

# Introduction

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“Taking Sides – Theories, Practices, Cultures of Participation in Dissent” explores different perspectives on dissent, while understanding practices, cultures, and theories of resistance, dispute, and opposition as inherently participative. The concept of side-taking is hence investigated in different facets. Firstly, as assuming a position/opinion in opposition to another or even affiliation with a cause or (unpopular) standpoint. Secondly, in a play on words, thinking about side-taking also often includes the taking of sites as a manner of protest, occupation, appropriation, or acquisition. Thirdly, taking a side implies an active decision, a process of subjectification and identification, in which the subject and the position it takes are equally produced.

Under these preliminary considerations, questions arise of how dissent can be embodied in thoughts separately from actions. Is there an option to oppose without automatically participating in acts of opposition? In this collection, we are conscious of the fact that any re-sistance also re-peats, re-instates, and re-iterates that which it turns against. It could even be argued that any ‘contra’ inevitably reiterates or even reinforces its ‘pro’. The affirmative aspect of practices of dissent, when they are inscribed or want to be visible in their respective discourses, hence also demands attention.

Additionally, historic and contemporary moments in which dissent becomes resistance or in which dissent is dissolved are compelling. Are self-proclaimed ‘alternatives’ really distinct, or are they merely substitutes that automatically turn into standards over time? And doesn’t objection to something further close an issue rather than opening it up as resistance builds? It is also debatable, who or which processes mark something as the antipode of an issue, which is then automatically made the norm. How can we describe the processes of taking place when “being against” draws a line that halts or hinders fluctuation? What binarisms (such as inclusion/exclusion, participant/non-participation, for/against) and contradictions arise when we take a position? Is it possible to take a side in a non-binary way of thinking and acting?

In June 2018, members of the research group “Media and Participation. Between Demand and Entitlement” invited participants from Germany, Switzerland,

Austria, France, Greece, Canada, and the US to come to Konstanz for a conference on “Taking Sides | Taking Sites”.

Early career researchers and principal investigators from Konstanz University, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, University of Hamburg, and Zurich University of the Arts each focus on different aspects of media and participation in five subprojects. Research unit 2252 investigates media-cultural processes of *Teilhabe* (participation), positions these in an interdisciplinary framework, and develops a theory of media participation.<sup>1</sup> At the conference four keynote speakers, two of which are also contributors in this collection, gave inputs for the following intense workshop sessions. Athena Athanasiou (Athens) asked, how can we rethink the political implications of crisis/critique/criticality in instating a possibility for decolonial, counter-nationalist, feminist/queer, anti-fascist, social, and political life in our times (see Section 3). By connecting the humanities and academia to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Athanasiou evoked a concept of the humanities (with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) as a space of potential action, as space to breathe when “I can’t breathe” has become a widely recognized idiom, 2014 with Eric Garner, reflected 2018 at our conference, and 2021, when we are writing this introduction and have entered a new intense time of protests, following the killing of George Floyd.

Emma Pérez (Tuscon) anecdotally questioned the coloniality of feelings, which she defined as feelings that emerge from the darker side of the U.S. political terrain during the historical “Trump moment”. She identified racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism as the colonization of feelings, which must be decolonized to create a hopeful future. She emphasized the “will to feel”, which goes against bourgeoisie, capitalist, automated, and dystopian tendencies of our times and positioned this against more pessimistic, glum descriptions of the epistemically violent status quo while herself taking a strong side for hope (see Section 1).

Gabriella Coleman (Montreal) turned to hacker-based politics, activism, and hacktivism that forms solidarities across causes to probe the theme of the conference: taking sides. She analysed instances of successful hacker cooperation, regardless of political stance, making very clear that “Anonymous is not unanimous”. She mapped some of the distinctive characteristics defining hacker political action as well as some of the possible causes behind, and limits to, hacker political intersectionality.

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<sup>1</sup> The German term *Teilhabe* is used in differentiation to everyday understandings of participation and stresses that part-taking is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, connecting and separating. By taking part (or having part, which would be closer to *Teilhabe*), the partial emerges at the same time as the participant. The project researchers hence emphasize that any call to partake is always connected to the interpellation of subjects, to promises of benefits from the participation, and at the same time to demands towards the subject.

Judith Revel (Paris) talked about resistance and subjectivation and described processes that shift ideas, affects, and activities from “I” to “We”, the latter not being predetermined but emerging. She explored ideas of community, the communal, and individual freedoms within power systems.

The conference hugely benefitted from the impulse papers participants handed in preparation for the workshop sessions – most of which have since been developed and turned into the chapters of this collection – and from the closing panel of the event: The German performance collective “geheimagentur” sent two of their secret agents to facilitate an alternative ending, reflecting on the insights and discussions beyond being a resume or round for questions. With cut up keynote power points, temporary tongue tattoos, and movement of bodies and minds, the conference participants went on to become contributors to this collection.

By focusing on four different fields of dissent, we want to discuss aspects of the body as a political instance, the identity and subjectivity building of individuals and groups, (micro-)practices of dissent, which can also focus on the importance of the (social) media, and theories of critique. The collection therefore touches upon contemporary issues, recent protests and movements, artistic subversion and dissent, and online activism as well as historic developments and elemental theories of dissent.

The four sections of the book are “Queer Thinking”, “Decolonizing Knowledge”, “Media Activism”, and “Theories of Critique”. Each is composed of papers by academics from international universities and early career researchers, as well as framing commentary from the editors. “Queer Thinking” includes aspects of the body as a political instance, the problematizing of identity and subjectivity building of individuals and groups by gender hierarchies, two-gender hegemony, or heteronormativity. In this section, the theories of queer studies are taken up to explore forms of non-binary thinking about resistance and relate them to case studies.

“Decolonizing Knowledge” problematizes different aspects of knowledge making. Next to the pivotal aspect of coloniality and the related cultural, racial, sexual, and geographical dichotomies we focus on aesthetic and activist practices of knowledge making. The chapters in “Media Activism” discuss (micro-)practices of dissent, which can also focus on the importance of (social) media and practices within social media communities that are directed against industry standards as well as tactics that are positioned to oppose participation by default.

Finally, “Theories of Critique” enquires into the (im)possibilities of taking up an external position and highlights an insider critique that reflects on its situation as ‘ecologies of practices’ and partiality. The discussion will therefore touch upon contemporary issues, recent protests and movements, artistic subversion and dissent, and online activism as well as historic developments and elemental theories of dissent.

This book would not have been possible without people who are not on the cover but have done crucial work. The editors would like to thank Kristina Jevtic and Maren Kraemer for editing the manuscript and Angela Whale for the native language proofreading.