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EDITORIAL

Accomplices to Social Exclusion? Analyzing Institutional Processes of Silencing

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Abstract

The editorial notes contextualize the theme of "silencing" and processes of un-silencing before briefly outlining the central arguments of the different contributions assembled in this thematic issue.

1. Introduction: Institutional Silencing in Context

"Silencing," particularly within the social sciences, constitutes a broad, textured theoretical and empirical topic of inquiry. Landmark contributions to discussions on silencing primarily focus on how it relates to mobilisations of power, with defined conceptual marriages between silencing, power, and resulting social exclusion for demographics and individuals who are subjected to silencing as a wielding of social power (see Bhambra & Shilliam, 2009; Mitchell-Bajic, 2022; Post, 1998). This has led the authors of this thematic issue to unwrap and analyse, out of necessity, the structural hierarchies of power that mobilise silencing as an upholding or yielding mechanism of that power (see also Mitchell-Bajic, 2022).

Whereas "silences" may be identified as "a systematic way to inform issues of voice, representation, and responsibility along with the associated problems of inclusion, exclusion, and participation" (Bhambra & Shilliam, 2009, p. 2)—that is to say, silences can be mobilised as a modality for excluded groups and individuals to protect and/or rebel against progressive social systems and practices (see also Clark, 2020)—silence-*ing* is framed as a mass phenomenon, embedded in institutions and regarded as a signifier of taboo or stigma. Therefore, while the editors are keenly interested in and appreciative of the body of

existing literature on the qualities of silence as a modality that may be *selected*, consciously or unconsciously, by oppressed demographics and individuals as a protective or rebellious mechanism, we affirm that the key focus of this thematic issue is primarily concerned with the imposition of silencing by institutions.

2. Legacies of Silencing as a Powerful Institutional Tool

Despite a long tradition of silences and silencing being discussed in scholarly work, framing silencing as a mobilization of power, especially by institutions that seek to uphold and bolster that power, is a bold claim to make. This leads to questions of *why* institutions mobilize silencing—for a "shelter for power" that has tangible qualities visible to the outside world (Brown, 1998, p. 315). In 2024, and with the current climate of international warfare, some European nation-states and higher education institutions define what is, for instance, anti-Semitic speech, and by that silence critical voices. Is this a new stage of political power play? What is the purpose of political and social silencing? How do they relate?

In their *Manifesto for an Intellectual and Political Counteroffensive*, French philosophers, and sociologists Geoffroy de Lagasnerie and Eduard Louis tackle the "archaeology of silence" (de Lagasnerie & Louis, 2015). They posit that the normalization (see also Vieten & Poynting, 2022) of racist extremist views and the shift to the far-right is either encompassed by some intellectuals echoing these perspectives or not challenging them loud enough. They call for more attention in political-institutional contexts, where institutional racisms may affect visible ethnic minorities by silencing their lived experiences.

Thus, we might also approach silencing as a method of intimidating prospective whistleblowing activities on discriminatory practices within institutional settings (see Tiitinen, 2020). What is needed, then, is to speak out and complain against institutional processes of silencing (see Ahmed, 2021). How does this contribute to wider social exclusions of those who experience silencing?

Tirion et al.'s (2023) discussion of "norm erosion" and by-standers who look on socially deviant behaviour sheds light on this in the context of social rule-breaking, finding that when rule-breaking behaviour is confronted, by-standers perceive norms as stronger than if a rule-breaking behaviour remains unchallenged. In this frame then, those who stand by to witness acts of silencing without confronting them may be imagined as complicit in embedded and institutionalised acts of silencing: The claim might be reasonably made then that by-standers uphold silencing, which is layered when given the context that *institutional* mobilisations of power through silencing may overtly or subconsciously intimidate those who witness them, given that institutions have the resource of pre-existing power to silence, re-silence, and reprise against confrontation.

3. Confronting Institutional Silencing in Social Exclusion

In situ, the myriad angles and case examples with which to approach institutional silencing as it is experienced through a social exclusionary lens present an extensive scope for the renewed address of how silencing is shaped and reshaped by power arcs. This thematic issue invited scholars to challenge both how and why institutions house silencing, interrogating processes of silencing as an apparatus of wider power arcs. Further, we were interested in understanding how silencing is overcome and in what ways temporary silence can be resolved without structural damage in giving a voice and being heard. Does silencing have consequences for institutional actors, and can acts of silencing be recorded?

The diverse and international contributions covered in this thematic issue demonstrate the breadth and texture of silencing's interplay in institutional settings and capacities. Paying particular attention to how intersections of social class, gender, race, and ethnicity receive and shape processes of silencing, this thematic issue seeks to situate intersections of individual demographic identity as ventricles of specific vulnerabilities to the silencing, power, and social exclusion nexus, to uncover institutions as instrumental in this. In the remainder of this editorial, we will briefly introduce the articles assembled in this thematic issue.

4. Contributions

From a focus on silencing within family histories, Isola (2024) unpacks intergenerational disadvantage as it relates to silencing, positing issues such as substance use, neuropsychiatric characteristics, and mental health concerns as linked to both "active" and "passive" silencing and consequent social exclusion because of several different institutional capacities. In this discussion, the author highlights that silenced and socially excluded individuals are more likely to internalise discriminatory or otherwise unfair treatment as a renewed facet of passive social exclusion.

Gautschi and Abraham (2024) approach compulsory social measures in Switzerland, discussing the hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents from backgrounds of poverty, e.g., from the minority Yenish population, who were placed in foster families or mobilised as farm labourers. Given the legacy of trauma and violence left by compulsory social measures on many of these children, the authors discuss the taboo surrounding the issue, analysing the public reappraisal that emerged in Switzerland in 2013 under the theme of silencing and silence-breaking.

There is also a place for investigating what artefacts and processes uphold silencing, as discussed by Whelan (2024), who approaches policy documents as "not neutral objects." Approaching policy silences under the context of the Government of Ireland's *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025*, the author holds a delicate discussion about inclusion, representation, and poverty. The theme that systemically embedded disadvantages afford powerful institutions palpable privilege has also been recently expressed by Falzon (2023), who approaches silencing because of imbalances between "developed" and "developing" nations in the UN climate delegation context.

Approaching ableism in grassroots organisations, Tsang (2024) focuses on autistic peoples' experiences of ableism through the lens of Bourdieu's symbolic power. Investigating the lived experiences of autistic adults, parents, disability advocates, social workers, policymakers, and academics, this contribution brings into the fold the multi-faceted role of social oppression and the complexities emerging from the growth of identity politics in advocacy spaces.

Discussing institutional processes of silencing from an inclusive university development perspective, Leonhardt (2024) discusses ableism in higher education settings and its links to postcolonial discourses on silencing. By situating formal access to higher education as a singular, incomplete face of interrogating "ableist-structured norms of ability" and its silencing impacts, the author brings to light the notions of transparency and (self-)critical approaches to inequality as ways to interrogate and hold institutional processes of silencing in a space of consequence.

In an autoethnographic reflection on the way a conflict regarding intellectual research ownership becomes silenced, Alpagu (2024) demonstrates that some leadership programmes of gendered (female) inclusion encompass (racializing) spaces of exclusion. While analytically using Ahmed's (2004, 2012, 2021) work, the author confronts us with intermediate processes of silencing that target those who complain. Nonetheless, Alpagu's personal account also illustrates how to overcome being silenced and how conflictive career interests are deeply enshrined in the culture of neo-liberal universities.

Kusmallah and Ghorashi (2024) turn their attention to the situation of unaccompanied refugee minors while exploring the agency of young refugees in responding to institutional silencing processes in the Netherlands. Four narratives are analysed in-depth, introducing young people who combat institutional attempts to make them invisible and silent.

The perspective on subaltern voices and how to enable speech that is not imposing and reproduces majority views and asymmetric power hierarchy is tackled by Dijkema (2024) as well. Here the example of the Université Populaire is given, a group initiative by actors in a marginalized social-housing neighborhood in Grenoble, trying to bridge class, gender, and ethnicity differences. Instead of interviews, public debates were stirred to overcome the stigmatisation and silencing of people living in the neighborhood of Villeneuve.

In their article, Sipos and Bagyura (2024) take us to Budapest, critically reflecting on the spatial choreography of the Pride parades. The authors follow the historical visibility of LGTBQ+ communities as they were confronted with regulations on their way. They map the development between 1997 and 2022 detecting the 3Rs—routes, regulations, and resistance.

Wilopo and Dijkema (2024) draw on postcolonial and subaltern studies to investigate silencing as a practice in the context of city government responses to anti-racism in Zurich. Discussing also under the frame of Rancière's (de)politicisation, it is found that social movement demands can both allow marginalised voices to be heard and create new silences.

There is a common thread in the contributions made to this thematic issue. All authors confront institutional processes of silencing by shedding light on who is silenced by whom, in what context, and how.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Ulrike M. Vieten (PhD) is a transnational sociologist based at Queen's University Belfast. Focusing on the question how racialised group boundaries are constructed and shift since the early 20th century in Europe, she unwrapped racist discourses of cosmopolitanism in Germany and Britain, investigated European belonging and identity of minority citizens, and publishes, since 2016, specifically on gender, racism, and the far right. As a feminist interested in intersectionality, she takes inspiration from political activism of black and minority scholars across the globe.