

Taking Sides as Taking a Stand

Critical Conditions of Co-Implication and Im-Possibility

Athena Athanasiou

"No one can write without passionately taking sides (whatever the apparent detachment of his message) on what is going wrong in the world". (Roland Barthes, "Taking sides", in *Critical Essays*, 1972, p. 163-170)

Taking sides takes place as a performative way of inhabiting, re-occupying, acting and reenacting (in) the world. It takes place in bodily relation to, and potentially in differentiation from, prevailing frames of subjection, which precede and exceed the subjects' reach although do not fully and unilaterally determine these subjects' positionalities (Butler 1997). As an agonistic engagement with the political, it does not preexist or exist apart from the complex social fields of intelligibility that are in place within specific contexts. Rather, taking sides is contingent upon those existing discursive formations that constrain and orientate in advance the kinds of "sides" that can appear as available, reachable or sustainable possibilities.

It is this contingency that holds an ineradicable critical potential for resistance to reigning regulatory social norms and for political transformation. Tracing and accounting for this critical potential, I argue, requires deconstructing the individualistic and voluntaristic conception of sovereign intentional subject-formation. In this regard, the analytics of taking sides would not require resorting to the notion of an originary self-identical subject who pre-exists the act of side-taking. Therefore, it should not be reduced to the desire of a pre-discursive constitutive subject to transgress norms and constraints. From this perspective, the purpose of this paper is to begin reflecting on the critical agency of taking sides as (dis-)continuous (rather than singular) performative (rather than constative, referential, and intentional) acts, which work to displace the very terms within which they take place and through which they have been enabled. I am interested in the ways the question of taking sides comes out of, and indexes, social positionings in our historico-political moment, notably collective struggles against rising fascism, racialized violence,

sexism, neoliberal governmentality, as well as imperialist militarization and securitization. And so, I would like to think through the question of taking sides as taking a stand to propel a reflection on instating possibilities for anti-fascist social and political life in light of the present moment.

What does it mean to be on the same side of a political struggle, and despite which social cultural inscriptions and ascriptions are the battle lines drawn at any given time? The social poetics of taking sides denotes a shared affective experience as a site of intense politicization and performative historicity: a site where the thoroughgoing relationality between social embeddedness and dissent comes into being. We are always already posited and positioned within, despite, and vis-à-vis dispersed discursive matrices through which we are constantly and incompletely constituted -at once constrained and enabled. We differentially occupy multiple subject-positions and intersubjective nexuses by excluding -and being excluded by- others. And we perform these conditions of im-possibility in unanticipated and incalculable ways, occasionally unconventional and transformative. The question is what are the ethicopolitical implications of such melancholic performative engagement with productive limitations conferred by existing power formations. It is the urgency of this question, I think, that compels us to attend to the critical ways the questions “which side are you on?” and “whom you stand with?” are inter-related with the questions “what we fight for” and “how we come together around a common purpose.” The words “side,” “stand,” “we,” “with,” “together,” and “common” indicate, precisely by not being able to fully capture, the complex considerations occasioned by the question of taking sides. They also, importantly, indicate the need to be attentive to the nuanced historico-political specificity of struggles within which this question makes sense. The complex dynamics of this specificity prompts us to consider the practice of taking sides as a political gesture of responsiveness and response-ability along the lines of registers such as engagement, collectivity, loss and comradeship, courage and vulnerability, belonging and unbelonging.

Although this account of the subject’s emergence as enmeshed and complicit in, and passionately attached to, the terms of its subjection might seem to diminish the possibility of taking sides, or to disallow the taking of sides that have been made unavailable or impossible, it is precisely this founding ambivalence and undecidable tension at the heart of subjectivation that becomes the condition of possibility for critical side-taking. Not all acts of taking sides are merely scripted in advance by power configurations, and the emergence of side-taking agency that eludes or rearticulates processes of subjectivation is an always undecidable, aporetic possibility. The challenge here is to resist the notion of critical side-taking agency as standing aside from prevailing modes of signification and subjectivation. Such perspective compels us to move beyond the liberal understanding of taking sides in terms of one’s own assumption of an available “option” over another. It would

prompt us to trouble the calculative, individualistic accounts that posit subjectivity and subjective agency in terms of sovereign will that masters an array of “choices.” In this light, a problem that I would like to introduce in what follows is how a thinking of taking sides might be allowed to reconsider and reformulate the paradigm of the will-to-act through the perspective of a critical account of the complicated intersections between will, power, desire, and subjectivation.

Taking sides raises the questions of how embodied and situated subjects come to materialize and reenact the political, who is fighting whom and why, which epistemic and political frameworks enable us to take sides, and what other sides are put aside or left out. In other words, taking sides is brought about in its relation to multiple forms of undoing and being undone within matrices of power that shape sides, bodies, and possibilities of worldmaking. It involves becoming situated in space and time through the collective work of always figuring out what is at stake.

From this perspective, my suggestion here is to think of taking sides in terms of agonism rather than pure affirmation; in terms of being-with-others as a modality of strange (or estranged) familiarity rather than ontological identification. The critical conception of agonism as what remains a troubling force, or a spectral challenge, is akin to how Foucault has theorized agonism between power and freedom in his definitive essay *Subject and Power*:

“The relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated. [...] Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’ – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.” (Foucault 1982: 790)

In maintaining his critique of the juridical model for understanding power, Foucault posits “the relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit” in terms of mutual susceptibility and ongoing struggle.

Thus understood, taking sides bears suggestive resonances with *taking a stand* but also *taking of sites* as a manner of collective protest, occupation, and critical appropriation. Drawing on those resonances, to address the question of taking sides includes accounting for bodies mobilized and mobilizing, responsive and put on the line in concert with others. Thus, the question of taking sides names the possibility of critically embodying and performing the political through what Judith Butler has theorized as bodily experience of exposure and expropriation, which implies both addressing the other from an inescapable perspective of an opaque self that resists narrativization (Butler 2005) and the corporeal condition of differential vulnerability and susceptibility as a galvanizing force in plural forms of performative actions (Butler 2015). In other words, I argue here for an understanding of what it means to take sides through a performative entanglement of criticality and corporeality.

In this sense, what concerns me in this essay is the question of taking sides in relation to the critical and aporetic structure of becoming engaged. Although we are always already engaged, in spite of all volitional or deliberate acts of engagement, we can also *become* critically engaged: that is, answerable to the pervasive social norms and resources through which we come to be formed as intelligible subjects. And yet, one's engagement can never be assumed as entirely one's own. It can occur only with others and through others, potentially in critical and agonistic ways. It is precisely this indeterminate possibility that enables the always unprefigurable, and potentially subversive, performative politics of critical engagement. What is politically significant about the performativity of critical engagement is precisely that it does not entail an absolute rupture between possibility and impossibility. In this sense, taking sides, it seems to me, prompts us to attend to open-ended epistemologies of criticality –as both crisis and critique, and as an assemblage of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. So the very idea of taking sides must be critically revised in ways that allow for *disorienting* and *decentering* the dominant ways of being in the world and in which we are all differentially tangled up.

Sides not in Place

Those “sides” involved in acts of taking sides, however, are not merely “in place.” They may be contingent and contentious. Not all confrontations can be reduced to siding with one of the available “sides” or to an unambivalent distinction between affirmation and negation. Moreover, the act (which is not merely singular) of taking part and taking sides in the political contest does not necessarily amount to staying on line or to being at home in this “side.” Rather, it may involve taking critical sides within the side one has positioned oneself, or disrupting and reordering the available sides or lines of association. In other words, taking sides may involve making turns, going astray, wandering off, and deviating from assigned lines of demarcation, and even, hopefully, taking apart the apparatuses that generate injurious and exclusionary lines of demarcation. Indeed, dissent often involves refusing to take sides between equally injurious and mutually complicit names or norms through which we are interpellated as subjects. It is in this sense that I am arguing here that taking sides can be about unsettling the paradigm of taking sides itself and its designated positions. And so, taking sides may be also about defending the dis-jointed position of neither here nor there, or the position of being out of line or out of place.¹

1 In a seminar delivered in 1978, in Collège de France, Roland Barthes defined the notion of “neutral” as that ethical and aesthetic position which “outplays” and “baffles the paradigm” (p. 6): in other words, as a way of troubling the terms by which a paradigm compels us to take

Sara Ahmed has offered an insightful account of how family gatherings “direct,” orientate, or push us along compulsory and idealized positions, lines, and avowable affective objects: “For me,” she writes, “inhabiting the family is about taking up a place already given. ... I feel out of place in this place, but these feelings are pushed to one side. We can consider how families are often about taking sides (one side of the table or another) and how this demand ‘to side’ requires putting other things aside” (Ahmed 2006: 88-89). “Sides,” from this viewing point, refer to directions, demarcations and orderings meant to shape and celebrate the straight body and desire while blocking other acts of becoming, notably those not aligned with compulsory heterosexuality and familial genealogy. In this sense, the demand to side can work to straighten different, eccentric, or queer affects and effects in domestic and public spaces. Such disciplinary straightenings and boundings rest on ingrained distinctions of sameness/difference such as the ones that play out in an anecdote Ahmed herself narrates, in which a neighbor called out to her and, propelled by her homophobic curiosity about two women living together in a house, asks, in a distinctly either/or manner: “Is that your sister, or your husband?” As we take sides, in familial gatherings and genealogies, but also in political conflicts and allegiances, we risk not only being injured for not being commensurate with assigned norms and names, but also being taken up by the ambient logic of straight directionality such as the one underlying that scene of the family table that Ahmed delineates. The “side” one might come to call one’s “own” is often a site of idealized social regulation, whose operations are not readily knowable or detectable by the subject itself.

However, taking sides holds out another crucial political possibility as well: norms become appropriable and are possibly reworked and altered as a way of creating critical spaces for responsiveness and dissent – or, responsiveness *as* dissent. In other words, injurious address may work to fix us into normative dispositions and designations, but it may also give rise to unexpectedly enabling and dissident responses. In light of this problematization of “straight lines,” I would argue that taking sides involves both being implicated in those unwilling lines of demarcation that act upon us *and* the agonistic performative appropriation of injurious terms against the interpellations they harbour. In other words, this latter form of taking sides refers to a performative *re-taking* of sides, which derives its political power from taking up those prior, assigned registers of subjectivation in new and improper, potentially critical and agonistic ways. As asymmetries of power related to intersecting race, gender, class and sexuality compromise our capacities for taking up space, taking place, and thus taking sides, at the same time our taking sides may

one side or the other within a binary opposition. For Barthes, the “neutral” does not indicate the self-assuring, quiet, or “objective” middle-ground or in-between. Rather, it is a manner to be engaged, to be “present to the struggles of my time.” (Barthes 2005).

work to unsettle those power configurations (as in siding with political struggles for equality and justice and against racism, heteropatriarchy and nationalism).

The inherently unstable and ambivalent processes of subjectivation complicate the possibilities of taking sides. Through a perspective that engages with the co-implication of subjects in crisis and subjects of critique, the question for me is how to tackle the problem of taking sides without reiterating the terms of self-willed individualism set by liberal imaginaries. The act of taking sides does not imply positing a pre-discursive sovereign 'I' that performs its volition as independent from, and invulnerable to, power formations. On the contrary, it denotes a possibility for a performative rupture in the regulatory repetition of the norms that sustain and are sustained by subjectivation. The subject of taking sides, then, does not refer to a pre-existing and self-determining volitional agent, but rather to a performative approximate occasion of its subjectivation. It is the space of this approximation which opens up the possibility of disruptive reworking of the terms by which subjectivation takes place as an ambivalent embodiment of norms – at once formed by and acting upon them. To understand the act of taking sides as a (dis-)continuous and incalculable process of subjectivation, one enabled and restricted by formations of power/knowledge, is to mobilize the critical potential of taking sides without assuming a primary locus of critique and without taking available configurations of sides and lines for granted.

What is at issue in the question how to take sides while disrupting the normative ways of taking up space is how to think about agonism alongside the political intricacies of non-sovereign subjectivity, finitude, courage, and responsiveness; and how to enact agonism as a contingent occasion to perform dissent while remaining bound to its aporetic or inherently contradictory condition of possibility as both possibilizing and impossibilizing. *Aporia*, writes Jacques Derrida, does not indicate a failure, a problem awaiting solution, or a mere terminus before an impasse. It rather indicates the experience of the undecidable, which has performative power, as through which a decision can take place (Derrida 1994; 1986). So the question becomes in what ways the non-linear, open-ended *poros* ('path or passage through') of taking sides as taking a stand can be precipitated and take shape each time so that it does not elide or suppress its constitutively aporetic structure, that is, the encounter with the pathless and the "non-way": the undecidable and the indeterminable. This raises the crucial question of whether it is possible to "take sides" in "ways" not consigned to the habitual linear tropes of fixed "lines" and "paths." How might this question, then, provoke new, nuanced and transversal "directions" for knowledge practices of taking-sides-to-come?

Taking sides is a complex ethicopolitical performative experience, which involves both the urgent necessity and the imperative move or the event of taking a stand in time and, at the same time, the perhaps slower, even (too) late, and less capturable pace of critical reflexivity. In other words, it implies at once motion

and motionlessness; uprising and contemplation. It takes (its) time to take place at a given time. Claiming a space beyond the active-passive ontological distinction, these semantic registers are simultaneous and inextricable components of the political; they pertain to the interrelated defining features of stasis, which, as Nicole Loraux has significantly suggested, is constitutive of democracy (Loraux 2002).

What kind of body politics and public intimacy would such work of taking sides/sites as taking a stand entail? Different activist protest movements working within and on the limits of the present moment, as they gather and take to the streets or occupy spaces to contest power configurations of racism, neofascism, police violence, heteropatriarchy, and the differential terms of neoliberal precarity, have performed the questions: who comes together, who has not been included in concerted actions of “the people,” and whose lives matter as lives? The international activist movement Black Lives Matter, which started out through public demonstrations seeking justice for the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin in 2012, struggles against racialized deadly violence and embodied disposability so thoroughly embedded in the ordinary. The Occupy Wall Street protesters in New York City’s financial district in 2011 and the occupy movements in Southeastern Europe demanded equality and protested the abusive power of the ruling financial elites. The transnational Latin American feminist movement Ni Una Menos (“not one woman less”) contests the conditions of gender-based violence that turn public space into a fixed landscape of hegemonic, patriarchal memorability. The Istanbul Gezi Park occupation of spring 2013, which began as a protest against plans to remove a public park and turned into an uprising against authoritarianism, has defended and opened up the public space against the neoliberal calculability of bodies and resources. In such street performances, by articulating and transmitting dissident claims and struggles, political actors assemble in and reclaim a public space and contest the conditions of possibility for their appearance through norms of gender, sexuality, nationality, raciality, able-bodiedness, as well as land and capital ownership. The sociality of coming together and taking sides/sites with others emerges as a performative engagement that defends and mobilize processes of embodied public dissent.

In these street actions, in all their situated specificity and singularity, activists do enact plurality and relationality outside of oneself and along with others in the public space. They embody their own and others’ precarious belonging vis-à-vis power assemblages of racism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal governmentality. It is from this perspective that I ask here whether and how the critical agency of taking sides/sites might be rethought and re-politicized as a critical means to carve expansive cartographies of dissent in the *polis* and build new affiliations of political subjectivity in light of historically shaped collective claims of political self-determination and freedom. These acts of collecting and re-collecting space are inextricably bound up with the performative dimension of taking space, also conceived as tak-

ing position. It is to these emerging spaces akin to bodies together, bodies apart, and bodies on the line that I now turn.

Taking a Stand

In order to tackle the poetics and politics of taking sides in terms of taking a stand and as a gesture of stasis (cf. Vardoulakis 2017), I would like to draw on my research with the feminist antinationalist movement “Women in Black” in former Yugoslavia, whereby the activists position themselves not along the authorized lines of gender, kinship and national normative belonging, but rather in the side of the other.² By means of an agonistic mourning and mnemopolitics for the dead of the “other side,” they take up the position of the internal enemy. They take a stand against idealized ways of siding with one’s own and as a political possibility of being with others across ethno-national lines of (un)belonging. Their political action of reclaiming a public space for remembering others and otherwise work to traverse and transfigure the *polis* and its normative rituals of remembrance and recognition.

Through the performative registers of dissident belonging and becoming-enemy, these activists mobilize cross-border grievability to counter the biopolitical economy of enmity, with all its racial, ethnic, and gender inflections. Their enduring attachments to such affective intensities, as they play out in their commemoration of the annihilated victims of the “other side,” their acts of camaraderie with the “enemy” community generate spaces for transvaluating afflicted losses into possibilities of critical agency. In hauntingly re-inhabiting and thus estranging the contained place of home, as both kinship and homeland, and in assuming the gender-marked position of the “internal enemy,” these activists affirm relationality with disturbing and unruly others situated out of place and estranged as external enemies. It is through this political performativity of self-estrangement that they address the disavowed memory of those who have been absented and effaced from the *polis*. These activists dress in black and stand still and silently, usually at rush hour, at central spots of the city and noisy crossroads, or in front of iconic national landmarks: squares, historic monuments, and fraught dividing lines. It is precisely the established intimacy of public recognisability that the activists’ black-coloured appearance defamiliarizes. In making themselves appear to others through their characteristic black clothing and silent standing, they take on the quality of a spectre in order to perform an unauthorized relationality with those who can no longer appear.

2 This section draws extensively from my book *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black* (Athanasiou 2017).

Their ephemerally “monumental” standing-in-silence, as a bodily mode of perseverance and protest, reoccupies and perturbs the monumental topography of memory and turns it into a performative field of contention and dissent. Since the years of the war that lead to the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, standing in silent actions for an hour, early in the afternoon every Wednesday at the Republic Square of Belgrade, had become the trademark of their political activism. Women in Black actions of *stajanje* (‘standing still’) resignify the territory of the memorable, despite and against the normative premises of blood affiliation, fatherland, and gender and kinship codes that found and sustain it. Indeed, a public space charged with contentious narratives of national history and politics, in all their idealized property and propriety of the “common place” (as a suitable and familiar space, national fatherland and home), is *spaced* by these activists’ bodies. Public space does not come to be presumed as an empty and unmarked container waiting to be filled with things, processes, and embodied encounters. Rather, it is reappropriated through a process of becoming that both relates and separates, as Derrida has shown through his concept of spacing (‘*espacement*’): “*Spacing* designates nothing, nothing that is, no presence at a distance; it is the index of an irreducible exterior, and at the same time of a *movement*, a displacement that indicates an irreducible alterity.” (Derrida 1981: 81)

In such events of *stajanje* as standing and stasis, the activists’ bodily posturing, steadfastly but also fleetingly counterposed to the national monumental architecture, textures and complicates the imperative to remember by opening it onto the disconcerting question of whom the remembrance of nationalist war requires effacing. In effect, the activists re-mark what has been established as remarkable about the monumental landmark. They occupy Belgrade’s central square, performing a spectralized plurality of bodies, present and absent, living and non-living. Their silent “stubborn choreography” (Sosa 2011: 70) embodies an acting monument that defies monumentalization. By re-positioning their political bodies at the centre of the *polis* as a means of embodying their own and others’ ambivalent and precarious (un-)belonging vis-à-vis its demarcation lines, these political actors become themselves “other” and turn the public space into a scene of dissent. They publically actualize the multilayered modalities of stasis as taking a stance and taking a stand, standing up for someone or something, but also bearing witness and giving testimony.

The Women in Black contemplative standing ensemble becomes a restless performative occasion of stasis. In standing at and across the border, in its multiple tropes of external and internal frontiers, enclaves, refugee camps, routes of mass expulsion, and states of siege, these political actors embody the *polis* in ways that echo what Loraux has described as “divided city,” constituted on the basis of that which it disavows. As marked subjects of gender, women, Loraux argues, performatively embody the awareness of this internal stasis – as both division and revolt.

These activists put into play the ec-static character of political subjectivity as constituted through the address of the other (denoting both being addressed by and addressing others). As they become “moved” by, through and toward, the disavowed losses that haunt injurious mnemopolitics, they deal with the question of how responsiveness might appear in the languages of activism. Stasis, in this context, involves an embodied practice of inhabiting the public through one’s own and others’ dissident belonging. So how might we think activism as taking sides in terms of responsiveness exercised precisely in conditions of dispossession, rather than in terms of achieving sovereign autonomy through transcending structures of subjugation? How might we think taking sides as one’s being collectively moved and moving with others despite and against the powers by which one is subjectified?

In summary, such performative actions of taking a stand articulate dissent as eventness of social agonism through relating with others. The disquiet these activists insert into the reigning domain of intelligibility manifests courage – a notion that Foucault has associated with critical work (Foucault 2012) – as not restricted to verbal acts of truth-speaking, but rather performed through a multiplicity of embodied daily acts, gestures, and aesthetics that enable the elaboration of critical matrices of de-subjugation and relationality. In the words of Holloway Sparks: “Courage, we might say, is a commitment to persistence and resolution in the face of risk, uncertainty, or fear.” (Sparks 1997: 92) In the context of our inquiry, then, rather than a state of individual honorable self-mastery and heroic, manly, moral transcendence, courage emerges as a historically situated performative ethos of collective endurance and resistance, necessarily linked to power relations.

This line of inquiry is about the challenge of attending to and accounting for the aporetic space of taking critical distance and taking a critical stance vis-à-vis the present order. In this sense, the critical re-elaboration of taking sides as a political figure here is not about presuming an event (as a singular, time-shattering, apocalyptic event) but rather about enacting multiple and perhaps discontinuous possibilities for taking up and disrupting the normative social scripts of race, gender, and class privilege, and enabling other visions and enactments of the world. The political performative figure of taking sides indicates a precarious exercise of subjectivation and de-subjectivation, which haunts, while remaining haunted by, the constraints of power but also the absent presences of other, de-realized subjectivities. Simultaneously constituted and constituting, complicit and disengaged, this critical exercise in taking sides to trouble and subvert regimes of subjection is always inflected with and strategically reworking these power/knowledge regimes, always underway and slow-burning, persistently taking place and taking time, bringing about and calling for the struggles and transformations of one’s time.

References

- Ahmed, Sara (2006): *Queer Phenomenology*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Athanasίου, Athena (2017): *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Barthes, Roland (2005): *The Neutral*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butler, Judith (1997): *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- (2005): *Giving and Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press.
- (2015): *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1981): *Positions*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- (1994): *Aporias*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- (1986): *Memoires for Paul de Man*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1982): “Subject and Power”, in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 777-795.
- (2012): *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II. Lectures at the Collège de France*, New York: Picador.
- Lorau, Nicole (2002): *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, New York: Zone Books.
- Sosa, Cecilia (2011): “On Mothers and Spiders: A face-to-face encounter with Argentina’s mourning”, in: *Memory Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 63-72.
- Sparks, Holloway (1997): “Dissident citizenship: Democratic theory, political courage, and activist women”, in: *Hypatia*, vol. 12, no. 4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 74-110.
- Vardoulakis, Dimitris (2017): “Stasis: Notes toward agonistic democracy”, in: *Theory and Event*, vol 20, no. 3, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 699-725.

