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Theorizing Resistance Rights in International Politics

When people are oppressed, they resist. But injustices like dictatorship, foreign occupation and colonization do not just lead to resistance, they also spark collective claims of a right to resist. The international community's decisions to support or condemn specific resistance struggles often seem to result from shifting geopolitical interests or arbitrary moral sympathies for those that seem culturally most like "us". However, by uncovering the mechanisms through which resistance rights are made, distributed, and limited, this project reveals how such decisions are actually made in light of the underlying, evolving norms of the international order.

The international order's rules and norms are not neutral – they shape opportunities for groups to struggle for justice, and they help mobilize or limit the global support that such groups can expect when claiming rights to freedom from oppression. Using a systematic approach to uncovering how resistance rights are made, distributed, and limited, this project fills an important theoretical gap in Political Science.

Political Science needs new research on the role of international norms and rules in affecting what seem like domestic, localized struggles for justice. I build on existing "social constructivist" research strategies, which highlight the role of shared understandings of power and legitimacy in shaping reality. The main steps of the initial stages of this project for which I am requesting IDG funding are (1) to develop concepts and (2) to build explanatory theory by delineating hypotheses through which to analyze three case studies of three resistance struggles in distinctive historical junctures.

The central goal in this project is to delineate critical mechanisms in the construction, distribution, and limitation of resistance rights. This is distinct from explaining why resistance movements succeed or fail. The contribution of the project is not simply to describe international reactions to specific conflicts between resisters and their oppressors. Rather, this project is about uncovering how such reactions are structured in ways that enable resisters a social resource of international legitimacy, while depriving the same to oppressors. In doing so, the contribution of this project is to conceptualize and uncover important variation in the inter-subjective making, distribution and limitation of rights to resist domination.

This project has great practical import. There are scores of conflicts and grievances in the world, and while some are peaceful, others lead to violence and disorder. Whether in Syria, Tibet, Sudan, and even here in Canada, with indigenous peoples, perceived injustices demand attention. For activists, peacemakers, and government officials, evidence-based findings about the sources and effects of international recognition for resisters' claims are imperative. A right of resistance can help counter injustices in those situations where the privileged and powerful hinder justice seeking measures. By understanding how the international order governs recognition of legitimate resistance, this project provides a basis for academic and policy dialogue on how to work with and respond to the grievances and injustices that surround us as global citizens.