

Dissident Participation and its 'post_colonial' Implications

An Exploration of Positionalities of Critique Considered Regarding the Institution of Higher (Arts) Education

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How is it possible to criticize predominant structures and institutionalized processes in order to achieve transformation? What are dispositions of critique and their specific positionalities? How, while theorizing critique, can we take account of current power relations that are grounded in a colonial legacy? These are the main questions I would like to touch on and partly tackle in this chapter. My focus thereby is on the workings of tertiary education and modes of intervention into these institutionalized settings. In the first section, I consider how critique contributes to the functioning of institutions. I am interested in the relationship between structures and institutions that define the normative order and the positioning of critique as well as their potential for transformation. In my second section, I look into dissident participation as a mode of critique. In my third section, I briefly question challenges to specific positionings. The fourth section draws on my earlier and ongoing research on in- and exclusion within Higher Arts Education to introduce a perspective anchored in empirical considerations. In my last section, I highlight the significance of introducing a post_colonial¹ perspective to the discussion and considerations of dissident participation and theorizing critique in general.

1 Notation of post_colonial with the underline represents the complex entanglements and historical contingencies that bind the colonial past to the present. Furthermore, the critical epistemology that questions colonial patterns of discourse in public, arts, and in science is emphasized (also see Hostettler and Vögele 2016).

How critique contributes to the functioning of institutions

In his work *On Critique* Luc Boltanski explains institutional structures to produce a specific norm, entity, and continuity (2011). Thereby, the structures not only confirm a value but contribute widely to the value's creation (Boltanski 2009: 122). He writes: "Far from being limited to confirming a value, in large measure they help create it." (2011: 78) Thereby, normative structures and their value systems are set. Boltanski explains that by transforming small gaps of differences into distances and thereby categorizing individuals and social groups, differences loaded with significance initiate a powerful multiplier effect in demarcation. Moreover, institutions must continually be subjected to a process of re-institutionalization to maintain their form and prevent them from 'unraveling' (ibid.: 80). Beyond their reproduction, they primarily have the function of self-justification (Bogusz 2010: 139f). This has the effect of naturalizing the occurrence of institutional structures and concealing their continual reproduction. The working of institutions enables the re-identification of abstract authorities and hence also their stability through time and space. This is the main reason for them to appear attractive and to re-enforce adherence to the existing structures (Boltanski 2011: 78). Institutional structures are also simultaneously a source of experienced power-relations and violence. According to Boltanski, critique must therefore be positioned from the vantage point of denouncing the institutions' power and symbolic – or epistemic – violence. The existence of symbolic violence is the main justification of critique, whose first move is to unmask and denounce the violence concealed in the folds and interstices of the institutional structures. Critique has the task to re-describe the mechanisms of institutional confirmation by rendering visible the violence held within it (ibid.: 96). Critique, in Boltanski's understanding, actually is inscribed in the tensions contained in the very functioning of institutions: "My main argument is that the tension incorporated by institutions harbours the possibility of critique, so that the formal genesis of institutions is inextricably a formal genesis of critique." (2009: 152, 2011: 98) In addition, Boltanski views critique as potentially taking on similar modes of domination that institutional structures themselves employ: "Modes of domination are necessary to the extent that institutions themselves are more strongly associated with the perpetuation of the asymmetries and forms of exploitation at work, and/or that the voice of critique makes itself more loudly heard." (2011: 117)

Judith Butler's discussion of Michel Foucault's text *What is Critique* (1978) adds a further dimension to the understanding of how critique contributes to the functioning of institutions in general. She too explains critique as always being of an embedded practice (2001: 1). The moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalizable practice, critique loses its character: critique only exists in relation to something other than itself. In a general

sense, Butler notes that according to Foucault, critique is a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing. This is guided by the inquiry into the relation of knowledge to power that produce epistemological certainties. These turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering (ibid.: 2). Critique, thus, is to unveil other and new realities by leaving established grounds of validity. However, as Butler points out, this is particularly risky: "The problem with those grounds is precisely that they seek to foreclose the critical relation, that is, to extend their own power to order the entire field of moral and political judgment. They orchestrate and exhaust the field of certainty itself." (Ibid.: 6) The position of critique seems to be located in the task of constantly risking the denunciations of those who naturalize and render hegemonic the very moral terms put into question by critique itself. Butler explains that in the understanding of Foucault, critique is a multiple act in that is the stylized relation to the demand upon it, and that, within a specific stylization of critique, a subject is produced that is not readily knowable within the established structure. (Ibid.) In this context, Foucault talks about *desubjugation*; whereby, a desubjugation from the established grounds occurs when a mode of existence is risked – a process of self-making through disobedience. The self is compelled to form itself within practices that are more or less in place – a process characterized as modes of *subjectivations* (ibid.). Foucault's understanding of critique thus suggests that critique also means re-composition and invention (ibid.: 1). However, as Butler further emphasizes in her text *Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity* (2012) "critique has something to do with a disposition of the subject." (Ibid.: 18) This entails questioning the basis of critical inquiry. Butler concludes that critique is a political dissent. It is a way of objecting to illegitimate claims of public and governmental authority that "cannot be sustained without institutional supports." (Ibid.: 20) Now, if critical practice opens up this new possibility for elaborating the subject as Butler demonstrates, how can we understand this process and the disposition necessary for the positioning of dissidence? As this consideration seems to suggest, subjectivity that occurs in self-making through disobedience is sustained through institutional structures. Dissent relates to modes of knowledge that articulate modes of governmental authority (ibid.: 24). By stating that dissent is established inside the purview of the polity and simultaneously as the principle by which a departure from an established polity can take place (ibid.: 25), Butler suggests that dissent is located both inside and outside of the very grounds it questions.

Terms and conditions for dissident participation

In the first section of my chapter, my aim was to sketch out how critique relates to the established structures and institutions. However, the question of how critique and dissent can be transformative despite their embeddedness remains. Posed the other way around: which context enables critique to have the potential of re-composition and invention as Foucault terms it? What further, additional, or even contradictory ways of understanding and conceptualizing critique are necessary to contribute to an understanding? To start tackling these questions, I am particularly interested in investigating if critique can be articulated from a positioning within. Thereby, I mean to ask, in what terms embeddedness allows for which degree of radicality in critical inquiry or, on the contrary, renders certain lines of questioning impossible. How transformative, re-composing, and inventive can critique be? What kind of not-knowable subject can possibly be produced within the established structure?

To at least address these questions partly, I would like to look into *dissident participation* as a form of critique. I thereby assume that the positioning of dissident participation is a less risky form that does not imperil its existence, but remains in acceptance of the structures, partly embracing them as they sustain one's own position. To tackle dissident participation, I will confine the discussion to the realm of Higher Education and thereby predominantly refer to Sabine Hark's extensive study (2005), in which she discusses the position of feminist and gender studies in the field of academia. Hark interrogates the potential of a critique from within academic structures, and states that inclusion into the structures subject to critique is a necessary condition for producing findings and understandings outside the hegemony (ibid.: 68). She writes:

“To change a field means to first of all change the rules of the game. The transformation of the rules, however, does not only demand a certain degree of virtuosity in understanding and navigating them, but it asks for – and this is precisely where the challenge and precarity of an ascertained critical project is located – the *acceptance* of the rules – and be it out of pragmatic necessity.” (ibid.: 70, translation S.V.²).

2 Original quote: “Denn ein Feld zu verändern bedeutet vor allem, die Regeln des Spiels zu verändern. Die Transformation der Regeln setzt allerdings nicht nur eine gewisse Virtuosität im Umgang mit den Regeln voraus, sie verlangt zunächst – und genau hierin besteht die prekäre Herausforderung für das sich herrschaftskritisch verstehende feministische Wissensprojekt – deren Akzeptanz –, und sei es aus pragmatischen Gründen.”

Thus, we must inevitably acknowledge the very structures subject to critique as entry into them is necessary to developing ground-breaking critique and achieving change. Hark subsumes this as a “dissident participation”:

“Dissidence and participation are, in other words, intricately enmeshed: participation, and yes, acceptance of the reigning rules of the game is the paradoxical premise for achieving change. [...] we actually (would like to) object the powers from which our being is dependent.” (Ibid.: 73, translation S.V.³).

Abolishing the structures is therefore not the primary goal of dissident participation. Rather, in Hark’s understanding, we are forced to work within the structures if we are to understand and develop effective possibilities of critical practices of knowledge. It is, then, a task of dissident participation to uncover the workings of institutional structures and systematic obscuring of their reproduction, and search instead for ways that offer other dealings with these structures (ibid.: 392).

In Hark’s terms, attaining power *within* the structures requires a specific anchorage into them. Although such a positioning within participation admittedly seems to enable a better access to the structures subject to change, the problem of the blind spots remains. They are not lapses but inevitably form part of the strategy by allowing a more enabled participation within the dominant discourse (Thompson 2004:39). Through participation, the intervention into the structures becomes more effective, but it is very likely that the ability to question power relations and privilege diminishes. This recalls Boltanski’s understanding of critique in which the back and forth between effective intervention and lessened critique is essential to the existence of institutions – thus benefitting the normative structure. Boltanski’s and Foucault’s explanations suggest that critique, especially if accepted by the structures, always remains tied to the institution it criticizes – and is governed by its hegemonic structures, eventually optimizing it in Boltanski’s terms (2009: 156). This observation allows the understanding that dissident participation (in the realm of Higher Education) renders palpable the proximity of affirmation and dissidence, participation and transformation, subversion and normalizing, and critique and regulation. It reveals how dissident participation is challenged to constantly be aware of its own immanence, privilege, cooption, and blind spots (Hark 2005: 250) – while navigating these contradictory dimensions and believing in its own critical and transformative agency. The work by Sara Ahmed *On Being Included* (2012) is a very conclusive account of the proximity between the endeavor to fight discrimination within institutional structures of Higher Education that ultimately

3 Original quote: “Dissidenz und Partizipation sind, mit anderen Worten, unauflöslich verknüpft: Teilhabe, ja Akzeptanz der herrschenden Spielregeln ist die paradoxe Voraussetzung für Veränderung. [...] dass wir nämlich gerade den Mächten widersprechen (wollen), von denen unser Sein abhängig ist.”

enforce institutional racism. Hark, in her account, suggests locating oneself on the margins between the inside and the outside of the institution to acquire the structures rather than being subjectivated. To be able to take on this defiance an oscillation between scientific and activist positions is necessary. This could come close to the undoing of structures in Athena Athanasiou's understanding.⁴ She states that critique takes a side insofar as it always also is undoing the structures subject to its inquiry. At the same time, she endorses that dissent has to be understood as *refusing* to take a side; that dissent is *against*. She says: "Taking on a side/site refers to disciplinary bonding and is strongly linked to boundary. It can be very normative. But it also entails dissent: critical agency refuses to be complicit with the structures."⁵ She explains that the dissent entails contradicting by participating and that it has to perform doubly in a dissonant temporality that conquers rather than preserves the futurity. It is about transforming and appropriating the structures rather than abolishing them. This could possibly relate to the process of self-making in disobedience by Butler discussed above.

Challenges to the positioning of dissident participation

The discussion so far suggests that in order for a critique's radicalism to be understood and perceived as such, it has to maintain a certain relationality and to be tied into the dominant system to avoid becoming unintelligible. This leads me to the assumption that any actor or activity in critique necessarily occupies a place of dissident participation. However, although seemingly critique always is complicit with the structures it hopes to manipulate – especially within dissident participation –, contradictory and simultaneous workings of dissent do have a radical and un-known potential for transformation. The consideration I would like to briefly raise here and suggest developing further, is the one of theorizing the positioning of the dissident participant: critique being understood as relational, the positionality of dissident participation becomes a circumscribed space. Taking into account the intersectional working of societal discrimination, dissident participation in quest of a certain critique within a specific structure cannot be occupied by any person in the same way. Subjectivities marked by gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, body, etc. necessarily are allocated to a specific realm within the structure

4 This talk by Athena Athanasiou was entitled *Taking sides, or what critical theory can (still) do* and held during the conference *Taking Sid(t)es* on 28.–30.6.2018, in Konstanz. It was convened by the research group *Mediale Teilhabe*. For more information, refer to: <https://mediaandparticipation.com/2018/06/27/taking-sides-conference/>, last access 10.24.2020.

5 This quote of Athena Athanasiou is taken from my notes during the conference *Taking Sid(t)es*. For the full argument see her chapter in this book.

and thus also to specific ways of being able to articulate dissident participation. The blind spots pointed out by Hark and briefly touched on above, decisively, probably are not random, but inherently tied to the position of a particular dissident participant. This means that a person with other blind spots cannot be there as a dissident participant. Dissident participation is tied to a specific positioning that asks for particular subjectivities and identity markers. This pertains to questions of survival such as who will be a subject and what will count as a life addressed. In reference to desubjugation by Butler (2001: 9f), she asks

“Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? And what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given [norms and structure]?” (Ibid.: 6).

Indeed, certain subjectivations are not part of the established framework of reference. How can they have access to dissident participation? And how can they avoid being jeopardized by the riskiness of critique?

Against the backdrop of these questions, it seems even more challenging to understand dissident participation with a potential for radical transformation. In her talk, Athanasiou too took up this question by asking who can this critical I be? She went on stating that it cannot be the self-willed individual of neoliberal formations. Instead, it has to refer to a performative situational subjectivation that is political, reigned by critical reflexivity, and based on responsiveness, collectively moved and moving others.

The Critical I and 'post_colonial' Implications: The Case Study of Swiss Art Schools

Two interrogations about who the critical I can be and which positionalities actually enable dissident participation, are at the center of this chapter. Questions arise such as ‘who is heard through which channels?’ ‘who can take on what kind of positioning?’ ‘who can talk about what and in which way?’ My assumption is that there are post_colonial implications to the consideration of these interrogations and that engaging them with the theorizing of dissident participation is very fruitful. To start unpacking some of this, I would like to refer to the field of Higher Education and briefly touch on research about in- and exclusion in Swiss art schools.

The project entitled *Art.School.Differences* (2014-2016)⁶ interrogated processes of in- and exclusion in Swiss art schools with a special focus on the admission process (Saner, Vögele, and Vessely 2016).⁷ In a very brief nutshell, I would like to point out some of our main findings about impossible positionalities within these institutions. Our findings are embedded in research that found that higher art and design education was “a preserve of the privileged” (Malik Okon 2005). Various studies circumscribe this privilege in terms of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and body (Burke and McManus 2009; Guissé and Bolzman 2015; Henry et al. 2017; Kuria 2015; Lange-Vester and Sander 2016; Rothmüller 2010; Seefranz and Saner 2012; Stich 2012). In their selection processes, art schools tend to constantly re-instate privileged groups of students. Especially in their intersectional working, the social conditions of the favored maintain existing privileges and allow for the ignorance of the latter. We, in our research, mainly interrogated the processes and mechanisms through which discriminations happen. The need to select, the deliberative process of decision making, and the openness of selection criteria within juries and the admission process in general, effected the choice of a very normative student cohort in that it is very similar to those present in the institution (Saner, Vögele, and Vessely 2016, chap. 5, chap. 5.3.4). Juries chose candidates that they deemed most likely to reflect the specific values of the institution in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and body. Our data analysis furthermore finds that the non-normative students missing from art schools are lower class, have experiences of migration, have non-normative bodies and/or genders, or are older. Class appeared to be the most decisive category in that the few students and candidates accepted from the lower class were all Caucasian. Physical ability was also a consideration concerning students’ flexibility and perceived endurance for long working hours.⁸ Along with the predomination of bodily normativity, social competencies or a reputable network were highly valued – sometimes more than artistic practice. Within the selection process, these exclusions and discriminations remained unnoticed and their institutional anchorage blurred (ibid.: chap. 5.5). Indeed, when discrimination is recognized within such kinds of structures, it is usu-

6 Together with a team, Philippe Saner and I co-lead the project initiated by the Institute for Art Education, IAE, at the Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK. The Haute Ecole d'Art et de Design (HEAD – Genève) and the Haute Ecole de Musique (HEM Genève – Neuchâtel) were cooperating partners along with the ZHdK in this self-reflexive interrogation of in- and exclusions to art schools.

7 For more information on the research, publications as well as subsequent initiatives and projects, refer to bit.ly/a_s_d, last access 10.24.2020.

8 Sarah Whatley talked about the “tyranny of ability” in this regard. She proposed this very trenchant term during the conference *Disability and Performer Training – A Colloquium* offered by the research project *DisAbility on Stage*, Institute for the Performing Arts and Film (IPF), ZHdK, 10.25.2016, Zürich.

ally attributed to either individual (racist and sexist) misbehaviors of certain faculty members and employees or relegated to societal and historical events (Williams 1985:331). We termed this structurally and institutionally facilitated discrimination, and accompanying ignorance of privilege, *institutional normativity* (Saner and Vögele 2016: 202; Saner, Vögele, and Vessely 2016) in reference to research led by Ahmed, Shona Hunter, Sevgi Kilic, Elaine Swan, and Lewis Turner. Ahmed et al. found an "Institutional Whiteness" at work – meaning that institutional structures privilege white people at all levels (Ahmed et al. 2006: 73). By introducing institutional normativity, we draw attention to the fact that, alongside skin color, ability, a middle class or privileged backgrounds, and a certain gendered and ethnicized aesthetic understanding are set as the norm within institutions. Institutions reproduce and reinstate this norm beyond their student body with faculty and other members, albeit tacitly and unreflectively. I termed this the camouflage of discrimination through normalization (Vögele 2020). This institutional normativity and the camouflage of discrimination through normalization is enhanced through processes of *Othering*. We, on different occasions, encountered a great desire for the Other, more precisely an interest in being creatively inspired by someone exotically Other. Among jury members, this interest often was articulated as a great opportunity to enrich the status quo of the institution. This articulates itself as a particular case of tokenisation that is an appropriation or even usurpation of the Other. We also encountered *Othering* that articulated itself in the refusal of the foreign and unknown (Saner, Vögele, and Vessely 2016, chap. 5.5.3, 6.3). However, *Othering* as a desire for the Other is inherently hierarchized and thus enforces power relations (Hall 1997). It entails not only a denial of the Other but also the means to reinvigorate existing racist and sexist differentiations (Mecheril and Plösser 2009).

These considerations of institutional normativity and *Othering* clearly show that, within the art schools under investigation, an array of subjectivities are impossible: lower class, racially or ethnically marked persons, termed as disabled by majoritarian discourse, trans*-persons, identified as queer and critical subjects, etc. These exclusions are not particular to art schools but mirror the outcomes of societal processes of exclusion present in the field of Higher Education in general. Such processes are the continuing effects of colonial power relations and thus require a post_colonial perspective to perceive, chart, and renegotiate them (Vögele 2020). Considering this, the question about which positionalities could allow for dissident participation within the structures set by art schools remains. Or put differently: what exactly is the premise of dissident participation, and what kind of subjectivity can possibly access it? Additionally, questions arise on the ways in which historically grown power-relations grounded in colonialism with effects on current racism, classism, sexism, and ableism enable or hinder the critique of (western) institutional structures. What kind of critique can possibly be articulated in a situation of institutional normativity, *Othering*, and the camouflage of

discrimination? What is the in-between here, and who can inhabit what kind of in-between? How can such limiting structures be adapted in order to be less discriminating? Referring to Boltanski's perspective, we could ask: in what ways can critique go beyond re-instating the predominant structures and transform them by integrating a previously concealed perspective? Is this practice at all possible without totally abolishing the structures (of the art school)? And maybe most importantly: how can we avoid putting certain subjectivities even more in peril through critique?

Dissident Participation that is Political, Reigned by Critical Reflexivity, Based on Responsiveness, Collectively Moved, and Moves Others

As I suggested earlier in this chapter, I think, it is necessary to consider the positioning of dissident participation from a post_colonial perspective. Against the backdrop of the led considerations, the ongoing societal processes of discrimination, largely effected by power relations that were implemented through colonialism, have to be accounted for. By introducing a post_colonial perspective to the theorizing of dissident participation, I suggest that rejection and other forms of Othering can be addressed and challenged. Decolonizing strategies have to be mobilized in order for dissident participation to deploy a simultaneous contradiction and adherence as a potential for transformation. The art seems to be performing institutions beyond interiority versus exteriority while defending them as a site of critique: critique entails the performing of institutions in a counter-institutional way.⁹

For this thinking, it is helpful to read Ruth Sonderegger. She exposes critical theories, as put forward by Boltanski and Foucault, to "implicitly at least, aim at a fusion of all requirements of critique." (Sonderegger 2012: 260) However, Sonderegger is critical of endorsing an encompassing conception into critique, claiming instead an inherent finitude (ibid.: 261). Thereby, she seems to suggest that theories of critique must be contradictory in order to approach their potential, a characteristic I have stressed above regarding Athanasiou. Sonderegger emphasizes that critique must endorse a collective practice in its theorizing and conceptualization. She mentions a collective perceiving, as in feeling, moving, or talking differently than our environment would predict (ibid.). Indeed, a post_colonial perspective anchored in heterogeneous theoretical traditions and disciplines entails a critical stance, which is always a critique of both the forms of knowledge and the forms of practice that correspond to them. Furthermore, a post_colonial perspective located at the margins to activism allows being practical and emancipatory in the sense, that it aims not only to understand but also to contribute to a transformation of the

9 Taken from my notes of the talk by Athanasiou during the conference *Taking Sid(t)es*.

social world that is already under way. Finally, post_coloniality addresses critique as being immanent, focusing on the internal contradictions and crises of a specific social order and its social imaginary. Accordingly, it cannot be reduced to a purely normative undertaking, but involves empirical analyses. Analysis and critique are thus inextricably linked and unveil the potential, to tackle institutions in a counter-institutional way.

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