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Ambivalence and Agonism of Public Participation in Contemporary Societies

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Abstract

In this editorial we introduce the thematic issue "Public Participation Amidst Hostility: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern." The aim of this issue is twofold. First, it takes stock of various ways in which public participation can be hindered, directly and indirectly. Second, it investigates different kinds of participatory practices that emerge in situations of hostility towards public participation. Given that participation in such situations often involves working around formal procedures and public spaces and depends on remaining hidden, particular attention is paid to de-publicised participatory practices. Overall, the articles in this thematic issue show how hostilities co-develop with specific participatory practices that, in turn, attune to, navigate, and resist the particular (hostile) circumstances in which they arise. The articles draw attention to the ambivalence and, in some cases, agonistic quality of participatory processes in contemporary societies, where mutually constitutive relations between participation and hostilities towards it shape matters of collective concern, political agendas, and possible futures.

1. Introduction

Reports of "participatory turns" taking place in science governance, health care, urban development, and many other domains have been arriving steadily during the past decades (Bergmans et al., 2015; Delvenne & Macq, 2020; Siffels et al., 2021). The concept of public participation and those related to it, such as engagement and

co-creation, have gained credit in wide academic and political circles. Participatory initiatives have received support from regulators and funders, and the formats of such initiatives have proliferated. In the context of waning confidence in governmental decisions and controversies over technoscientific developments, public participation has often been put forward as a go-to solution for averting crises of democracy and expertise (Eyal, 2019; Krick, 2022; Nowotny, 2003).

Against this background, this thematic issue on public participation amidst hostility may look surprising. If the value and practice of participation are so well established, why do we need to examine hostilities towards it? However, this undertaking is justified and even urgent, considering two points. First, critical social science scholars, including scholars of science and technology studies (STS), have documented a wide range of practices and understandings that restrict and sometimes deter public participation, even where it is declared a priority (Krzywoszynska et al., 2018; Wehling, 2012; Williams et al., 2022). For example, members of the public may be welcome to deliberate on the implications of nanotechnologies that they find potentially problematic but unwelcome to question broader priorities for allocating research funding (Delgado et al., 2011). However, while critiques of the exclusionary effects of various participatory arrangements abound, less attention has been devoted to taking stock of the different ways in which participation is hindered. This thematic issue addresses this gap by investigating different kinds of hostilities towards public participation.

Second, most participation scholarship focuses on situations that can be characterised as democratic, where, at least in theory, publics are welcome to participate in political matters (De Loureiro et al., 2021). This focus is not due to the fact that outside such situations, publics are incapable of articulating and addressing matters of their concern. Scholars, however, have been conceptually limited in their ability to discern how participation in non-democratic situations happens because public participation tends to be conceptualised as hinging on making issues visible and debatable. Yet, participation in non-democratic situations may involve working around formal procedures and public spaces and depend on remaining hidden. Such participatory practices may never produce open contestations, in contrast to many cases analysed in the existing scholarship (e.g., the case of HIV/AIDS activists transforming biomedical research in the US by Epstein, 1996; see also Zilliox & Smith, 2018). Consequently, such practices are often excluded from academic accounts of participation. This thematic issue, in contrast, investigates different kinds of participatory practices, including de-publicised ones, that emerge in situations of hostility towards public participation.

It is these two lacunae that this thematic issue is positioned to address—to take stock of different ways in which participation can be hindered and to examine a broad range of more and less visible participatory practices that take place despite being unwelcome. To situate the articles comprising the issue in this editorial, we first discuss the operation of hostilities to participation and reflect on conceiving and noticing participatory practices in situations when participation is unwelcome. Further, we outline the thematic issue content, highlighting many intriguing ambiguities that the included articles bring to the fore. Not only can participation be welcome and unwelcome at the same time, but hostilities to participation may also occasionally open windows of opportunity for participatory practices instead of suppressing them. Furthermore, strategies to cope with hostilities to participation might have unintended effects throwing off the aims of participatory collectives. Striving to participate despite hostilities, actors employ practices that often uneasily entwine collaboration and contentiousness in relation to authorities; all the while, very similar participatory practices that blossom despite being unwelcome may have vastly different effects, some

supportive and others corrosive of democracy. Overall, the articles in this thematic issue show how hostilities co-develop with specific participatory practices that, in turn, attune to, navigate, and resist the particular (hostile) circumstances in which they arise. The articles draw attention to the ambivalence and, in some cases, agonistic quality of participatory processes in contemporary societies, where mutually constitutive relations between participation and hostilities towards it shape matters of collective concern, political agendas, and possible futures.

2. Understanding Hostilities to Participation

What we call here "hostilities" to public participation are diverse and often not deliberate; that is, there is nobody out there purposefully striving to hinder public participation. While some hostilities are directly geared towards obstructing participation, others emerge as indirect products of governance logics and entrenched ways of sensemaking. Using examples from the literature and the articles included in this thematic issue, below we briefly outline how "indirect" hostilities of the second kind operate and then touch upon more clear-cut hostilities that target participation directly.

2.1. Indirect Hostilities

Without denying participation outright, indirect hostilities operate to limit or circumscribe participation to particular preframed questions, controlled formats, or selected groups. Consequently, while the ideal of public participation in governing various spheres of life appears to be maintained, public contributions beyond a delineated territory become unwelcome. This is often the case in preframed participation events (Bogner, 2012; Irwin et al., 2013; Meyer, 2017; Tironi, 2015). One illustrative example of how this happens was provided by Braun and Schultz (2010). These authors described a Leipzig Youth Conference, a participatory event dedicated to the topic of genetics, organised in 2006 by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research. It consisted of educating participants about the science of human genetics and then asking them to create films, posters, or other media products expressing their views on the regulation of genetic testing. Braun and Schultz (2010) highlighted that "at this event, the young participants were generally constructed…as a homogeneous social group," members of which "supposedly do not hold controversial views" on the issue (p. 411). The media products prepared by the participants expressed very different positions on the matter at hand. However, since the purpose of the event was to create a final document that would present a single authentic view of "the young generation," a debate among the group or an acknowledgement of conflicting demands was impossible. Braun and Schultz (2010) concluded that a "purified public" of such events is "carefully selected to exclude people who hold strong opinions, or who are engaged or politically organised. Or, if they do hold such views, they are prevented from presenting them" (p. 411).

There is no doubt that, in the example provided by Braun and Schultz (2010) and in many similar instances, participation in general is welcome; after all, the Youth Conference is a participatory event organised to facilitate the engagement of young people with genetics. At the same time, we can still discern indirectly exercised hostilities to participation, as only a limited range of contributions is welcome. With participation being circumscribed to consensus, everything that threatens its achievement is excluded, as is also highlighted by articles in this thematic issue (see, e.g., Morsello & Giardullo, 2025, about the uninvitation of pro-vaccine choice communities in Italy, and Värttö, 2025, on contestatory forms of public participation in the Covid-19 pandemic management in Finland).

Often especially unwelcome are potentially conflictual contributions by those who have already become concerned with the topic and formed specific commitments, individually or as members of organised groups. During the Leipzig Youth Conference and in other similar cases noted by STS scholars, such already engaged members of the public are presumed to be too entangled in their own interests, biased and, thus, incapable of deliberating for the common good (Welsh & Wynne, 2013). The organisers of the Youth Conference and other participatory events conducted in similarly highly scripted formats, such as citizen juries, tend to be much more eager to involve the so-called general public, consisting of those with no prior connections, allegiances, or formed views on the matters under consideration. Separating publics into open-minded ordinary citizens and variously termed vocal interest groups with already formed agendas allows to invite only the former, which "appear as more malleable constituencies, less inflexible and categorical" than the latter, as Lezaun and Soneryd (2007) argued. When participation is arranged via the "ordinary citizens only" route, it is easier not only to prevent confrontation, gloss over disagreements, and achieve consensus, but also to impose preframed agendas and avoid the consideration of alternatives while often legitimising already made decisions. Thus, we can notice how, in some situations, indirect hostilities to participation operate by justifying selective invitations for some and the uninvitations of others who are framed as having less right to participate, often due to being too actively concerned about a matter at hand.

There are many other ways in which indirect hostilities to participation operate. We do not intend to provide an exhaustive list, a task likely to be impossible because of the diversity of situation-specific configurations of hostilities to which the articles included in this thematic issue attest. Instead, let us mention one more example to illustrate the multiplicity and subtleness of the ways in which some participatory practices are made unwelcome. This example stems from our own research in the field of drug development, which has been undergoing a participatory turn in the last decade. Pharmaceutical industry players have started establishing and disseminating formats for patient participation to standardise emerging participatory arrangements that were nearly unheard of in this field until the 2010s. Our research (Egher & Zvonareva, 2024) demonstrates that the formats considered and increasingly put into practice tend to require that patients have in-depth knowledge of contemporary drug development processes, including the specificities of its different phases, industry practices, and even regulation. Patients without this knowledge are rarely considered suitable for participation. This preference for expert patients, as they are often called, is creating a narrow elite group of patients who have resources and opportunities to acquire the requisite knowledge and then repeatedly participate in drug development.

In this example, participation becomes circumscribed to the topics and questions selected by the organisers of participatory exercises, most often pharmaceutical companies, primarily through insisting that most patients, being "lay" persons, do not possess the knowledge that would allow them to productively join the table where decisions are being made. Our research highlighted that being closely familiar both with how drugs are being currently developed and the companies that undertake the development might render expert patients less likely to pose questions that are critical and/or go beyond the technicalities of drug development itself, such as questions of access, pricing, and daily usage. In this case, then, hostilities to participation operate through distinguishing a new small class of expert patients endowed with an in-depth knowledge of a kind closely aligned with dominant practices and organisational arrangements in contemporary drug development and denying the relevance of other kinds of knowledge that broader groups of patients possess.

Many articles in this thematic issue further attest to the prominence and diversity of indirect hostilities, including the article by Liu and Coveney (2025), where the authors delineate multiple indirect barriers to

participation of people with disabilities in Covid-19-related policymaking, including exclusion of people with disabilities from data collection on the impact of pandemic control measures.

2.2. Direct Hostilities

The indirect hostilities delineated above do not necessarily entail an intention and specific focus on hindering participation. In contrast, the hostilities briefly discussed below are explicitly directed at hindering participation. They boil down to the claim that there is no need or reason for publics to participate, irrespective of the knowledge they possess, the format of participation they adopt or the concerns they have. Today, in many situations, such an attitude would be surprising and widely unacceptable. However, in what we might call authoritarian situations, this is what publics effectively face. And it is such situations that produce direct hostilities, as delineated below.

What are authoritarian situations? Let us take a look at the two components of this term—authoritarianism and situations—to get a feeling for how direct hostilities to participation are produced. In our usage of the word authoritarianism, we rely primarily on political anthropology scholarship. While the exact definitions of authoritarianism offered by this scholarship diverge, they tend to share three elements: (a) a highly uneven distribution of power, which is (b) maintained by coercion, and (c) the use of coercion, also to keep publics (selectively) disengaged and demobilised (Davey & Koch, 2021; Stroup & Goode, 2023). Another complementary line of scholarship is the practice-oriented approach to understanding authoritarianism, which moves beyond locating authoritarianism analytically solely at the level of the state and proposes instead focusing on practices as patterns of action embedded in organised contexts (Glasius, 2018). Taken together, these lines of scholarship allow understanding of authoritarian situations as constituted by practices of coercion used to maintain an uneven distribution of power and tight control over (certain) publics to keep them demobilised. It is these characteristics of authoritarian situations that produce direct hostilities towards public participation. An example from one of the articles in this thematic issue attests to how this occurs in practice. Zvonareva (2025) describes a case of participation in politics by networks of antiwar and prowar volunteers in contemporary Russia. Their participation takes place in a context of stark power differentials and coercion: Volunteers find themselves with little to no means of influencing authorities, whereas the authorities have an arsenal of means at their disposal to crack down on the work of volunteers, including imprisonment for violating "war censorship laws" and subjecting to violence in places like police stations—an illegal but widely adopted practice. The threat of such means being used is selective. It is directed at those who do not support the war, with a view to demobilising them, whereas those who support it are largely given free rein for the time being.

The word "situations"—the second component of the term "authoritarian situations"—highlights that authoritarianism (as well as democracy) is not strictly bound to specific states and cannot be defined geographically. Critical social science scholars have long stressed the patchy and uneven character of authoritarianism and democracy, where pockets of exclusion and exception exist within democratic states and participatory openings may occur in otherwise oppressive circumstances (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2020; Czada, 2015; Jasanoff, 2005; Laurent, 2011). Therefore, it is unproductive to view authoritarianism as existing uniformly within the boundaries of one state and ceasing to exist within the boundaries of another. To account for the disparate and dynamic character of authoritarianism, we employ the word "situation," as it is localising and open-ended, more so than other related terms, such as "setting" (Barry, 2012; Birkbak &

Papazu, 2022). Looking at authoritarian situations, rather than, say, authoritarian settings, foregrounds the occurrence of direct hostilities to participation in what is typically considered democracies. In this thematic issue, the article by Stoli et al. (2025) illustrates this point. It highlights how an international community of transgender activists has found a way to participate in politics through home-based production hormones in a situation where it might be too dangerous to pursue other, more overt forms of participation. In comparison to the previous example, the push to remain disengaged and demobilised for this community is not country-specific, while the sources of coercion to maintain an unequal distribution of power are much more widely dispersed. It can be said that the members of this community find themselves in an authoritarian situation, despite many of them living in long-established democracies.

The various direct and indirect hostilities to public participation considered above are not mutually exclusive, nor are they always sharply distinct. In any particular case, we might notice that participation is made unwelcome through a situation-specific combination of more or less direct ways. The articles in this thematic issue trace how these ways operate and interact with participatory practices and how exclusions as well as ingenious forms of participation and solidarities emerge through these interactions.

3. Noticing Participation

Having discussed hostilities to participation, in this section, we briefly consider participation itself. What kinds of practices can be thought of as participatory? In delineating an answer to this question, in this thematic issue we draw on STS scholarship, as it allows accounting for a wide diversity of ways in which publics articulate and address matters of collective concern.

The understandings of participation advanced by STS scholars tend to emphasise its co-produced and relational character. In doing so, they depart from viewing publics and the issues with which publics are concerned as firmly delineated and existing in a clearly defined manner prior to participatory practices. Instead of existing "out there" in a natural form, ready to be consulted on any topic deemed in need of societal input, publics come into being together with the issues of their concern through processes of articulating and addressing these issues (Amelung & Machado, 2019; Marres, 2005). Take, for instance, the issue of agricultural transitions. There are, among others, farmers concerned about losing their livelihoods due to the pressure to transition away from livestock farming; some citizens concerned about water scarcity, impending not least due to large-scale consumption of animal products; and industrialists concerned about losses to their businesses should industrial stock farming be required to change its environmentally taxing methods. The issue of agricultural transitions entangles all these diverse threats to different livelihoods and lays bare the incompatibility of the interests involved. In the process of formulating these threats, clarifying what is at stake, articulating the issue of agricultural transitions as a particular kind of issue (e.g., of intergenerational justice or food security), and taking it upon themselves to address it, collectives concerned form, grow and emerge as a public. To sum up this mutually constitutive dynamic, Marres (2005) famously formulated: "no issue, no public." She also stressed that it is through articulating and dealing with issues that publics come to be involved in politics, oftentimes when existing communities and institutions are incapable or unwilling to take care of matters of their concern. The articles in this thematic issue look at very diverse kinds of publics, all of which can nonetheless be understood as publics by virtue of their involvement in articulating and addressing collective concerns over certain thorny issues.

Not surprisingly, the ways in which these publics go about articulating and addressing collective concerns or, in other words, about practising participation, are also highly diverse. Refraining from prescribing what participation is and should be in advance allows the authors in this thematic issue to go beyond much researched deliberative and explicit public participation formats and to notice its various uninvited, everyday, mundane, and material forms (Jansky & Langstrup, 2022; Nielsen & Langstrup, 2018; Weiner et al., 2023). The articles in this thematic issue investigate efforts to affect matters of collective concern made in diverse areas of life, including those traditionally defined as non-political, such as producing medicines (Stoli et al., 2025) and arranging childcare (Tietje, 2025). These efforts are also made through diverse means, including co-creating films (Loftus & Murphy, 2025) and building houses (Schikowitz, 2025). Nonetheless, we can understand them as participatory by thinking about public participation in relational and co-productionist terms that emphasise how publics, issues, and participatory formats are interrelated and emerge together. As Chilvers and Kearnes (2020, p. 350) put it, "far from being external pregiven categories, the subjects (publics), objects (issues), and models (political ontologies) of participation are actively co-constructed through the performance of collective participatory practices, both shaping and being shaped by wider social, political and technoscientific orders" (see also Felt & Fochler, 2010).

4. Articles in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue originated at the conference panel Unseen Participation: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern, which we convened during the EASST Conference in 2022. The contributions to this panel showcased diverse and intriguing participatory practices performed in the face of various arrangements that limited, hindered, or persecuted participation. During the discussions that followed, the term "hostilities" popped up as a shorthand for referring to such arrangements.

The original focus of the thematic issue idea, born out of the panel presentations and discussions, was on the creativity of practices collectives employ to still affect matters of their concern, even when they are not welcome to do so. An open call for contributions further broadened the range of such practices that went beyond talk-based formats explicitly designated as participatory and could be placed side by side in the thematic issue to highlight their ingenuity.

However, as the articles that are now published within this thematic issue were being developed, it became difficult to maintain this original focus. It seemed to assume a degree of stability and definitiveness of both participation and hostilities that did not align with the flow and ambiguity the full texts of the articles made noticeable. A writers' workshop, during which authors and editors came together, made it clear that the focus needed to be reformulated, taking into account the fact that neither hostilities nor participatory practices can be held constant in analysis or presumed in advance to have specific political implications. Hence, the thematic issue turned to focus on how participatory practices and hostilities interact and co-develop, together shaping the ways in which matters of collective concern are articulated and addressed. Looked at from this angle, the articles in this thematic issue still make the ingenuity and creativity of participation amidst hostility visible but also foreground its ambivalence. Below, we delineate the articles and how their order in this thematic issue makes visible different kinds of ambivalences, from ambivalences of institutional attitudes towards participation to the ambivalent outcomes of mutual shaping of participation and hostilities to it in different situations.

The articles in this thematic issue, first, highlight how omnipresent the ambivalence of institutional attitudes towards participation is. Despite discursive support and even prioritisation of public participation, the latter is very often significantly limited in practice. In their article on efforts by a citizen initiative to reinvigorate an empty neglected park in a Dutch city, Knibbe et al. (2025) highlight subtle but consequential hindrances the initiative encountered despite participation being nearly a "gold standard" for city planning and development. For example, one such hindrance had to do with ideas about what the public is and, thus, who can participate. Through experimenting with temporary changes in the park, holding neighbourhood events, and maintaining the green space, the initiative had managed to attract residents whose engagement with the events and regular presence at the park promoted friendliness, connections between neighbours, and engagement in communal affairs. The municipality, however, did not recognise the support the initiative received locally and thought of it as a small group of people, distinct from and thus nonrepresentative of the rest of the neighbourhood, which had long been framed in reports and official communications as a problematic one, with low participation of its poor and low-educated residents. Instead, the officials preferred statistical demonstrations of citizens' support collected via questionnaires, which supposedly made it possible to tap into what an "average citizen" thought. Thus, the local authorities were inclined to dismiss the proposals of the initiative, as it did not represent "the whole neighbourhood." The authors highlight that the "'old' realist approach to neighborhood publics, thus, reproduced the stigmatized "antisocial" neighborhoods and cut off the attempts to develop new neighborhood publics in the process."

The article by Liu and Coveney (2025) on attempts by the international disability movement to influence Covid-19-related policy also highlights the ambivalence of institutional attitudes towards participation and that exclusionary dynamics intensify during crises. While in many settings civil society actors generally faced difficulties when trying to contribute to pandemic response, persons with disabilities faced additional barriers, despite a wide consensus and international policy guidance on the necessity for organisations of persons with disabilities to participate in Covid-19 policy—and decision-making. For example, one such barrier was the lack of accessible formats of communication, such as providing sign language interpretation and easy-to-read and audio descriptions in government briefings and press conferences. As a result, the members of organisations of persons with disabilities often lacked access to relevant information and were thus hardly in a position to contribute to Covid-19 policy—and decision-making. Another example of a barrier the authors identified is the exclusion of people with disabilities from Covid-19-related data collection at the national and UN levels. The lack of statistical data on the impact of pandemic response measures specifically on people with disabilities limited these organisations' abilities to contribute.

At the same time, some articles in this thematic issue show how hostilities to public participation are ambivalent in that they not only oppress but also may configure new participatory constellations. For example, in his article on self-organisation among residents of the struggling El Raval District in Barcelona, Tietje (2025) foregrounds the dual impact of the welfare state transformation in Spain. On the one hand, increasingly left to fend for themselves, the residents have seen how issues of concern become individualised and responsibility for dealing with these issues is shifted to them. On the other hand, this same shift of responsibility inspired collective responses in areas such as housing, security and care through which the residents contradict individualisation, establish something in common and create (temporary) local participation infrastructures that also serve as infrastructures of welfare provision. In their article on the participation of pro-vaccine choice communities in public health politics in Italy, Morsello and Giardullo (2025) also show how hostilities to participation may unexpectedly open participatory opportunities. These

communities were explicitly uninvited from decision-making processes concerning vaccination and public health. This uninvitation was constructed through the country's stringent vaccination policies, including sanction regimes for those who were unvaccinated. It was also constructed through the public discrediting of pro-vaccine choice communities in the media, frequently portraying them as ignorant conspiracy theorists. Yet, in doing so, the Italian media also enabled pro-vaccine choice communities to gain unprecedented visibility, leading to an increase in followers, and inadvertently included them in the public discourse on vaccination, thereby facilitating the spread of their messages and the garnering of support. The authors stress that "inclusion and exclusion, as well as participation and non-invitation, are often intricately intertwined processes."

The intertwinement of participation and hostilities is also the focus of the article by Gardenier (2025), who highlights a different dynamic: participatory practices proceeding amidst hostilities reconfigure hostilities as well. In this article, Gardenier focuses on Dutch volunteer hackers who have been identifying and disclosing vulnerabilities in computer systems since the 1980s, thus playing a crucial role in cybersecurity governance. Initially, the Dutch government viewed the disclosure of vulnerabilities by hacking as illegal and criminalised it. In response, some hackers stopped hacking, but others continued searching for and disclosing vulnerabilities, creating arrangements such as secret collaborations with journalists to do so without risking a prison sentence. At the same time, they formed a community and gradually reshaped initially hostile institutions to legitimise their work. The author emphasises that the hostility encountered initially by volunteer hackers is an example of institutional mismatch that arises when emerging forms of citizen participation, such as ethical hacking, are not recognised as such: "While cybersecurity campaigns assume a lack of citizen engagement and aim to foster participation where it is allegedly absent, in reality, citizen participation does occur but is not always acknowledged by institutions." Moreover, amidst attempts to cope with hostilities, participatory practices themselves may have unexpected 'closing down' consequences, as Angelucci et al. (2025) show in their article on migrant communities' participation in integration policy-making and implementation in a small town in Italy. For more than 20 years, immigration has been among the most contentious issues in the town's political debate. This article highlights the importance of intermediary figures in such small locales capable of acting as bridges between migrant groups and institutions. Such bridging figures, the authors argue, are "crucial for facilitating the transition from an adverse to a more inclusive political environment, enhancing participation by specific migrant groups." However, the authors also highlight the ambivalence of such figures because reliance on them "can promote participation, but it may confine it to individual interactions rather than foster broader migrant engagement."

Thus, together, the articles in this thematic issue put to the fore the mutual shaping of participation and hostilities to it. This is a continuous, uncertain, and ambivalent process, as Schikowitz (2025) makes clear in her article on how self-managed collaborative housing (CoHo) groups engage in and with urban planning in Vienna. Her article is situated in an environment where citizen participation is formally prioritised and encouraged but indirectly hindered by governance logics, planning practices, and administrative procedures. Schlikowitz highlights how, in this environment, CoHo groups simultaneously make their aims compatible with and challenge urban planning visions and strategies in order to realise their projects and intervene in urban planning. The author elaborates that, "not only is the City both hostile and open towards CoHo, but CoHo is simultaneously hostile and open towards the City, co-producing hostilities and forms of participation that are specific for the indirect and ambivalent Viennese participation culture." Importantly, this co-production of hostilities and participation forms may, as in the case of CoHo in Vienna, create

"conditions for an ongoing political struggle, where coalitions and interactions are possible but are also constantly re-negotiated," or in other words, facilitate agonism. Schikowitz argues that such an agonistic ongoing struggle allowed housing to remain a political issue, rather than being reduced to a technical problem—a development that "caters to both activist and municipal stances and might help to delay neoliberal developments towards commodification and financialisation of housing."

In his article on the participation of citizens in the Covid-19 pandemic management in Finland, Värttö (2025) argues, more generally, for the beneficence of agonism—seeing value in conflict as something essential for the quality and liveliness of democracy, rather than something to be eliminated through consensus. He shows how during the pandemic, in the context of a lack of critical voices in public arenas, citizens expressed their concerns through information campaigns, protests, and demonstrations. The author suggests that "contestatory forms of public participation allowed citizens to scrutinise and challenge public policies by bringing light to the injustices and inequalities they created." Not idealising these forms—Värttö acknowledges the voluminous literature on the potentially negative sides of civil activism during the pandemic—the article suggests that forms of participation agonistic in relation to institutional actors can contribute to more effective and democratic crisis governance. One such form of participation amidst the climate crisis is scrutinised by Tilk et al. (2025) in their article on bodily climate activism. They highlight how activists are increasingly using their entire body for/in climate activism by, for instance, gluing or tying their bodies to objects, barricading driveways, and sitting on public squares. These bodily ways of addressing shared matters of concern have recently been subjected to hostilities, often labelled "radical" and "terrorist." However, by tracing how, during climate actions and manifestations, an activist's body becomes multiply related to other bodies, public spaces, materials objects, law enforcement, media, and climate governance and policy, rather than being a stable and autonomous figure, the authors argue for the legitimacy of bodily climate activism. Drawing on their analysis, they argue "that bodily climate activism is a valuable avenue for non-violent public participation because of its relational transformative collectivity," which goes beyond just placing demands on the state.

Importantly, the agonism—forms of conflict supportive of the quality and liveliness of democratic politics—noted by several articles in this thematic issue is not something that is guaranteed to be produced through the mutual shaping of participation and hostilities to it. The articles that focus on participation amidst direct hostilities in explicitly authoritarian situations demonstrate that further antagonisation and reaching the stage of not having anything left in common are also real possibilities; the more so the more coercive the surrounding circumstances are. For example, the transgender DIY hormone producers in Stoli et al. (2025) work around public spaces, maintain their invisibility, and do not attempt to draw attention to the injustices they encounter or to contest formal institutions. By producing their own hormones to aid in their transition, they resist dominant meanings and arrangements and actively build alternatives, which qualifies their practices as participatory, but they do so in an autarkic, self-contained manner. This community appears to have given up on engaging with opposing points of view and building a world in common with those hostile to its members. Zvonareva (2025) also highlights the divisive potential of participation amidst hostilities in her article about grassroots volunteer initiatives that emerged all over Russia after February 2022 to assist Ukrainian refugees. Most of these initiatives emerged in an attempt to resist the imperative of supporting the aggression against Ukraine foisted on Russian citizens by the state. But there also exist collectives similarly dedicated to assisting people from Ukraine, whose assistance activities do not mount resistance to the war-waging authoritarian state, but aspire instead to extend the

reach of this very state. These two types of volunteer collectives neither cooperate nor engage in any public discussions, nor do they stage open contestations of their opposing viewpoints. The author argues that by acting as a public on the issue of their concern—the war—these collectives have been persistently assembling alternative and incompatible versions of the world.

Finally, some articles in this thematic issue foreground the roles of academics in the ambiguous mutual shaping of participation and hostilities to it. Specifically, Loftus and Murphy (2025) explore the co-creation of the short film *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home*, a film that emerges as a form of academic activism amidst the rise of populism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in Ireland. In the film, six refugee participants share their stories through objects, such as a bloodstained Nicaraguan flag or a Tibetan sound bowl from Ukraine, carried from homes they were forced to leave. The film is an intervention enacted not "through narratives of victimhood but through the presence of matter—how objects, bodies, and voices coalesce to produce a different sense of forcibly displaced experience." The authors argue that *Ordinary Treasures* is an enactment of "thick solidarity"—"uneasy, fragmentary, yet deeply committed to unsettling the narratives that seek to confine and reduce forcibly displaced lives."

With this thematic issue, we hope to draw attention to the diverse implications of mutual co-development of public participation and hostilities towards it, as briefly outlined above. Perhaps one fruitful line of discussion could concern the agonistic qualities of public participation in contemporary societies and the possibilities of decentring consensus and deliberation in discussing and organising participation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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