

## **Social Representations: Between Complicity and Resistance**

**Alexander Kurunczi, Sandra Marzinkowski, Kenneth Rösen,  
Vivian Sper, Cornelia Wächter<sup>1</sup>**

This Special Issue derives from a seminar and a subsequent student conference on *Complicity and the Politics of Representation* (<https://complicity.blogs.ruhr-uni-bochum.de>), which took place in the summer term of 2017 at the English Department of the Ruhr University Bochum. Seminar and student conference were both interlinked with an international and interdisciplinary academic conference of the same title, which was held at Bahnhof Langendreer, Bochum, from 16-18 June 2017.

Definitions of *complicity* vary significantly but most agree that to be complicit means to make a causal contribution to a moral wrong.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, complicity is usually understood in 'atomistic terms', based on the assumption that there are clearly discernible and unambiguously right moral frameworks and that complicity entails a violation of these frameworks.<sup>3</sup> It is thus assumed that a) complicity *can* always be avoided and b) *should*

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Christian Wuckelt, who was part of the editorial team.

<sup>2</sup> Chiara Lepora, Robert E. Goodin: *On Complicity and Compromise*. Oxford 2013.

always be avoided.<sup>4</sup> Such an atomistic understanding, however, fails to acknowledge that moral harm frequently lies in the structures just as much as in individual moral agents.<sup>5</sup> We, therefore, follow Paul Reynolds in arguing that “given the complexity of contemporary societies”, “complicity as a lens for a wider social critique is particularly important”<sup>6</sup>. Identifying complicity is helpful precisely because it does not necessarily attribute moral responsibility to a single person, group or institution but puts it into the larger context of “structural forms of domination.”<sup>7</sup> In the words of Afxentis Afxentiou et al., it provides us with “a better understanding not only of complicit ‘bad apples’, but also of the rotten barrels which contain them”.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the dominant configuration of the term, *complicity*, here, does not function as a disciplinary tool or as a means of blame assignment geared towards an individual deviant but as a rhetorical device<sup>9</sup> that elucidates and perpetuates power relations.

Conceptualising complicity as a rhetorical tool enables us to lay bare naturalised forms of asymmetrical power relations – both in terms of the structures of institutions’ and of subjects’ agency. It also offers an understanding of resistance that transcends a mere binary constellation in which agents are either complicit or resisting, thus allowing for new forms of collaboration between resisting bodies. Given the notoriously contested question of what exactly constitutes resistant acting, the notion of *anti*-complicity enables agents to contest the seemingly ‘natural’, conceivably ‘real’ limits of critique. At the same time, the very structures which enable resistance become the subject of scrutiny and may themselves be

<sup>3</sup> Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, Michael Neu. Introducing Complicity. In: Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, Michael Neu (eds.): *Exploring Complicity. Concept, Cases and Critique*. London 2017, pp. 1-15.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Paul Reynolds: Complicity as Political Rhetoric. Some Ethical and Political Reflections. In: Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, Michael Neu (eds.): *Exploring Complicity. Concept, Cases and Critique*. London 2017, pp. 35-52, here p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Afxentiou et al., Introduction, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, *Complicity*, p. 42.

understood as complicit in new asymmetrical power relations. To stay with Afxentiou et al.'s metaphor, resistant groups and individuals might offer new 'barrels', but that does not automatically render them immune against containing 'rotten apples' or being themselves susceptible to rotting.

The articles of this Special Issue pursue the approach of complicity as a lens to explore how we conceive of complicity, how it is conceived of in our culture, how complicity manifests itself in discourse, and how we deal with borderline cases of complicity. They engage with an often spectral concept which can take on multiple shapes and forms: evidently, the questions of who is complicit with whom or what and in which situation can generate an intricate multitude of answers as indicated by the range of issues and structures this issue's contributions throw into sharp relief, ranging from the documentary form and its representation of sex-workers to questions of marginalisation within marginalised groups, to the anti-complicity of intersectional insurrections, and pedagogy as a prototypical space of anti-complicity.

All articles in this issue share an interest, not just in the exploration of complicities, but also in the potential for resistance and the potential for *anti-complicity*, i.e. "to be defiant, in collaboration with others, in the face of structural wrongdoing".<sup>10</sup> It must, however, be stressed that not even a critique of complicity can ever be free of complicities. Dispensing with the idea that academic writing is untainted by bias – a not infrequently made assumption that has its roots in the myth of 'academic objectivity' – we would like to underline the heuristic nature inherent in our critique of complicity, which can always merely remain an academic pursuit rather than an aspiration for an exhaustive theory. Investigating complicity must be considered an endeavour that will and should never be finished, for to stop exploring 'structural wrongdoing'<sup>11</sup> will only make us complicit in its continuation.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Afxentiou et al., Introduction, p. 11.