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Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, nationalist and rightist movements were on the rise in many parts of the world. Far-right parties for example gained support throughout Continental Europe (Albertazzi and van Kessel 2021) and in the United States (The House January 6th Committee 2023). In many ways, politics of difference were evoked to gain political power, at the heart of which lay negative characterizations of immigrants, including those otherwise deemed as qualified for immigration status. The most affected were those characterized as 'non-Western' individuals during what was labelled as a threatening 'immigration crisis' in most of the 'developed world' (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). In terms of women's rights, abortion rights were dismantled in countries such as Poland, Italy and the USA, and women's roles were re-traditionalized by the pandemic (Primecz 2022). During and after the pandemic, these trends and sentiments mingled with conspiracy theories and anti-democratic movements, brought together and further churned up by right-wing social media (Demmel 2021). 'Where is this world going?', one may ask, 'and what is it that still binds people together?'

In light of this 'feeling of the times', we would contend it is the responsibility of critical scholarship to investigate how people construct, perceive and affirm those who are different, and to unveil the mechanisms which underlie these processes. Why is a certain difference chosen as relevant? In whose interests is it? What would be the alternatives? And what are the consequences? For example, in many countries, residents are asked to self-identify in terms of race. However, what counts as 'race' differs across time and place. 'Irish' used to be are racial identifier (MacManus 1921) – but no longer is, and categories such as 'Latin' or 'Hispanic', too, are power-laden in an equally ambiguous and fleeting way (Faria, Ibarra-Colado, and Guedes 2010). Also, while there is the idea that a person's self-identification in terms of race overweighs how others see them (the ascriptions of race), putting self-identification first is nonetheless not unproblematic.

Adding further complexity to the politics of difference, the same issue might be labelled as 'racial' in one cultural context, such as North America, but as 'ethnic' in another one, such as Continental Europe (Lentin 2008). Thus even if there is no awareness that Muslim migrants in presumably ethnic homogeneous countries such as Germany are met with suspicion because of their 'non-Whiteness' and 'non-Westernness', this phenomenon still constitutes a problematic racialization with real effects on those who are subjected to it (e.g. Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin 2017). For example, research shows that Migrant women wearing headscarves are heavily discriminated when seeking qualified jobs in Germany and Austria (Weichselbaumer 2016). Muslim migrant women thus face double discriminations: those of race and those of gender. Yet, in other cases, Muslim women are more included than Muslim men in Western workplaces, because women are considered to be the 'safer choice', independently of their religiosity.

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This suggests that Crenshaw's (1989) original argument about the need for considering difference 'at the crossroads' (of two identity categories) is still relevant. Crenshaw (1989) had put forward the idea that the issues faced by Black women may not be subsumed under the interests of White feminism, as they emerge at the intersections of gender and race. Feminist interests, she argued, are thus only partly, not *fully*, universal to women, and the difficulties lie in figuring out the specifics of what is shared and what is different. In light of today's post-pandemic and socially fragmented 'era of crises', this is a more than relevant call for identifying the glue that 'holds people together' but to also understand precisely when and how people's lived experiences differ, and across which intersections of difference and how exactly this is the case (Mahadevan, Primecz, and Romani, 2020). For example, as the paper by Schmidt, Bendl, and Clar (2023) in this special issue identifies, there is a regression towards heteronormativity and gender binaries that hinder more pluralist feminist organizing.

It is also astonishing which differences do *not* disappear – even though one may have expected they might have. For example, as Barth ([1969]1998) has rightly argued, ethnicity is a socio-cultural category that should disappear as soon as ethnic groups come in contact with each other. Why does it not? Barth states that it is not ethnicity, as a category filled with content and meaning, that remains relevant, but rather ethnicity as a boundary mechanism: In this function, ethnicity constructs the border between two, otherwise undistinguishable groups, and this construction is to the interest of those doing it. For example, 'ethnic minority workers' is an often-used category in the literature – but what exactly does it contain? What does one ethnic minority worker from country A have in common with another ethnic minority worker from country B, and why is it that the (national) majority doing the construction – which are potentially also those making the job selection – does not have an 'ethnicity'? (also see Romani, Holck, and Risberg 2019). As Theunissen and Van Laer (2023) reveal in this special issue, language and the politics of linguistic difference are key closure mechanism through which native speakers defend job privilege and prevent migrants from entering.

When investigating difference as political in the aforementioned ways, we do not doubt that objective differences do, indeed, exist. But what these differences *mean*, and to whom, and in which situation and for what purposes – this is where reality might and does become problematic. Or, to reverse this logic: even though difference is never objective, its consequences are real. In that sense, difference is never innocent (Harding 2009). We thus wish to put into focus the phenomena and situations in which some are constructed as different (or self-identify as different) and to investigate the consequences of these processes, also in light of the wider systems, structures and boundary conditions that frame how difference is made 'real'. For example, whereas Christian rites and practices in organizations, such as the annual corporate Christmas party, are understood as not being in opposition to a presumably rational and secular global business (Hidegh and Primecz 2020), alternative religious practices, such as saying Muslim prayers (Mahadevan and Kilian-Yasin 2017) or adhering to a Hindu vegetarian diet (Mahadevan 2012), are viewed as strong signs of an insufficient, non-Western, traditionality, and labelled as backwardness. How has it happened that one way of practicing religion has become normalized whereas others are constructed as irreconcilably different from what is considered secular modernity?

Dichotomies such as 'West' and 'non-West', or 'Global North' and 'Global South' are not innocent: they are linked to actual historic and systemic inequalities (Zanoni et al. 2010). Consequently, some identities become the 'cosmopolitan self-initiated expatriate' whereas other 'types' of qualified globally mobile individuals are classified as 'migrant workers' – a dichotomy that is reproduced even by the managerial literature (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry 2013).

Likewise, English as a global lingua franca is not only an arbitrary linguistic choice but a product of a specific unequal history, and this is why it makes a difference in the perception of whether a non-racialized or a racialized person speaks English with more or less fluency or with a certain, and not another, accent (Kassis-Henderson and Cohen 2020). The same applies to other former colonial languages, such as Spanish or French, and the power delineations they infer (Ibarra-Colado 2006).

At the same time, difference is also an agentic choice: individuals are, to a certain extent, free to position themselves in terms of compliance and resistance, to 'use' and subvert the system to their interests, and to re-define difference and its consequences. For example, processes of Englishization in Indian call centres are as much restricting as they are enabling (Boussebaa, Sinha, and Gabriel 2014), and organizations play a role in which differences are (not) normalized and in what ways (Naccache and Al Ariss 2017). Difference and organization are thus mutually constitutive, and their intersections differ across interest groups (Mahadevan 2021), diversity categories and cultures (Mahadevan, Primecz, and Romani 2020), and time (Maclean, Harvey, and Clegg 2015; Barragan, Mills and Paludi 2017).

For entangling the politics of difference, critical methodologies (overview in Romani, Mahadevan, and Primecz 2018) and in-depth and contextualized qualitative and ethnographic approaches (overview in Mahadevan and Moore, 2023) seem ideally suited. They require researcher involvement and an acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality and power position, often to achieve or at least contributing to systemic change (e.g. Mahadevan 2021).

Consequently, the papers in this special issue employ in-depth qualitative research (Hidegh et al. 2023), ethnography (Wettermark 2023), single case study approaches (Theunissen and Van Laer 2023), critical discourse analysis (Krysa, Barragan, and Mills 2023) and seeking expert insights from an embedded activist perspective (Schmidt, Bendl, and Clar 2023). They range from the less to the more 'politically engaged', but always with a focus on gaining novel intersectional, and thus more sophisticated and differentiated, insights on the politics of difference.

Theunissen and Van Laer (2023) focus on the multilingual context of Belgium in which language (in this case: Flemish/Dutch) is highly contested and politicized. Using a single case study, they analyse the language requirements of certain jobs, and the archetypes of 'ideal worker' and 'non-ideal worker' which is constructed by them. They show that language requirements function as multiple layers of context against which migrant workers' linguistic difference is constructed: sometimes, language 'matters', depending, for instance, on the availability of applicants, yet, if conditions are different, then different language requirements are put forward. This then implies that language requirements, much like the perception of migrant workers' language fluency are not objective but rather a political instrument of difference. As Theunissen and Van Laer (2023) show, they are also a closure mechanism by means of which a native, ethnic majority speaker defends job privilege. The authors reflect on how the research process itself was implicated by such language hierarchies and politics, and discuss the consequences of this insight in light of their study.

Wettermark (2023), in a dual role as ethnographer and volunteer, researches language Cafés – a supposed means of migrants' 'integration' – organized by a Swedish voluntary organization in Stockholm. In her study, she presents and problematizes the idea and practice of a 'happy multiculturalism' in which migrants narrate themselves as being 'on the way of being included' and present themselves as having chances to catch up with local middle-class life style and to work on achieving this goal. In the given neo-liberal context, such migrants are attractive, even 'trendy' and fulfil the societal requirements to contribute to society to 'repay' the support which they receive as migrants. Conversely, frustrated, angry or traumatized migrants and refugees who cannot successfully narrate and exhibit the required happiness and optimism, are rejected as 'bad' and 'ungrateful' migrants.

Hidegh et al. (2023), focussing on the Hungarian context, analyse the experiences and testimonies of entrepreneurs at the crossroads of gender and disability. They show how entrepreneurial identity expectations – such as the 'hero entrepreneur' – are often rooted in ideas of ability. Gender further complicates the situation, as the normative idea of the 'hero entrepreneur' is also 'masculine'. Against this background, the authors show how entrepreneurs with disability are active agents of their identity work. They employ various strategies, such as bracketing, reconciling, adjusting and neglecting, to overcome tensions between their identities and the hegemonic entrepreneurial ideal. This way, they work against their 'being different' that is projected upon

them, thus providing a counter logic to established normalities of what it means to be and act entrepreneurial.

Schmidt, Bendl, and Clar (2023) examine the status of gender equality in Austria. They identify a clear backtrack from a pluralist perspective on gender equality policies and a regression towards hetero-normativity, complemented by a focus on 'quasi-naturalized' gender binaries. Identifying expert strategies in dealing with these policies and trends, they identify new spaces for feminist organizing, that is: efforts led by women to challenge women's subordination to men. When doing so, they position themselves as embedded feminist activists. Their research thus highlights how we, as researchers and academics, have the collective freedom and responsibility to work towards more inclusive and generally fairer systems of work and life (see also Primecz et al., 2016). This then requires a reflexive engagement with oneself and others, and a constant practice of questioning present realities and attempts at change: even if one identifies clear inequalities – how can one be sure that the change one fights for does not simply replace one system of dominance with another?

Krysa, Barragan, and Mills (2023) trace how various societal agents shape textual categories such as 'worker', 'employee' or 'professional' in Canadian government-produced texts. They show that certain texts hint that some newcomers are not 'Canadian' enough. Consequently, it is not surprising that this group then faces difficulties when seeking employment. Krysa, Barragan, and Mills (2023) thus show how textual practices contribute to creating a hierarchy of more or less desirable, and of less or more 'different' migrants. Like Wettermark (2023), they reveal that certain types of immigrants are welcomed, while others are excluded. This then underscores the need for reflecting upon how language is a vehicle for reproducing dominant differences and exclusion, and to reframe difference for a more inclusive reality.

Together, these papers highlight theoretical, methodological and practical ways of how to move beyond simplistic categories of sameness or difference. They offer options of how to come to more nuanced and differentiated, and thus: intersectional approaches towards people's lived experiences, within systemic boundaries. Finally, they pinpoint those practices, discourses and ideas that produce and maintain systemic inequalities – such as marginalization, exclusion, othering or closure. Thus, these papers identify the point and place when researchers and practitioners need to stop being neutral and rather become agents of an emancipatory change to the better. At the same time, the papers in this special issue also highlight how system change is always a collective project, beyond single standpoints and across multiple lived-experiences, to do the intersectionality of identities and experiences in today's complex and interconnected world justice.

The insights from the papers in this special issue stem from specific contexts were uncovered by specific researchers and using specific methods. Nonetheless, their implications always point beyond the immediate context and beyond the immediate phenomenon studied. The patterns behind present state-related backlashes against feminist organizing in Austria, for example, have something in common with how migrants are constructed as 'the Other' in Canadian government-produced texts, even though the specifics and the interest groups involved differ. In such ways, the papers themselves create an intersectional web of knowledge, in which the insights gained are both different and related, and in which the specific emancipatory projects differ but also share a common goal.

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