of this alternative public representation manner, even the visibility strategy deployed on tattoo as regard to conditions can alone comprise a resistance pattern. For, having a tattooed body always bears the potential of being a target of social reactions and stigmatization; therefore, by making visible of tattoos in public space one may confront and challenge this reactions and stigmatizations. Here, there is a resistance which finds its expression merely through a tattooed body rather than what motifs are being inscribed on it:

(...) one day, a woman insulted me in a supermarket saying 'profane'. She said that 'the world has gone from bad to worse because of the people like you!' (...) I'd reveal my tattoos in public rather than concealing them. Further, I want to expose them deliberately more than concealing in the presence of conservative, puritanical, religious people who disapprove of tattoos. (Interviewee 16, Female, 26).

On the other hand, tattoo, for some individuals, is a direct way of expression of their opponent discourses and political view concerning some political issues such as power, inequality, economical policies etc. The body becomes a space in where social structure and order is being criticized by means of tattoo. It is also significant that this kind of critical and opponent expression through tattoo provides individuals with an alternative channel which mediates people to participate social issues by manifesting their societal discontentedness. One of the respondents, who has a tattoo saying "F**k The World" on his nape stated that he uses this tattoo as if it is a "board". He pointed out that he expresses his challenging attitudes against resource allocation and inequality in terms of accessing to social benefits:

I wanted my tattoo to be visible (...) It is a very beautiful world. Travel, eat, drink (...) But what shall I do with all of these when I am not able to reach them (...) I would only see beauties that I can experience. The beauties that I can't experience are still beautiful but they don't make not much sense to me. One tourist would come and tell you that 'What great country you have. Why would you like to leave it?'. I admit that it is beautiful but you can live that beautiful but I can't. I am a bird here inside the golden cage, nothing more. You'd come here for ten days, swim, go to pool; it is heaven for you but for me (...) Come and see our hospitals (...) Yes, there are some beauties. We are in a world that is beautiful but also ugly (Interviewee 41, Male, 24).

It can be suggested that two types of resistance patterns emerge concerning resistance through tattoos. Firstly, *directly resistance* which carries its message directly towards its target and that message is open, easy to understand, and not implicit. This kind of resistance through tattoo may comprise some images of written words and symbols inscribed on the body that intend to say what it wants to mean straight forwardly. Secondly, *indirectly resistance* whose meaning is both limited to and resides in holder of tattoo, thereby not easy to grasp, highly symbolic, and sometimes its intention is not even to resist. However, people can utilize their tattooed bodies in order to produce

counter hegemonic discourse to resist some social settings such as conventional cultural norms about the body, cultural domination on the individual body and, restrictive mechanisms of society.

3. Conclusion

Tattoo as a body modification and a kind of body adornment should not be considered simply as a consumer text which is being consumed by individuals free from meaning. Rather, tattooed bodies produce actively meaning through tattoo while consuming it and resistance is one of the outcomes of that producing consumption practice.

This resistance pattern of tattoo is at the core of the individual body and the public body debate. Because an individual body that is having tattooed often contradicts with public body which produces hegemonic disciplining discourse concerning individual body. Thus, it can be claimed that a tattooed body is inherently resistant since it fights back traditional body discourse and therefore undermines it in some degree.

Resistance through tattoo also depends on context in which a tattooed body perform. On the one hand, the body may be tattooed with the intention of being resistant and the motifs may be chosen accordingly; on the other hand, one may have tattoos regardless of being resistant but in certain circumstances she may be using her tattooed body in order to fight back normative cultural expectations.

References

- Bell, S. (1999). Tattooed: A Participant Observer's Exploration of Meaning. *Journal of American Culture*, 22(2), 53–58. DOI: 10.1111/j.1542-734X.1999.2202_53.x
- Carr, C. L. (1998). Tomboy Resistance and Conformity: Agency in Social Psychological Gender Theory. *Gender & Society*, 12(5), 528 — 553. DOI: 10.1177/089124398012005003
- Cooper, C. (2013, May 1). *What is a Fat Activist?* Retrieved from <http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com.tr/2013/05/the-basics-what-is-fat-activist.html>
- Dreher, J. (2016). The Social Construction of Power: Reflections Beyond Berger/Luckmann and Bourdieu. *Cultural Sociology*, 10(1), 53–68. DOI: 10.1177/1749975515615623
- Fedorak, S. (2009). *Pop Culture: The Culture of Everyday Life*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Fenske, M. (2007). Movement and Resistance: (Tattooed) Bodies and Performance. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 51–73. DOI: 10.1080/14791420601138302
- Hardt, M.; Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hollender, J. A.; Einwohner, R. L. (2004). Conceptualizing Resistance. *Sociological Forum*, 19(4), 533–554. DOI: 10.1007/s11206-004-0694-5
- Johnson, F. J. (2006). Tattooing: Mind, Body and Spirit. The Inner Essence of the Art. In *Sociological Viewpoints*, Vol. 23 (pp. 45 –61).
- Lilja, M. (2009). Theorizing Resistance: Mapping, Concretism and Universalism The New Feminist Concepts of our Time?. *Resistance Studies Magazine*, 1, 3–19.
- Ortner, S. B. (1995). Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37(1): 173–193. DOI: 10.1017/S0010417500019587.
- Scott, J. (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.
- Storey, J. (2014). *From Popular Culture To Everyday Life*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- Sweetman, P. (1999a). Anchoring the (Postmodern) Self? Body Modification, Fashion and Identity. *Body & Society*, 5(2–3), 51–76. DOI: 10.1177/1357034X99005002004
- Sweetman, P. (1999b). Only Skin Deep? Tattooing, Piercing and the Transgressive Body. In M. Aaron (Ed.), *The Body's Perilous Pleasures: Dangerous Desires and Contemporary Culture* (pp. 165–188). Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.
- Synnott, A. (2002). *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- Vinthalen, S.; Johansson, A. (2013). Everyday Resistance: Exploration of a Concept and its Theories. *Resistance Studies Magazine*, 1, 1–46. Retrieved from <http://resistance-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Vinthalen-Johansson-2013-Everyday-resistance-Concept-Theory.pdf>
- Weitz, R. (2008). Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation. In C. Malacrida; J. Low (Eds.), *Sociology of the Body*(pp. 314–321). Canada: Oxford University Press.