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JEREMIAH MORELOCK &
FELIPE ZIOTTI NARITA

THE SOCIETY OF THE SELFIE

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The Society of the Selfie

Social Media and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

Jeremiah Morelock
and Felipe Ziotti Narita

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Information Technology and Authoritarian Populism

As we begin the second decade of the twenty-first century, two trends are immediately apparent. First, more than ever before, a substantial portion of our social relations are taking place online. Any kind of dichotomy between 'the real' and 'the virtual' has become difficult to sustain. Second, authoritarian and populist social movements have surged in popularity throughout the world, placing the stability of liberal democracy into question. In this book we argue that these two saturations of our social terrain, that of information technologies and that of authoritarian ideologies, are deeply related. This does not mean that in some simplistic sense informational technologies are the cause of authoritarian populism, nor vice versa. Our claim is that certain characteristics of neoliberal capitalism have dovetailed with and been amplified by the proliferation of information technologies and social media, and that these overdetermined tendencies have poked with increasing vigour at a selection of psychosocial wounds, already endemic to neoliberal capitalism, that tend to inspire authoritarian and populist reaction.

Over the last few decades social media has risen in importance to connect people and cultures all over the world like never before since images and information on the internet can travel anywhere instantaneously and saturate society. With the digitalization of society, social relations are increasingly dependent on the deduction of knowledge from pieces of information and the recombination

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of data (Nassehi 2019). On the whole, people who are connected in this way spend less time face-to-face with friends and family and spend more time projecting information and images out to a general, faceless audience. Since the 1980s, what has been called 'globalization' is unconceivable without the cultural logics of surfaces and images, individualizing and deterritorializing the production of digital/immaterial contents, from affects to goods, from labour to leisure, and so on. Life itself has been absorbed by digitalization and the projection of abstract images and data. If it leads to a reconsideration of the strong individuation processes of global capitalism (Martuccelli 2010; Lahire 2011), via personal profiles and personalized consumption options, the emerging sociotechnical relations have constructed new interfaces between individual affirmation and collective pressure.

In the era of COVID-19, the importance of social media has risen tremendously, even from its prior position of omnipresence. Already, many of us were compulsively checking our email, scrolling through our newsfeeds, rechecking our latest tweets or status updates to see if anyone had a new response to give, many teenagers were keeping in constant contact with their friends through a steady stream of text messages, and many people were getting their news from social media rather than buying 'the newspaper'. During pandemics, the requirement or best practice of social distancing has made face-to-face gatherings outside of one's immediate household intrinsically risky and comparatively rare. Now more than ever, virtual interaction typifies many of our connections with friends, family and coworkers. Spending more time at home, many of us spend hours of the day clicking with bated breath to learn of the new death counts from the disease and the plan or lack thereof for addressing the crisis. And the other major issue that preoccupies the world, that splatters unstoppably over our newsfeeds, is authoritarian populism. It is close to impossible to overstate the significance of the severe polarization of political platforms, the resurgence in popularity of far-right politics, and legitimate insecurities about the future of democratic society.

The pandemic presents novel circumstances, but it has only plunged us deeper into contact with trends that were already brewing well under neoliberalism. We are in an era of widespread crisis, where the ground we stand on has either already been ripped away or is under constant threat of dissolution. And it is not because of the pandemic that this is the case – the pandemic is tragic and it is severe, but the logic behind the wider crisis encapsulates the logic of the COVID-19 crisis. It is the society of globalized neoliberal information capitalism that harbours all of these cracks that the current predicament has aggravated and brought to greater urgency. In other words, neoliberal capitalism has brought itself to a point of global crisis because of the social contradictions it embodies. The society that we are dying to restore, with the naïve appeal to go back to the 'old normal', is the society that brought us to this point of desperation and uncertainty in the first place.

What is this 'society' of global neoliberal information capitalism? What are its sociocultural contradictions? And what do they have to do with the rise of authoritarian populism? This book is all about drawing these connections. Throughout this book we refer to the geoculture tied to global neoliberal information capitalism as the 'society of the selfie'. We use this term for a few reasons. It is an homage to Guy Debord's famous work from 1967, *The Society of the Spectacle*, which – as we will describe later on – we find to be very pertinent to life in the early twenty-first century, and yet which to some extent begs for updating in order to take account of the global material and sociocultural transformations of the past fifty years, including, very significantly, the preponderance of information technologies and social media. Besides this, the term 'society of the selfie' also refers to a specific process of individuation, which is connected to the pervasive need for online impression management and individual self-investment reinforced by neoliberal logics. Technology, thus, is not the efficient cause for social transformations: rather, technological impacts mediated by social relations (that is why we emphasize the *society* of the selfie) are crucial – they form a *sociotechnical* complex. If social media and digital interactions favour the need for exhibition of achievements, failures, engagement, anxieties and private issues – and life itself, thus, has become reified under an omnipresent and anonymous threat of scrutiny and discrediting – the inhuman volume of human images and other data in online networks may say something about sociality, acceleration of change, and adaptation to digital conditions (Hassan 2020). In this book, the significance of the selfie goes beyond the surface of individual portraits with mobile cameras. For us it is a cultural sign of individuation in neoliberal capitalism, which overlaps with the spectacle of social media, the interaction with a remote invisible audience, the need for digital engagement with collective causes and the moral investment in individual profiles.

Technology is not linear, nor can the uses of social media be reduced to stigma (narcissism, etc.). The spread of digital networks can reinforce solidarity and produce new political affects (Nemer 2013; Safatle 2015), with real possibilities of community engagement in progressive causes (Schwartz 1996), but it can also favour intolerance and the authoritarian revolt against democracy. These conflictual lines are shaping contemporary societies and both are invariably dependent on the society of the selfie. Since its spread to personal use in the 1990s, the internet has raised ambivalent signs on liberal democracy and the limits of individual freedom. If the policies for information control comprise cryptography, hacking, privacy and issues of national security, the individual interaction in the digital milieu proliferates social conflict and hate speech (Saco 2002).

To explain a little more about our approach, and how this name refers to it, we will define for the reader what we mean by 'society', as well as what the significance of the 'selfie' is for our analysis. Regarding the first term, it has

become increasingly problematic over the past several decades to uphold the notion of any 'society' as a discrete entity in the cultural sense. The reasons might be summed up in the rise of globalization and postcolonialism. There are plenty of official societies that involve formal membership, perhaps also involving dues to pay and ritual social events to attend, etc. And yet the concept of society is at least equally appropriate to informal social relations that are grounded in repeated interaction, shared culture, etc. In itself, this vagueness is not necessarily problematic. A third element in the term poses a greater difficulty: a 'society' is frequently denoted as bound, whether loosely or firmly, to a geographic territory, such as a nation-state. This part of the concept does not mix well with the rest of it in a globalized and globalizing world, where material, cultural and demographic crosscurrents between people of distal regions are increasingly commonplace.

The internet has a major role in this trend. In terms of any individual's sociocultural milieu, the assumption that it is geographically bound is now obsolete, without any more qualifying information. Some people and some regions are more 'plugged in' than others, to be sure, but a very large portion of the global population participate in relations and affiliations that span regions, nations and continents. Here we use the term 'society' primarily in the cultural sense, decoupled from the geographical stipulation. We do not pretend that this 'society' impacts all regions and demographics in the same ways, and we are careful to qualify our claims with data on such as regarding place, race, gender, class, age and so on. Where we feel it especially important, we explore in greater depth the specific dynamics of contrasting peoples or regions. And yet we argue that the dynamics we articulate are best understood as general trends that differ in expression at times, but importantly function according to a definable, consistent overall sociocultural logic. While the expression of these characteristics will differ according to the particularities of societies, it is still helpful and meaningful to view these differing expressions as part of the same overall developmental trend. The situation is likewise for neoliberalism and social media. 'Neoliberalism' is a title given for a variety of trends that follow a similar logic, although differing in their specificities. The sociocultural influences of social media are manifest and expressed somewhat differently among different peoples, yet the internet itself is a globally connective medium of communication that does not differ in its basic laws of operation nor of the broad trajectory of social transformation implicit in its adoption. Something similar must be said for the contemporary rise of authoritarian populism. Surely the simultaneity of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Brexit, Marine Le Pen, Narendra Modi, and so on is not just coincidence. It is no less anomalous that the #BlackLivesMatter movement has directly generated the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation.

Both materially and culturally, the various regions of the world are more interconnected than ever in history. For these reasons, we treat the society of the selfie as a unified phenomenon. If globalization is the material complex that, based on the unequal exchange among countries, provides infrastructure

for the flow of goods, people, ideas and labour, the society of the selfie is unified by the market structures that have been reshaping global capitalism since the 1980s. Just like the spectacle, which emerged from the structural transformations of global capital between the 1850s and the 1950s, the society of the selfie unifies and condenses time/space differences into accelerated processes of data flow and the ubiquitous presence of digital surfaces.

If neoliberal capitalism were our sole axis of analysis, perhaps the term 'society of the self' would be a little more fitting. Yet the hegemonic force of self-interest coincides today with the saturation of life by social media, and there is no better sign than the selfie of the contemporary love affair between self-obsession and social media. It is a very large element in social life as well, as indicated by the many jokes about it, the criticisms of it on the grounds of narcissism and the celebration of it on the grounds of self-expression. It is frequently also an inadvertent admission of social estrangement, e.g., the picture-taker is the self rather than a friend or family member. Likewise, the picture is often of the self [*alone*] in some spectacular context. And finally, the picture is posted online, for others not present to witness, with the hope that members of an invisible audience will see the picture taker as living an interesting and exciting life, and indicating as much by clicking 'like' and adding to the counter.

1.1 Note on Methodology

The immensity and complexity of the object we gesture towards in these pages – 'social media and the crisis of liberal democracy' – demands a multi-pronged approach, and considerable conceptual polyandry. The phenomena are simply too much to contain in one theory, and yet without theory, we could only describe empirical objects. Even notions such as 'social media', 'crisis' and 'liberal democracy' could not make an appearance in this or any book without recourse to theoretical thought on some level. Our multi-pronged approach takes considerable influence from the methodology of theoretical 'constellations' developed by members of the early Frankfurt School. In his 'epistemo-critical prologue' to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin famously proclaimed: 'Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars' (1998, 34). To paraphrase his explanation of the meaning of this analogy, objects are what they are, irrespective of the ideas we have about them. Our ideas are built out of these objects, but likewise are not determined by them. The idea is a shape that we observe as a gestalt, comprising the relations between objects. There is both a silence and an interaction between ideas and objects.

In any interpretation of complex information, understanding trends requires heuristics. Being hammered with disconnected facts fetishized in their specificity does not facilitate comprehension of the nature of these larger connections, which in an interconnected world, are implicit. Hence, some filtering of information, and the willingness to draw connections that cannot be put to empirical

testing because they rely on speculative leaps, is needed. It is a common trend in mainstream social sciences today to fixate on faithfully reporting no more than narrowly conceptualized but rigorously calculated statistical facts or individualized personal narratives of lived experience. Surely rigor and faithfulness are important virtues in academia, but without speculation, no progress in our comprehension of any object of study is possible.

This bias towards facts and away from speculation is the problem of positivism contra theory, which was famously debated between critical theorist Theodor Adorno, philosophy of science Karl Popper, and others, during and following a 1961 conference of the German Sociological Association. Popper and Adorno both rejected the narrow form of positivism that has become predominant in the social sciences. They differed, however, in many respects beyond this starting point. As pointed out by Ralf Dahrendorf, a major axis of difference between the two is Popper's relative alignment with Kant vis-à-vis Adorno's relative alignment with Hegel (Adorno et al. 1976).

In this respect, Popper's 'critical rationalism' hinges on the tentative character of all theoretical knowledge, and emphasizes the necessity of theory-testing. If a theory cannot be tested for whether it is false, it is not a scientific theory (social science included). In this way, one could understand Popper as identifying a kind of theoretical speculation as necessary to social science, and also that all theoretical speculation is inherently suspect, and must be empirically tested. If it cannot be tested, if is out of bounds. The object of knowledge, and the concept we use to encapsulate it, are intrinsically divorced; and yet we can use our concepts to more or less approximate and accurate denotative representation of the object. At least we can know if our denotation has not yet been proven wrong. In this sense, speculation is implicit in human cognition, and the speculation of the scientist involves guesswork.

Adorno's treatment of speculation is in a stricter, more Hegelian sense of the term. For Hegel, speculation is the process of dialectical unfolding. It involves reaching beyond the immediate object into its immanent logic. The concept is a speculative leap from the immediate intuition or experience of the object, but it is determined by the dialectical logic immanent to the object, not by the guesswork of the scientist. Immanent logic is not testable, as it does not involve empirical propositions. As such it is not falsifiable. In the Hegelian model, human cognition does not 'represent' reality in the alienated sense that Kantianism espouses. Instead, reality is inseparable from its expression in human awareness. In contrast to Hegel though, Adorno preserves some of the Kantian not-knowingness and the notion of an unbridgeable chasm between the consciousness of the subject and the total 'truth' of the object. In his claim that every object that enters its concept leaves behind a remainder, he indicates the fundamental impossibility of conceptual thought capturing its objects in their entirety. Similarly, every concept exceeds its object via speculation (Adorno 2003, 2014). To put this in Popperian terms, every concept, and thus every theory, is necessarily false. And yet unlike Popper, Adorno sees the element of

falsehood not as a reason in of itself to discard theories. Instead, theory needs its quantum of falsehood in order to tell us anything:

> [T]heoretical frameworks characteristically do not entirely agree with the results of research and set forth opposing views. They venture out too far; in the language of social research, they tend to falsify generalizations […] Nevertheless, speculation would not be possible without venturing too far. Without the unavoidable moment of untruth in theory, speculation would resign itself to the mere abbreviation of facts, which it would leave unconceptualized – pre-scientific in the true sense of the term. (22)

Adorno speaks of 'untruth', but he does not subscribe to the correspondence theory of truth. Instead, following a more Hegelian methodology, he argues for unfolding the dialectical logic immanent within the object. For Adorno, this unfolding composes a 'constellation' of moments, each one illuminating some aspect of the object, and contextualizing the other moments of the exposition (Adorno 2003). The object is not nailed down to a fixed definition (Adorno 2017). Instead, it is experienced from multiple points of illumination in the process of the development of its logic (Adorno 2014). Whereas for Popper, contradiction is grounds for rejecting a theory, for Adorno contradiction is intrinsic to any object's developmental logic (Adorno et al. 1976).

With Adorno (2003, 2014), we would recognize that without speculation (in both senses – Kantian and Hegelian) we are cognitively limited to what is immediately apparent, so our imaginations cannot understand the broader context and import of events. Speculation prevents the current state of affairs from having totalitarian control over consciousness. Without speculation there could be no valid *raison d'être* for social science, since it would wither to become bare reporting of facts and lived experiences, which can easily be accomplished without the pretensions of academic disciplines. With Adorno, we see the restriction to a unitary and denotative notion of truth to be unduly limiting, and see a constellation of moments and theoretical angles – all of them limited and 'false', but all illuminating nonetheless – to be more informative. Rather than pinpointing the truth of an object within a fixed, self-satisfied theoretical boundary, we prefer a process approach where the object is experienced through a broader unfolding of contents and implications. And with Adorno, we do not see contradiction as inherent grounds for dismissing a theory. Unlike Adorno, however, we are not committed to a purely dialectical approach.

In the shadow between theory and reality, speculation takes an explicit role (Morelock 2019), as complex relationships between objects and concepts are drawn out. Just as comprehension of objects is inseparable from conceptual thought, so also comprehension of reality is inseparable from theoretical thought. If, as we would suggest, the difference between concept and theory is a matter of degree rather than of kind, then in both cases the degree in question is

about the complexity of the shadow between the abstract and the concrete. The greater the shadow, in this sense, so also is the greater amount of information bracketed. The greater is the amount of information bracketed, so also is the greater space for multiple theoretical interpretations that bracket differently. They are all incomplete, but they all illustrate relations and patterns that could not be seen without them.

In light of the foregoing, the distinction between 'fact' and 'speculation' might appear to be relative, grounded in interpretation and custom. Yet the distinction is a socially critical one, since without accountability to some form of factual verification – or 'falsifiability' as Popper would have it – speculation becomes only so many opinions and daydreams, and this is a very socially dangerous state of affairs. The dangers of postmodern-era relativism are given frightening concreteness when we consider recent events such as many Americans' willingness to believe Donald Trump's insistence that he won the 2020 election, and his claims of widespread voter fraud, with no evidence provided. That his unverified and yet incessant claims played a central role in rousing an armed crowd of far-right 'protestors' that broke into the capitol building and came close to carrying out a sequence of assassinations, is evidence of real consequences. Letting go of the burden of providing sound empirical evidence and standing up to rational scrutiny facilitates the justificatory rooting of truth claims in the whims of orators and crowds. Without some recourse to fact, there is no standard for judging truth claims other than their emotional appeal or the charisma of their speaker. In this sense, the liquidation of epistemology is not only intellectually bereft, but also sociopolitically treacherous. Within social science, it is critical to have recourse to facts for evaluating truth claims because without this, social sciences lose all of their power to inform. Without recourse to facts, the claims of social science devolve into pure rhetoric, and as such can no longer claim any elevated relevance for consultation in addressing social problems and pathologies.

Our affirmative position is fourfold. First, *speculation is necessary*. Understanding complex developments that span micro and macro, material and cultural dimensions of social life across time, wide regions and diverse peoples, requires theoretical understanding, which in turn necessitates the retention of considerable space for speculation. Second, *critical scrutiny is necessary*. Respect for speculation in such a context needs to be tempered by continuous critical scrutiny of the theory, including its accountability to fact and its internal coherence. The theory cannot and should not be able to account for everything, but it should at least be able to fit the objects and concepts retained in its purview and it should retain its integrity when subjected to immanent critique. Third, *multiplicity is useful, but not necessary*. Especially when the shadow between theory and reality is large or complex, it is useful to adopt 'a metatheoretical angle which supports the use of multiple perspectives' (Morelock 2019). In other words, it is often beneficial to use multiple theories to illuminate different dimensions of a phenomenon. In other situations, a single

theory may be as adequate or more. Fourth, *consilience is useful, but not necessary*. When using multiple theories, they should be chosen deliberatively and not arbitrarily or haphazardly and should be able to stand up to critical scrutiny. Yet in a post-foundationalist sense, they do not need to be unified in a central methodological knot where they all become commensurate. As in Adorno's constellation methodology, contradiction does not necessarily indicate invalidity – indeed, many phenomena contain contradiction. Instead of translating them all together, they can remain clashing, and together they may allow a nuanced understanding more like coloured optical lenses that together can be used like a Venn diagram. Or to use Benjamin's constellation analogy again, they are like intersecting or overlapping constellations, which use some of the same stars as one another, but use different patterns of emphasis to compose their different shapes. We use multiple theories to illustrate, not to denote. That said, where connections between theories can be drawn, it may be useful, informative and convincing to draw them.

Our approach to theory is also intended as an affirmation and defence of social theory in the social sciences. It is an example and suggestion about one way to step beyond the impasse of positivism and postmodern-era relativism to advance theoretical thought further, rather than embracing a 'lazy pragmatism' as has become increasingly common in social sciences today (Morelock and Sullivan 2021). The present historical conjuncture presents great urgency that demands dedicated conceptualization that can be broad and holistic. For this, social theory is indispensable. We consult several theorists here, most prominently Guy Debord, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Erich Fromm and Erving Goffman. Besides the framing, we illustrate social trends and theoretical concepts using empirical examples and data throughout our exposition. At times we will point to significant historical or political events. At other times we will refer to artifacts from popular culture such as films and advertisements. Other times we will report from primary or secondary statistical analysis. If there were no empirical substance to use in this way, it might suggest that we were too far out in our speculation to be illuminating of actual social trends. Yet it is important to emphasize: these forms of evidence are used mostly for illustrative (not denotative) purposes, to support the theoretical constellation that is the heart of our methodology.

Our choice of theorists is somewhat eclectic, and several of them are incommensurate in their foundations, when paired together. Yet this is not a problem for us, since our approach is anti-foundational, or in other words it is descriptive rather than denotative. The question, then, is not whether the theories can be reconciled into a unitary ontology; but rather what is our methodology for theory selection, and by what criteria could our constellational model be assessed? Our answer begins with another of Adorno's precepts in his negative dialectics: 'the priority of the object' (Adorno 2003, 2014, 2017). Far from being a cry for the non-theoretical representation of pure, individual, empirical objects, Adorno suggests by it that the theoretical thought surrounding an object of analysis must be determined by the qualities peculiar to that object.

We would add that to claim the qualities of an object, as well as the theoretical moves that express those qualities, an act of interpretation is necessary. In this way, our theoretical model is a complex of interpretive assertions and logical relations. To assess the viability of our model, we suggest employing an evaluative approach broadly in the family of how Weber (2009) approached the issue of *Verstehen* in interpretive sociology. In other words, our interpretations, and the theoretical structures that express them, should be evaluated by a combination of logic and interpretation. If the reader can empathize with our depiction, if the reader finds what we describe to be familiar and resonant, this indicates that our illustration of the object is successful (although not exhaustive). But the critical reader should also evaluate our conceptual claims to determine if they are logically sound. In this respect, Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction is useful. With Deleuze (1994, 2004), however, we maintain that contradiction or opposition does not exhaust difference per se. There are some forms of difference that may present claims that are divergent or even conflictual, and yet which are not exactly 'contradiction'.

We suggest a distinction between four types of difference that one might encounter in a model like ours. One type is when there are exceptions to a theoretical claim. This is really just a problem of incompleteness, which every theory has. To us this indicates that the claim is not universally true. It does not indicate, however, that the claim is universally false. This in no sense invalidates the use of the claim for illustrative purposes, but it does point to the need to acknowledge aspects that extend beyond the claim. The second type of difference is when a theoretical claim is logically impossible. In this case, a claim might be logically incoherent, or incapable of expressing that aspect of the object which we position it to express. It also might be when empirical reality is so contrary to the theoretical claim that the claim ceases to be 'limited' per se and becomes overwhelmingly fictional. It can also occur if we make multiple claims that are irreconcilably divergent – e.g., mutually exclusive – and cannot meaningfully be treated in dialectical fashion. This type of difference is the sort that the principle of non-contradiction is appropriate to address. It would be a problem for our model. The third type is when two or more claims are incommensurate, but not logically incompatible. This is the issue of difference in 'kind' (Deleuze 1991). We assume this is the most common form of contradiction in our theoretical constellation, since theorists like Goffman and Foucault, for example, might be understood as theorizing in different languages when they make various descriptive claims. If theoretical frameworks occupy an *n*-dimensional space rather than a narrow, unilinear space, then several theories might describe separate dimensions of the object that do not even 'speak to one another'. This type of contradiction is not a problem for the viability of the constellation. The fourth type of difference is dialectical contradiction, where a claim involves immanent contradiction. This is also not a problem, provided the dialectical nature of the claim is addressed, and coherence is maintained.

1.2 Outline

The book begins with a brief historical overview and proceeds to run through a series of sociopsychological theoretical concepts. We introduce the concepts, assuming the reader is not already familiar, and apply them to the issue of human relations in the time of Web 2.0. In the final chapter, we relate these theoretical concepts to the political scene in particular, to suggest connections between the social trends outlined and the crisis situation of liberal democracy, with the dramatic transnational (and transcontinental) rise of authoritarian populism in the twenty-first century. We do not claim that the sociopsychological trends to be due solely to information technologies and social media, nor do we claim that the crisis of democracy and the boom or authoritarianism to be solely caused by the social psychology of the society of the selfie. We will reiterate throughout that we see these social trends as broadly preceding and extending beyond social media channels, but social media, as it has developed so far, harmonizes or dovetails with these trends in a way that reinforces or amplifies them.

Our historical exposition concerns the global spread of the material and cultural developments of capitalist society, including the recent rise of the digital and Web 2.0. In Wallerstein's concept of 'geoculture', the world-system is not just economic; the culture of modern capitalism is extended into regions when and where the global market extends. Using this framework, in Chapter 2 we focus on the place of communication technologies in the global economic and cultural changes from the Industrial Revolution to the present. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the telegraph and the printing press facilitated transnational flows of information with much greater speed and volume that at any time in recorded history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, radios, cinemas, cameras and phonographs became popular in many cities for news and entertainment. Between 1945 and the 1970s, global and domestic markets, urbanization and consumerism continued to grow. Many households started owning televisions, and entertainment media became even more central to popular culture, saturating society with advertisements and alluring images. Describing these changes, we explore Guy Debord's theory of 'the spectacle'. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the rise of information technologies and the World Wide Web dovetailed with neoliberalism and spectacular capitalism, amplifying a cultural trend already well under way: the movement away from substance and depth, towards images, surfaces and superficial appearances. We argue that in the age of social media, much interpersonal communication is mediated and fragmented through social media via likes, comments, tweets, and so on. Users construct alternate, 'spectacular' versions of themselves that circulate online. The 'selfie' is a perfect symbol for this new state of culture.

In Chapter 3, we describe how on social media, people orient around a variety of metrics in order to build and display their 'human capital', projecting their preferred electronic doubles of themselves in order to gain desired recognition from others, and in many cases to network and showcase a 'professional' identity

directly in the interests of career advancement. We discuss this in light of a theory of 'neoliberal impression management', which we introduce in reference to the ideas of Erich Fromm, Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault. Erich Fromm theorized that many people in modern capitalism have a 'marketing orientation'. In Fromm's description of capitalist society in the mid-twentieth century, people are always trying to 'sell' themselves to others on the 'personality market', as attractive, capable, and so on. Erving Goffman wrote about his theory of 'impression management'. For Goffman, people are always performing for each other their preferred identities. They do this with a variety of tools, from the words they use to the clothes they wear. In Michel Foucault's explanation, 'neoliberalism' leads people towards self-improvement for the maximization of their 'human capital' (personal assets like education, training, reputation, and so on). They are entrepreneurs of themselves, self-marketers looking to amass 'objective' indicators of their own value. In our theory of neoliberal impression management, a person forges a spectacular self through which their actions and interactions are displayed in 'public' view. In doing this, they also amass publicly viewable metrics (likes, shares, followers, etc.) that suggest an 'objective' value. This cultural development moves towards self-centredness, narcissism and attention-seeking, and away from genuine concern for others and connection with them. This feeds the potential for numbness to – if not outright acceptance of – political cruelty and injustice.

We begin Chapter 4 by summarizing ideas from George Herbert Mead. He theorizes that personal identity is formed through the reactions of others. Mead says each person internalizes the 'generalized other'. It is a combination of real reactions from actual people, yet fused together, taken for granted and generally out-of-awareness as such. It becomes something like an anonymous authority enforcing social norms and designating the individual's identity. We then extrapolate from this to social media, which we claim creates a novel space of interaction, where this relationship to the 'generalized other' is twisted. The following is a summary of the points we make: when a tweet or a Facebook 'status update' is posted, it is first directed to something like the generalized other, in the sense that it is sent to a collective, invisible audience. The person-to-person interaction comes second, out of the primary interaction of person to invisible audience. It is a novel form of communication that is delivered to everyone and no one at the same time. The experience underscores the *expression* of the speaker. In reference to Herbert Marcuse's theory of 'one-dimensionality', we make the following points: at the same time as people express themselves to a generalized, invisible audience over social media, the 'everyone' of this invisible audience is often narrowed in a very specific way – echo chamber effects. The invisible audience and echo chamber effects both reinforce a solipsistic horizon for every person, and these individual horizons come partially together under echo chamber effects, constituting a multiplicity of separate 'homophilic assemblages' characterized by normative and political alignment, one-dimensional communication, and black-and-white thinking. We call this a 'splitting public

sphere'. On the whole, rational debate is curtailed, under the reign of soundbites, memes and angry venting. The lack of exposure to reasoned disagreement makes people more susceptible to authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda.

In Chapter 5, we portray dialectically intertwined issues of alienation (in the Frommian sense of estrangement from self and others), abnormality, anxiety and authenticity. Anthony Giddens theorizes that modern society is undergoing a 'transformation of intimacy', where love and sex are freed from patriarchal traditions, and people increasingly value 'pure relationships' where authentic connection is the only motive and can be fully realized. We claim that this desire for authenticity extends beyond this in the society of the selfie, the persistent unrequited thirst for it directly clashes with the alienated status quo. 'Authenticity strain' haunts the social terrain with loneliness, anomie, and the threat of volatility and transgression of personal boundaries. Giddens, along with Ulrich Beck, additionally says that 'late modern' society tends to be fixated on risk assessment and avoidance, and Zygmunt Bauman argues that in the 'liquid modern' age many people are haunted by general, pervasive, 'derivative fear' and anxiety about the dangers of other people. At the same time as the transformations that Giddens and Bauman identify, the selfie phenomenon participates in the blurring of the boundaries between public and private space, many selfies showing people in spontaneous, private situations; yet viewable by potentially thousands of people. Many also tout the capacity of the selfie to bring a new kind of authenticity via self-expression online, and much of the pro vs. anti selfies discourse revolves around the perception of the selfie as either artificial or authentic. The desire for authenticity, and the moral sense that surrounds it, dovetail with the frustrated voyeurism of life under the spectacle in the age of Web 2.0. Fromm says that the inability to genuinely connect with other people can inspire people towards sadomasochism instead, which primes them for authoritarian social movements. And once again we turn to Foucault, to describe his theories about the designation of 'abnormal' people. Today, the fear of abnormalities of self and Other, both inner and outer – of becoming or falling victim to predatory, psychologically unhinged Others such as cyberstalkers, violent obsessives, paedophiles with fake avatars, mass shooters, etc. – has become a rampant new nightmare. It is a nightmare that fuels a common desire for greater protection from 'deviants' and outsiders through an increase of coercive force, i.e., for authoritarianism.

In Chapter 6, we finally tie together and explicate at greater length the political implications of the trends discussed in previous chapters. For Fromm, sadomasochistic desires are bred from modern alienation, and these desires can fuel authoritarian social movements. For Foucault, modern authoritarianism (and genocide) is fed by the idea that the state needs to protect the normal majority from the abnormal minority (biopolitics). Giddens says in 'late modernity' people distrust experts, long for authenticity, lose concern with morality and fixate on avoiding risk. With the rise of global social networks, there is also a lot of reaction against globalization. Facing porous national boundaries, many

people push back against multiculturalism, seeing it as a threat to their social order. We argue that all three theorists can shed important light on how the culture of the society of the selfie feeds authoritarianism and populism, and how it can provide platforms of action for social movements today. We then describe how in other, more direct ways, social media plays into authoritarian populist ends that subvert liberal democracy. We provide several examples, such as in the United States, where Russia used social media to spread disinformation in the United States during the 2016 election, stoking political polarization and anger; and where Donald Trump's continuous spreading of inflammatory claims online about voter fraud inspired an armed crowd to break into the capitol building in hopes of preventing the certification of Trump's successor Joe Biden, with some aiming to assassinate various members of Congress. We will also analyse the role of social media in the election of the far-right in Brazil in 2018, because digital devices were important in the mobilization of hatred and political affects that produced the sense of populist polarization. We suggest that when political leaders use Twitter and Facebook they too can project spectacular selves, and post messages that make them appear more authentic and connected to 'the people'. We analyse the effects of the society of the selfie and the crisis of liberal democracy in light of authoritarian movements in Germany, India, France, Netherlands and the rightist turn in Latin America in the end of the 2010s. Another topic concerning the force of authoritarianism in the society of the selfie is how to protect digital infrastructure from political surveillance and repression: we mention, for example, the cases of Myanmar (2021) and Iran (2018). At the same time, social media also offers new channels and tools for protest, activism and anti-authoritarianism. In this sense, we analyse the relationship between online activism and 'real'-world mobilization in Russia (2011–2012), Argentina (2015), Poland (2016), Hong Kong (2019), Chile (2019) and Colombia (2021). We also emphasize the transnationality of the #MeToo movement, which grew rapidly since 2017 and was facilitated by Web 2.0. Radically democratic resistance movements are also fed in this climate of crisis, and in some ways the participatory qualities of social media facilitate new forums for civic engagement and political mobilization, as well as new expectations for participation and empowerment in society. As we argue, the multitudinary street movements of the 2010s (with Occupy, but also with important moments in the streets of São Paulo, Istanbul, Madrid, Tunis and Paris) pointed to important potentials for progressive agency in the society of the selfie. The 'agitation games' of authoritarian political figures inspire their own opposition as part of their method of inspiring their own movements. Authoritarianism is a growing reality, but so is anti-authoritarianism.

CHAPTER 2

Communication Technologies and the History of the Spectacle

2.1 Introduction

The world of social media renders sociality dependent on *images* – digitized shapes, sounds, movement and colours that are embedded in the surfaces disseminated on screens. This condition is the result of a long process of socio-economic development encompassing the growing dominance of sociotechnical apparatuses over the production of human relations. The saturation of the social world with media and images is especially preeminent in the age of the internet, but this sort of condition was well known decades before. An important account of these transformations appeared in the late 1960s, when French theorist Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle*. The book was very popular among the radical left and student activists in France. Debord also produced a film about his powerful book. In the film he mixed various images – from Fidel Castro giving a speech to the fashion designer, Coco Chanel – with the reading of his book. The book is about a broad cultural development that emerged from modern capitalism: *the spectacle*. It comprises all of the media images in society taken together, but it is more than this. It has a very specific function that concerns Debord: 'The spectacle is not a collection (*ensemble*) of images, but a social relation mediated by images' (1992, 16). The

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spectacle stands between us and the real world, like a massive looking glass. People see everything *through* it, including themselves and one another.

In this chapter we will begin our exposition of the society of the selfie with a brief historical analysis of communication technologies in light of the rise of the spectacle between the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries. We interrelate the theories of Immanuel Wallerstein and Guy Debord to frame our analysis. From Wallerstein (1996, 1991), we are interested in the interrelationship of two structural processes: (1) the origins of the modern world-system, which depends on communication technologies at the same time as it depends on material structures (division of labour, commodity exchange, etc.); (2) the construction of a modern geoculture grounded in the transfers of cultural goods, including via communication technologies. We argue that these processes were the material basis of the Debordian spectacle – that is, they facilitated the mediation of social relations by images, in a process promulgated under the inertia of the valorization of capital. The world market has a world spectacle as its corollary (Debord 1992). The spectacle unifies the modern world-system in a geoculture, as the mass production of commodities sublimates world integration into/through images that circulate through the capitalist infrastructure. This is significant because the rise of the spectacle has always been a transnational affair, and it is precisely in this transnational sense that we understand the 'society' of the selfie. From this axis, we offer a constellation of problems *pari passu* with the new forms of relatedness via images: conditions of visibility, the logics of surfaces and projections of spectacular selves with digital devices in the twenty-first century.

2.2 From World Market to the Modern Geoculture

The constitution of the world market was an entangled historical process that assembled different forms of labour and asymmetrically integrated regions into transnational circuits of value, commodities and exchange. This system was organized in transnational divisions of labour between core regions (countries that profited from colonization since the sixteenth century and the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century) and peripheral areas (colonial or former colonial regions). Transnational commodity chains (Wallerstein 1996, 16–17) constructed the modern world-system as a complex that comprises dense flows of goods, people, ideas and labour.

This system was made possible due to the spread of automate, technical artifacts, which were both an effect and a condition of the structures of capital accumulation and valorization. The *couplage* man/machine was not a purely technical fact, nor a purely social relation, but rather a *sociotechnical* condition (Simondon 1989, 244–245), because technical processes were intertwined with new forms of sociality mediated by non-human mechanisms. From the 1850s

onwards, with the spread of industrial techniques and modern infrastructure for the increased velocity of the circulation of money and commodities through core and peripheral areas (railways, ports, steam engines, etc.), the integration was accelerated (Narita 2020). The modern world-system also generated a culture that extended into regions when and where the industrial techniques and global market extended. This cultural form was based on the circulatory effects provided by both material infrastructure and new means of communication. In this sense, communication technologies played a major role in the constitution of this growing *geoculture* grounded in material and cultural transfers among interconnected regions.

Between the 1850s and the 1870s, for example, the development of the telegraph counted on electromagnetic application in communications systems. With long-distance information transfers, electrical telegraphy was based on transcontinental transmission systems (Galison 2003). In this context, new spaces for communication and integration of the modern world-system were available for connecting, for example, the North Atlantic (via Western Union, 1857–1866) and submarine cables connecting Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Lisboa and another axis connecting Buenos Aires and Cádiz (Schäffner 2008). Terrestrial telegraph lines were also built with the Australian Overland Telegraph and the Indo-European Telegraph Line (Huurdeman 2003) at the same time as the colonization efforts of crossing the interior of Brazilian territory with telegraph lines (Naxara 2018). In the British Empire, the expansion of communication devices went hand in hand with colonial rule and played a major role in the incorporation of new publics into the growing geoculture of consumption and circulation of ideas (Potter 2007).

But the cultural symbol *par excellence* of nineteenth-century geoculture was the popularization of the printing press. It opened up new forms of socialization to the public in the biggest cities, be it in industrial countries like Paris, London, Chicago or New York (Thérenty 2007; Motte and Przyblyski 1999), or in peripheral areas like Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Santiago and Buenos Aires (Luca 2018; Terán 2008; Narita 2017; Silva Castro 1958). There were many impacts on the public sphere, since the press amplified the sense of cultural circulation and deterritorialization of information (Kern 2003, 34–36) among urban middle classes and even popular groups (Williams 1961; Negt and Kluge 1993). With the refunctionalization of the consumption of culture with ads, posters and sensationalism (Habermas 1962, 258–262), the market orientation of printing culture counted on the establishment of regular illustrated newspapers. Mason Jackson (1885, 278), one of the pioneers in the study of illustration in the press, called it the rise of the pictorial representation of the world. With wood-engraving techniques, the steam-powered printing press, halftone photo-processes and photo-reproduction processes, the sublimation of everyday scenes into printed images rendered socialization dependent on the mechanical reproduction and exhibition of culture.

2.3 The Spectacle of Mechanical Culture

Image-mediated socialization, which constitutes the spectacle of modern communication technologies, gained momentum with photography and, in the end of the nineteenth century, the cinema. This new sensibility in modern geoculture turned the spectacle of industrial image effects into something beyond shapes: images *appear* to the senses (Didi-Huberman 2013, 356–359), that is, they interpellate and disclose visibility available through surfaces. Visual culture in the first decades of the twentieth century, was subjected to the mechanical reproduction of sensations, combining visual effects, sound, colours and movement. The aesthetic of industrial forms of communication produced new regimes of attention and subject positions, since the individual would be affected by visual stimuli in surfaces and abrupt flows of information (Crary 2001).

Walter Benjamin (1974, 113–114), reflecting on the 'shock experience' of modernity, located the modernization of the senses at the very centre of capitalist culture and the new sociotechnical relations with mechanical images. The multiplication of sensorial stimuli in urban life, with crowds and rapid succession of scenery, illustrates a broader cultural complex grounded in new social experiences connected to mass communication outlets. Technology and mechanical images displayed many dematerialized kaleidoscopic signals to consciousness and, especially with the cinema, the human sensorium was constantly subjected to the need for adaptation (*training*) in relation to the ever-changing surfaces. The mechanical reproduction of culture can also be conceived as the first act of the era of the spectacle.

If the printing press and illustrated newspapers paved the way for the mass consumption of culture, photography and the translation of its techniques into the cinema put the pictorial representation of the world in sequential frames. The projection of mechanical images in film entailed two innovations: movement and staging (Kracauer 1960). Both features reinforced the growing appeal to observers' senses, as the modern entertainment industry took shape, with its mass production of cultural items (Horkheimer and Adorno 2009), creating new needs and popular icons for the geoculture. A sociological figure emerged from this shift: the *anonymous masses* as a target affected by communication technologies. The mechanical reproduction of culture entailed the mass-production of the person, that is, the individual as a generic being (*Gattungswesen*) (Horkheimer and Adorno 2009, 159) that could be everyone and no one. The standardization of communication technologies rendered the individual person abstract amid the levelled, generalized masses.

In the early twentieth century, radio illustrated this condition under the need for spreading audio contents (especially news and advertisements) to a mass of anonymous, diffuse, generalized individuals. Radio extended the domination of media product to everyday life through the intrusion of narration

and rhapsodic voices (from Wagner's *Parsifal*, as in the first Argentinian radio broadcasting, to the news from distant fronts during the World Wars) into the private sphere (Wolf 2010). It was a cultural force that reached a wider public during its glory days in the 1930s and 1940s, serving as an artifact to unify the nation (Hilmes 2002). The radio spread rapidly through the United States, Britain, France and Weimar Germany (Führer 1997; Douglas 2004). In peripheral countries of Latin America, the first experiences with stable radio transmissions took place in Brazil (with the Radio Sociedade do Rio de Janeiro and Radio Clube de Pernambuco between 1919 and 1923), Argentina (LOR Rádio Argentina in 1920), Mexico (XEB in 1923), Venezuela (Ayre in 1926), Peru (LIMA OAX-AM in 1925) and Colombia (HJN in 1929) (Dângelo and Sousa 2016). However, the massification of radio in the region occurred only in the 1930s under the aegis of its political uses, for example, with Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and the populist regime of Lazaro Cardenas in Mexico (Haussen 2001). With mass communication technologies, capitalist modernizing moves rearranged the public sphere and empowered the masses with a politicized culture and promises of a new protagonism (Morelock and Narita 2018b). At the same time, these technologies and their effects constituted and facilitated new forms of domination and a structural transformation of politics and culture in the twentieth century (Pavlik 1996; Hyden et al. 2002; Oswald 2009).

The great turning point in the production of contemporary mode of perception, dependent on the combination of images in movement and sound with the spread of these media outlets through broader publics, took place in the 1940s and 1950s. The television became the prototype of a sensorial revolution, since it unified image and sound with a massive industry devoted to the production of entertainment. It also promoted the personal use of technology, and the pervasive effect of images, displaying contents in surfaces, that became the medium of new forms of relatedness that traversed the globe alongside the expansion of market structures.

2.4 Era of the Television

The television is a potent metaphor for the cultural power of communication technologies in the twentieth century (Wolton 1990). The first experiments with it were in the late 1920s and 1930s in England, Germany and the United States. In the New York World's Fair of 1939, themed 'The World of Tomorrow', several companies presented televisions to the public for sale (Kovarik 2015). The spread of TV took off during *les trentes glorieuses*, that is, the 30 years from 1945 to 1975 that experienced great economic growth and the rise of a new sociotechnical milieu with the ubiquitous effect of duplication of reality (Habermas 2003, 208) into real life and images. Industrialization and markets expanded quickly, and cultures all across the world experienced rapid cultural

shifts (Hobsbawm 1994, 259–262). The process was an entanglement of technological innovation, market expansion, cultural change and urbanization.

In the years following World War II, the number of American TV stations expanded rapidly, and by the early 1950s, the television became a popular household item (Winston 1998, 95–102). In core countries, major networks like America's NBC and CBS and England's BBC broadcast for far and wide audiences. In countries on the periphery of the capitalist world-system like Brazil and Mexico, the first transmissions were only to small audiences on networks such as Brazil's TV Tupi and Mexico's XHTV-TDT, which were inspired by the massive market for television in the United States (Fox 1998). It was not until the mid-1960s that television became something people along the capitalist periphery privately owned and watched in their homes (Fox and Waisbord 2002).

Japan, which was in reconstruction after its defeat in 1945, was entering a phase of rapid economic development that included a rising high tech industry and a booming market for home televisions (Yoshimi 2005). And the cultural tensions derived from this were far from being residual: the exhibition of images for middle-classes desiring consumption, banal and of vulgar scenes, and many appeals for material success were articulated through mass media (Kim 2017).

During the Cold War, TVs and TV networks expanded their domain throughout both capitalist and socialist countries. Naturally, both sides (the USA and USSR) had a vested interest in improving their technologies faster, for purposes of national advancement in tandem with the competition between capitalism and communism for securing political allies and trading partners across the world. In this way, the space race and the arms race were two legs of the same beast. And the space race – agitated in 1957 with the success of the Soviet satellite 'Sputnik' – would connect with the spread of TV, in the sense that satellite technology became an enormous boon to the ability for televisions to broadcast distant events, and so also to connect disparate regions of the world. In 1964, the United States started this trend when the country used a satellite to broadcast the Summer Olympics from Japan. That year, 143 countries came together in the International Telecommunications Satellite Consortium (INTELSAT). The use of satellites for TV broadcasting expanded through the 1970s, which also entailed the expansion of international broadcasting and coordination (Kovarik 2015).

Television was rapidly becoming a central beacon of mass culture, and as such it could and did serve political functions that both supported the growing capitalist geoculture *and* fuelled popular protest within core countries. The expansion of television networks was a vital component for spreading ways of life, propaganda and even psychological warfare (Schwoch 2002). Yet the American Civil Rights movement, for example, gained many more sympathizers due to protests acquiring televised media coverage. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I have a

dream' speech at the Washington, DC Lincoln Memorial in front of 250,000 spectators in the 1963 March on Washington and the brutalizing of Civil Rights protestors by Alabama police in 1965 made lasting popular impressions.

In socialist countries, TV broadcasting also expanded vigorously. The political potency of television became evident, for example, when the screens reached and inflamed the audience in the streets during the Prague Spring (1968) – after the Soviet repression, even the Communist Party stimulated soap operas (with the dramatic serials of Jaroslav Dietl) in order to communicate with the public and negotiate the normalization of everyday life under late communism (Bren 2010). Televisual entertainment became a force for globalizing culture through the spectacle of mechanical images. The circulation of imported entertainment from Western countries, comprising cartoons, films and a variety of commercially produced programs, was significant in Hungary, Poland and especially in the former Yugoslavia (due to the relatively independent geopolitical situation of the country in relation to the Soviet bloc) (Mihelj 2012). In the late 1980s, Brazilian telenovelas and their eye-catching social realism became blockbusters in Poland and the Soviet Union (Mattelart and Mattelart 1990).

It was a turning point in the scope and form of communication. Communication technologies were important elements in the uneven integration of different regions (be it capitalist countries or planned economies of the 'actually existing socialism') into the modern world-system. The rise of mass communication devices in industrial core countries and the spread of technologies to peripheral areas created interdependent nodes of a vast network for the production and circulation of images. In this context of broadening cultural circulation, for example, Carmen Miranda could sell worldwide the Brazilian exoticism in the Jimmy Durante Show in the 1950s, when Nikita Kruschev also sold the agricultural and industrial improvements of Soviet politics on Face the Nation (CBS).

Sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (1996, 124–125) called this process the basis of 'capitalist civilization'. The global expansion of markets was accompanied by an expanding cultural logic where people treated new technologies as if they carried with them the keys to the good life. The enchantment of the new and the promises of unlimited abundance went hand in hand with the touting of well-being and quality of life as major boons of capitalist civilization. If the consumer society of the twentieth century 'is to be sure a function of science and gadgetry', as Wallerstein states, the rapid expansion of radios and televisions across the globe played an important role in spreading consumerism and reverence for new technologies.

In consumer-oriented capitalism, desires are stoked and through taking part, people in all parts of the world become entranced, and buy in. In leisure, consumption, entertainment and the dictates of advertising and self-exhibition, the compulsion to buy hooks people in a variety of forms. New 'must-have' objects arise and turn obsolete, arise and turn obsolete, in a perpetual cycle with

increasing speed. The consumerist geoculture has no boundaries: it is pervasive and tireless, spouting new branches and bringing new territories under its spell. It finds a way into everywhere and everything. The world becomes united in a global industrial order, and intrinsic to this order is the culture and logic of the commodity. It is facilitated by new powers of media – first print media, then radio, then TV. The uneven integration of different regions – Wallerstein's 'capitalist world-system' – would not have been possible just because of physical connections (transoceanic cables, telegraphic lines, etc.). The critical factor was the hypnotic spell of images and their commodities, a spell that was already thriving but that really colonized the globe when TVs colonized the household.

It is not that the images people become so enthralled by misrepresent the reality of the products they consume. It is also not the case that the images accurately represent the value. The images *become* a big part of the value of the products, both in terms of production and consumption. Images must be produced, but it is in the name of the product, not of the image itself, that they are produced. The value invested in the production of the image has its use-value in the spectacular value it adds to the product, in the way it builds connotations for the product in the cultural lexicon, thereby calculated to increase consumer demand. People learn to desire the product not only because of the longed-for visceral, embodied experience of consuming the image, but also because of the spectacular value delivered from the commodity to the consumer through osmosis. The self that consumes items of social value becomes a more socially valuable self. Affected by the spread of mechanical images and communication devices, people buy and assimilate impressions and appearances by buying commodities. In other words, people deal with a reality mediated and transformed by the spectacle.

2.5 Spectacle and Commodity Fetishism

Debord never says communication technologies *caused* the spectacle, but clearly, they were indispensable in facilitating it. The spectacle, thus, is a social relation derived from the sociotechnical development of capitalism: a social structure and a historical moment in which social relations became mediated by images (Debord 1992, 16). The TV is only one aspect of a deep historical movement well underway since the nineteenth century, where vastly different groups of people were united by their growing exposure to images and their exhibition *en masse* – be it via the printing press, the radio, the cinema or the TV – that often carried with them flashy advertisements and encouragement to acquire and consume this or that commodity. Society was subsumed and unified under the domain of the spectacle.

By 'spectacle' he means not only something in public that people gawk at. It is not just about whether a media image excites people. The spectacle has a central place in the structure of society, and it dehumanizes. The most obvious reason

for this dehumanization is that when people's minds are saturated with media images, their perspectives on themselves and one another are at least partly coloured by media images, along with the internal labyrinth of desire and aversion that goes with them. Another reason for the dehumanization is that people encounter the commodities they buy separately from the people who produced them. This occlusion of social relations is connected to Debord's account of alienation (Bunyard 2018), since commodities appear as autonomous forces based on the growing divorce between human power and the direct control on the production. According to Debord (1992), the sublimation of this process in images is completed (*achevé*) when the individual deals with an alien world in which reified social relations represents the complete separation of the subject from the activities society takes (*dérober*) from him. This tension between subject and an alien objectivity is a concrete production (*fabrication concrète*) of alienation of life as a whole: the externality (*exteriorité*) of the spectacle puts sociocultural pressures on human relatedness to produce needs for an alienated consumption according to an alienated production.

This is where the spectacle *mediates* between producer and consumer. The spectacle promises cultural unification – since different people can have standardized experiences, using the same imagistic references and surfaces – but it delivers social separation (Faucher 2018). One can think about this in two ways. First, socialization is largely dependent on the dynamics of images (embedded in information, advertisements, etc.), which are the very sign of separation (*détachement*) between life itself (*vécu*) and its representation (Debord 1992, 15). Second, if the spectacle crystalizes the structural separation between producers and products (28), commodities do not belong to workers, but become foreign (*étrangers*) to them and multiplicate needs in a loop, that is, they appear (*image*) and circulate as premises of the modern abundance of dispossession (31). The structural separation implicit behind the images feeds consumption *à distance*, which is to say, the new desire economy is necessarily sublimated in the medium and its potency of multiplication of exhibitions *ad infinitum*.

Most of the time, people do not meet the others who produce the items they consume. And most of the time, people do not think about the producers of their purchased commodities. In everyday life, on supermarket shelves and in department stores, shoppers find commodities packaged and presented, beckoning to them. There may be a person operating a cash register, but that person bears no personal relationship to the various items the shopper selects for purchasing. This is the waking life of consumer society: production is invisible. The individual encounters media images and commodities – not the workers, the people who built the commodities and images. The consumer experiences the finished product, not the process or people behind it.

When a person consumes images (watching Coke commercials), just like when they consume commodities (drinking Coke in real life), they are not just relating to objects (commercials and Cokes). They are also relating to all of the work and all of the people involved in the work that went into making them. Yet

the typical consumer tends to just think about the object itself. Anselm Jappe (1998, 51) calls it the disappearance of the subject – people act as if the social world were ruled by objects and images, as if objects and images had an autonomous life. This is the problem of *commodity fetishism*, an important concept for Debord and in Marxist social theory in general, first introduced in volume 1 of Marx's *Capital* (1962 [1867], 85). In Debord's words,

> It is the principle of the fetishism of the commodity – the domination of society by 'supersensible [*suprasensibles*] as well as sensuous [*sensible*] things' – that attains its ultimate fulfillment [*s'accomplit*] in the spectacle, in which the real world is replaced by a selection of images that exist above it and at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the sensible *par excellence*. (Debord 1992, 36)

As mediation between labour and consumers, embedded in the apparent autonomy of commodities, the spectacle is an 'abstract general equivalent' that 'is money one can only look at, because in it all use has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation'. The aesthetic features of exhibition and the quantitative jump of production of images lead to a new sensory discipline grounded in value production, since 'the commodity is this effective [*effectivement réelle*] illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression' (44). Images and surfaces, like commodities, are the primeval nuclei of contemporary capitalist socialization dependent on the ways people see and are seen by the diffuse audience. The visibility implies the need for self-valorization and inter-subjective recognition grounded in esteem, solidarity or moral complaisance (Honneth 2003), but it also deals with the imagistic power of surfaces and the inhuman amount of information in communication technologies. The connection of moral components with the new sociotechnical milieu produces a peculiar kind of spectacle that renders the individual prone to watch and to sell their own self according to the new visibility of media devices.

2.6 The New Visibility

In a famous study, Marshall McLuhan (1994) pointed out that TV opened up a new universe of perception. Through TV, a rhapsody of shows and ads started making the world accessible and knowable via unprecedented barrages of images, sounds, colours, and so on. The myth about the 'global village', with spaces increasingly more interconnected via the spectacle, is the cultural icon of the promises of the modern geoculture. It made the world more accessible and knowable, but only through surface appearances – the particular sequences of image and sound presented on TV. And of course, it was a pleasurable experience. The TV image became a key item for consumption; be it the success of John F. Kennedy's self-presentation in the 1960 presidential campaign in the

United States, the general appeal of the troubles of the American marines in Vietnam in the late 1960s, Castro's nationalization of Cuban television in order to project images of radical political transformation (Rivero 2015) or the mass celebration (in coloured images) of the 1970 soccer championship in Brazil and the nationalist propaganda of the military dictatorship (then in its apex). Instead of being there inside the events of our lives, people became spectators of events, onlookers of images of a world on display for private enjoyment. But enjoyment was only the tip of the iceberg.

The world of the spectacle is the constant stimulation of the senses. Debord speaks of *objets sensibles*, in French: literally, objects whose first appeal lies in our sensory experience. Consider how hedonism and consumerism facilitate one another so well. All of the senses are enlisted in this spectacular way of life, but one stands out even more than the others, and that is sight. How things look matters a great deal to us, and often sight is the first sense involved in noticing – never mind evaluating – an object. In the society of the spectacle, the pleasure of seeing is exploited most out of all of the senses. This is true first of all by advertisers, shop owners, and really anyone with commodities to sell. Consider the phenomenon of 'window-shopping', for example – people walk past the windows of shops, stoking their desires for the items that are placed in the shop windows in order to grab the attention of people walking by, or the advertisements on billboards towering over highways. It is also true in human relationships, where physical appearance has risen to a paramount consideration for social and self-esteem for so many people.

People are bombarded with messages about this or that item that they should buy, and about how to think about goods and people that appear in surfaces. This 'how to think' aspect is almost always with social connotations attached such as being sexy, attractive, powerful, fun, popular, in fashion, and so on. The individual is surrounded by stores and advertisements prodding them to buy things, suggestions abounding that the commodities will not only be satisfying but that they will also make the consumer give off good impressions to other people. In this sense, people want one another to know about the things they buy, because what people consume defines them to such a great extent. It gives voice to common people and makes demands (political issues, lifestyles, etc.) visible. At the same time, while the world of buying and selling and the commodities involved are thrust into human awareness constantly, individuals become more concerned with how they are coming across to others in the most basic of ways, and in how they can use the things they buy to manage others' impressions of them.

The new visibility of the spectacle carries an important feature, especially with media coverage of the big stories: ritualized emotional intensity (Compton 2004, 83–84). Be it with the Gulf War in the United States or the daily news on the criminal investigations led by the Federal Police of Brazil that targeted mainly (between 2014 and 2017) the former leftist government of the Worker's Party, attention-grabbing footage is featured and repeated, diffusing dichotomies

(e.g., good/evil) with sensationalist appeal. In both cases, the novelty is not destruction nor political corruption, but rather the visibility gained by these issues due to the spectacle.

The world of experience is fixated on the 'visible' by a flood of advertising and exhibition, surface appearances and countless icons. The tease of these images is both ecstatic and alienating. People are steeped in them to the point of overstimulation, stoking an insatiable coveting: the desire to acquire, to experience the full thing, 'the real thing', and to participate in all of the glory portrayed in the image. As the old Faith No More song goes: 'You want it all but you can't have it. It's in your face but you can't grab it'. The coveting of images and their objects carries a yearning – an attempted command, even – for the object to disclose itself, to become fully 'visible', no longer alien. And as a *modus operandi* of the society of the spectacle, this extends beyond commodities; it invades how people relate to one another as well as to themselves. With the rise of social media in the 1990s, this would only deepen.

With the home computer, the internet and social media, the spectacle took on new dimensions. Instead of a top-down 'culture industry' like Adorno and Horkheimer (2009) once described, the online spectacle was much more decentralized, and even participatory and democratic in some ways. In Debord's (1990) terms, it became 'diffuse' and integrated through the forces of capitalist globalization. In this diffusion and democratization, many people began to take part in generating the images that they then collectively took for reality, or at least wanted reality to be. But now it was no longer just images and movie stars and cans of Coke. Now everyone could take part in the spectacle, not just as spectator, *but as producer and as image*. The alienation of a reality mediated by images now went beyond the realm of consumption, and into the realm of social life in a more thorough way than even before.

2.7 Rise of the Digital

In the 1980s and 1990s, a deep economic and cultural shift took place. The world witnessed the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, collapse of socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the political reorientation of China ('one country, two systems', according to the *motto* of Deng Xiaoping), democratization in Latin America, pioneering neoliberal experiments of the 'Chicago boys' in the Chilean military dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet, and neoliberalism spreading from the USA and the UK. With the alleged end of communism, many people sensed that capitalist liberal democracy was the only workable kind of modern society, and that the whole world was destined to join this reality. In these terms, Francis Fukuyama (1992) famously proclaimed civilization was reaching 'the end of history' in light of the alleged stability of liberal democracy over the political conflicts of the twentieth

century. The widespread assumption was that, according to the Thatcherian *motto*, 'there is no alternative'.

Just as the first computers were built for military purposes during World War II, the first computer networks were invented for military purposes during the Cold War. The Advanced Research Projects Agency of the United States Department of Defense forged the beginnings of the internet in a network of computer systems between four universities. They set up the network in 1969 and gave it the apt but unmemorable name 'ARPANET'. In 1972, email was invented.

Basically, there were networked computer systems in several different countries, and while everyone wanted to be able to link them, they were all different, and so it was hard to do that. In 1973, a computer scientist at Stanford named Vincent Cerf and a program manager at ARPA named Robert Kahn came up with something called 'packet switching', which basically solved the problem. Cerf and Kahn's invention of the transmission control protocol (TCP) and the Internal Protocol (IP) address became a mainstay of internet infrastructure and remains so to this day. Building from Cerf and Kahn's TCP/IP, Bob Metcalf, one of the computer scientists involved in the implementation of ARPANET, also invented Ethernet in 1973, patented in 1975. This allowed the integration of personal computers – at this point the only viable personal computer model was the Xerox Alto – into the developing network of networks (Misa 2004; Kovarik 2015).

During the 1980s, first with the IBM PC and then with the Apple IIe, the personal computer took off, and at the same time, the National Science Foundation (NSF) was working on the 'civilianization' of the internet – its increased accessibility and use, in order to better coordinate and propel forward scientific research. In 1981, the NSF funded the establishment of the Computer Science Network (CSNET). By 1986, the NSF had set up several supercomputer centres along with NSFNET, which connected the supercomputers between centres. In 1990, ARPANET closed down, leaving NSFNET to run the internet. This means that starting in 1990 the internet was entirely a noncommercial, government enterprise (Misa 2011; National Science Foundation 2003).

Also, in 1990, the World Wide Web was invented, and it was through this that digital communications really exploded into everyday life. Communication technologies played an important role in exposing people to events happening all over the world, even more than TV already did. Although the manipulation of information extends back to the early modern period, with the collection and arrangement of textual excerpts in human memory, manuscripts, print and libraries (Yates 1966; Blair 2010), today humans deal with active non-human devices like data mining, wikis, search functions, downloads and PDFs. Information management has become much faster and diversified and the practices of sorting, selecting, searching, storing and summarizing were dematerialized from physical presence. They also contributed to a growing overload of

information, which some suggest could inhibit people's capacity for critical reflection (Carr 2020). Lived historical experiences became derealized by media into 'happenings' and the amount of data surrounding the ubiquitous interactions favoured by the digital and the immanent codes and media languages veered towards cultural fragmentation (Hassan 1987). At times it was thickets of conflicting information that were easy to get lost in. People became accustomed to frequent, rapid, fleeting and provocative images (Wajcman 2015). But the onslaught of information also contributed to a sort of historical shortsightedness. On the one hand, the past continued to lose its authority with the decline of traditional values. On the other hand, the future lost its authority, as progressive hopes for a future utopian society lost credibility with the apparent 'end of communism'. No longer looking to the past or the future, a kind of cultural presentism (in other words, a fixation on and to present conditions and values) developed and flourished (Hartog 2003, 156–157).

The growing presentification of contemporary society, with ephemeral exhibitions and glances syncopated under sequences of images, turns every fact into an event susceptible to the spectatorship of a generalized, global audience. The disclosure of the world fragments imagistic appearances according to the publicity of time and the expropriation of life following the rhythm of commodities. Individual behaviour itself becomes prone to production even in moments of leisure, especially after the massification of the TV and the popularization of the internet, when the audience only exists to the extent that it is a corollary of the productive activity of images. The historical time of the spectacle is the time of the 'estranged present' (Debord 1992, 154–158) since the pervasive effect of technical images and surfaces delivers the internal separation of commodity producers' societies. The 'becoming-commodity [*devenir-marchandise*] of the world' (61), with the rise of digital images and digital surfaces, makes much of the digitally mediated social relations prone to forms of economic transaction and self-marketing, for example, by trading in representative images of life (Faucher 2018).

Debord says that the spectacle makes the world of commodities 'visible' (*fait voir*). Images carry not only their immediate, objective features for their representation into consciousness, but also a logic of exhibition grounded in a model of social satisfaction according to the needs of the society of consumption. Russell (2019) describes the spectacle as a 'phenomenological terrain of value'. With mechanical images, the self-movement of appearance-forms (advertisements, displays, etc.) in surfaces makes visible the commodification of society. If the mass diffusion of television between the 1950s and the 1970s was a turning point in the constitution of the spectacle, the pervasive effects of the digital and its personal uses in computers and smartphones provided the annexation of the entire individual life. For instance, apps (like corporate groups in WhatsApp) and social media like WorkPlace, an enterprise connectivity platform, subject individual productivity to the discipline of being always available and logged-in (Huws 2016). It is a 24/7 society with full availability of the individual

for production since no moment or place can exist in which one cannot shop or consume via digital surfaces and images (Crary 2013).

By the late 1990s, the internet was abundantly feeding two different, incongruous social trends. On the one hand, the web was becoming something of a new, bottom-up public sphere, harbouring new spaces for collaboration and instantaneous communication not only for research as the NSF had envisioned, but in all kinds of public matters as well, including social protests and political debates, via mailing lists, online news, video streaming media, social protests, online discussion, and so on (Lovink 2009). On the other hand, the web had gone for-profit, and online culture favoured alienated communication, exhibitionism, competition, quantification of social relations, and the erosion of both historical awareness and reasoned critical reflection. These two faces of informatization are the basis of what Hardt and Negri (2000) refer to as 'Empire', that is, the political form of global capitalism connected to the rise of digital networks. The spectacle was grounded in a new transnational social formation with no single centre of control. All these broad trends have profound political ramifications, and the way they continue to play out just might be a – if not the – deciding factor in whether democracy has a future on the world stage.

The online world brought the modern geoculture to a new level, with the creation of a *virtual* global space grounded in instantaneous interactions and the absolute dematerialization of goods and cultural consumption, that is, processes that were not dependent on physical supports and platforms anymore. Basically, we are dealing with the concretization of digital objects (Hui 2016). Data objects formalized by metadata and structured according to logical statements and codes embedded in computer programming and codes for web-platform development like HTML, XML, etc. Especially in the World Wide Web, the semantic web has constructed interobjective relations based on personal parameters and algorithms that capture sociality in selfies, individual consumption, likes and shares. Life itself was objectified in data and its new visibility marks the era of surfaces.

2.8 Surfaces: Without Depth and Without Trajectory

With the rise of the digital era, communication technologies played a major role in defining how people experienced and thought about the present. Spurred on by internet advertisers' attention-grabbing marketing techniques, the online spectacle comprised an inhuman amount of information demanding the constant availability and attention of users (Garcia Canclini 2018). The expansion of the domestic use of TV and of multichannel television providers among middle classes accelerated the diffusion of information and colonized most homes – especially in urban areas – with an endless cascade of cartoons, films, news and ads. With cell phone notifications of emails and social media happenings, when it is easier to take care of bills and other such necessities by

going online, and with the compulsive desire to check email again or to see if people have liked one's latest post of a cat meme, the internet is practically a vortex that has made the spectacle much more ubiquitous than in Debord's time (Frayssé 2017).

In the empire of the TV and the boom of personal use of computers, humanity entered an era of surfaces. Cultural theorist Vilém Flusser (2002) was concerned with how being exposed to lots of 'surfaces' (lots of images in film, television, and so on) changes the way people think. This transformation means people are disciplined not to deal with things, but with images instead. There is a much more fundamental separation between viewer and the object represented by the image. John Wayne's gun cannot be touched. The can of Coke in the advertisement cannot be drank. General levels might be adjusted, such as of lighting, colouring and sound; and the viewer has the option to change the channel and watch something else or just get up and take a walk instead. But viewers cannot physically interact with the images, or in Flusser's language, 'surfaces'. They can only witness them. And to Flusser, this witnessing of surfaces – in the terms we used earlier this means consuming images – is itself a very real, full activity, just nothing more than what it is: observing surfaces.

An important part of Debord's theory of the spectacle is the alienation that media saturation brings. Fixated on images, and understanding and experiencing the world through them, people are split off from any reality beyond images. Flusser's ideas make an integral compliment to Debord's for our account of how the spectacle impacts sociality due to a narrowing effect on deliberative discourse and moral sensibility, which we will discuss at length in Chapter 4. Flusser is not concerned with the world beyond the surface in Debord's sense of alienation, although he does not explicitly argue against theories of alienation either. Instead, he concerns himself with how contemporary society immerses us in a kaleidoscope of images. And these 'surfaces' are not only shallow – in the sense that they are only images, only surfaces with no depths – rather they are also out of sequence. This does not mean they are in the wrong order; they have no intrinsic order. As opposed to a 'line' of text on a page such as this one, which the reader follows as it starts in one place and ends somewhere else, a 'surface' is instantaneous. It is the cultural sign that inflates the presentist condition of the digital era. Linear time drops out of the picture. For Flusser, surfaces are without depth, and without trajectory.

Wim Wenders' *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (1989) marks the early days of the attraction of the digital spectacle with a useful reflection on the new status of images and surfaces: we are creating an image of ourselves and attempt to resemble the image despite the dissonance between the image we have projected and ourselves. With painting, the original was unique and each copy was a copy. Photography and film are more complicated: the original was a negative and each copy was the original. Now, with digital images, there is no more negative, because the very notion of original is obsolete. Everything is copy and, without the need of physical support, can be diffused without trajectory.

2.9 The Spectacular Self

The audiovisual revolution was grounded in the one-way dispersion of information: from the production company and transmission centre to the masses. The computer, on the other hand, allowed for much more individual autonomy. Users could copy, edit and rearrange information according to their own wants and needs. This laid the groundwork for the individual – as opposed to the company – to become a significant new productive unit in society. When the World Wide Web spread in the early 1990s, the individual started to become a new productive unit of media culture. In other words, the spectacle began a process of decentralization and democratization. Now the production of culture became a participatory affair (at least in principle) mediated by surfaces.

Social media extended this in a very specific way: a good part of social life went digital. Social media is used so much today that it is no longer reasonable to claim that it is only a digital representation of our own persons and our relationships. It is more accurate to say that most of our relationships are partly online, some of them entirely. People keep in regular contact by liking and commenting on one another's status updates, tweets and posts. Instead of meeting face-to-face, they simply open a chat window.

In these digitally mediated, alienated forms of interaction, people sacrifice some things and gain some others. Obviously, they do it because they want to, at least on some level. Users gain the capacity to make new friends they would probably have never met before and keep in touch regularly with people all over the world, without waiting for the international postal service or paying long-distance phone charges. At the same time, some communication with friends and family is now relegated to these online forums – one does not have to call or meet someone in order to talk with them. Clearly, the impact is both connecting *and* alienating. Users gain frequency of interaction and wideness of social networks, and yet the gained interactions come with a loss of the particular sort of spontaneity and intimacy that face-to-face social interactions involve.

The loss of spontaneity and intimacy also means a loss of real-time pressure and risk. This was particularly true in the early 1990s, before the days of social media platforms Friendster and Myspace. Socializing online originally took place through chat rooms and private messages, with no associated avatar other than the 'screen name' one gave oneself. On the one hand, this made it possible for a person to easily project an entirely bogus identity, and this reality raised public concerns about sexual predators lurking in chat rooms and adopting fake personas. On the other hand, this meant that people could explore various genuine aspects of themselves through expressing themselves in a multiplicity of screen names and identities (Turkle 1995). With the invention of Windows, it became possible to participate in multiple identities simultaneously in real time (Turkle 1999). Yet over the past two decades, this opportunity for freedom and multiplicity in online identity has narrowed, and at the same time the internet has garnered a dramatically expanded user base as well as an increasing

presence in the lives of users. Avatars on Friendster, Myspace, Twitter, Facebook, and so on ask for profile descriptions and photos, and in such a situation, the social media profile explicitly ties the user account to a unified, embodied, *organic self* with a 'real' face and a 'real' name. It is still possible to completely fabricate identities in user accounts for purposes of trickery or predation. It is more complicated, however, to casually express oneself through a multiplicity of online identities. The trend moved more towards curating one's general online presence to project a coherent, desired online identity (Van Dijck 2013; Marwick 2013a, 2013b) that was still anchored, more or less authentically, in the attributes and identity of the flesh and blood user (Wee and Brooks 2010; Banet-Weiser 2012). This marriage of curation and authenticity is contradictory, and it reflects the one/many characteristics of the self that is split between the spectacular and the organic on the one hand, and on the other hand is at least ostensibly a coherent reconciliation of the spectacular and the organic.

If someone's avatar on Twitter shows them at their most fit, in their best clothes, at the best camera angle and with perfect hair, then whenever they tweet, it is as if that image of them generates the tweet. Their online social identity is wed to that ideal image. And yet just as the spectacle is in one sense alienated and, in another sense, real (unto itself and in its establishment of representation as reality), the spectacular self and the organic self are in a dialectical relationship, each one informing and partially inhabiting the other. Along with the injunction to be 'authentic', i.e., to fashion one's online identity in good faith as a reflection of the organic self, comes the injunction to measure up, i.e., to fashion one's organic self in good faith as a reflection of one's online identity. Turkle (2017, 185) describes it well: 'Social media ask us to represent ourselves in simplified ways. And then, faced with an audience, we feel pressure to conform to these simplifications'.

The spectacular self is both an alienated, digital rendition of the organic self, and a logical extension of neoliberal rationality. As we will see in Chapter 3, neoliberalism is much more than a set of economic policies, promoting privatization, deregulation, and so on. It involves a kind of broad colonization of governments, cultures and personalities by the ways of the market. Despite all the talk about being 'free to choose' (Friedman and Friedman 1980), neoliberalism involves a transformation of state power rather than its dissolution: increasingly, the government is run by and for the market, as well as according to its rationality of calculation, self-interest and maximization. And people increasingly run their own lives this way too, holding individual responsibility, productivity and self-valorization as central values. *People act like they are their own enterprises, as if they are entrepreneurs of themselves*. As Tom Peters (1997) put it,

> Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business

> today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You. It's that simple – and that hard. And that inescapable.

Neoliberalism and the digital era emerged together within a broad process of social, cultural and economic transformation. The network infrastructure was the condition and the product of the spread of global capitalism. Neoliberalism and the digital shaped one another in integral ways. The neoliberal dream was more or less the marketization of the world, and information technologies provided the communications infrastructure to make the dream easier to approach. Digital communications constituted a new lucrative frontier for Wall Street traders, while the stock market became exponentially more fast-paced and completely dependent on the transfer of data within digital networks. The financial sector exploded when it went digital. Multinational corporations were given a tremendous boost in efficiency as well, feeding a deterritorialization of the market wherein very powerful businesses were able to constitute themselves above and beyond national borders and laws.

The intertwined issues of alienation – estrangement from self and other on the one hand and sociality mediated by images and surfaces on the other hand – were already well underway decades before the personal computer became commonplace. The spectacle was already in full force during the middle of the twentieth century. The digital era just helped it spread in new directions, namely into the self.

2.10 Prosumers, Exhibition and Surveillance

The combination of individual use of digital technologies and network infrastructures made exhibition the *motto* of the society of the spectacle. This encounter produced the cultural contours of our times. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1999) call it 'interactive spectacle'. The passive spectator of the TV era became passive and active at the same time: as spectator of surfaces *and* producer of digital content (photos, texts, files, data, etc.). The wide availability of digital devices exposed every nook, cranny and crevice of social life into a potential object of exhibition – even ordinary everyday activities like cooking and cleaning. The audience became active producers of content while still remaining consumers (Faucher 2018) of images, commodities, affects and life itself.

The online spectacle runs on the activity of 'prosumers'. Users produce and consume via chat rooms, instant messages, blogs, vlogs, flogs, sex on webcams and violence (such as police brutality and even mass shootings) caught on smartphones. Producing the spectacle from each ordinary activity, life itself becomes a potential object of online exhibition (Vattimo 1992) and consumption. The flipside of this intensive exhibitionism and spectatorship is that more of life is under surveillance (Andrejevic 2004). Private life is made public in a

vast process extending from the economy of big data (consider the scandals of Cambridge Analytic and Facebook) and the capture of our faces wherever they appear – e.g., city streets, airports, soccer stadiums, Facebook profiles, etc. (Zuboff 2018) – to the disclosure of intimate areas of life with the spectacular spread of new ethics of the personal, reaching sexual orientation, gender identity and family.

Popular reality TV shows of the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as Big Brother, unveil this development towards a new form of the spectacle. The social dynamics in the houses are not labour in the traditional sense, but they clearly generate value, since people watch them eagerly and advertisers pay exorbitant amounts to have their commercials interjected at regular intervals into the stream of video. It is a kind of mass representation of people working on themselves: when some people are confined in a house where they are subjected to constant surveillance through many cameras and microphones, their experiences that are usually private are now revealed to a public audience. Intimate details of life that a person normally only witnesses with family or hear about from their closest friends are revealed to complete strangers and flow through an anonymous mass; all of the affections and experiences of life itself: love, friendship, cooperation, hatred, envy, authenticity, desire and so on. Back in 'real life', people participate in comparable dynamics. With the reputation-building productivity of online performance (Hearn 2010), individuals market themselves not only to sell traditional commodities, but also to participate in an economy of strategic exhibition that has powerful 'real world' ramifications in terms of career goals, social esteem and life chances.

Reality TV is a fascinating artifact of the first days of the society of the selfie. The participants are subjected to virtual interaction with an invisible audience (e.g., 'we', the viewers). This is a new valuation of unexceptional human experience. A kind of 'vicarious experience' (Brooks 2005), it exhibits how we perform different roles and the invisible audience can react as if they were living the lives of others. Often the drama surrounds the contrast between individual conduct and collective interest, and the 'schizoid tensions' (Terranova 2004) participants undergo in an economy of social punishments and rewards, revolving around how well they can sell their personalities and flaunt their personal skills. Moral lines are drawn, dividing winners from losers, hard workers from slackers, and so on. The reality TV phenomenon speaks to the schizophrenic longings and fears of an alienated society longing for intimacy but afraid of other people, turning to voyeurism in lieu of satisfying social connections. There is a lot to be said about this twisted dynamic, and reality TV is just the tip of the iceberg. But before we get to this, we need to dig deep into the texture of alienation in social media culture. It almost goes without saying that the promotion of individualism goes hand in hand with the suffering of estrangement from others. The world of social media that emerged in the early 2000s helped this partnership – neoliberalism and estrangement – stretch to new extremes.

2.11 Conclusion

The construction of the spectacle from the 1850s onwards was the focus of this chapter. Modern culture is inconceivable without sociotechnical relations that, via communication structures, have constituted a dense transnational flux of information. It has unified social experiences according to the diffusion of cultural practices in a geoculture structured by the expansion of the world market. From the popularization of the printing press to the age of cinema, television and the internet, the spectacle has sublimated human relatedness into images and favoured new ways of production and reproduction of culture, as well as new forms of consumption and alienation. The popularization of digital devices and digital networks was intertwined with personalization of contents and personal visibility on surfaces, turning every individual into a productive unit of the spectacle. The society of the selfie, thus, emerged from the articulation of two processes: the strong emphasis on individuation within the sociotechnical complex built upon digital networks and a new cultural momentum driven by market economy of the neoliberal order.

As we noted in the introduction, the 'society of the selfie' should be understood as the coming together of the culture of spectacular consumer capitalism with amplifications and dovetails of information technologies in general and social media platforms in particular. It comprises a constellation of tendencies that are unbounded by geography. There is no fixed entity such that one could point to the 'society of the selfie' existing 'here' and ending 'there'. It extends, at least potentially, to all locations globally, and to all persons capable of socialization into cultural norms and practices, especially those who have access and ability to use information technologies. The society of the selfie is broadly open to all, and does not distinguish based on race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, age, neurotypicality, etc. This being said, the society of the selfie is not a hegemon of sameness either. Internet access, ability and interest does vary by location and population demographic, as do the cultures with which the society of the selfie must somehow integrate in order to spread. And yet it does spread its influence wherever it extends, which is quite extensive and the process has been very rapid. Internet use has skyrocketed in the early twenty-first century across the globe, and for people across differences in race, gender and class.

To express the spreading ubiquity of the society of the selfie, we offer the following statistics to testify to the global reach of information technologies and to the increasing prominence of their use across demographic categories. In 2008, 11.2% of white and 5.8% of nonwhite Latin Americans reported using the internet daily. By 2019, these proportions had risen to 55.3% of white and 45.3% of nonwhites using Facebook daily. For Latin American men, the rise from daily internet use in 2008 to daily Facebook use in 2019 rose from 11.4% to 53.5%; for women: 8.3% to 50%. For people making more than the mode income bracket, the change was from 14.7% to 56.4%, while for those under or

equal to the mode, the change was from 3.5% to 40.3%. In the United States, dramatic increases also occurred between 2000 and 2018. Hours of use per week among whites rose from 9 to 20.5, and for nonwhites the change was from 10.1 to 23.8. For men, hours per week rose from 9.9 to 21.6, and for women it rose from 8.6 to 21.2. Across all subjective class categories, average hours per week rose; from 7.6 to 19.6 for the lower class, 8.5 to 20 for the working class, 9.6 to 22.6 for the middle class and 10.3 to 28.6 for the upper class. And again, similar shifts happened in Europe between 2002 and 2018. Those of the ethnic majority who reported using the internet daily rose from 14% to 65.1%, and for those in ethnic minorities, daily use rose from 18.2% to 72.3%. Those in the ethnic majority reported spending an average of 233 minutes online daily, while those in ethnic minorities reported being online an average of 203 minutes. For European men, the change was from 18% using the internet daily to 67.5%, while for women the change was from 10.6% to 63.6%. Across Latin America, the United States and Europe, there are inequalities of use between various demographic divisions, and many of these inequalities are statistically significant, especially those pertaining to income and class. At the same time, people in all of the surveyed race, gender and class categories exhibit dramatic increases such that by now, very substantial proportions of all of these groups are using the internet daily.[1]

Today, with the popularization of laptops and smartphones, the spectacle becomes exponentially more diffuse, since anyone can broadcast themselves at any time and place – and the visibility and attention constitute new forms of social capital and competition (Fuchs 2016). The quantity and quality of images have changed (Peraica 2017): be it for intimate souvenirs, help requests, self-assertion or advertising personal skills and achievements, the selfie is more than a way of representing ourselves on the internet. It is also a fascinating distillation of social reality in the age of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The rampant phenomenon of the selfie is symptomatic and symbolic of a cultural emphasis on self-affirmation, in an era where public display is a key to success. And this is where we now turn – to a trend we call 'neoliberal impression management'.

Notes

[1] All statistics on Latin America, the United States and Europe are analyzed using data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the General Social Survey (GSS) and the European Social Survey (ESS), respectively. Weights were applied to the LAPOP and ESS datasets to facilitate samples representing more evenly the populations from the various countries of the two continents. The data points presented here are taken from the results of a series of t-tests, one-way ANOVAs and crosstabulations.

CHAPTER 3

Neoliberal Impression Management

3.1 Introduction

'Image is everything', says tennis star Andre Agassi, tipping down his sunglasses. A celebrity tennis player on a very successful television commercial for Canon cameras, Agassi's words ring with a layered truth perfectly suited to the spectacular capitalism of the early 1990s. Presumably Canon was not hoping to enlist him to give a critique of late capitalism, where he could imply a message like 'there is no longer any experienced reality unmediated by the spectacle' or 'now media images have consumed reality'. The intention appears to be for him to be giving semi-autobiographical advice, a vague message that indicates that how we portray ourselves to others determines our success in life, whether we are 'winners', as Donald Trump likes to say. In other words, it is a broad invocation to be hyper-concerned with how others view us, and a suggestion that tending diligently to this will result in one's rise in status, power, wealth and luxury. The commercial opens with Agassi donning a snazzy white-on-black suit in front of a background of lit up Las Vegas streets, and a gritty-voiceover asks us 'what is the image of a rebel?'. As a sweaty Agassi pounds tennis balls and removes his shirt, the voice answers the question for us: 'these are the images of a rebel'. The 'rebel' in this case is a world-renowned tennis champion.

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The commercial portrays the image of an individualist, a rebel against conformity. Agassi is daring – unpredictable and efficient in his skilful movements, competitive, successful and tough. But all those athletic skills were well-known by any informed spectator of the world of sports in the 1990s. There is something more: framed by the night-time neon Las Vegas lights or cruising along in his hot car, he is also unmistakably cool. He expresses the hedonism and the *jouissance* of a successful life that pervaded globalized capitalism via screens and slogans. This is the perfect image of 'cool capitalism' (McGuigan 2009), where life turns seductively tasteful: the rebel is not a Latin American guerrilla; he is a *winner* that promotes the best image of himself, on his own and untamed by routine. He is the entrepreneur of his own life. He plays hard in the arid landscape, poses in front of the city lights, relaxes in the pool and drives off into the sun. Wherever he appears, he is 'the best version of himself': he deals with creativity and flexibility. The implication is that rugged individualism has led him to fame and riches. It is a story of success in neoliberal terms, honouring skilful impression management as the all-important key. This was before the days of social media, and clearly the ideology of self-marketing as a strategy of living a good life was prevalent enough already. The vision is clear enough through the focus on individuality and self-fulfilment, the association of who you are with what you buy, the need for 'success', and so on.

One of the main characters in Kurt Vonnegut's book *Breakfast of Champions* is Dwayne Hoover, a very successful car salesman who is suicidal and losing his grip on reality. In the 1999 film rendition of the story, the duality of Dwayne Hoover – played by Bruce Willis – is especially glaring. He is a celebrity in his town, advertisements carrying his smiling face ludicrously common on television and in public spaces. People love him and want to be like him, and some even obsess over him in paranoiac or delusional ways. This Dwayne Hoover, the one in the advertisements, the wealthy, smiling, trustworthy car salesman whose image is in everyone's eyes and whose name is on everyone's lips, is what we would call Dwayne Hoover's *spectacular self*. Of course, this spectacular version of Dwayne Hoover is only a shell of him, and a distorted one at that. Dwayne Hoover the *person* is actually a psychological and emotional disaster.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Breakfast of Champions* in the early 1970s. The principles of personal branding and media saturation were obviously present back then, as a general tactic in the new consumer oriented, spectacular capitalism. In Dwayne Hoover's case, outside of his presentation of self in everyday life, he has advertising, and especially television advertising, to increase his presence and keep selling his brand even during his off hours. Today, Dwayne Hoover would be all over the internet, tweeting about cars and trustworthiness, posting pictures on Instagram of himself shaking hands with 'another satisfied customer', and so on. And indeed, he does, through so many of us. In the society of the selfie, we are all Dwayne Hoovers, or at least we will be if we want to swim rather than sink.

Users sell themselves, but generally on social media the currency is not money, at least not directly. There may be career payoffs down the line to building and curating 'online presence', but future career payoff is one step removed from the true immediate transaction. Users sell themselves to others in return for their attention, and their marks of approval (which may translate into more attention from others). Attention and approval, however, are also transformed.

The spectacular self is the star figure of this chapter, along with the cornerstone traits of the successful spectacular self. Essentially, the individual projects a digital rendition of the self, comprising images contoured for favourability. And this favourable virtual self-presentation, doctored through filtration, alteration and selective emphasis, is directed towards the display of personal assets and abilities. In the race to become prized commodity, spectacular selves are conduits for the particular genre of restless activity that saturates the social terrain in the society of the selfie. The basics of this situation are familiar enough to any savvy social media user and probably most disgruntled technophobes. We will begin our exposition by discussing a shift in everyday communication that underlies the world of the spectacular self – the decline of face-to-face interaction with its particular qualities and dynamics, or what we will refer to as 'embodied co-presence', following Erving Goffman's terminology. We will then consult several social theorists to help illuminate this strange, extremely common trend in contemporary society in a deeper way. Specifically, we will survey three distinct theories that together overlap and express what we are getting at. These theories are Erich Fromm's theory of the 'marketing orientation', Erving Goffman's theory of 'impression management' and Michel Foucault's theory of neoliberalism and human capital. Taken together, these ideas illuminate this late capitalist phenomenon that we refer to here as 'neoliberal impression management'.

3.2 Decline of Embodiment and Co-Presence

In everyday life, in face-to-face interactions, positive responses from other people generally come in the form of verbal and nonverbal communication in real time. Goffman (1963a, 17) used the word 'co-presence' to refer to the face-to-face interactional context, where people 'are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived'. Goffman distinguishes between 'embodied' and 'disembodied' information delivered in communication.

> A frown, a spoken word, or a kick is a message that a sender conveys by means of his own *current* bodily activity, the transmission occurring only during the time that his body is present to sustain this activity. Disembodied messages, such as the ones we receive from letters and mailed

> gifts […] require that the organism do something that traps and holds information long after the organism has stopped informing. (14)

In the society of the selfie the situation is more complicated. Goffman took for granted that co-presence involved people being in embodied, organic proximity (i.e., having access to the other's immediate verbal and non-verbal signals). Decades ago, when he wrote the above quote, it may have been more possible to establish a firm division between co-presence and embodiment on one side, and their opposites on the other side. Back then, the telephone may have been one of the only partial exceptions to this division. With social media, exceptions abound. The chatroom, or chat window is without all organic bodily signals, but communication generally flows in real time, not unlike a conversation in-person or over telephone. With the capacity to record short audio clips and video clips to send over DM (direct message), an additional organic component is added, even if some of the rhythm of back-and-forth communication is distorted in the act of recording. Video chat, now having exploded in popularity due to the COVID-19 crisis, adds in a strong visual dimension, where it is even possible to simulate (or digitally facilitate) eye contact.

Recent scholars of online social interaction have reframed 'co-presence' away from Goffman's simple dichotomy, to apply to interaction in virtual spaces as well (Bulu 2012). Even the notion of 'co-location' has been used in both ways – people being together in virtual and organic spaces (Zhao and Elesh 2008). For this reason, it will be useful to distinguish between *embodied co-presence* (being together in physical space) and *disembodied co-presence* (being together in virtual space). Acknowledging the many grey areas social media provides, and that forums such as Second Life and Zoom especially complicate the distinction, it is still true that social media provides other forums where the distinction is more relevant, i.e., where there is little if any disembodied co-presence. And still, social media is unique in providing an omnipresent space of immense prominence where simply daily interaction on various – albeit not all – platforms can involve little to no co-presence. Here we are primarily concerned with the significance of social media in terms of the rise in day-to-day life of interaction with minimal co-presence, which still owes to social media, even if it does not characterize social media as a whole. The reader should take this caveat into account in this and following chapters where we will contrast embodied co-presence with the social media sites and activities that are low in disembodied co-presence. Instead of a direct interactional context, these sites – such as Facebook and Twitter – primarily involve posting and replying.

Embodied co-presence carries a fullness of experiencing another person that is very complex and extends even beyond the signals we consciously send and receive. By contrast, social media introduces a variety of metrics of social attention and approval – namely likes, replies, shares and follows – which are stripped of so much of the complexity and fullness of interaction in real time. The 'like' adopts a single symbol, for instance, and is generally displayed on a

social media post as the symbol, with a count next to it. Facebook has added complexity to this, with the ready symbols for like, love, angry, sad and laughing. Still, this is a very limited range of expression. The icons are electronically generated and highly generic. Only dim traces of the time, space and embodied co-presence of face-to-face interaction remain.

Now, with platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the alienation of the spectacular self from the organic self is crystallized in a form more powerful than ever before. People can work on projecting their carefully contoured images all day without even getting out of bed. Nothing needs to be spontaneous – users can carefully select and doctor every photo and word every witty response with great intentionality rather than spontaneity. Without the subtle signals of real-time, co-present communication, discerning between spontaneity vis-à-vis contrived and calculated expression is much more difficult, and arguably impossible. Even differentiating spontaneity from contrivance in one's own expressions can be opaque. 'Whenever one has time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance. The "real me" turns out to be elusive' (Turkle 2011, 180). In a sense, face-to-face communication requires less guesswork regarding how well a person's expressions are received. Nonverbal cues, and the immediate presence of other people lend more immediate data than the screen with its surfaces. In a different sense, however, face-to-face communication requires more guesswork. Online metrics are supplied on every platform to indicate the popularity of the user's words, their pictures and even just *themselves*. And other users immediately can see the counts on the user's popularity as well, so there is no need to guess – users are automatically appraised (Hearn 2010).

These are signs of a hyper-industrial culture in which the mass consumption of information dematerializes (Stiegler 1996, 160–162) and disembodies communication, turning social expressions of attention and approval into measurable abstractions. Indeed, there is an attention economy that fills social media and drives so much online activity. Advertisements, status updates and notifications provide a barrage of stimuli and invite – if not demand – the user to be constantly available (Wu 2017). In response, the user needs to invent strategies to manage their own 'attentional disposition' (Citton 2014) towards the many solicitations of engagement, collaboration, pleasure, frivolity and personal exhibition. In other words, the attention economy primes the individual to deal with an inhuman speed of virtual situations and information, forcing people to judge and evaluate social behaviours according to their virtual presentations and metrics.

3.3 Marketing Orientation and Impression Management

Social media was not the cause of the attention economy, but it undoubtedly propelled it forward. It dovetailed brilliantly with these cultural trends that were already in motion, providing a new powerful impetus to propel the culture

of self-branding and self-marketing at breakneck speed. Psychoanalyst and social theorist Erich Fromm noted as far back as the 1940s that in the twentieth century, people's personalities were increasingly dominated by the logic of marketing. Fromm believed that the demands of the economy and the working world forced people to take on certain characteristics in order to succeed, and that these characteristics then carried over into the rest of their lives. If a person has to spend 8 hours, 5 days a week of their waking life exercising some particular set of habits, they become more skilled in those habits, and more used to using them. Eventually they will be likely to defer to those habits in their other waking hours, in many ways, some obvious, some more subtle. What someone does in general becomes a major part of how they think and act in general. The culture of one's working life bleeds over into their private and social life.

In this way, the demands of the entire economy – imagine a virtual landscape of money, occupations, workplaces, shops, sales and purchases – are expressed in the culture of society, and in the character traits of the people who live in it. The capitalist society of the twentieth century made people into twentieth century capitalist characters. In Fromm's words, the 'market concept of value, the emphasis on exchange value rather than on use value, has led to a similar concept of value with regard to people and particularly to oneself. The character orientation which is rooted in the experience of oneself as a commodity and on one's value as exchange value I call the *marketing orientation*' (Fromm 1947, 68). People began to experience themselves as objects to be advertised and sold. Whether competing for jobs or customers, people needed to advertise what they had to offer on the market. And what they had to offer was not just skills, it was also personality. In the new 'personality market', getting people to like oneself and on that basis want to hire or do business with oneself rose to become a huge part of things. To 'make it', a person had to learn to sell themselves – their skills and their personality – to potential buyers in the economy.

Although he had a different focus and used different language, Fromm was clearly aware of the impact of the Debordian spectacle in shaping the nature of self-presentation. He published *Man for Himself* in the early post-war years, at the dawn of the mass consumer society with its spread of spectacular logic. Fromm framed images in advertisements, movies and television as more than imitations of reality, and as more than windows into it. They were channels for producing and disseminating social norms for people who were *devoted* to marketing themselves. Fromm believed that people had a deep need for a 'frame of orientation and devotion', which guides their actions with moral force. The marketing orientation is not something you put on when you go out on Friday night and take off for the rest of the weekend. It is a way that you structure your approach to living, and you feel obligated to follow it. Selling yourself well is an *ethical* pursuit, and your self-esteem is bound tightly to your success on the personality market.

The need to treat oneself as a commodity on the 'personality market' for economic success bled over into the rest of life. People of the 'marketing orientation'

would treat themselves as commodities even when 'off the clock'. They related to other people as potential buyers and related to themselves as products to be made simplistic and appealing, social interactions as opportunities to advertise themselves, the social world as a social marketplace. In Fromm's description of the 'marketing orientation' he is highlighting a deep transformation in the realm of ethics. People do not just passively play scripted roles like cogs in a social machine. They write their own roles, style their own performances. On social media, users construct their virtual identities through profiles, preferences, friends and posts. If the 'marketing orientation' of today turns the self into an object on display at the social media bazaar, the Debordian spectacle of today has become more participatory and reflexive, as it enlists users to strategize and concoct their images, to produce and manage their impressions.

About 10 years after Fromm wrote *Man for Himself*, in 1956, sociologist Erving Goffman wrote his most famous book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which described a similar issue to what Fromm was talking about in the 'marketing orientation'. It was in this book that Goffman articulated 'impression management'. It is just what it sounds like – in everyday life, when one interacts with other people, one is trying to control how other people view them. In Goffman's theory, social interaction is a performance where one tailors what they do, say and look like in order to control the impressions others have of them.

People do this through every means available, running the full gamut of what they say and do. Most people are more aware that they are trying to manage others' impressions of them in situations where they are particularly nervous, like job interviews or first dates. In these situations, people carefully select their clothes and mannerisms and try to look as good as they can while also fitting the part of the date or the prospective employee. They might rehearse to themselves lines they plan on saying, just as if they were their lines in a play. They might have all kinds of emotional ups and downs and butterflies, and 'back stage' they might even confide about these to their closest friends and family. Yet when they appear 'front stage', they may go to great pains to hide all of these uncomfortable or awkward thoughts and feelings, so as to always appear poised, appropriately confident (or deferential), and likable.

Ben Stiller's movie *Meet the Parents* is all about impression management. In this case, the scenario is that Gaylord 'Greg' Focker is meeting the parents of his girlfriend (who he secretly wants to propose to) for the first time, in a visit to stay at their home. Greg is particularly nervous to make a good impression, because of his hopes of marrying his would-be fiancée, Pam. The situation is very stressful for him overall, and much of the comedy in the film revolves around the awkwardness of Greg, who tries to conceal his nervousness and growing frustration, at which he usually straddles the line between success and failure.

For example, at a convenience store with Pam's father Jack, Greg uses a random magazine to try and hide the fact that he is eavesdropping on Jack's

conversation. Jack asks Greg what he is reading about, and Greg reveals the magazine to Jack, which happens to be open to a display of a woman using breast pumps. Greg makes up a story about how he is interested in milking because he grew up on a farm. Later, over dinner with the rest of the family, Jack brings up what Greg said about growing up on a farm. Pam knows Greg never lived on a farm, so Greg says some nonsense, and then makes up a story about how he once milked a cat named Geppetto. It gets especially awkward when Jack challenges Greg with the question: 'I have nipples, Greg. Could you milk me?' Still, Greg continues to pretend that he is comfortable, casual and enjoying the conversation. Obviously though, he is uncomfortable. Greg leaves the table to get a bottle of the cheap champagne that he bought at the convenience store earlier (when he was hoping to find expensive champagne). Alone in the kitchen (back stage), we see Greg angrily wrenching at his shirt collar and mimicking Jack's question about milking. Yet Greg's agreeable demeanour returns when he comes back to the dining room (front stage).

The situation above can be used to illustrate that impression management often includes hiding how you really feel, or as Goffman called it, 'expressive responsibility' (Goffman 1956, 132). Depending on the situation, this can involve putting on a costume of attitudes to have things to say, ways to say them, and so on, which are carefully chosen. It can even involve quite a lot of rational calculation at times, in order to achieve the desired effects, to project the desired persona. Adopting etiquette that suits the occasion generally – but obviously not always – involves emotional restraint and the presentation of a pleasant and respectful demeanour. Many private topics and feelings are to be left out of the show. Of course, this is all culture-bound and varies depending on the context. Still, the point stands that overall, this is the general veneer of public social behaviour: rational restraint and self-control (137). Arlie Hochschild – a student of Goffman – has further pointed out that sometimes particular emotional displays are considered appropriate. The rational veneer is not the only veneer. Especially for women, often the expectation is to exhibit certain kinds of feelings, while not emoting at the proper level is considered a violation of what Hochschild (2012) calls 'feeling rules'. This is especially evident in many occupations traditionally held by women, such as flight attendants. In such occupations, not only are women expected to suppress frustrations they might have with difficult passengers, but they are expected to actively exude happiness and the desire to help or nurture. Part of the job is this 'emotional labour'.

Goffman (1968) identifies an implicit ethic in the 'face work' of polite social interaction where each individual is obliged to maintain a positive and *consistent* image of themselves for others. The consistency is called a 'line', while the positive image is called 'face'. The *Meet the Parents* dinner scene also shows Greg struggling to maintain a consistent 'line' in the interaction, to avoid being 'discredited' by Pam's family. This maintaining of a consistent narrative of self in order to avoid being discredited is also a central theme in Goffman's (1963b)

discussion of 'stigma', how many people will go to great lengths to make some attribute of their person undetectable to others, and how this 'passing' constitutes a rift between how other people see them, and who they 'really' are (how other people would see them if they knew about the attribute). In its basic dynamic, this divide between 'virtual' and 'actual' social identities is an intensification of the same basic logic of impression management, with its division between front stage and back stage.

Goffman's ideas are strikingly relevant to the world of social media, where, in our terms, the division between front and back stage can be mapped onto the division between the spectacular and the organic. On a site like Facebook, one's profile can be carefully curated to send across the desirable image. Selfies and other photos can be taken at just the right events and locations, with just the right facial expressions, to convey a consistent, positive 'face'. Other photographs less flattering, even if taken, can be left out, one can un-tag oneself from them, etc. This practice can contribute to the illusion that a person is frequently or even always in the featured situations, and always looking their best. Profile photos can be not just selected for the best angle, the fittest physique, the best clothes, etc., but actually doctored. With programs like Body Editor and FaceApp, waistlines can be reduced, teeth can be bleached, and facial blemishes can be erased.

Many studies have been done on impression management online (Krämer and Winter 2008; Cunningham 2013). Scholars have analysed online self-presentation strategies in a variety of virtual contexts such as personal homepages (Dominick 1999), dating sites (Ellison et al. 2006; Zytko et al. 2014) and Facebook (Hall et al. 2014; Dorethy et al. 2014), among others. Scholars have also studied the online impression management of a variety of populations, such as US athletes (Smith and Sanderson 2015), Malaysian students (Shafie et al. 2012) and UK members of parliament (Jackson and Lilleker 2011), among others. The specifics change among contexts and populations, but the nature of the activity is consistent: information is controlled, selected and projected in order to present the self in a fragmented and favourable light.

A key difference between Fromm and Goffman is that Fromm saw the marketing orientation as historically situated and tied to consumer capitalism, while Goffman talked about social life in a very general way. In Goffman's mind, some amount of impression management is inevitable because in social situations people inevitably perform, at least to some degree, like actors on a stage. It is important to remember that Goffman was writing in twentieth century America, so his observations of allegedly general human behaviour were all within that context. This does not mean he was wrong, necessarily, but it does indicate his descriptions of human behaviour in particular contexts should not be unreflectively universalized. Regardless, these views of Goffman and Fromm are not mutually exclusive. Even if we assume with Goffman that impression management is a part of public life, at least to some degree, in any society, we

can still see how the pressures of twentieth century capitalism would dovetail with the tendency and amplify it.

3.4 Human Capital and Neoliberalism

Good impressions can come through being associated with people who are already respected. Getting closer to high-status people can allow one to catch some of the excess status as it dribbles off them. Just having a lot of friendly connections, *in itself*, is what sociologists like Robert Putnam (2000) call 'social capital'. But when someone uses their social connections to make themselves come across as important and desirable, they are dealing with another kind of capital: *human capital*. To understand this kind of individual investment into the self, it is important to take into account a shift in contemporary societies with the rise of neoliberalism.

In the late 1970s, Foucault (2004a) lectured about a historical shift in capitalist society from 'liberalism' to 'neoliberalism'. As a catch-all word, neoliberalism refers to many different trends. In terms of economic policy, it denotes privatization, deregulation of national markets, the reduction of state presence in welfare policies since the 1980s and the managerial revolution of the 1990s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2011). It refers to a specific variety of political practices that have changed capitalism since the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s (Harvey 2005), and have changed the relationship between sovereignty and territoriality (Ong 2006). There is a very complex mosaic of governmental and economic policies to consider (Slobodian 2018), from the first experiments during the military dictatorship in Chile in the late 1970s to the conservative hegemony in Britain and the US under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and do not forget the government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in France in the late 1970s and the economic and managerial reforms in Latin American countries in the 1990s.

In Foucault's lectures, neoliberalism is much more than a strictly economic phenomenon. The transition to neoliberalism is a deep and wide transformation, reaching not just into economic policy, but also into culture and political thought. Foucault's story of the journey from liberalism to neoliberalism begins in the eighteenth century, when liberalism emerged within the wealthy and powerful regions of an expanding transnational colonial system. In these regions, as international markets grew, so too did domestic markets. This means that market transactions were rising in significance not just in the larger geopolitical sense. They were also a prominent part of civil society (Rosanvallon 1999, 69) and produced the individual as a political subject that could express their needs and satisfactions via utilitarian relations of profit, self-interest and efficiency. Foucault, thus, describes a new 'art of government' that was intimately tied to the market and to the power to individualize behaviours and their economic costs (Foucault 2004b). Previously, the government was tasked with holding the

market in check, for example in regulating prices by moral criteria, or restricting the circulation of labour and commodities (Foucault 2004a, 32). Instead, in the era of 'liberalism', government was held to the standard of securing the freedom of individuals to pursue their own interests in civil society and the market. Liberalism emphasized freedom from oppressive government, to allow people the autonomous, utilitarian pursuit of their individual self-interests.

Neoliberalism is something of a reversal of this. It is about a state under market surveillance, not a market under state surveillance (Foucault 2004a, 120). Under liberalism, the state secured the freedom of the market since market rationality was the limit beyond which state policy should not cross. Under neoliberalism, the market colonizes the state. Neoliberalism, thus, is not about the end of the state or public services, but rather about the expansion of market relations towards every aspect of the state and the society.

Two moments can be identified in the rise of neoliberal thought in the twentieth century. The first one is connected to a response to the general crisis of liberalism in the 1930s, with the debates within the Freiburg School, the Walter Lippman Colloquium in 1938, Austrian liberal authors (like Hayek) and the ordoliberal theses of Eucken, Röpke, Rüstow, Müller-Armack and Grossmann-Doerth. In reaction to Nazism in Germany and Keynesianism in the United States, these authors railed against strict state control and massification. In this sense, they claimed for a renewal of a set of liberal policies concerned, above all, with a juridico-political institutional apparatuses that optimizes capital accumulation within nation states (Jessop 2019). Basically, this first neoliberal theory was concerned with the political and socioeconomic preconditions of functioning markets and the optimization of state reform, subjecting state to a competitive order (Biebricher 2019).

The second – and decisive – moment for the birth of neoliberal society took place in the United States. The first writings of American neoliberalism can be traced back to the writings of Henry Calvert Simons in the 1930s, which influenced the Chicago School of economics. The quintessential event, though, was the 1964 publication of Chicago School economist Gary Becker's seminal book *Human Capital*. The basic idea of 'human capital' that Becker articulated is that people can invest time and resources into themselves that will pay off in future material profits (Foucault 2004a, 230). By building one's own marketable knowledge and abilities, a person can increase their own market value. Becker's emphasis on the investment on human capital implies the formation of the attitudes and values as the sole basis for the liberty of civil society and accumulation. For him, the 'ingredient to economic progress' (Becker 1993) counts on family and private proactivity to adapt individual skills to the needs of free market. This emphasis on private activity encompasses a notion of personal responsibility that is inseparable from a wider moral idea of family responsibility. In other words, it is a cultural sign of the privatization of welfare and state responsibilities (Cooper 2017), since the private debt obligations of family and individual with human capital are foundational to socioeconomic order.

The theory of 'human capital' stretches economic reasoning about profitability beyond goods and services. Economic reason is extended into the self, and people become little enterprises committed to self-valorization. This individuation through self-realization via individual investment in human capital has become part of the cultural constellation of neoliberal capitalism (Lordon 2013, 72–73). The enterprise-form extends all throughout society, going beyond even monetary concerns and becoming a new grounding for culture and human relations. Economic reasoning about supply and demand, cost and benefit, investment and profit, permeates individual consciousness and social life. Market relations colonize how people relate with family, friends and, above all, with themselves (Foucault 2004a, 247; Cooper 2020).[1]

As Marwick (2013a) has noted, it has become expected if not required in many industries to self-advertise over social media, to build one's 'online presence', to play the human capital game. For instance, chasing human capital can be a way of relating to education. Wendy Brown (2015) showed how institutions of higher education, and the way people approach higher education, are being increasingly narrowed to focus on human capital rather than human understanding. It is evident too in the way that the liberal arts are being devalued in contrast with degrees that are more geared to job training, or STEM fields. Within the social sciences and humanities, the 'publish or perish' context is similarly directed, e.g., towards maximum impact factor points. Budding academics – graduate students and those on the tenure-track – seek to produce as many publications as possible in the 'top' journals of their fields. Journals with high impact factors are important to publish in. The graduate degree in itself is a form of building oneself up, as are – as mentioned above – conference presentations and social networks, membership in and service to professional organizations, awards, grants, and so on. On Academia.edu and ResearchGate, academia directly enters the world of online profiles and metrics of personal valorization (Duffy and Pooley 2010) of the society of the selfie.

In sum, under neoliberalism everyone becomes an entrepreneur *of themselves*, striving to maximize their *human capital*, manage their own needs and act according to calculations of risk and opportunity. In Fromm's 'marketing orientation' back in 1947, everyone relates to themselves as commodities, and act like their own advertising campaign, trying to win over people to desiring them. In Foucault's description of neoliberalism, the goal is less to advertise oneself as it is to build up the self, to maximize one's market value; and this is called building 'human capital'. It is not just that the self is a commodity; now the self is a commodity and a corporation all in one, dedicated to amassing as many 'points' as possible of various kinds. The 'points' will be advertised of course, that much has not changed. Advertisement is still critical. But the fever is just as much if not more geared towards self-improvement; not just to increasing interest, but to *increasing market value*. And for Foucault, this logic begins in the economy but extends all throughout our culture.

With digital media as a new primary playground for the Debordian spectacle, the cultural effects of media saturation reach further than in Debord's time. Now, the self is an active participant in the world of media images – in the sense of generating and spreading content, but also in the sense of forging and promoting a spectacular self. The self merges into the spectacle, into the realm of surfaces. Life itself is subjected to the valorization of value, human capital and personal skill. As Marwick (2013a, 14) says, 'Web 2.0 is a neoliberal technology of subjectivity that teaches users how to succeed […] [T]he technical affordances of social media reward with higher social status the use of behaviors and self-presentation strategies that make people look'. The expansion of self-presentation and impression management echoes the pervasive effects of the market on extra-economic social relations that Fromm once denoted as the 'marketing orientation', but now, with the collapsing of public and private spheres, the selling of the self extends to a never-ceasing avocation: the exhibition of individual behaviour via digital surfaces. Neoliberal rationality is a technique of government of the self that is grounded in self-satisfaction. Yet the individualistic striving for satisfaction occurs against a taken-for-granted horizon that determines the possibilities for satisfaction at both ends – in the articulation of desire and in the objects posited to provide satiation or fulfilment. Individual needs are socially produced and constructed, based as they are on the forces and relations of commodity production and on the appearance-forms of the spectacle. And the valorization of the individual, their self-satisfaction, is sought out in the spectacular and commoditized world of personal ability, desirability, social status and consumption. In the age of neoliberalism and social media, fulfilment is promised as an individual's choice of movement, but this 'choice' is a moment within a loop that begins and ends at the spectacle. This economic regime of desire (Beistegui 2018, 64–65) promotes efficiency in production and maximizes output in terms of individual satisfaction and freedom. It captures and channels desire according to the individual's self-investment in their projected image.

Through the exhibition of the spectacular self, the logic of the competitive economic order is translated into social relations mediated by digital technologies. Psychological research has shown that people with narcissistic personality traits tend to be more active on social networking sites in terms of self-presentation behaviours and amassing large 'friend' counts than people without such traits (Buffardi and Campbell 2008; Gnambs and Appel 2018). We should not, however, reproduce stereotypes about social media, reducing all online communication to shallow narcissism. Different from the time when Debord wrote his seminal treatise of 1968, today social media is an important component of the spectacle. Yet social media is only part of the issue. The heterogeneous forms of exhibition, from colourful and baldly narcissistic tweets of social and occupational victories, to the controlled, formulaic and austere professional profiles on job hunting platforms such as LinkedIn, grow in the same

terrain: *a broad landscape of proactive individual self-promotion*. It implies a specific kind of self-entrepreneurship: the neoliberal impression management of the individual's impressions over the spectators, and the individual's responsibilities towards maintaining their own relevance, which can be measured via likes, visitors, etc. Neoliberal governance, thus, is about the conduct of individual behaviour, that is, it is about subjects. The productive individual, in this sense, manifests its freedom through the exercise of personal choice, autonomy and self-fulfilment (Miller and Rose 2008, 48–50) as normative pathways to social recognition.

According to Foucauldian theorists Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), the society of enterprises is grounded in a new preeminent norm of efficiency. Competition, flexibility, fluidity, precarity and 'hard work' are associated values. Neoliberalism is not an ideology, per se. It is not a coherent set of principles, and it is not exclusive to right-wing or left-wing politics. Rather, it is a mode of conducting oneself according to the rationality of the market. And this is not just on the job or the job market. Each *individual* person is the *manager* of their own life, in work, play, relaxation and love. Human capital becomes a way of approaching one's friendships – all relationships serve networking purposes. Health and fitness become forms of human capital. 'Hobbies' can turn to playing fields for human capital. Collecting knowledge and objects in any genre can be geared to the purpose.

The neoliberal logic of human capital can be found in any enclave these days. Its rationality knows no boundaries, material or cybernetic. People – 'subjects' – develop within the neoliberal culture and their personalities express values of efficiency, hard work, competitiveness and flexibility in a changing, precarious job market. We are forged to function within the circuits of production and consumption, as *homo œconomicus*. The change in everyday social behaviour is perhaps at its most stark on the internet, in users' personal branding and in our attention seeking, in their racking up of followers, likes, shares, and so on. We now turn to this hotbed of neoliberal impression management: the world of social media, the quintessence of the society of the selfie.

3.5 Personal Branding and Attention Seeking

On social media, many people are trying to get noticed, and in particular ways. Savvy online self-marketers know that if you care about *how* people perceive you (not just *that* they perceive you) it is not enough to say anything you want to online. Sure, there are some tried and true methods of gaining attention, such as being intentionally provocative, but this only works if one wants to build a reputation for being provocative. In the attention economy, where self-image and career prospects are bound up together and depend on online presence, it is important not just to get noticed, but also to be consistent. If a user is a doctor, popular worldly wisdom says they should post about medicine,

or about things that fit with the upper middle-class doctor stereotype, such as family vacation pictures. A musician should tweet about music, perhaps displaying how they know all about their genre's music scene, maybe posting pictures of themselves at shows or playing an instrument. Whatever one does, the script must be served. Users should build themselves up as important people in whatever fields they work in or want to work in. There is even a name for this: 'personal branding'.

The notion of branding the self became popular starting in the late 1990s (Vallas and Cummins 2015; Whitmer 2018), being first directly articulated in Peters' (1997) article 'The Brand Called You'. Yet the dynamics that characterize 'branding' were clearly described by Fromm (1947) in the middle of the twentieth century in his discussion of the 'marketing orientation'. Recent authors have identified antecedents of the trend in even earlier times (Pooley 2010; Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017). Today, there are many self-help guidebooks that teach all about personal branding – *Me 2.0* (Schawbel 2009), *Personal Branding for Dummies* (Critton 2014), and so on. For the most successful people, personal branding and online presence are one and the same. Every time they go online and make noise (and it should be very often), they will effectively portray the commodified version of themselves. In Peters' seminal article, he indicated it was important to do nothing more and nothing less than advertise and sell one's 'brand' (self) with every click and every keystroke. In his words:

> When you're promoting brand You, everything you do – and everything you choose not to do – communicates the value and character of the brand. Everything from the way you handle phone conversations to the email messages you send to the way you conduct business in a meeting is part of the larger message you're sending about your brand. (Peters 1997, n.p.)

People who successfully build up massive social media followings are sometimes referred to as 'influencers'. Some of these, like Taylor Swift and Lady Gaga, really do make it to the level of true celebrities, and have a life of fame and fortune that extends well beyond their newsfeeds. Others – what Theresa Senft (2008, 2013) coined as 'micro-celebrities' in her study of 'camgirls' – amass considerable followings, but remain below the radar of many people outside of their fields, and their social media metrics and attention may not translate into financial gains. Emotional gains, maybe. But there is a downside.

Many people love to hate celebrities. And the trouble with success in building a following is that despite the many pressures that push a person to do so, in many social circles it is still a social faux pas to *want* to do so. 'Wanting attention' is often used as a discrediting indictment that is wielded at one who receives attention, from toddlers to tennis pros. It is associated with selfishness and narcissism. Back in 1947, Fromm stated:

> Modern culture is pervaded by a taboo on selfishness. […] [T]his doctrine is a flagrant contradiction to the practice of modern society, which holds the doctrine that the most powerful and legitimate drive in man is selfishness and that by following this imperative drive the individual makes his best contribution to the common good. (Fromm 1947, 119)

His statement is still pertinent and applies just as well to attention-seeking. Material and social success – intimately bound as they are – are increasingly related to if not dependent on the amassing of human capital in the form of verified, documented, quantifiable attention from others, often in the form of praise and accolades. And 'success' *could* mean a six-figure salary, but it often simply means getting any salary at all, rather than contract work. Even for those fully involved in the 'gig' or 'platform' economy, it is still important to consistently direct efforts to maintain a positive public image simply in order to continue to attract temporary employers who will give you short-term contracts (Vallas and Cristin 2018; Gandini and Pais 2020). For example, take care.com, an online service for independent childcare providers to find work, and for parents to find childcare. Every nanny has an avatar, with a photo (or multiple photos) and space for a short bio. They also receive star-ratings and verbal reviews from past employing parents, similar to reviews on Yelp. Attracting employers is not so different from attracting customers, especially when you relate to yourself as an entrepreneur.

We suggest that the culture and practice of neoliberal impression management *amplifies* the human potential to selfishly seek fame and admiration. Given the necessity of tending to one's public image and garnering attention and praise, it is only natural that whatever human propensity to relish the attention and praise of others would be fed. When 'playing the game' is key to material, social and possibly even psychic survival (Lasch 1984), it is an adaptive strategy to learn to love the game, to internalize the game as one's own. Marx (1962 [1867], 335) said that capitalists are compelled incessantly and inexorably by the 'coercive laws of competition' to upgrade their means of production and increase the rate of exploitation of workers. Human capitalists (i.e., people) are in much the same situation in relation to themselves. As Brittany Hennessy puts it in her popular guidebook *Influencer*: *Building your Personal Brand in the Age of Social Media*: 'You may not love the idea that your follower count may be seen as more important than your actual skills, but you need to adapt, because those who don't adapt won't make it very far' (Hennessy 2018, 8).

In their book *The Narcissism Epidemic*, Twenge and Campbell (2009) refer to the 'fantasy principle'. They say 'any force in society that allows an individual to present a grander image of his or her self than is actually warranted is a potential amplifier of narcissism', and note that social media is full of it (Campbell and Twenge 2015, 361). They explain that in the United States, varieties of narcissism have been growing along with various cultural practices that support individualism and positive views of the self since at least the early 1970s, so

rising narcissism in America is not *because* of Web 2.0 so much as greatly facilitated by it. The social media landscape *systemically* lends even more fuel to a 'culture of narcissism', as Christopher Lasch (2018) famously called it.

Yet when an individual is ridiculed for seeking fame and admiration, it is likely to be on the level of a *personal failing* to live up to moral responsibilities, that the 'narcissistic' or 'shallow' person is *individually guilty* for their social and psychological transgressions. The label of 'attention-seeking' is often used to shame and discredit, in a fashion that might carry the explicit or implicit injunction to rescind attention and esteem away from the accused attention-seeker. 'They just want attention' may often carry a connotation along the lines of: 'what they are doing is disingenuous or not worthy of attention' as in the famous story 'the boy who cried wolf'. In this case, the criticism never steps outside of the neoliberal discourse. Especially when accused attention-seeker is a winner in the 'digital reputation economy' (Hearn 2010) – such as an influencer or micro-celebrity – it is plausible that part of the impetus to tear them down stems from the competitive urges of the accuser, who might not be as successful at garnering online attention and accolades. The norm against individual attention-seeking in a culture that promotes – if not demands – attention-seeking, constitutes a double-bind.

This is not to say that the accusation of 'attention-seeking' has no legitimacy. Far from it, it is simply to say that the criticizer and the criticized are subject to the same broad cultural pressures, and so *playing the game and decrying the game both occur within the cultural framework of the game*. In the society of the selfie, nobody is above the game, they just occupy different positions within it, and so relate to it with different emphases. On the one hand, attention-seeking and the tearing down of attention-seekers can both be adaptive responses to a competitive and alienated society. Research has shown, for example, that presupposing online trolls to have implicit attention-seeking motivation is a psychologically resilient response associated with less negative affect (Maltby et al. 2016). On the other hand, attention-seeking and attention-seeker discrediting both involve the placement of the attention-seeker in a kind of spotlight to have their individual value assessed. Both positions can participate in reproducing the context of competition and alienation. Just as social media amplifies neoliberal impression management it also amplifies tendencies towards public shaming and ridicule. As we will discuss later on, alienation, sadism and authoritarianism go hand in hand in the society of the selfie.

3.6 Conclusion

Impression management is how an individual works out on himself to project the spectacle and maintain a positive and consistent image of themselves for others. It is grounded in the social pressures for individuation in neoliberal society, with self-investment in human capital and the individual as an

entrepreneur of themselves, dealing with personal branding and attention seeking. The dovetail of impression management and neoliberal cultural landscape marks the axis of the society of the selfie.

The spectacular self is a solo creation by self-authors practicing impression management. It is an individual affair that – to be properly executed – requires people to pay a lot of attention to themselves. Yet it is also part of a broad tendency towards self-tracking and self-monitoring that is intensified with a particular flavour in 'neoliberal culture' (Elias and Gill 2018). We are very self-conscious – in the sense of general self-monitoring, self-analysing, self-scrutinizing and self-helping. As Anthony Giddens (2002, 37–38) insists, this *reflexivity* is a defining characteristic of life in the 'late modern' era. With the decline of traditional morality, the rise of transnational networks and a constant barrage of information, people are faced with lots of lifestyle options, as well as conflicting and changing opinions of various experts. They are also faced with a taken-for-granted moral prescription that they are *individually responsible* to evaluate and choose between expert opinions and lifestyle options. In Giddens' sense, modern reflexivity comes from the expansion of 'abstract systems'.[2] Socialized into this world of diffuse specialized knowledge, and with a variety of available tracking technologies for everyday personal use, people are compelled to monitor themselves and morally assume sole responsibility for their own trajectories. The self becomes an ongoing 'reflexive project' (Giddens 1990, 2002).

Sociologist Deborah Lupton (2016) discusses how contemporary self-tracking cultures are grounded in a new measurability and record-keeping of the self. With wearable devices like FitBit and the smartwatch, and with smartphones that are often more or less attached to their owners all day, data about an increasing amount of what people do is recorded and quantified on various electronic platforms. And these tracking devices and apps are more than just tools for self-analysis. They are also stages for the spectacular self to go on display. The rise of the 'quantified self' (as Lupton calls it) is also an ethos. Tracking oneself for self-improvement is a lifestyle that has a moral force behind it. In this sense, self-tracking 'represents the apotheosis of the neoliberal entrepreneurial citizen ideal' (Lupton 2016). Compulsive self-monitoring for self-improvement dovetails with the self-entrepreneurship that Foucault describes. The conversion of leisure time into self-improvement time fits snugly with a relentless 'work ethic', and the extent of one's private efforts can be publicly broadcast, putting on exhibit the play-by-play of one's career achievements, exercise regiments, eating habits, travel destinations, and so on.

We will explore some political implications of this in Chapter 6. Here we mainly want to emphasize that the spectacular self is not just a fragmented, fabricated self – a limited representation of a person's full, true self. It is also an *active* production from a hidden human atom, through activities conducted in isolation, akin to 'the man behind the curtain' in *The Wizard of Oz*. The internet is a place where people are literally alone together: alone in their organic

corporeal fullness typing, clicking, swiping and tapping, and together – as spectacular selves – in the virtual dimension. They are not just subjected to the alienations of Debord's spectacle, as passive witnesses or receptacles of the onslaught of images. They actively create it as they construct and project their spectacular selves.

In the next chapter, we will discuss a growing style of communication endemic to the society of the selfie, epitomized in the 'status update'. The soundbite of text is sent out to roll through so many other newsfeeds, maybe seen, maybe not. This communicative style distils a performative and alienated relationship between oneself and the world. Messages sent lack the social feedback loop of embodied co-presence, i.e., speaking to somebody in particular, watching their reaction, receiving their response, and so on. In the case of the status update, messages are not part of social 'loops', they are essentially unidirectional, and all about the speaker, words being sent out to a general, invisible audience. What we have is a competitive playground of neoliberal impression management, a bazaar of spectacular selves on display for everyone and no one at the same time. And this bazar also points to a decisive feature of the society of the selfie: the growing fragmentation of the public sphere.

Notes

[1] It is important to understand that in Foucault's actual theories, the self – or 'subject' – is not impinged upon by society, per se. This does not mean people are free from society's impacts. The opposite is closer to the case. The Foucauldian subject is not something separate from society that engages in struggle or dialogue with it. The Foucauldian subject is not a 'core' self that can be contorted or filtered or channeled or repressed. Instead, it is produced by society; formed out of building blocks that society provides, and into a shape that society recognizes. In this way, the neoliberal subject is a new human being: *homo œconomicus*, the self who is an enterprise.

[2] An abstract system is basically anything complicated and abstract that people use for guidance, be it an institution like the healthcare system or a genre of technical expertise like medical science.

CHAPTER 4

Invisible Audience and Echo Chamber Effects

4.1 Introduction

Having extended Debord's theory of the spectacle to the self in the last chapter, emphasizing how neoliberal transformations dovetail with digital devices and structure a sociotechnical milieu that we call the society of the selfie, we now proceed to move from the self to the interpersonal. The two are deeply intertwined, and arguably inseparable, as many argue that the self is a construction built upon a foundation of communication with other persons. Below, we will begin with an explanation of this theory of the self as a reflection of the interpersonal, as it is found in the microsociological theorists who greatly influenced Goffman. From there, we will suggest that the world of the online spectacle fosters curious twists in the communicative relationship between self and other, even beyond the commerce between spectacular selves discussed in the previous chapter. In many situations, the relationship is between self and what we will refer to as the 'invisible audience'. Simultaneous with this trend, is a kind of discursive and normative narrowing, facilitated by the ubiquity of Flusserian surfaces in the online Debordian spectacle. Communication is narrowed in the direction of 'one-dimensionality' (Marcuse 1991), with nuanced understanding and moral complexity emaciated. We will also discuss normatively splitting

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and fragmenting tendencies of social media, where morally and discursively divergent communities solidify and insulate themselves from deliberation with dissenting views.

4.2 Immediation of the Generalized Other

Goffman's notion of impression management comes from the tradition of symbolic interactionism in sociological theory, which stems back to the work of Charles Horton Cooley and his colleague George Herbert Mead, from the early twentieth century. In *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902), Cooley articulated the concept of the 'looking-glass self'. His theory states that the self-image is experienced as if a person were looking into a mirror that captures their mind, body and evaluations of their characteristics, value, and so on. Yet this sense of immediate and true reflection is a distortion. Really it is a person's projected approximation of what other people think about them. One always sees oneself as if looking through other people's eyes. Mead (1913) was interested in how individual social conduct was connected to a double transformation of objects into subjects and conversely: when one acts with reference to oneself as one does towards others, one becomes a subject; when one is affected by the impression of one's own conduct, one becomes one's own object. He transformed Cooley's concept into a theory about the internalization of the attitudes of the 'generalized other', which he considered to be integral and intertwined with not just self-consciousness, but with *consciousness* as such and the use of language or 'significant gestures' (Mead 1934). For Mead the self is in two dimensions: the 'I' being the self as an acting subject who perceives, chooses and has agency, and the 'me' being the self as an object to the 'I', an internal reflection of the attitudes of the generalized other. When self-conscious, the 'I' perceives the 'me'.

The generalized 'other' that determines the 'me' is a conglomeration of responses the individual has received from other people over the course of the individual's life, that becomes taken-for-granted within the fabric of the individual's reality. 'The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called "the generalized other"' (Mead 1934, 154). One does not see it or experience it as a 'thing', so much as it is always already present. It is through the 'me' that the attitudes of the generalized other become embodied in an object, but the 'I' experiences the 'me' internally, as if the attitudes represented are the organic persuasions of the 'I'. One experiences self-consciousness as if it is a direct, organic apprehension of the truth of the self, as if the 'me' that is experienced is unmediated. This is an illusion. The self that is experienced as a 'thing' intrinsically embodies the mediation of the experienced attitudes of the generalized other towards the self (Mead 1934).

Yet the generalized other is not one pool of static responses that manifest in a uniform way. It is a complex set of expectations or rather predictions, about

how others want one to act, and will respond if one takes this or that course of action. It shapes behaviour differently in different situations, according to social norms one has internalized from prior experience of others' reactions. What a person 'should' do in any given situation is not only based on patterns and predictions, but also imbued with moral force. People are normatively invested in the reactions of the generalized other in a deep way, in that the perceptions of the self are constituted out of this understanding of the self in relation to others.

Mead connects the co-development of the self and the generalized other to the individual's participation in rule-governed games. The self does not project itself into the other: the other and the self act together (Mead 1932, 169), since sociality is composed of interrelated acts in which the self occupies the attitudes of the others at the same time as it occupies its own attitude in the role of the other (Mead 1932, 86–87). In baseball, for example, each player bases their actions on the reasonable predictions of what other players will do, based on the rules of the game, and on the individual's position in relation to the other players. Yet in total, the generalized other becomes so broad and pervasive that it is typically experienced on the horizontal level, as an existential condition rather than a set of particular rules and responses. 'The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community' (Mead 1934, 154). In being 'the whole community', the generalized other is thus a placeholder for 'everyone', and in being everyone, it refers to no one in particular. The generalized other concept does not, however, refer to an objective, bounded community, much less to a universalistic claim about the individual's access to the perspective of 'everyone'. The concept refers to an internal process, akin to an inherent cognitive faculty that develops inextricably from social interaction, but not a 'thing out there' nor an objective standard of measurement (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007). Every generalized other is part useful, and part delusory. It is experienced as anonymous and invisible, and this grants it a kind of omniscience. One constructs it inevitably, composing it out of the collection of reactions from concrete others in one's own life, and due to the ability to take the role of the other in concrete encounters. Being anonymous and omniscient, it also tends towards the pretension of universality, i.e., 'what people think'. Still, expectations congregated in the generalized other are checked in real social encounters by how individuals actually respond to us. Neither the generalized other nor the self is ever fixed once and for all, as one is always taking in new information. Especially in 'late modern' times, the generalized other has to be understood as not fixed, but instead as something like 'a complex and untidy process of bricolage' (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007).

The generalized other is brought into every interaction, but it is also modified with every interaction. This is a mainstay of symbolic interactionist theory from Blumer to Goffman and beyond: every social interaction is an enactment *and a transformative negotiation* of the relational (and by extension individual) identities, roles and norms of the participants. It is common knowledge that people are more impressionable and more powerfully formed by their childhood

experiences than their adult ones, but this does not mean people are wholly *fixed* in identity or personality at any point in life. People are always learning from and adapting to their social circumstances as they vary and change.

The negotiation of self, other and relationship, the negotiation of expectations and revisioning of the generalized others is not an ordered set of distinct operations. It is a synchronous process that makes interpretation possible. For Kant, the manifold of sensory experience comes into existence with the capacity to unify it according to concepts or forms of thought under the regulatory principle of reason. And yet concepts can only be constructed on the condition of their being built using the sensory experience of reciprocal influences (*wechselseitiger Einfluß*) rooted in how the community (*Gemeinschaft*) of phenomena (*Erscheinungen*) are interrelated and affect the way thought conceives objects simultaneously (Kant 1956, B260, 261–263). Without negotiation and the dense/fluid exchange between consciousness and the objects (Kant uses the Latin word *commercium*, which emphasizes the principle of exchange in the perceptive movement), the existence of the manifold at the same time for the perceiving subject becomes an empty sensory experience. In a similar sense, for Mead the facility with symbolic communication renders conscious thought possible and constitutes the matter out of which it can form. Mead (1934) uses the realm of consciousness to the Kantian field of sensory experience via the 'I', whereas he refers self-consciousness to social relatedness and to the 'awakening in ourselves of the group of attitudes which we are arousing in others'. The negotiation can be more or less conscious in different ways and in different situations, but it runs very deep, to the point of being the building blocks out of which experience of reality is constructed. This model about identity negotiation and social cognition is founded on the privileging of face-to-face communication, where feedback loops containing complex mixtures of verbal and non-verbal (e.g., eye contact), conscious and unconscious communication, are rapidly expressed, delivered, received, reacted to, etc. The self-and-other unit in embodied co-presence is the basic unit of interaction, and as such, the self actively 'reads' the other all throughout the interaction and takes the signals from the other as an enormous component of the reality within which the self is framed and guided. Goffman (1963a, 17) says that the 'richness of information flow and facilitation of feedback' specific to this type of interaction 'provide enough structuring significance to provide one analytical rationale for […] separate treatment'.

In written symbols, the depth of communication in embodied co-presence is deferred, and the missing information in the exchange has to be inferred on the part of the reader (the self) from stocks of past experience. And yet in this loss of a particular kind of depth, there are other gains. The history of communication technologies is largely a history of the expansion of opportunities for communication to occur across distances of space and time, which face-to-face communication does not allow. This brings people together in new and

important ways. Written symbols allow practical benefit, such as when supplying written instructions, or learning about the world. They also permit various forms of artistic expression, such as in poetry and literature – and these can convey a considerable amount of information and intimacy about the experiences, understandings and emotions of other persons, even hundreds or thousands of years after the words are written.

Social media can facilitate old friends being connected for much longer than they might otherwise. Whereas before the internet, a scarcity of 'free time' and an abundance of geographical distance might encourage a particular social connection to fade out to the point of dissolution more rapidly, social media can facilitate this sort of a connection to be maintained, even if at a low level of intensity, without having to set aside specific time or overcome travel limitations. Because staying connected with people requires less of an investment of time and energy, it is possible to stay connected with many more people. It is commonly understood that a person's 'friends' on Facebook are by no means to be assumed to be 'real' friends; but conversely it is true that social media permits people to stay in some sort of regular contact with more friends and family than in days prior.

The connection across distance brings people together in profound ways, but it also drives them apart, in that mediated forms of communication always contain a loss of the particular kind of information and intimacy that face-to-face interaction naturally contains. And as mediated forms of communication become more readily available, easier to use and cheaper, people defer to them more readily not just in situations where people could not communicate otherwise, but in situations where face-to-face interaction would be almost as convenient, but not quite. This is also the case with the telephone – even with the capacity to call one another from virtually any location via mobile phones, text messages are extremely popular, and in some sense are used instead of using the phone to talk, which would include using and hearing human voices in an interactional exchange where timing, tone, and so on, still play an active role. In other ways, social media stands in where the telephone otherwise might. A 'direct message' will suffice instead of a phone call, for many communications.

The handwritten letter is often portrayed as an intimate form of communication, as a particularly heartening overcoming of distance through a very personal use of language. The typed letter, first on a typewriter and then on a word-processor, is given less of a romantic framing, but it is still seen as a form of putting effort into reaching out, perhaps because it requires some effort that is not expended regularly on any chance interaction. Letters are folded and addressed, stamps are applied, a mailbox is approached, etc. The world of email, on the other hand, is not granted any such nostalgic honour. It is still treated as purely utilitarian. It is a transformation in the technology of writing, since the new devices are not mere exterior tools, but they imply interior transformations of consciousness (Ong 2002, 80–82). Of course, the sight of a loved one's

name popping up in bold in one's inbox can be an emotional experience, but as a medium, the email is not typically considered an intimate channel of connection. Regardless, in all forms of letter-writing, people have at least the potential to express their thoughts, emotions, intentions, meanings, and so on, at length and in some sense of approximately full complexity. In some sense, then, the loss of information and intimacy from speech to writing is partly made up for by the capacity for lengthy description and expression, and rapid transmission from one person to another.

The grammar of the digital milieu is a twist in human relatedness. The manifold stimulation of sensory experiences (Türcke 2002, 192–194) by digital surfaces counts on the aesthetic effect of images to project the self in spectacular form. Snapchat, Slingshot, Frankly Chat and Yik Yak promise the appeal of 'live stories' to 'share the moment': the ephemeral logic of exhibition, since the digital contents are erased after a short period, implies new forms of attention to stimuli among users (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck and Falk 2015). It also places an emphasis on privacy (Kotfila 2014) – Snapchat, for example, notifies the sender that someone else's screen captured a snap – as the user must share content from the present, that is, the system does not allow users to use files from the archives of the device. Snapchat maintains the expression from one person to another in a peculiar way: the audience is known and this can reinforce existing social ties (Campbell 2015), but this relationship between the sender and the audience is totally mediated by lived contents embedded in images and emotional moods, promoting the spectacular self in a digitally mediated person-to-person interaction. It is also a sense of connected presence (Liccope 2004) with the growing possibilities of disembodied co-present interactions via mobile images and text messaging. As a native mobile application, the very technical device of apps/networks like Snapchat reinforce the mirage of individuality, turning every individual and each residuum of the living subject into a producer of the reified spectacular self, projected in a narrative form in the stories promulgated through digital devices and social network.

4.3 The Culture of the Newsfeed

On social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, a new form of written communication has developed in individual accounts: the tweet or status update. These are not only limited to being typically short if not necessarily short (as per Twitter's automatic restrictions). The status update is directed firstly to an invisible, diffuse audience. It is a remote audience that can potentially be affected as one's message participates among the rhapsody of updates and data in the audience's newsfeeds. These communications are part of a new style of spectacle that Debord could not have foreseen, since he was writing between the 1960s and 1980s, before the digital rose to become a central

organizing principle of social life. Yet the logic of the digital spectacle is consistent with the logic of Debord's original notion, i.e., the hegemony of media images and their mediating role in sociality, as well as the reconciliation of the very alienation they promote, through the dissolution of the distinction between spectacle and reality as the spectacle comes to saturate, define and even constitute reality. On social media, much content manifests in a stream, that is, an algorithmically guided exhibition of photos, videos and texts (Naaman, Boase and Lai 2010). The infinite scroll in the social media newsfeed facilitates a digital voyeurism that can drift through the inconceivably large volume of data and attention-seeking mechanisms (memes, images, sounds, etc.).

Group or mass emails already had the quality of impersonality, since they are expressions delivered out to several people at once, and hence the particular intimacy of one-to-one communication is sacrificed for the form of 'expression to audience'. Yet in the status update, this is taken even further. We are not intending to uphold only one-on-one or embodied co-present communication as a normative goal. There are limitations to these, and communication in different arrangements and through different media are not *ipso facto* inferior. Performance is an important part of social life, for instance lecturing before a class, giving speeches and performing stand-up comedy are not to be stereotyped as morally suspect or deprived. There is plenty about them to appreciate. The issue is that in-person, one-on-one communication has irreplaceable and important qualities that are specifically *not* there in the forums we are describing, and that their *conspicuous absence* indicates social pathology. It is not that everything should be one-on-one or in-person, it is just that one-on-one and in-person forms of communication would preferably not fade out of day-to-day life.

Group/mass emails are generated for specific purposes; there is no illusion that they are a 'normal' form of communication. They are also delivered to very specific and limited audiences, such as a few friends, family members or co-workers, or perhaps to a mailing list. There are some forms of mass email that are particularly impersonal and probably trump the status update in this sense, as they can be automatically generated for thousands of people (a.k.a. 'spam'). Yet again, these are generally seen as onerous exceptions to 'normal' communications. By contrast, tweets and status updates are routine by design. They are presented casually, almost as a running side narrative to accompany everyday life as they report on it, sent out to every person the user is connected to at once on their social media account, which for many users numbers in the hundreds or thousands. 'Lists' on Facebook can be used to choose sections to post to for different purposes, but the basic structure remains. Lists are not typically used to post status updates to a few family members, for instance. Group private messages are used for that. Even with lists, the style of expression and interaction is the same in kind, even if arguably variable in degree. Some status updates and comments can be lengthy, or link to lengthier blog posts, etc., but most are memes or short quips, or pointed, quickly delivered opinions.

On Twitter this is even more the case, as Facebook status updates can be long, but Tweets and their replies are necessarily short. Some people try to get around the limitations of Twitter by creating Tweet threads where they reply to themselves. Yet this is the exception rather than the standard.

Although less extreme as Facebook and Twitter, similar dynamics can be found on Instagram and Pinterest. The latter enables users to share photos and hobbies, promoting the spectacular self and the design of what a good life should be. Instagram is used to share photos and short videos with captions and comments that are directed as mostly outward facing (Schroeder 2016), that is, the content is public (although the user needs to register to comment) and is directed to an invisible audience. Like Twitter, Instagram is an asymmetric network: users do not need to follow the others back. It reinforces a sense of hierarchy in the production of the spectacular self and its metrics: profiles and users with many followers, especially the ones with much more followers than the number of the profiles followed by the profile, may be signs of relevance and popularity. The strong presence of selfies and self-portraits with friends and family among photos posted by individual users (Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati 2014) are cultural symbols of how a good life should be exhibited or how an imagined individuality can be affirmed. With the plethora of images, the spectacular self is prone to a pervasive visuality (Lupton 2015, 172–173): the representations of bodies as means for self-exhibition of physical contours are not a monopoly of websites devoted to sports, pornography or sexual fetishes, but also part of the most popular social networks streams containing all shapes and sizes of bodies.

The presence of 'influencers' in video-led platforms plays an important role in this asymmetricity. The good influencer, with an audience of many followers, puts moral pressure on other users via the interaction between the influencer's spectacular self and the reactions of the audience. Digital influencers diffuse contents to the generalized other at the same time as they enhance a kind of self-performance committed to build values and brands dedicated to specific segments of society. For Mead (1934), the generalized other is integral to the social process by which individuals interact and fractions of society exercise pressure over individual actions. In this sense, individual selves must be engaged in 'cooperative processes' in which the double correlation (the self as both subject and object of socialization) is produced in so far as individuals direct their behaviour accordingly. As subject, self-consciousness operates under the need for subjective freedom; as object, in the society of the selfie self-consciousness turns into a need to improve on one's neoliberal impression management, which illustrates the reification and standardization of any attempt at promoting a singular individuality under the domination of digital capitalism. With the interactive tools of social media, these dynamics of correlation can produce a mirage of unmediated contact between users, although the interaction remains inextricable from mediation by the asymmetrical exhibitions of users' spectacular selves.

In relation to the former traditional media of the culture industry, new social media reinforce the need for an ideology of authenticity. Against the distant contact between users and the mechanical qualities of their mediated gestures, 'authenticity' is sought out as a remedy for alienation via the promise of freedom of subjective expression against the dehumanizing experience of the sociotechnical world. Theodor Adorno (2003, 416–417) offers a useful analysis of this dynamic: if the search for authenticity attempts at an expression of true inwardness against outer artificialism and the 'frozen emanations' of social interactions, offering the 'pretense of the deep contact with the emotions (*Angerührtsein*)', it is as artificial (*standardisiert*) as the world that it negates. For him, this authenticity is a reified charge against reification (*Verdinglichung*) (Adorno 2003, 419–420). As Marwick points out, simulated 'back stage' access has become part of the typical style of celebrity and micro-celebrity online behaviour, the performance of 'authenticity' being an essential element of successful personal branding (Marwick and Boyd 2011b; Marwick 2013a).

The broad pretension of authenticity in the era of the digital spectacle is that true expressiveness will remedy the widespread sense of reification and lost intimacy. Yet in attempts to actualize this program over social media, even authentic intentions towards authenticity are coopted by the nature of the medium. Self-consciousness turns into self-deception (*Selbstbetrug*) and authenticity becomes ideology to the extent that it subverts itself. The gesture towards authenticity struggles against the growing powerlessness of the subject and the loss (*Verlust*) of its substance in a reified world subsumed under the instrumental imperatives of neoliberal impression management, but when social media is used to enact the struggle, the gesture must first acquiesce to what it portends to resist. In capitalist socialization, any reconciliation between the inner and outer worlds stumbles when against the impoverishment of the subject in light of the broader economic and social imperatives (Adorno 2003, 460–461). In other words, following Adorno's insights in connection to Mead's theory, with the generalized other the subject becomes an object (*Ding*) and a mass product (*Massenartikel*) within the spectacle.

4.4 Invisible Audience

The shift from face-to-face communication to status updates – be they tweets, memes, Instagram photos, etc. – entails a loss of the kinds of information and intimacy particular to the feedback loops of embodied co-presence, and an increase in the projection of self in images, or in other words in spectacular surfaces. Returning to Mead (1934), the generalized other frames and influences every interaction, varying its assessments and dictates depending on context; and it does this from an invisible, omniscient place. The generalized other is projected, to some degree, onto every person one encounters, with some selection and modification depending on the definition of the situation and the

particularities of the individual other(s) present. As the generalized other frames the self and the individual other, so the individual other and the self's encounter with it may feedback into modifications, however small, in the generalized other. The generalized other is experienced through the particular other; it is mediated by concrete specificities. The context of interaction – the setting, for example – shapes what part of the generalized other's repertoire comes to weigh in on the interaction. Thus, the feedback loop between particular and general is constant and thorough, just as for Kant, concepts and sense-impressions co-determine one another as a condition of consciousness.

The status update radically separates the particular from the general, and substantially privileges the general. The general is posited prior to the particular, as the 'definition of the situation' – that is, the posting of the update for newsfeeds – never changes and there is no embodied human co-presence with particular faces and bodies that might mediate and inform the generalized other. Compared to face-to-face interaction, in the status update the other flesh-and-blood person is further away, actually invisible, and only implied with some degree of probability. In other words, the user can imagine somebody, in particular, if they want, but will the imagined other see the user's post? *Maybe*. Yet, the relationship to the generalized other is more direct, less mediated by the chaos of particular persons in embodied co-presence and all the signals that filter, refract and reflect back upon the voice of the generalized other. The generalized other was always invisible, but in face-to-face communication this invisibility was coupled with the visibility of other flesh-and-blood individuals. In the status update, there is no eye contact, no body language, no particularly, no co-presence, embodied or disembodied. The individual expresses first to the immediate generalized other, second to whatever particular individuals happen to invisibly view the expression in their own places and times. In losing the feedback loops of co-present interactions, the status update is a one-way communication rather than a moment in a flowing exchange. It is an expression delivered to an invisible audience, an attempt to be witnessed by representatives of the generalized other, a gamble in hopes of the payoff of likes and replies. The experience is characterized by the *expression* of the message sender, as there is no receiver other than the invisible audience, more or less haunted by an 'imagined audience' (Marwick and Boyd 2011a), which may be informed vaguely through a broad sense of who is on one's friends list, and/or of the users whose posts scroll by on one's newsfeed. In the action of expression, the message is not sent to any particular receiver – it is simply sent *out*.

This is not to say that the status update remains perpetually an isolated, unidirectional communication. In some cases, the invisible audience only responds with silence, yet even this is a response – a signal of disinterest or a product of the reified communication dependent on the hierarchies and selections induced by algorithms of social media (according to individual preferences, profiles with which individuals are most likely to interact, etc.). In this case,

there is a peculiar position of the generalized other in the mediating, alienating and hegemonizing stylings of the Debordian spectacle that manifest on digital platforms: the specific audience is unknown, especially in social networks like Twitter and Facebook, but the *potential* audience *may* be known according to hashtags and the algorithmic selection of shared interests between the producer and the many invisible audience members (Bernstein et al. 2013). Yet in many cases, and in fact in the expected or at least attempted scenario, some number of persons likes or comments, at some point, perhaps within a few seconds, minutes or hours. An exchange of comments may ensue, each one mirroring to a large extent the character of the status update. In the case of the tweet, every comment is also its own tweet. Thus, a process of social feedback is facilitated, just in comparison to face-to-face interaction, carrying – as mentioned above – a significant loss of information and delivered within a format directed towards the invisible audience as much as – if not more so – than to individual persons in the exchange. Every comment arises out of the invisible audience since this is always a fundamental experiential context of the newsfeed. At times something rapid enough to fabricate a flow of communication is enacted, but in general the situation is that each like or comment is delivered as an *isolated expression*, rather than a moment in embodied co-present dialogue. At any moment, comments could cease, as there is no 'hello' ritual, no 'goodbye' ritual, and no implicit consensus around communication norms. Every silence between comments could just as easily be the end of the 'encounter', and the generalized anonymity of the invisible audience resumes its omniscient character.

The invisible audience is omniscient in the newsfeed, and it is more directly present than in face-to-face communication that is haunted by the genres of the generalized other. Despite its pervasive presence, and despite the lack of synchronous social feedback where the generalized other is renegotiated as it comes to bear on every situation, the invisible audience of the newsfeed is actually *more* malleable than the generalized other of face-to-face interaction. In day-to-day life, if someone is not alone, they will invariably be in social settings that lie somewhere on a continuum between what we will call *closed* and *open settings*.

On the closed end of the spectrum are settings where through pact or contract, one can reasonably expect to encounter the same persons there upon repeated visits, which are integrated in life's routine rhythms. These settings include the household, the factory, main office buildings, schoolhouses, and so on. In such places, interactional patterns develop into predictable, sustained relationships, and the individual has their place/identity within a set of social relations that can evolve over time, but generally speaking only changes slowly. These settings are more prone than open settings to involve what Goffman (1963a, 199) refers to as 'tight' social gatherings, as well as 'focused interaction', meaning 'the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention' (Goffman

1963a, 24). The individual can exercise some agency and influence the relations in such spaces, but cannot typically exert control per se over the social environment except by choosing not to be present, and/or to break the pact or contract, such as in the case of family separation, leaving unexpectedly from home, school or work, taking a different job, dropping out of high school, etc.

On the open end of the spectrum are settings where people participate without explicit pacts or contracts to return at any particular time. These include free public spaces like roads, sidewalks and parks, and are prone to contain what Goffman (1963a, 198) refers to as 'loose' social gatherings. There are certain ways these areas might be expected to be used, but the style is typically more informal than in tight social gatherings in closed settings. Social expectations are less binding here, and who will be there at any given time, and what their relationships will be, is fundamentally unpredictable. Especially in urban settings, this openness translates into general anonymity, and so to some extent, interactions become predictable because they are typically short, pragmatic and ritualized. There is little information exchanged or negotiated about the identities of self and other, beyond visual cues like clothing and whatever body language a person typically adopts in their public persona. The scenes tend towards 'unfocused interactions' (Goffman 1963a, 24), meaning 'the kind of communication that occurs when one gleans information about another person present by glancing at him, if only momentarily, as he passes in and out of one's view'. Between the two ends, but closer to the open end are public or private spaces where participation is tantamount to provision or consumption, such as at the movie theatres, restaurants, convenience stores and sports stadiums. In these situations, embodied co-presence is episodic and relatively unpredictable, but roles are a little more circumscribed, and people will typically be bifurcated into sellers and buyers, or performers and spectators, etc., with plenty of clarity about the respective roles of either side. In these open settings, if someone participates as a consumer or spectator, it is relatively easy to opt out, and maybe never come back. Still, a person cannot decide who will be there with them. One can choose a convenience store, and even to some extent choose the clerk to interact with; but one cannot choose who will patron this store, nor who will work at the store. People can find a place in the setting or avoid the setting. They cannot dictate the setting.

The newsfeed is considerably different from closed and open physical social settings. It is something of a nested indeterminate sociality within a broadly determined context. In other words, when a user posts a status update, they cannot control or predict with any certainty who might like, comment on or share their post. So far, this is like an open setting. Yet like a closed setting, the invisible audience of the newsfeed is largely limited by one's own friends list, which is primarily stable, or at least predictable and knowable. Unless a conscious alternation is made, the invisible audience is made of the same collection of persons, who the user has vetted to constitute their generalized other.

In the larger context here, participants are fixed, but in the immediate context of the action of the status update, there is typically no coherent 'situation' or 'social occasion' (Goffman 1963a, 18) to guide interaction norms other than the experience of expressing out towards the invisible audience. The user cannot help but fill the glaring absence with an imagined audience. In so doing, the user partially avoids the indeterminacy and inhumanness of the experience; and yet this imaginary audience is always that – an imaginary presence that can only haunt the immediate and irrevocable experience of absence.

It is easy to select in and out human elements that users wish to be in their invisible audience – sending friend requests to opt someone in, blocking to opt someone out. By definition, it is possible to use any criteria to determine who will constitute one's audience. In corporate social media, like Workplace, this universe is more limited, since the spectacular self is constructed in a strictly controlled virtual space composed only by employees. In other platforms, like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the list tends to be broader, since people can use it for co-workers, colleagues, friends, family, or some combination. While some users limit their lists in these specific ways, the most common way is something of a haphazard combination from these various categories, with some friends of friends, friends of friends of friends, and more or less random people included. It is not all chaos though. The typical invisible audience is culled in order to reflect back the responses the user wants to receive from others. In Mead's description of the generalized other, the individual is subject to the audience and the reactions of the audience shape the individual's expressions. In culture of the newsfeed this dynamic is preserved but it is synthesized with another: the individual user's audience is subject to the user, and the reactions of the audience are filtered according to the user's tastes and comfort. In the former case, the generalized other shapes the individual. In the latter case, the individual user also shapes the invisible audience.

The entanglements between the invisible audience and the generalized other is tangible in live streaming – a spectacular format that encompasses the main features of the society of the selfie. The role of live streaming has increased in digital platforms like YouTube and Twitch in the wake of the quarantines during the COVID-19 pandemic (Laubier 2021). This format of self-broadcasting deals with two important dimensions. On the one hand, the democratization of who can provide television-like content (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). On the other hand, a new kind of value generation grounded in new consumption needs that appear in the spectacular surfaces according to the particular activity of each streamer, reinforcing a sense of proximity between the streamer and the generalized audience as well as the figure of the streamer as a 'partner' who earns a share of the ad revenue (Hamilton et al. 2014). It reinforces the emphasis of the individual as a producer and entrepreneur of himself, above all, with the projection of his own spectacular self and abilities in a supposedly direct, authentic contact that is grounded in a lived, on the ground experience.

The spectacular self is thus formed as the invisible audience is formed, and one has considerable discretion in both cases. This 'everyone else' that seems to represent the opinions of 'the world' is largely the user's own concoction. In this way users can construct a protected world where they are seen the way they want others to see them, where others agree with the user's ideas, and where the 'looking-glass' aspect of the 'looking-glass self' is always already what the user wants it to be. This is not a fantasy world per se, but it is a unique world contoured to one's own imagination, desires and comforts; and as it poses as universal, it is actually very particular, providing the comfortable illusion that 'everyone else' (or everyone who counts, everyone 'real') thinks and responds more or less how one wants them to. This is the *echo chamber effect*.

4.5 Echo Chamber Effects

The term 'echo chamber', seminally dealt with in the works of Cass Sunstein (2009, 2018), is commonly used to refer to the worlds of social and ideological similarity that people form, nowadays generally on social media, through excluding voices that present opinions that diverge too much from their own. The echo chamber is a social space of discursive homophily, created intentionally by a person or persons working in concert, selecting voices to listen to that tout agreeable ideas to one's own. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) describe a conservative echo chamber guided by Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, etc., where not only are dissenting opinions excluded, but they are also categorically discounted and framed in polarizing terms, as a force of opposition to those in the chamber who are framed in a positive light. Nguyen (2020, 146) defines an 'echo chamber' as 'an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members'.

The terrain of the term overlaps with the related terms 'epistemic bubble' and 'filter bubble', which it is often conflated with in popular discourse. Nguyen (2020, 143) defines an 'epistemic bubble' as 'a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission'. By contrast to an echo chamber, which is as much a social structure as a mechanism of discursive and normative constraint, an epistemic bubble refers to a horizon of knowledge that has unknown gaps but does not necessarily result from a conscious inclusion/exclusion process. While the echo chamber is robust to outside views, and is even actively policed by persons within it, the epistemic bubble can be more easily popped, simply by exposing the inhabitant of the bubble to previously omitted viewpoints. 'Filter bubble' refers to the results of algorithmic selection processes on social media, whereby the user is exposed to images and messages that the user has already indicated assent to (Pariser 2011). An epistemic bubble is likely to contain a filter bubble, but its construction is not restricted to social media and its algorithms; it can be integrally connected to broad 'social sorting' (Bishop 2009) processes. The chamber

and bubbles overlap in the sense that they all point to a retreat – either deliberate or accidental – away from difference and dissonance in the culture of the newsfeed. The key difference between the epistemic bubble and the echo chamber is in the intentionality and dogmatism of the latter.

We should not overestimate the influence and ontological status of 'echo chambers'. Recent empirical research (Dubois and Blank 2017; Dutton et al. 2017; Shore et al. 2018; Sindermann et al. 2020) indicates that many users get information from many sources, that is, the majority of individuals are not mechanically dependent on only one channel. Yet we should not ignore the tendencies that the term 'echo chamber' is typically invoked to describe. If the view of the social media terrain as a collection of hardwired echo chambers is reductively pessimistic, the view of this terrain as full of reasonable dialogue, reflexivity and individuation of ideas falling into the myth of pluralism and reasonable behaviour is naively optimistic. Numerous studies have revealed echo chamber effects in both Twitter and Facebook (Guo et al. 2020; Usher et al. 2018; Jacobson et al. 2016; Del Vicario et al. 2016; Cossard et al. 2020). Far from a utopian deliberative arena based on a reasonable forum, social media are mostly composed by contents users who select and agree. In this sense, much more than an algorithmically constructed bubble, the echo chamber effect deals with the way sociality and thought are constructed in social media.

Rather than viewing an 'echo chamber' as a 'thing', and wrestling with the question of whether it exists or not, it is more accurate and useful to look at the 'echo chamber effect' (Di Fonzo 2011). Viewed as enclaving tendencies rather than delimited rooms, echo chamber effects can be understood in a more diffuse sense, where they can be more or less prevalent in different virtual contexts, and among different subpopulations (Sindermann et al. 2020). Here, TikTok is a good example, since it operates through short videos and machine learning, employing constant interaction between the users and the system to generate an extreme personalization of contents (Brennan 2020). The echo chamber effect here is amplified increasingly with increased use of the platform since individual preferences are available faster due to the feedback system. Efforts like those of Chkhartishvili and Kozitsin (2018), who have developed a metric for measuring the echo chamber effect, may be more helpful than attempting to delineate a uniform notion of exactly how powerful and encompassing 'they' are.

To speak of 'echo chamber effects' it is not necessary to posit ontologically separate groups or enclaves, with bounded membership, absolutely homogeneous expression of beliefs and complete immersion of participants. Instead, one might imagine a rhizomatic dimension of echo chamber effects running throughout the general social (media) terrain, punctuated with condensations of greater or lesser density and intensity in different places. In this image, consider echo chamber effects as always coexisting and interacting with dimensions of other tendencies, such as open dialogue, reflexivity, diversity of viewpoints, and so on. Our primary purpose in this book in to analyse the ways that social media culture may play a part in the social pathologies that manifest

in the crisis of liberal democracy, and as this is our main purpose, we will focus here on echo chamber effects rather than other, contrary tendencies.

Returning to the individual user, who projects a generalized other onto an invisible audience, an area of great power for the echo chamber effect is in bolstering the individual's normative solipsism. The user can craft their audience and newsfeed so that others will evaluate the user based upon criteria that the user is comfortable with, and the user can craft their own image for their spectatorship, in order to live up to these evaluative criteria as much as possible. One cannot entirely blind or hypnotize other users. There is a bare minimum one cannot erase, where one is always subject to the threat that one might not measure up. In the newsfeed, the user can craft their spectacular self according to what they want to think of themselves. The user can craft the invisible audience so that the latter also will think well of the user to the extent that the user conveys the image aspired to. And yet there are limits to this malleability – if the user were entirely in control, the need for impression management would be less. The capacity to select one's audience does not go so far as to eliminate social anxieties and insecurities related to body image, for example. Research has shown that social media use can exacerbate such anxieties and negative perceptions among young women (Fardouly 2015), since the typical tendency is to compare one's organic self, 'flaws' and all, with the carefully filtered spectacular selves other users project.

4.6 Splitting Public Sphere

Echo chamber effects include defensive mechanisms which help insulate the user from the potential to take seriously divergent views. One such mechanism is the reinforcement of trust in the in-group (those who think like the user), and of distrust in the out-group (those who think differently from the user). Nguyen (2020, 147) also discusses what he calls disagreement-reinforcement mechanisms: 'members can be brought to hold a set of beliefs such that the existence and expression of contrary beliefs reinforces the original set of beliefs and the discrediting story', for example in Endre Begby's (2017) notion of 'evidential pre-emption' – if outsiders' responses are predicted and cast as erroneous before they are encountered, insiders may be prone to discrediting the others' responses immediately when encountered on the basis of the accuracy of the prediction rather than due to careful consideration. The exposition to the generalized other and the manifold stimuli of the surfaces and declarations coming from groups and profiles of users who cluster because they already agree, reinforce a partisan sense of position before any debate starts. It is easier to inflate an individual position and act as if it could count on an amount of (sometimes irrational) arguments, personal beliefs and data. In other words, the echo chamber effect is not a technological determinism, it is not connected to the total administration of technology over human conducts;

instead, it is about the way relatedness deals with the proliferation and filters of arenas for individual self-expression that characterize the clustered individual experiences of self, other, politics, morality and life itself under the Debordian spectacle in the digital age. The echo chamber effect is thus not totalitarian, but it does narrow horizons and generate mirages.

The narrowing began, however, long before Web 2.0. In a chapter called 'The Closing of the Universe of Discourse', of his famous book from 1964 called *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse described mechanisms by which language had come to portray a simplified view of reality that seemed to leave no space for questioning or dissent. It is not so much that dissent is decried, as that dissent appears irrational if not entirely nonsensical and impossible from within the dominant discourse. Among the mechanisms he described are, for instance, the common use of acronyms that mask complexity; the over-use of hyphenated language, etc. especially in joining together aspects of technology, politics and military; a language of 'concreteness' that tends to conflate 'the thing and its function'; and particularly relevant to the world of social media memes, *images are substituted for concepts*.[1] The pervasive effect of images implies a peculiar form of engagement and even rationality. If the concept designates an abstract representation grounded in a process of reflection (Marcuse 1991, 108), the predominance of one-dimensional thought deprives this rationality of any critical potential, since reflection may be damaged due to its confinement to operational terms. In the 1980s, Neil Postman (1985/2006) offered a similar diagnosis in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman located the narrowing in relation to the inflated position of television in society. He suggested the logic of entertainment was infecting other areas of life (e.g., religion, education, etc.), and critical reflection was phasing out as people were instead inundated with images. Politics was reduced to entertainment, and people's capacity to think about and discuss politics shrunk in concert. Now in the age of social media, psychological research on internet users indicates they develop skills at multi-tasking and visual-spatial understanding at the expense of their capacity for critical and creative insight (Carr 2020; Greenfield 2009).

Marcuse's concern with the ubiquity of images overlaps considerably with Flusser's concern with the ubiquity of surfaces, but they should not be reduced to one another. Instead, as with Debord, we find in Marcuse a useful pairing with Flusser to supply a broader theory of the society of the selfie. Marcuse's concern was largely of the domination of positivist 'technological rationality' and the closing off of other dimensions of interpretation, awareness and contextualization. For Flusser, the narrowing is not explicitly complicit with technological rationality. Its primary dynamic is in the erosion of depth, meaning, movement and relation beyond the image or surface in its form of appearance. In this sense, while Marcuse's theory of one-dimensionality is still useful, Flusser's notion is more flexible to denote the potential for the narrowing to occur for different persons or collections of persons in different ways. If 'narrowing' implies a centre of the narrowing as a kind of telos, then – contrary to

Marcuse – we suggest that the narrowing occurs in relation to multiple centres or teloses. Normative conclusions are not all the same, they remain multiple, and in fact their multiplicity is in some sense amplified by the narrowing. What is similar across communities of belief is the moral and discursive insulation of each from the others involved in the common narrowing process.

With social media, the narrowing takes a novel turn. With television, the spectator is passive, and in its first few decades, the selection of shows and channels was constrained. The trend was towards people passively soaking in the same images. With social media, the spectator is also a participant, and the patterns of each individual's participation shapes the personalized collection of images they encounter. The algorithms that facilitate this tendency thus feed into the narrowing but with the internet, the user shapes the horizon at the same time that the horizon shapes the user. The echo chamber's narrowing mechanism is towards solipsistic mirage that allows one not to feel challenged on the level of one's values. Everyone's horizon of normative deliberation is narrowed here, to the point where motion is increasingly unnecessary, to the point of growing 'one-dimensionality'. The echo chamber effect, especially under the aegis of algorithms based on what one likes or follows/unfollows, is part of a personalization of communication standards described by Marcuse (1991, 94–96) as the *effect of familiarity*. For him, spectacular language is based on the authoritarian identification between person and function. The superimposed, standardized selections of social media and the relationship with the generalized other, in Marcusean terms, turn the interactions dependent on functions and images that are presented and fit 'especially for you', that is, it 'promotes the self-identification of the individuals with the functions they and the others perform'. This expression of one-dimensional thought deprives critique and repels the recognition of the factors behind the facts; the abridgement of the concept in simultaneous images, according to preferences and hierarchies in social media, implies the loop of self-validating thoughts immune against contradiction (Marcuse 1991, 100).

For Marcuse, one-dimensional discourse was part of a larger process encompassing politics, psychology and culture in advanced industrial society – all areas converging in one-dimensional directions, towards 'total administration'. Rather than being administered by 'the capitalist class' in any conscious way, the one-dimensional reality serves the perpetuation of bureaucratic capitalism but has no nameable source in any particular person or organization. Marcuse's work came before the postmodern era, and while much of his analysis still resonates today, the situation is different in the twenty-first century. For example, it is still possible to argue that popular media shapes public opinion (McCombs and Valenzuela 2020), as Marcuse indicated, but today there is a wealth of independent media available online, that is clearly not co-opted and directed by the preferred discourses of a small society of big business elites and establishment politicians. Users have many diverse perspectives at their

fingertips, and with blogs and YouTube, anyone can become an independent source of political commentary. In this sense, claiming that all independent media is somehow enlisted in the preservation of bureaucratic capitalism is clearly reductive. Yet in some sense the tendency towards one-dimensionality is as strong as ever, via memes, hashtags, slogans and language that carries hidden presuppositions and leaves little to no space for reflection or dissent. Considering the echo chamber effect, individuals construct their own idiosyncratic horizons; but when individual horizons are similar, they operate centripetally, while when they are different, they operate centrifugally. A simple analogy: the tendency is something like a reverse magnetism, where similar 'charges' gravitate together, and opposing 'charges' pull further apart.

Yet there is an added dynamic, that centripetal horizons are in discursive intercourse and join together to participate in what we might call 'homophilic assemblages' characterized by one-dimensional communication and presupposed consensus. In the mid-twentieth century, Marcuse denoted a 'closing universe of discourse'. Let us put Marcuse's notion into dialogue with Debord's theories. The Marcusean 'universe of discourse' is, at minimum, a collection of dominant frames and narratives. The Debordian 'spectacle' is the intermingled mass of media images that constitutes the dominant frames and narratives through which we experience and understand the world. To give a Marcusean slant to Debordian theory then, we might say that the spectacle is not only a hegemonizing force. It is also a force of narrowing. Experience and understanding are at once mediated by the spectacle and atrophied due to the limited range of conceptualization permitted by the mediating spectacle. Marcuse's work on one-dimensionality and Debord's work on spectacle shared much in common. Both works reflected on the same broad social developments, and both were inspirational to left-wing activists in the 1960s. Both also predate the rise of the digital and social media, and so could not have foreseen the new significance of social dynamics particularly marked in digital platforms.

In the era of digital media, the diffuse circulation of data promotes two simultaneous motions that constitute a different-but-related scenario from the one described above: (a) fusing together individual horizons into homophilic assemblages, and (b) pulling apart and isolating these homophilic assemblages to render them functionally incommensurate. In the society of the selfie, it is maybe more accurate to denote a *splitting public sphere*. We mean 'splitting' here both in the sense of the physical analogy of branching, ramifying, etc., and in the psychoanalytic sense of black-and-white thinking regarding self and other. In object relations theory, 'splitting' is a defence mechanism whereby to the splitter, a person is either all good or all bad (Fairbairn 1994). In this sense, when we speak of 'splitting', we mean a simultaneous process of fragmenting and narrowing.

When one ventures into a context away from their accustomed homophilic assemblages, one carries their personalized horizon with them, which is based

on the affirming and reaffirming experience of encountering similar opinions to one's own as a typical state of affairs. In situations where people express divergent views on a thread of comments to a post, productive dialogue should not be anticipated. The unlimited reactions and responses expressed become a rhapsody of views that are not able to reflect about others' opinions other than clear derision or agreement. It is an exhibition of largely incommensurate positions. Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018, 8) says 'the very structure of a Facebook post and the threads of comments that run beneath it resist full and calm consideration. Posts and comments are designed to respond to just the comment directly above'. While it is possible to tag multiple people within one's comment, the basic structure is that each comment only refers to one post or other comment. 'They are nested to inhibit any member of a discussion from considering the full range of responses. Participants are encouraged to respond rashly, so they often respond rudely'.

In this splitting public sphere, rather than closing into a docile, consenting, homogenous population, there are an array of solipsistic social and political fragments with heated differences, talking past one another. As people become used to their homophilic assemblages and personalized echo chamber effects, they tend to become more intolerant of voices who diverge (Stroud and Muddiman 2013) from their horizons of normality. Engaging in civil debate less, people publicly *express* their opinions more instead. To express as one wants to, without seeing one's audience, increasingly becomes the rule, and thus the expectation and perhaps even the preference. The conviction that the freedom of individual expression trumps the responsibility to be considerate of one's audience, allow extreme and angry public venting to become normalized and even defended as a moral imperative to permit and to practice, e.g., the popularity of the slogan 'fuck your feelings' among Trump supporters around the time of the United States 2016 presidential election (Hong 2020). Voiced disagreement communicated towards those one disagrees with does not disappear, of course. Rather, it becomes less rational, more heated and more derogatory. The angry monologue declaring a group of others monolithically to be depraved, idiotic, duped, evil or biologically inferior, becomes increasingly common. After continuous frequent exposure to the 'flaming' reactions of others online, individuals become more likely to exhibit the same verbally aggressive tendencies (Hmeilowski et al. 2014). Friendships are lost and family members are disowned because disagreement cannot be managed and need not be tolerated (Smith et al. 2019). And the experience of the intolerance of the other side towards one's own, can only feed into an inflated sense that *they* – the monolith on the other side – are irrational, hateful, etc. (Yudkin et al. 2019), and so must not be tolerated. In a back-and-forth cycle, the spreading assumption heads towards a self-fulfilling prophecy between diverging groups who more and more become opposing and intolerant groups (Ahler 2014).

The splitting and fomenting work of the authoritarian public figure and propagandist – or 'agitator' (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949; Sipling 2021) – is

accomplished from the ground up in this case. This is what makes cultural sabotage through online trolling, etc., so effective. It is like poking a hungry, angry dog. Send out an extreme, divisive meme, and people will willingly champion it or attack it viciously, in effect legitimizing it to those who would champion it (Seymour 2019, 2020). In such a state people are highly susceptible to authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda. Social media per se is not responsible for authoritarianism. The reified relations of the society of the selfie, instead, play an important role in the spread of contemporary forms of authoritarianism. Agitation and black-and-white thinking are particularly prone to the mobilization of popular resentment against the elites and the perceived inequalities and injustices of material life.

In Chapter 6, we will explicate this at greater length. For now, recent events in Brazil can provide one empirical illustration of this hyper-politicization of digital media. Since the far-right government was elected in 2018, the president Jair Bolsonaro decided to open a personal account on Facebook to give a live broadcast about his political views every Thursday night. Those broadcasts have been transmitted regularly and they are marked by the performance of authenticity. The president tries to convince the audience about his independence in relation to the political elites and the artificial establishment of mass media, using simple language and allegedly expressing his true feelings and emotions with his invisible audience. These live broadcasts construct a popular digital milieu for far-right militants to express their views as being a space for unmediated contact between the leader and the people. The comments are open to all users and the conflict of homophilic assemblages becomes tangible: the spectacular appearance of individuals is guided by opinions that are already closed and are only exposed either to confront the opponent or to reinforce a solipsist logic that confirms narrow subjective beliefs prior to any rational debate. In this sense, the plethora of meanings and echo chamber effects collide in a rhapsody of stigmas and moral offenses.

Yet the digital political strategy of the far-right is not confined to the spectacular exhibition of the government via the construction of the image of the president as a humble man. In light of the presence of right-wing extremists in social media, the Supreme Court began an investigation against the 'cabinet of hate', a group connected to the president and his family that is responsible for promoting hate and political attacks via profiles and fan pages on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Facebook and Instagram, moreover, decided to remove 73 accounts of the 'cabinet of hate', associated with the spread of hate speech and political attacks against the establishment (democratic institutions, mainstream opposition, journalists, etc.). The same cabinet is also investigated by the Supreme Court and the Federal Police – and was the target of an operation for the search and apprehension of alleged criminal material – due to the mass spread of 'fake news', attacks and threats since 2018 via WhatsApp and social media, comprising a complex network of technical and financial support that counts on businessmen, digital influencers, far-right politicians and far-right militants.

4.7 Conclusion

Instead of being guided by reasonable consensus, the public sphere is much more fragmented in the society of the selfie (Vaidhyanathan 2018). At the same time as spectacular culture has been grounded in the unification under market pressures, it also delivers 'tribalization'. It implies a rhapsody of assemblages (much of them transitory and volatile) of groups, orchestrated hate attacks, hacker activities and single-issue campaigns that populate social media, online forums, blogs and stream channels (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997). These are cultural and political signs of the fluid and fuzzy boundaries of a de-centred public life (Johnson 2013), in which the hegemony of mass media coexist with plural micro-groups and individual producers of spectacular content.

Since the 1990s, some postmodern theories and liberal theories have celebrated the cultural force of micro-publics, based on the progress of multicultural society and new forms for self-expression and difference paved by a conjunction of liberal democracy and the global market (Brunner 1995). The new forms of cultural consumption were understood as a self-realization and the participation in the democratic promises embedded in digital media (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2007; Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013). It would be the end of grand narratives with the supposed implosion of the big questions of modernity and their unified public narratives grounded in nation, progress, reason, class struggle, race, etc. Urban tribes were the apex of multicultural society and the many cultural references for individuals devoted to banality and media consumption (Maffesoli 1990, 94–96). When it comes to digital communication, it is argued that it constituted the subject in ways other than that of traditional modern institutions, affecting the ways identities are structured: the postmodern subject would be unstable, multiple, diffuse and not attached to grand narratives (Poster 1995).

If subjective transformations grasp important changes in the life-forms of contemporary capitalism, the postmodern pluralism and the celebration of micro-publics seem to stumble when up against its effects in light of the disaffection with liberal democracy expressed in extremism, and far-right and fascist filter bubbles that bases identity politics on ethnicity, nation, moral order, romantic past and stigma on the difference. The contemporary force of ultra-nationalist groups, which diffuses aversion to racial minorities, counts on the discourse of purity centred in an exclusive notion of polity comprised by ethnic unity (Valluvan 2019). In other words, the appeal of far-right and even conservative politics tries to re-centre public life around key elements of the grand narratives of modernity. Instead of a resurgence of the old order amidst the new, these micro-publics that counter the democratic liberal societies have been present in the internet since the 1990s – they are a byproduct of the society of the selfie, just as multicultural promises are. In contexts of crisis and strong modernization moves, those groups have gained visibility and have been normalized in the society of the selfie with hate groups and projects for attacks in

Italy (Frate 2021), mass messages systems with neo-Nazi content in Germany (Jordans and Rising 2021), threats to leftist politicians in Brazil (Rupp 2021), videos with swastikas in live transmissions in Portugal (Henriques 2021), etc.

These political strategies count on echo chamber effects and black-and-white thinking made visible in the splitting public sphere, but also on the catching effect of their messages disseminated out indefinitely through the invisible audience beyond friends lists, via hashtags, memes, gifs, montages, fake news and sensationalism. Propagandistic images proliferate via multiple platforms, as rational debate is reduced and moral complexity is harder to come by and easier to avoid. Spectacular selves, seeking to affirm and impose themselves (with retweets, sharing, avatars, strong opinions used to 'slay' and impact, etc.), are productive units of contents connected to the new forms of propaganda and polarization. The susceptibility of digital media to authoritarian rhetoric is a new frontier of social and political conflict as well as a cultural sign of alienation, which goes hand in hand with the search for authenticity in the reified terrain of the society of the selfie.

Notes

[1] *One-Dimensional Man* was published just three years before *The Society of the Spectacle*, and in these works Marcuse and Debord share a kinship in their analyses of consumer society and the closing down of consciousness, and in their Hegelian-Marxist roots.

CHAPTER 5

Dialectics of Alienation and Abnormality

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we describe a complex, dialectical 'system' of psycho-sociality. The system has four aspects, which we will discuss in relation to one another: alienation, 'authenticity strain', fear and normality/abnormality. We begin by defining our use of the term 'alienation' here, where we will focus more on Fromm's theory of alienation than Debord's, although in the society of the selfie Debord's and Fromm's respective models of alienation can be understood as two wings of the same bird.

Up until now we have primarily discussed the topic of alienation in terms of Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities, as taken up in Debord's theory of the spectacle. Here, social alienation in the sense alluded to in Marx's early essay on estranged labour, and taken up as a central component of Fromm's psychosocial analysis of modern capitalism, begins to occupy a central role in our analysis. There is debate among Marxists whether it is appropriate to consider Marx's early thought (e.g., the estranged labour essay of the Paris manuscripts of 1844) as essentially the same or different from his later thought (e.g., *Capital*), but for our purposes here, the difference does not need to be weighed or arbitrated. We might conjecture that the later theory of the fetishism of commodities could be 'folded into' the earlier theory of estranged labour without problem, but even this is not crucial for us. Instead, the utility in referencing

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both as related to different aspects of alienation under capitalism, is that alienation under capitalism is multifaceted, and so is best understood using a multipronged approach. If the theories directly contradict one another in a way that poses unreconcilable, substantive flaws in our analysis, then it may be best not to use them in such a constellation as we display in this book. Yet in our assessment the difference between them is not so problematic, and so we choose to use both of them in our constellation, to illuminate different aspects of the society of the selfie.

This new aspect concerns a different dimension or form of alienation from the sense of alienation as mediation of sociality by commodities or by the spectacle. That form of alienation concerns the mystification of the social and economic life that runs underneath the spell of capital, that social and economic reality being in fact the foundation of capitalism and its final word, despite the contrary illusion that the 'phantasmagoric' world of commodities and images presents to people. This new aspect of the society of the selfie that we now turn to, concerns alienation as estrangement from self and others. It is a type of alienation that translates into feelings of loneliness or meaninglessness. It is alienation in the sense of feeling cut off from one's 'authentic' inner self, and cut off from 'full' connection with other people. The division between the two types of alienation – Debordian alienation as mediation and Frommian alienation as estrangement – is useful analytically to identify certain dynamics with greater clarity and theoretical precision. Yet we maintain that the two types are related when the issue at hand is the social impacts of communication technologies. The mediation of sociality is also a kind of social distancing, and the effects of technological change on the social structure is likely – or inevitably – to involve transformations in the texture of human relatedness and the scope and activities of social networks. Because these two types of alienation overlap, our discussion here necessarily includes the issue of mediated sociality, although our concern with it in this particular chapter regards its role in social and self-estrangement.

Our aim here is not simply to give another lamentation about the loss of community and meaning in modern life. This has been treated extensively by plenty of authors already. And such lamentation can easily lapse into a distorted idealization of pre-modern life. Instead, we are concerned with this estrangement as part of a dialectical system where the alienated society is simultaneously a society fixated on authenticity and connection. And to the extent that alienation might be seen as a form of social pathology, so too we view the hunger to overcome alienation by obtaining a greater experience of authentic relatedness as caught up in the same pathological system. The integral underside to the fixation on alienation and authenticity is the fixation on normality and abnormality, which co-form one another in dialectical interaction, much the same as alienation and the reaction against it operate in dialectical mutuality. The psychosocial problems that populate this dialectical system are propelled by a tendentious relationship between fear of others' transgressions on

the one hand, and the strained desire to overcome alienation with authenticity on the other hand. It is a system that permits no simple 'sane' solution on the individual level. This does not mean that every individual is equally 'crazy' or tormented or incapable of living a satisfying life or hopeless to develop and maintain rewarding and 'healthy' relationships with others. Surely alienation and fear impact different people in different ways and with different intensities. Yet as an individual living in a society where sickness imbues the status quo, it is impossible to be 'healthy' and 'normal' simultaneously, and to the extent that abnormal people are prone to be alienated and alienation is unhealthy, it is structurally impossible to purify oneself of the complex social sickness (Fromm 1955). The game must be played because it is the only game in town, and leaving town is not only a scarce possibility, it is also already written into the game. Theodor Adorno's adage that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly' is particularly pertinent. The only real way out of the damning system is to change the damned system, and for this, pursuing revolutionary social transformation is the only possible route of agency. The sense of this necessity is one of the key products of the system's machinations.

Below, we explain our concept of 'authenticity strain' in relation to alienation. In brief, the society of the selfie includes the simultaneous promotion of alienation on the one hand – both in the Debordian sense of alienation as mediated sociality and the Frommian sense of alienation as estrangement from self and others – and fetishization of authenticity on the other hand. Authenticity strain is the tension that arises from the gap between experienced alienation and desired authenticity. We then discuss fear and risk avoidance, which Giddens and Beck identify as a defining characteristic of contemporary 'risk society'. One of the fixations of pervasive contemporary fear is the threat of other people who are dangerous, deviant or 'abnormal'. We finally describe how the fear of abnormality buttresses and possibly reinforces 'normal' alienated life in the society of the selfie, while authenticity strain – which is partly provoked by alienation – inspires the 'abnormal' desire to transgress social boundaries. The parts are intertwined and the system reinforces itself. It runs on and generates psychosocial unrest. As the system grows in preponderance throughout society, the possibility disappears of individuals independently avoiding or transcending it.

5.2 Alienation and Authenticity Strain

Despite the trends towards narcissism and solipsism that accompany the spread of the society of the selfie, despite the growing ubiquity of neoliberal impression management and self-expression, people still live in a deeply social reality, where at minimum they long to receive positive metrics on their posts. Generally, people still long for numbers, words and images to emerge from the invisible audience, with real names and avatars attached.

Yet it is not only that the social element *haunts* the culture of the newsfeed, nor even that it still *defines* it, albeit in an estranged and mediated form. With the ubiquity of surfaces, there has also risen a celebration of depth. With the ubiquity of artificiality, there has also risen a celebration of the organic. While much of their interaction is alienated through tailored digital avatars, people hold *authenticity* in high esteem. The moral valorization of authenticity is part of a long historical trajectory of the full expression of subjective feelings dating back to the early Romantics in the late eighteenth century (Frank 1989; Williams 1976), especially in the paradigmatic works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder. This tendency puts a strong emphasis on radical individuation and the notion of originality as a source of the self. The expressive self-articulation intensifies the sense of depth and produces a tension with disengaged rational constraints and all kinds of artificial control provided by mainstream rules over individual inwardness (Taylor 2001). It is both ethically elevated and hungered for. The desire for authenticity, and the moral sense that surrounds it, dovetail with the frustrated voyeurism of life under the Debordian spectacle.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the popularity of reality TV testifies to the hunger, as also does the trend of 'found footage' style horror film, with the enormous popularity of *Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*. Whether real, fabricated or somewhere in the middle, spectators long for the feeling that they are getting a real look into somebody else's experience, in Goffman's terms, beyond just the 'front stage' of crafted social encounters, reaching instead into the more authentic 'back stage', to experience others in all of their imperfection and vulnerability. On the one hand, this indicates a human longing for real connection, and a trend of turning away from the artificiality of airbrushes and avatars. On the other hand, the trend also stretches into increased voyeurism, which is facilitated considerably by the internet. The selfie phenomenon participates in the blurring of the boundaries between public and private space, many selfies showing people in spontaneous, private situations, yet viewable by potentially thousands of people. And finally, the turning away from the spectacular and glossy to things that feel more authentic, brings authenticity itself into the orbit of the spectacle. One consumes the experience of others' authenticity, and one offers up one's own authenticity for others to consume, as a selling point on what Fromm (1947) denoted 'the personality marketplace'.

If the Romantic celebration of authenticity was a moral protest against the rise of the Enlightenment ideal of instrumental reason (Taylor 2001), in the society of the selfie authenticity may be the superficial sign of a rejection of alienation and narrowing communication. However, it fails when it comes to try to overcome the reified sociality. In Chapters 3 and 4, we emphasized authenticity as a dialectical protest against the reification of a self that seeks to affirm its originality via impression management and self-expression before an audience. Self-exhibition and the need for an authentic way of being are

nothing but a subjection of the self to the cultural jargon of an age that, under maxims like 'never hide' and 'broadcast yourself', is immersed in brandings dedicated to turn life itself into a self-alien commodity and to dissolve it into representation via the spectacle, as Debord described. Moreover, neoliberal impression management itself, under which every form of the spectacular self articulates its authentic expression amidst an intangible stream of data and images, is a product of this reified sociality.

Yet, the free, authentic, individual self remains a hallmark ideal of contemporary life under capitalism (Taylor 1991). It is a modern ideal that emphasizes the moral content by which each individual has an original way of being human. The diffuse promises of authenticity as self-fulfilment and self-realization entail a subjectivist exhibition of personal choices and lifestyle as being all worthy, that is, a soft relativism permeates modern culture. If via impression management the individual tries to define themselves meaningfully, the spectacular self promotes a self-centred culture in opposition to the commons demands of society. It can favour a kind of fragmentation (amplified by echo chamber effects) by which the sense of collectivity is eroded by partial groupings and tribalism. Political citizenship and collective commitment to polity, thus, turn out to be purely instrumental and dependent on 'one-dimensional' or 'split' communication – ironically, authenticity eventually feeds its opposite, that is, instrumental reason and the damaged ties of sociality.

The free, individual and authentic self is also an ideal that has been continuously frustrated by the modern world, with all of its zones of conformism and artificiality. In this sense, authenticity and the spectacular self also promote a demand for recognition (Taylor 1991) in which people identify themselves by their social roles through profiles, personal updates, etc. There is a superposition within this impression management: if the promises of liberal democratic societies and social media imply a growing sense of horizontalization between citizens, this formal principle is contradicted by the exhibition of social hierarchies – as soft as they may appear in profiles and avatars. Liberal-democratic capitalism is self-agitating in this way, that freedom, individuality and authenticity are stifled at the same time as they are celebrated. The ubiquitous, shifting challenge to the status quo of counter-cultural niches, are a reproduction of this contradiction at the same time as they are defections from whatever norms flirt with hegemony at a given place and time. The hippie and punk movements, for instance, were very similar in that they were often touted by members as zones of cultural liberation; and yet there were particular styles of consumption which one had to ape and even flaunt – styles of music, clothing, etc. – if one were to convincingly belong to these allegedly free, authentic and nonconformist creeds, who stood in defiance of the confining conformist world of mainstream society.

Regarding this ethical side, people also tout the capacity of the selfie to bring a new kind of authenticity via self-expression online, and much of the pro vs. anti

selfies discourse revolves around the perception of the selfie as either artificial or authentic. Some social media 'influencers' come under immense criticism for seeming inauthentic or impersonal. Others boost their celebrity careers by adhering to the authenticity imperative, keeping in touch with a wide fan base in a 'personal' way, and divulging information about their private lives, or images and videos of themselves with their families, etc.

The search for authenticity and the blurring of boundaries between public and private spheres are part of the transformation of individual inwardness and personal relationships. Anthony Giddens (1992) theorizes that modern society is undergoing a 'transformation of intimacy', where love and sex are freed from patriarchal traditions, and people increasingly value 'pure relationships' where authentic connection is the only motive, and can be fully realized. The process deals with a broader transformation of the self in modern culture: the same subjectivist principle that makes every life-style worthy also makes the individual more malleable to volatilize a preordained state of affairs of traditional values and strict moral norms. In the society of the selfie, the whole of life is under the pressure of a growing need for disclosure and it implies the production of new intersubjective pressures. The pervasive presence of digital surfaces blurs the modern separation between public and private realms and induces the individual to be available 24/7 not only to consume, but also to interact with the many others. Authenticity, in this sense, becomes an impression to be managed, that forces one to express how good one's life can be, despite the reified and damaged content of sociality.

The volatilization of the difference between the public and the private space reveals the power of 'extimacy' (Tisseron 2001, 52–54), that is, a movement of intimacy towards self-disclosure and the exposition (emphasis on the Latin prefix *ex*) of fractions of individual life that was formerly confined to individual inwardness. And here the relational aspect is important, because the desire for 'extimacy' goes hand in hand with the creation of new social needs grounded in the reaction of the generalized other. Be it the reactions on the newsfeed or the followers and comments a virtual self deserves, those new needs are dependent on the self-spectacle. This 'appearance of the self' (*démonstration de soi*) (Tisseron 2001, 68) is connected to the new symbolic signs of recognition embedded in digital images: digital images are intersensory, because the spectacle is a rhapsody of means of reproduction (personal videos, selfies, avatars, memes, etc.) and synesthetic stimuli (sounds, colours, movement and sensations). 'Extimacy' expresses the centrality of self-expression to give voice to individual's own narratives against the pressures of reality and despite the persistence of traditional, more selective forms of spectacle (like TV corporations and mainstream newspapers).

The investment in self-image is a constant flux of rationalization regarding the best angle, the most appropriate phrases, what is trending, how the invisible audience reacts to certain contents, etc. For Giddens (1990), thus, as a 'consequence of modernity', the self is a reflexive practice, because the individual must

construct it amid the many paths and promises for self-fulfilment as well as the pressures of an inhuman amount of abstract information. In this sense, the self is modelled and continuously examined under the sociocultural pressures of incoming information. If authenticity promises the opening up and projecting out of the self into the spectacle as commodity and representation (via the exhibition of intimacy and inwardness), it also builds new forms of personal trust mediated by images. The relatedness with 'absent others', since face-to-face contact becomes phantasmagoric and geographically distant (and almost irrelevant), demands the exposition of the individual profile to the invisible many by hazard. The construction of trust in digital milieu is not a pre-given datum, but rather a project for self-presentation that needs to be *worked at*. Sociality is dependent on a mutual process of self-disclosure in which individuals express their lives and views as worthy of being shared and commented.

So far, we have described the desire for authenticity in terms of its origins in Romantic thinking, associated with freedom and individuality; and yet frustrated no end by the alienation and artificiality that consumer-oriented, spectacular capitalism engenders. In this sense, modern capitalism suffers from internal contradictions that reach deep into people's emotional lives, into their longings and capacities – and lack thereof – for intimate connection. The alienation of the human subject under the reign of the Debordian spectacle is accompanied by a persistent and insatiable desire for reconciliation and recognition, for connectedness with the 'real' and 'authentic', for unmediated intuition and for unqualified use-value. This hungry desire is continuously frustrated both by rampant social alienation and by the lack of any clear exit of consciousness, much less of social life from mediation by the spectacle. The festering alienation and frustrated longing for authenticity feed into patterns of aggressive transgression, or in other words, to violent forms of deviance.

'Alienation' is a broad concept that resists simplistic definition. Arguably because of this, but also likely for more political reasons (e.g., its association with Marxism and youth rebellion) it has not commonly featured in mainstream sociology over the past few decades. Yet in terms of the actual substance of a variety of sociological theories, the notion of alienation is still very influential, underneath alternative labels and guises (Seeman 1983; Smith and Bohm 2008). Appreciatively, Kalekin-Fishman and Langman (2015) have referred to alienation as 'the critique that refuses to disappear'. Seeman's typology from 1959 identifies several branches of alienation theory, respectively stemming from Marx, Mannheim, Durkheim, Nettler and Fromm (Tatsis and Zito 1974; Smith and Bohm 2008). Criminology has taken great influence from the Durkheimian tradition concerning 'anomie' as well as from the 'social integration' tradition of the Chicago School. For our purposes here, we are primarily interested in the branches that can be traced to Fromm and Durkheim.[1]

Fromm (1947, 1955) suggested that people have a collection of needs, satiation of which can be sought in positive or productive ways but can also be sought in more negative or destructive ways, when positive satiation does not

appear to be an option. Whether the 'productive orientation' will flourish is influenced by social and structural conditions, and the particular flavours of surrogate satiation will also be contoured to the prevailing society. In nineteenth century capitalism, exploitative and hoarding orientations were promoted by society. In the twentieth century, he says receptive and marketing orientations were promoted.

Unavoidably, people are born into a context of ambivalence regarding freedom and its negative relations to belongingness and security (Fromm 1941). This is intrinsic to human life, and yet it is exacerbated under conditions of modern capitalism. Fromm frames this in terms of the connectedness that children experience, first within the womb, second within the family. The child progressively separates from their parents, with each step of separation, achieving newfound strength in their individuality and autonomy. And yet this new independence is always accompanied by anxiety – a sense of vulnerability and aloneness. Ultimately, the child's developmental trajectory is to become an independent adult. Ideally, they are able to connect with their families of origin in new ways that are still profound, and this transformative *re*connection is only possible based upon the child's successful development of a secure, autonomous sense of self, which requires the courage to *dis*connect.

In traditional societies, there is perhaps not such a great distance between the family and the community, and so 'striking out on one's own' still entails a basic modicum of rootedness, belonging, and so forth, even perhaps living very geographically close to one's family of origin (Fromm 1941). But in modern capitalism, the adult individual has to 'strike out on one's own' in a more severe way, facing a 'society' of millions of people in an individualistic culture and a competitive marketplace. In some important ways this provides an even greater potential for adult autonomy and self-creation, and at the same time, the situation is perhaps exponentially more anxiety-provoking than in societies of the past. When people encounter newfound freedom, accompanied by anxiety and aloneness, they can relate to this freedom in one of two overall directions. In the first, one can rise to it, and learn to reconnect with others, rooted in the strength of one's new autonomy, with an authentic self-knowledge. In the second, one can retreat from it, and regress into various 'mechanisms of escape', these being sadomasochism, destructiveness and conformity. Fromm's analysis is primarily intended to point towards the sociohistorical conditions that give rise to fascism, and in the next chapter, we will make more explicit these connections. For now, we will stay on the character traits *sadomasochism* and *destructiveness*, their proliferation in late capitalism, and their manner of appearance in the society of the selfie.

For Fromm (1941, 1973), contrary to Freudian and common parlance, sadomasochism is primarily about power in interpersonal relations, rather than about sexuality. He says people are driven towards 'symbiosis', where they can have a kind of cognitive fusion of self and other through complementary roles of domination and subordination, the other being another person, or possibly

a social, political or religious cause with which to subordinate oneself. Whether taking the dominant role and incorporating the other into oneself, or the submissive role and losing oneself in the other, the goal is this sort of merging, where the self loses its autonomous integrity. The desire to lose oneself in symbiotic fusion with the other can be a very compelling drive, and even feel intensely romantic. There may be a sense of desperate need for the other, in order to feel complete, or in order to be saved by them – as a mythologized 'magic helper' (Fromm 1956). There may be an intense drive to control the other, first as a means of connection, second as a defence against the threat of abandonment. Destructiveness is often found in conjunction with sadomasochism, but it can be analytically distinguished, in that its purpose is less to join with the other than to vanquish the other. There is a twisted intimacy in this – to be someone or something's destroyer is to matter intensely for them, even if negatively. It also removes the possibility of their autonomous existence, which is perhaps threatening by virtue of them being alien from you. If they no longer exist, they are no longer alien.

Durkheim's theory relevant to the issue of alienation revolves around his concept of 'anomie'. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, he introduces it to refer to a pathological state of society where traditional norms have eroded but new norms have not set in to replace them (Durkheim 1991). In *Suicide*, he attributed anomie as one of four social conditions that can facilitate if not inspire suicide. Durkheim indicates that society is most vulnerable to anomie in times of rapid transition, where the social structure has changed too rapidly for people to be socialized into it in a harmonious way, or to develop and integrate new norms that they could be socialized into. It is not only as a result of crises or negative transitions that anomie is generated, although crises are one of genre of its sources; it can also come through otherwise positive transitions, such as a rapid increase of wealth throughout society that is enough to destabilize customary social positions and expectations. His description of this scenario is particularly pertinent to the present discussion:

> With increased [*accrue*] prosperity desires increase [*exaltés*]. At the very moment when traditional rules have lost their authority, the richer prize offered these appetites stimulates them and makes them more exigent and impatient of control [*règle*] […] But their very demands make fulfilment impossible. Overweening [*surexcitées*] ambition always exceeds the results obtained, great as they may be, since there is no warning to pause here. Nothing gives satisfaction and all this agitation is uninterruptedly maintained without appeasement. (Durkheim 1990, 281)

Robert Merton (1938) took from Durkheim's theory of anomie to develop his own theory of structural 'strain' as an explanation of criminal behaviour. In Merton's theory, when people's expectations about what they are supposed to

be able to attain or achieve are mismatched with the reality of their constraints on being successful (especially in terms of wealth and status, which have become centrally valued personal attributes under capitalism), they experience strain. Under such strain, and more intensively as the strain is more intense, people will be moved to adopt one of five strategies to cope, differentiated by the extent to which they maintain society's high expectations on the one hand, and pursue ascribed (normal) pathways for reaching expectations. The five types are conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. 'Innovation', is a prime breeding ground for criminal behaviour; the innovator may be inspired to pursue illicit pathways for achieving the imagined successes that haunt them, and that they feel like they should be able to have. Strain theory is enormously influential in criminology and is broadly substantiated by decades of empirical support.

Fromm's theory of alienation and the Durkheimian theory of anomie share three points in common. First, both identify rapid material change as a destabilizing force that can lead to problematic social behaviour. Second, both identify the loss of traditional role guidance in modern capitalism as a source of potential social disfunction. And third, both identify the systemic frustration of social desires as generative of socially problematic behaviour. Regarding this last point, a major difference between the Fromm and anomie/strain theories is that Fromm's theory focuses on desires for social relatedness, while Durkheim and Merton tend to focus on the desire for individual success in wealth and status. A second important distinction is that in anomie and strain theories, a person's high expectations for themselves play just as much a role in the strain as do the systemic constraints on their realization of those expectations. In this respect, the hyper-focus in modern capitalism on individual wealth and status combine with the widespread difficulty if not impossibility of their satiation for much of the population, creating the strain that leads innovators to 'deviant' solutions that can include violent transgressions.

We suggest that in the society of the selfie the first two points above are clearly operant. Information technologies and Web 2.0 have rapidly transformed social life and as such accelerate the social destabilization, role confusion and drift towards 'normlessness' endemic to capitalist society. Regarding the third point, we suggest that the differences between Fromm and Durkheim/Merton can be integrated: authentic human relatedness joins wealth and status as simultaneously heightened and frustrated social expectations in the society of the selfie. And when this authenticity strain is great enough, some people – Merton's innovators – will be moved to attempt satiation through surrogate sadomasochistic pathways. For some people this stoked sadomasochism may manifest in criminal behaviour directed towards piercing through 'normal' alienation, violently collapsing the distance between self and other. For the rest of the population, even if not yet moved to violence or personal transgressions, authenticity strain remains a lingering, festering presence.

5.3 Fear

In Fromm's theory, anxiety accompanies alienation, and the flight into sado-masochism, conformity and destructiveness is driven not just by the desire for lost authentic relatedness, but also for a sense of security, as the alienated individual is also the frightened individual. For Giddens (2002) – and relatedly for Beck (1992) – the contemporary period is marked by heightened concern with risk and the avoidance of risk. In contemporary 'risk society', people are dependent on 'abstract systems' that are beyond their control, and the powers of human ingenuity in science and technology have proven to be at least as dangerous as they are helpful. With the invention of the A-bomb and the H-bomb, and especially following the United States' dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, the threat of apocalyptic war became a realistic concern. In addition to the power of nuclear weapons, environmental destruction has become a constant source of anxiety concerning death and destruction on a global scale, and over the past several decades, the fear of an apocalyptic pandemic virus has grown, no doubt exponentially during the era of COVID-19. The reality of the ever-present threat of massive destruction, and the seeming powerless of the individual to do anything to prevent it or protect themselves, contributes to a pervasive 'ontological insecurity', and orientation around risk aversion.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes the contemporary period as 'liquid modernity' – social reality melts into transience and inconclusiveness. Precarious work, unstable social relationships and fluid identity mark much of the human experience, and people suffer from great insecurity as a result. This insecurity is often manifest in 'derivative fear', which he defines as 'a steady frame of mind' characterized by 'the sentiment of being susceptible to danger; a feeling of insecurity (the world is full of dangers that may strike at any time with little or no warning) and vulnerability (in the event of the danger striking, there will be little if any chance of escape or successful defense; the assumption of vulnerability to dangers depends more on a lack of trust in the defenses available than on the volume or nature of actual threats)'. Bauman further characterizes derivative fear as prone to a 'self-propelling capacity', meaning people organize their lives in defensive ways to avoid imagined threats, and in doing so, they do in fact avoid situations that could hypothetically include real threats. Yet the defensive or retreating tendencies will also shield them from coming to any realization about the accuracy or lack thereof concerning their anxieties about the 'world full of dangers' (Bauman 2006, 3). He notes that while one may consciously fear specific dangers, such as associated with one's body, livelihood or social standing, the origins of the fear might be entirely different from the threats now consciously imagined. In psychoanalytic terms, Bauman is alluding to the defence mechanism of 'displacement' (Freud 2018).

Sociologists Barry Glassner (2010) and Frank Furedi (2007, 2018) both argue that American culture has come to be saturated with fear. Glassner emphasizes

that the severity of contemporary fears typically overshoots the real degree of danger, and this overshooting is egged on – if not caused – by the sensationalism of popular news media. In this sense Glassner describes what amounts to a variety of persistent and often simultaneous 'moral panics' (Cohen 2002) over issues like race, parenting, drugs, illness, etc. Like in Bauman's notion of derivative fear, Furedi (2006, 4) describes contemporary fear as having a 'free-floating dynamic', operating in a kind of fluid, easily transferrable fashion. We might liken his description to a cathexis jumping haphazardly between objects. Yet he says that a common denominator in many objects of fear is that they indicate a misanthropic status quo, where people are chronically wary of others. People no longer know what to expect of one another, and so they are habitually cautious, and 'expect the unexpected' (Furedi 2006, 115). The fear that any strangers could be dangerous, serial killers or 'extraordinarily perverted and sick individuals' has set deeply into what for many people is taken-for-granted common sense.

5.4 Dialectic of Abnormality

Typically, the 'social character' of a given society will tend to harmonize with the demands of the social structure (Fromm 1941, 1962). This is how Fromm explains the shift from the dominant character types of nineteenth to twentieth century capitalism. This plays a part in how 'nonproductive' orientations (Fromm 1947) can become normalized and even venerated. In Fromm's terms, common and normalized nonproductive, sadomasochistic or destructive tendencies are 'socially patterned defects' (Fromm 1955). In terms of the well-being of the individual in the fullest sense, including having genuine autonomy and relatedness with others, the status quo may very well be far below the ideal. A certain quantity of sadism, for instance, might be an asset in a very competitive marketplace, where it can be channelled into the will to succeed at the expense of others. People who are able to satisfy sadistic desires through legal, normalized economic behaviour and even become rewarded with money, status and power through doing so, will not appear to be 'unhealthy' within the context of the prevailing order. By the same token, we might note that in a highly mediated, alienated society, estrangement from self and others will not be an abnormal condition. Hence for an individual to have very little in the way of ongoing positive face-to-face social experiences, perhaps very little in the way of a robust support network, could reasonably be interpreted as being deprived of an important area of human needs, and yet might fit into the status quo very smoothly. In an alienated society, estrangement may be a 'socially patterned defect', but it is not abnormal, and it is not pathologized, per se. In the society of the selfie, this is the case with authenticity strain.

In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, integral to many diagnoses is the criteria that the condition under question interferes with 'social,

occupational, or other important areas of current functioning' (American Psychiatric Association 2013). In other words, a cluster of traits goes beyond the level of 'socially patterned defect' to constitute a 'disorder' – or 'neurosis', as Fromm called it in 1955 – when it is heightened beyond 'normal' limits, to the point where the symptom bearer is dissonant with society. At this point the 'condition' becomes a stigma (Goffman 1963b), and the stigma-bearer might go to great lengths to 'pass' as normal in everyday life. But 'passing', however successful, always contains the reality beneath, that the passer has a secret identity, and might be socially discredited were they to be found out.

This dividing line between 'normal' and 'abnormal' is, according to Foucault (2003), a very prominent element in various fields of social control in contemporary society, from the prison to the asylum (Foucault 2008, 2012). According to him, the tendency to categorize as Other a subpopulation, and separate them from the rest of society for the protection of normal/healthy society, can be traced back to the exclusion of people of leprosy in the middle ages (Foucault 2009). They were literally driven out of society, sometimes *tout court*, sometimes into houses of confinement specifically for lepers. Foucault says the notion of the 'abnormal' person, which modern psychiatry was created in relation to, came into being in the nineteenth century, out of three other categories of person that had been separate in the eighteenth century: the monster, the incorrigible and the masturbator.

In common parlance, the term 'abnormal' describes a wide spectrum of deviance, and Foucault's description, while of historical interest, does not map easily onto, for example, the DSM-V as a monolith. Yet the nineteenth century 'abnormal' person that Foucault describes – part monster, part incorrigible, part masturbator – does in fact characterize very well the stuff of contemporary nightmares concerning 'crazy' people who might do something bad to you or your children, for instance serial killers and sexual predators. Part of what makes these people so threatening is that they are supposed to be generally invisible until and unless they are in the process of attacking. They are always 'passing', either knowingly, or perhaps worse, because they do not even know they are 'abnormal'.

The unknowingly passing abnormal individual is the case, for instance, in the television series *Bates Motel*, a recent five-season prequel to Alfred Hitchcock's classic film *Psycho*. In this series, Norman Bates is very well-mannered, respectful and calm, most of the time. This is all anyone knows in the beginning, other than his mother. Norman's excessively controlled demeanour hides a serial killer though, a side of himself Norman is entirely unaware of because he always blacks out when he kills, and when he is conscious again, he is entirely oblivious. For most of the series, his victims are women, and what triggers him, while varying, consistently has to do with his intense volatility in moments where he encounters female sexuality. According to what he says to his victims before he kills them, he believes they are sexually transgressive, and this infuriates him to the point of murder – yet in his excessively polite, proper demeanour and in

his tendency to be triggered when women direct sexual energy towards him, it is not unlikely that a great deal of his rage comes from his virulent denial of his own sexuality. He claims he is killing others for their sexual deviance, but really, *he* is the dangerous sexual deviant, albeit in an inverted form.

The series *You* is another instance. We first encounter the protagonist Joe as a kind, intelligent, articulate and responsive worker at a used bookstore, admiring a young woman who has entered the premises. His admiration is very in-depth, almost like a Sherlock Holmes style interpretation, and it is clear that he is watching and analysing her without her knowledge. After a brief, flirtatious exchange with the woman nicknamed 'Beck', he proceeds to stalk her and obsess about her. Eventually they do become mutually romantically and sexually involved. On the surface he is very good to her, very attuned to her, in general. The problem is, he is secretly a stalker and a murderer. He sees himself as mostly just doing what is necessary to protect and support her, which apparently has some degree of legitimacy, but more importantly he uses this story about his aims as a rationalization for his own compartmentalized blood lust, obsessiveness, manipulative control and boundary violations. Eventually, she discovers the truth about him, and he locks her up, hoping to sort things out. It is of course impossible to resolve the issue. Eventually he kills her.

In both of these examples, outwardly friendly men turn out to be secretly abnormal, and while their victims are not exclusively women, their murderousness revolves around intimacy with women. Getting close to them is dangerous. Yet in other examples, the gender dynamics of the threat vary. In *Emelie*, a deranged woman kills a babysitter to steal her identity for the purpose of taking her babysitting job and preying upon the children of the family. At first, she seems very friendly, but things get progressively stranger. Mostly the threat is that she will torment, kidnap or kill them, although in the process, her sexual deviance comes out. After some flirtatious attempts at alignment with the older boy of the family, she coaxes him into the bathroom with her and gets him to give her a tampon, which she inserts in front of him, flashing him in the process.

In *Creep* (2014), a videographer for hire named Aaron goes out to a remote vacation home in the mountains for a job. The owner of the house, Josef, very quickly raises the intimacy level past normal. After telling Aaron that he has a brain tumour and will die in a couple of months, he pays Aaron, and informs him that the event is no longer a business transaction, instead it is a 'journey of the heart'. Then, to officially begin the filming, he invites Aaron to film him taking a bath. His intimate disclosures to Aaron are paired with erratic, alarming behaviour with murderous innuendos thrown in, make it clear that he is constructing a notion about their closeness that is oddly insistent and inappropriate, and also that he is unhinged and unpredictable. At one point, Josef confesses to Aaron about a time several years ago when Josef discovered his wife had been looking at a large amount of animal pornography on the internet, he broke into the (his own) house while his wife was sleeping, tied her up and raped her while wearing a wolf mask. Aaron gets away from Josef, but

Josef becomes Aaron's stalker, which includes sending him things in the mail, including videos of himself. In the professed last DVD from Josef, he confesses to Aaron that he wants a chance to let Aaron know who he really is, he indicates a frustration with trying to be an actor when younger because it wasn't 'real', and confesses to Aaron that he is a lonely person, with nobody in his life to talk to. Interestingly, the film is 'found footage' style, so the sense of realness is thematically present, implicitly, the whole time.

One thing that Norman, Joe, Emilie and Josef share is that they are specifically alienated people, albeit in different ways. Norman's attachment to his mother is extreme, and their relationship borders on incestuous. Through this attachment – or perhaps rationalized through this attachment – Norman does not have many friends. Mostly he stays at home, working at the family's motel which is on the same piece of propertied land. Joe is an introvert, and a pseudo-intellectual. On the surface he seems too bookish to be going out and maintaining friendships, 'he is too smart for most people he meets' would be an easy – yet misleading – interpretation. There is some truth to it, and yet he also keeps to himself because his life tends to revolve around obsession and murder, and when he is not overtaken by his feelings for a woman, he is likely hiding something he is up to, or someone in the cage that he keeps in the basement of the bookstore. Anyway, people who get close to him often wind up murdered, if not by him, then by somebody who is involved in his larger secret bloody and demented drama. Emelie is driven by the obsessive desire to have a child, which she cannot do biologically. She had a baby of her own once, but accidentally killed it. Outside of the man she is involved with, she appears to be a primarily unknown person, a transient in some sense, who plans to leave the country with her man and an abducted young child. Josef is unknown, and who he 'really' is gets explicitly problematized. All we know is he has a sister, he assumes others' identities, he is abnormal, and he is evidently socially isolated, with the exception of his brief relationships with his victims.

Information technology sometimes has a lead role in horror stories about the alienated abnormal individual. *Friend Request* (2016) is a film about a normal popular girl in college named Laura who gets a Facebook friend request unexpectedly from Marina, another student at the school, out of the blue. Marina has no friends on her Facebook account, and is clearly very isolated, at least at school. Laura befriends her to be nice, but Marina's obsessive behaviours and trichotillomania concern Laura, who unfriends her. After the unfriending, Marina kills herself. Things get worse from there in a number of ways, most pressingly that Marina seeks revenge from beyond the grave, focused on ruining Laura's reputation via Facebook, and killing her friends. *Unfriended* (2014) is similar, although in this case, the girl who kills herself (Laura) does so because of an embarrassing film of her passed out at a party going viral. She proceeds to seek revenge from beyond the grave and kill her former friends.

Cam (2018) takes a different approach, yet the themes are related. This time, Alice works as a camgirl, and it appears to be her entire life. She lives alone,

performs in front of a giant screen in her living room, and is very interested in rising in the rankings on 'FreeGirlsLive', the website that she works under. She has private conversations with various male fans, where she feigns intimacy, outside of just her performances. One of these men appears very attached to both her camming and their conversations, and for him at least, there is the experience of close attachment. Her career is threatened by a doppelganger of her, who is seemingly a precise replica, along with an exact copy of her living room. The doppelganger also sexually performs over FreeGirlsLive, stealing Alice's attention. While trying to track down the truth about what is happening, she decides to meet up with the man who is very attached to her for a 'date', hoping he can help her get more information. Eventually he is triggered to rage and attacks her. In the end, Alice discovers that her doppelganger was not a human at all, but rather an AI (or perhaps some sort of supernatural-digital force).

In all three of the above films, there are threats from two sides. On one side, there is the 'normal' world, saturated with social media and its customary forms of disconnected togetherness. On the other side, there is the threat of the abnormal breaking through into the normal world and tearing it apart. And a primary channel for this chaotic, destructive, evil abnormal force, is somebody who gets too close – gets obsessed, unhinged and invades your life, destroying the comfortable because familiar and seemingly predictable or controllable, albeit a somewhat shallow and alienated media-saturated bubble that the victim has become so accustomed to. The lack of humanity in the alienated, normal, digital world on one side, the lack of humanity in the perverse, insane, abnormal and obsessive person who refuses to accept the distance of the normal world on the other side.

To the extent that these films about alienation and the abnormal reflect the social character of the society of the selfie, this character needs to be understood in a 'multiperspectival' way (Morelock 2021a, 2021b; Kellner 2003a). In other words, the 'collective soul', as Kracauer (2019 [1947]) put it, should be understood as a collective multiplicity, more like a pointillist image than like a canvas displaying only one colour. And yet these multiple perspectives are in dynamic relation. Here in particular, there is a dialectic between alienation and abnormality – not because the abnormal individual is isolated, but because the abnormal individual is the one who is driven 'mad' by alienation, or at least acts 'mad' when they try to transcend the alienated status quo. The 'socially patterned defect' of alienation breeds abnormality in reaction to itself. The desire to transcend the alienated reality is familiar to everyone. Yet the individual who actually steps outside of it, tends to be one who is driven to do so 'neurotically'. This is why aggressive grabbing at the 'real' or at 'intimacy', such as depicted in *Creep*, tend to come out in perverse and abusive forms. Reciprocally, these perverse and abusive forms, these monstrous, incorrigible, masturbatory abnormal eruptions out of everyday rhythms, can only further convince the 'normal' fearful person that it is crucial to be very careful who they let into their life,

to be very wary of the potential 'sociopath next door' (Stout 2006). Thus, the socially patterned alienation is further solidified by the perverse piercings of the uncomfortable but stable and familiar status quo.

Alienation and abnormality are mutually reinforcing, and to some extent each generates the other – but not just because the abnormal are alienated from the normal, because they do not fit in. It is also because (a) abnormality frightens the normal into extending and fortifying their own alienation, through increasing the ratio of mediated communication to embodied co-presence or through generally limiting social engagement, (b) the articulation of normality articulates abnormality by contrast, and (c) the alienation of normality (mediated sociality and estrangement from self and others) forges abnormality in reaction. One tragic irony of this for the normal person is that in their effort to shield themselves from abnormality, they may encourage abnormality within and around themselves, by effect of their own alienation, partly self-induced in defence.

The psychodynamic defence mechanisms of 'reaction formation' and 'projection' – which can operate together – make it even more difficult to differentiate clearly between alienation and abnormality. Reaction formation is when somebody substitutes a strong emotional attitude that they can handle easier for a strong emotional attitude they have trouble acknowledging to themselves, in relation to some object (e.g., some particular quality of another person). In the case of abnormality, this may simply be that a person harbours unwanted 'abnormal' (predatory, voyeuristic, etc.) longings; and instead of experiencing them as longings, which would be too threatening to the 'normal' identity, experiences them with the same intensity but with something of the opposite emotion: a specifically marked aversion to them, a 'neurotic' repulsion. Projection is when one avoids acknowledging something about oneself, and instead imagines it in another person, often to decry that quality. A lesser form of projection may be not so much to *imagine* a quality (falsely) in another person, but rather to readily identify it in another person, and adamantly reject it in them, perhaps exaggerate its presence in one's view of them, as a way of attempting to disown or eliminate the quality in oneself (Freud 2018). A crusader against sexual violence could very well be using said crusade as a way to distract themselves (and perhaps others) from their own predatory impulses. Foucault (1990) suggested that the rising concern over controlling sexual deviance was inseparable from the rise of sexual deviance in society – not because control is a reaction to deviance, but because control constructs – or articulates – deviance and hyper-focuses on it. To be preoccupied with controlling sexual predation also means amplifying discourse about sexual predation, which means raising focus on sexual predation, amplifying it in the public mind.[2]

Our issue here is not sexual deviance per se, nor even empirical instances of sexual violence or otherwise transgressive aggressions, so much as this broader notion of contemporary abnormality, and the feared characters who embody it. This dialectic of abnormality plays out not in the domain of face-to-face

encounters so much as in the schemas, connotations and cathexes of the taken-for-granted backdrop of social life. Research shows, for instance, that actually sexually violent offenders and serial killers are not nearly as much inspired to transgress by alienation as by an interaction between genetic and environmental factors, such as their own experiences of victimization, trauma and normalized aggression (Glasser et al. 2001; Viding et al. 2005; Viding and McCrory 2012; Mohammadkhani et al. 2009; Simons et al. 2008).

The forms of alienation that proliferate in the society of the selfie generate a range of reactions, yet most if not all of the reactions can be understood as within this contorted dialectic of alienation and abnormality, with the ambivalences of authenticity strain playing a pivotal role. The spectacular other is unreachable except through digital mediation, via viewing their posts and through brief, unobtrusive 'comments' on their posts. The desire to consume them as one would consume any commodity, but to consume 'the real thing' not just the surface, is hypnotic, and so the heated desire for their authenticity, and the frustration when they fail to deliver, become marked. Yet the status quo is quite alienated and fragmented, and authenticity is not supposed to come with investment or attachment, and so like a cat frustrated by a ball it can't quite reach, the alienated voyeur can turn to various forms of aggression or manipulation in hopes of forcing or seducing others into deeper, more intense, or more lasting contact. Yet grabs and fabrications from a place of alienation are not a good footing from which to connect with others healthily, and so the forms of relatedness that are manufactured are likely to be 'neurotic', and/or abusive; in other words, abnormal.

For Foucault (2003a, 26), the concerns about abnormality go hand in hand with the 'power of normalization' that constitutes standards and reasonable, predictable behaviours. This power is not properly repressive, but productive: it implies the formation of a *savoir* that is both an effect of normal behaviours and a condition of its exercise (51–52). The disciplinary systems of modernity tried to individualize power relations, attributing inhuman characteristics (monsters, hermaphrodites, masturbating child, Siamese twins, etc.) to abject humans (57). This classificatory discourse system can be seen in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980), which emphasizes the *attraction* of abnormality as a technique of classification of the incorrigible individual during the Victorian Era. If deviants were on the fringes of modern training techniques (Foucault 2003a, 326), their appearance was conditioned to special situations in which the power of normalization pointed to the exceptionality of degeneration and the need to defend a sane society.

But in the society of the selfie, the condition of the spectacular self is its exposure to a wide sphere of contents with no trajectory and no recipient. The transformation of intimacy, with online exhibition, promotes a democratization of personal relationships (Giddens 1992, 202) since people seem more open to the individualization of life-forms. However, it can also erode the sense of order and stability. Everyone is vulnerable to the potential deviant other. Abnormality

is not an exception, but it can be embedded in every image that defies a sense of order and reason. Besides that, remote interaction and search engines enable a vast mapping of profiles and personal activities, rendering them vulnerable to any kind of voyeur and to unwanted intrusions via inbox messages, spams, etc. The fear of predatory, psychologically unhinged others such as cyberstalkers, violent obsessives, paedophiles with fake avatars, mass shooters, etc. has become a rampant new nightmare; a nightmare that fuels a common desire for greater protection from 'deviants' and outsiders. People recurrently face threats themselves, or hear about them, from abnormal others, and protection can only come in the form of further retreat into the alienated status quo. There are two actors who can feed this retreat: the self, and the powers that be. If one always stays several yards away from the porcupine, one will avoid its quills every time. If more porcupines are being locked up, that makes things less chaotic and more predictable.

On the one hand, abnormality and private dangers pose a new set of threats to individuals: they are no longer embodied in an organic human self but can be part of fake profiles and robots. On the other hand, the exhibition of cultural difference can reinforce radical nationalism and traditional values against the sense of destabilization of an ideal homogeneity of national society. In this case, the incorrigible and the unwanted are targets of political violence, since the difference may be seen as abnormal. Globalization, which found its expression in digital infrastructure and the superabundance of images of the society of the selfie, confronts individual and community identity with the difference and the strange. It confronts the places, which are rooted in common customs and communitarian ties, with the many non-places (the digital milieu) marked by the ephemeral (Augé 1994) and the inhuman circulation of data of social behaviours, individual lifestyles, etc. In the society of the selfie, the individual relationship with the pressures of the generalized other forces the coexistence of the self with the many worlds represented in the spectacle on social media.

The society of the selfie is a fertile terrain for those new dangers since the basic form of sociality is the generalized other and the invisible audience surrounding the profiles and digital activities. It comes as no surprise that our times are marked by diffuse *grandes peurs* that produce a mix of hoax and collective traumas about online exhibition, with memes and viral creepy stories that blur fact and fiction. Between 2015 and 2019, the 'Blue Whale Challenge', which was a supposed online suicide game linked to the deaths of some teenagers in some countries, spread via profiles and online forums (Adeane 2019) and became a mainstream internet phenomenon with media coverage in several countries. In a similar way, the 'Momo Challenge' and the 'Goofy Man Challenge' use the effect of images to create a sense of abnormality and terror that resonates as concerns with safety guidelines in social media (Waterson 2019; Postiglione 2020). Those situations, which mix the aesthetic and the script of horror movies with real life, illustrate the immanent risk of the spectacle in terms of real human costs.

The problem of the spectacular self stretches to its limits with the recent events of mass shooters that mix the effects of video-game simulation and real massacre. The terrorist attack in Christchurch (New Zealand) in 2019, led by a white supremacist who killed 51 people, was broadcast on Facebook Live via a headcam he was wearing (Menon 2020). In the same year, a terrorist attack against a synagogue killed two people and was filmed in a first-person shooter perspective in Halle (Germany) – the incident was streamed online via Twitch (Hsu 2019). In these cases, we are not dealing with the kind of spectacle promoted by traditional media with image coverage of wars and urban violence in the 1990s and the 2000s anymore. The grammar of violence became part of impression management: the individual is a producer, and the spectacular self discloses its authenticity in the form of hatred (a direct action with no artificial mediations) and promises the authentic defence of the nation with its own hands.

The state is the only power that can really ensure law and order, by catching the abnormal and locking them away. If killers and predators are everywhere, they need to be hunted down and locked away. The state needs to get *tough*. Individual solutions only go so far, and while social media platforms can institute rules on their own, they are more likely to do so if there is state intervention requiring them to do so. The sense of chaos, of creeps around every corner, fuels a longing for order, for less general tolerance of abnormal transgressions and greater punishment for them. Of course, this cannot satisfy the longings for authenticity that 'normal' people still feel in the society of the selfie. Conveniently and tragically, authoritarianism poses itself as a solution here as well. It should perhaps not be surprising, in light of the above, that far-right movements attract so many highly alienated and sexually frustrated men (the 'red pill' community), as well as so many anti-sexual moralizers, such as found among many religious fundamentalists. In the society of the selfie, Incels have been attracting the attention of many researchers devoted to the relation between sexual repression, personal virtual exhibition, social media and political extremism (Jaki et al. 2019; Hoiland 2019; Hoffman et al. 2020; Maxwell et al. 2020). Moreover, concern with other people's sexual deviance was one of the criteria for authoritarianism in Adorno's F-scale (Adorno et al. 2019 [1950]). As Fromm indicated, the thwarted desire to connect meaningfully with others is easily turned into sadomasochistic, conformist and destructive urges, which can all be somewhat satiated by joining an authoritarian movement and submitting to an authoritarian leader.

5.5 Conclusion

Alienation is not only determined by commodity production and the spectacle, but also by estrangement from self and others. This chapter connected Debord's alienation as mediation to Fromm's alienation as estrangement. If

the society of the selfie depends on the spectacular projection of images, this sociality also reinforces social distancing between the many producers and the generalized, anonymous others of digital networks. The search for authenticity and connection tries to reduce the sense of atomization with the spectacular exhibition of a supposed inner, true subjectivity that stands against the reified effects of mass communication. If it produces broad cultural effects, like the transformations of intimacy in the last decades, it also favours political demagogy and the use of popular resentment by the alleged authentic leader against the artificial, corrupted system. The geoculture grounded in the exposition of a rhapsody of data (texts, audio, images and profiles) tends to shock the sense of normality with abnormality, that is, the sense of an organized self is dialectically negated and sublated with the others. It is illustrated with the hoaxes, cyberstalkers and fake avatars that pervade the society of the selfie and may pose threats to individual security and self-exhibition on the internet, but it also feeds extremism with the authoritarian suppression of difference (scapegoating subpopulations, minorities, migrants, etc.). If political pluralism and multicultural society have been basic elements for the legitimation of liberal democracies since the 1980s, the confrontation between the normal and the abnormal in the society of the selfie points to a saturation of some democratic principles. However, extremism and authoritarianism are only part of a much broader context. The political use of communication technologies can also open up new forms of progressive activism. To understand the new forms of public and political engagement in the society of the selfie, we have to consider the relationship between authoritarianism and resistance.

Notes

[1] Marx's theory of alienation is important for our analysis, but it has already been integrated throughout, introduced in Chapter 1 in the discussion about Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities, and Debord's theory of the spectacle. In this particular section we are concerned more with the psychosocial aspects of alienation, which are dealt with more directly by Durkheim, and especially Fromm.

[2] Foucault goes so far as to reject psychoanalysis and 'the repressive hypothesis', to say that society has simply become more preoccupied with sexuality, and controlling it is just one side of this rising preoccupation. Yet his description is in broad strokes much the same as what 'reaction formation' and 'projection' amount to, when considered on the level of dynamics within society at large, rather than any mind in particular.

CHAPTER 6

Authoritarianism and Resistance

6.1 Introduction

As we have indicated throughout this book, we argue that the social psychology of the society of the selfie contributes to the crisis of liberal democracy engulfing so much of the world today. These various conditions we outlined, from neoliberal impression management to authenticity strain, do not control the political beliefs and inclinations of subjects in any totalizing sense. The individual is still, at least by definition, capable of critical insight and reflexivity, of not being entirely hypnotized and 'taken in' by the spectacle. Agency still exists. And yet they can only make their moves within a terrain already established, with qualities, possibilities and limits determined largely outside of their control. As Marx (1960 [1852], 115) once reflected: '[people] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please [*freien Stücken*]; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances that are immediately found [*unmittelbar vorgefundenen*], given and transmitted'. The dialectics between agency and structure is conceived as the capacity of conscious mobilization (constituting subjects) within the reified world of the society of the selfie.

In the following exposition we finally turn our attention entirely to the political question. We start from an assumption very important for the early Frankfurt School: sociological conditions influence psychological dispositions, which in turn influence political persuasions. In the preceding chapters we have discussed at length some of what we believe to be the psychological dispositions

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fostered within spectacular capitalism in the digital age. Here we will draw connections between the political and the psychological. We will also discuss how information technologies are used by political actors to agitate, propagandize, organize and resist. These technologies serve authoritarian movements and leaders at the same time that they serve resistance movements and activists. On both of these levels – the sociopolitical psychology of spectacular subjects, and the forms of political persuasion and engagement – social media plays an integral role. The crisis of liberal democracy, tumultuous as such a global crisis is bound to be, is not only a pathological condition. It is also a response to a pathological society, and in this respect provides opportunities for change for the better.

6.2 The Crisis of Liberal Democracy in the Society of the Selfie

Before we get into the social psychology of the spectacular subject (as outlined in previous chapters) and its relation to politics, we will here ground the reader in what exactly we are talking about when we refer to a 'crisis of liberal democracy' in the context of the society of the selfie. The sense of political polarization and division in contemporary democratic systems is inseparable from the pervasive effects of digital media. Brexit and the election of Trump in 2016 demonstrated the use of digital media to manipulate data, produce sensationalist content and foment anger (Gentzkow 2016; Neudert and Nahema 2019). An onslaught of fake news and buzzwords, *pari passu* with the effects of a generalized crisis (be it the scars of the 2008 financial crisis or the socioeconomic shock of COVID-19), lead to a dangerous terrain for liberal democracy.

With the end of World War II in advanced industrial countries and in the 1970s and 1980s, after the dissolution of military regimes in Latin America and the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, different institutional processes converged in some key points that constitute liberal democratic regimes. This development has structured new relationships between state and society with the need for monitoring political structures to avoid decisionism and autocratic moves (Keane 2009). Expanded political participation (via electoral mechanisms, community decision-making, etc.) and the construction of civil rights counted on the freedom of political association (the party system). It was a system that was open to the demands of civil society, a system of checks and balances among branches of government (Held 2006). A new sense of citizenship emerged, combining the liberal idea of sociocultural plurality (Kymlicka 1995) and the belief that public policy should reinforce individual freedom and human rights. In this context, established media played an important role in presenting political processes and debates to broader audiences and subjecting political decisions to public scrutiny.

This sociocultural and political landscape has shaped the promises of liberal democracies with a normative principle in the public sphere: the need for

tolerance and the positive role of individuation and difference in heterogeneous, multicultural societies (Turner 2006). The pervasive presence of social media and digital data has added new elements into the political grammar. Participation in public affairs and discussions goes hand in hand with the diffusion of social conflict and the manipulation of popular *ressentiment* (Langman and Schatz 2021). The presence of far-right groups and supremacist propaganda on the internet is not new: since the 1990s, online groups, electronic bulletins and websites marked the presence of radical contents on the web via racial stigma, pro-weapon campaigns, neo-Nazi propaganda, suspicion about election results, etc. (Betz 2003; Statzel 2008). Digital networks offered reduced costs and logistics in relation to former methods of communication (i.e., letters, physical meetings, posters and printed magazines). In turn, many molecular neo-Nazi groups, with precarious or almost no financial support (Whine 1999), could slowly spread throughout the digital landscape of fragmented micro-publics. This kind of digital activism was far from being mainstream. It developed subterraneously and rhizomatically, beneath the dominant, rampant discourses of the times that were busy loudly proclaiming the stability and inevitability of liberal democracy. Then over the last decade, this rhizomatic form of communication went mainstream.

India presents a good example. With the election of Narendra Modi in 2014, the country established transnational ties with the global far right, echoing a political agenda of reaction against the expansion of democratic rights and policies for social inclusion (Heller 2020). In October 2019, the visit of rightist politicians from the European Parliament to Kashmir was a symbolic event that took place just two months after the Indian government removed the region's semiautonomous status (Leidig 2020b; Kildis 2021). In January 2020, Modi invited the far-right Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro as his main guest for India's most important national holiday. India is one of the countries with the highest number of internet users (Statista 2021); since the 1990s – long before the election of Modi – Hindu ultra-nationalists have used the internet for online political groups (the 'Internet Hindus'), operating at the margins of the mainstream media (Mohan 2015). Religious nationalism arising from the digital network counts on the educated middle-class youth from urbanized areas, like Mumbai and New Delhi (Udupa 2015), and reacts against secularism and multi-ethnic society. Right-wing extremism grounded in Hindutva ideology was latent in India's nation-building identity (Leidig 2020a). It became more visible through the digital network infrastructure (Therwath 2012; Anderson and Longkumer 2018), with extremist groups inciting disinformation campaigns and hate, especially against Indian Muslims (Banaji and Bhat 2020).

Two moves point to a new moment of the threat to democracy coming from the structures of digital communication. On the one hand, recent literature on the presence of the far right focuses on linkages for radical politics against difference, and the spread of conspiracy theories via Parler, 4Chan, 8Chan, Reddit, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter (Burris et al. 2000; Von Behr et al. 2013;

Koehler 2014; Ernst et al. 2017). On the other hand, the popularization of social media and mobile devices overlaps with a succession of crises (i.e., refugee, economic downturns, precarization of labour conditions and the erosion of middle classes), accompanied by destabilization and strong disaffection towards traditional parties. And the overlap is not entirely coincidental, since the new visibility tends to convert crises into viral, attention-grabbing representations. The electoral success and new mobilization of rightist extremism via digital networks (Caiani et al. 2012) is also a sign of cultural fragmentation, threats to traditional social ties and deep instability that are generated by modernization processes.

The participatory potential of digital networks is used by authoritarian groups because it can also give voice to radicalism. One of the main features of the society of the selfie is the 'produsage' (Bruns 2008) of digital contents: if the individual becomes a productive cell and the tip of a dense network of others, the use of forums and communities can empower conspiracy theorists and political groups that were poorly organized or had no voice in mainstream media/institutions. The participatory, continuous, unlimited creation and diffusion of data facilitates cohesion and coordinated rapid action that otherwise could not be possible. The perma-orgy of produsage is a rhizomatic force, invisible on the surface of 'real' life but very tangible as a tangle of relations. It is an assemblage of remote cohesion with units everywhere, since it generates the main traits of a remote *community* (Rheingold 1993) – relative duration, belonging, common purpose and common (cyber)spaces for interaction.

When a mob stormed the Capitol in January 2021 to contest the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States, it was an unprecedented crisis in American history. The event was planned and immediately broadcasted via many smartphones in far-right forums and networks (Timberg et al. 2021). This new form of disruptive movement – which shares many features of terrorism – could not exist without the society of the selfie: it combines mediation of sociality by the spectacle, individual production and rapid mobility of contents facilitated by digital technologies, distrust in traditional democratic procedures and a deep resentment against the elite, and transgression of boundaries into the 'back stage' territory of government officials.

Many state institutions have implemented policies to deal with the agitating effects of Web 2.0 on popular resentment and anti-democracy. Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has come under polemical criticism for their online surveillance of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (DW 2021), the country's most successful far-right party since 1945. This reaction is part of a broader context of suspicion. Since the 2017 general elections (Hegelich et al. 2017) and the 2018 regional elections in the country, the AfD used social media to spread polarizing messages via memes, images, posts, emojis and sound, designed to stoke people to react. The party has relentlessly posted content on structural problems that attract public concerns – such as unemployment, and crimes committed by migrants (Busvine 2018) – and

shares a vast network with connections to other far-right groups like the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident and the Identitarian Movement (Havertz 2021).

Political control of digital infrastructure is another threat to democratic liberties. Since the digital is omnipresent in the society of the selfie, one of the main concerns for democratic policy is how to plan public policy that recognizes in the network a vital forum for pluralism, conceiving digital infrastructure as a permanent area of focus for state policy committed to democracy. The coup d'état in Myanmar in February 2021 illustrates this political impasse. Statistics from online data have shown a constant collapse of connectivity in the days that followed the military coup (NetBlocks 2021). Internet connectivity had dropped to 50% of normal levels after the army cut off the infrastructure and operators like the state-owned Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) and Telenor. Access to Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger was severely restricted, since the network has been used by political parties and independent activists to assemble opposition to the coup (Giles 2021). More than ever, Web 2.0 is a disputed realm comprising political strategies of autocratic regimes that seek to control information and the exhibition of discontents (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). In Myanmar the state apparatuses became evident as an authoritarian move of the government to intervene in digital infrastructure, but this trending is not new; rather, it has been latent since the 2010s. In Iran, during the large street protests in 2018, which counted on social media to spread the spectacular effects of public demonstrations (BBC 2018a), the government used bots (embedded in hashtags and social media profiles) and even cyber warfare to dissuade protestors. Basically, the tools of the society of the selfie are an important front for political confrontation and social conflict in contemporary times.

From the presence of diffuse groups to the rise of Web 2.0 in the 2010s, there was a turning point with the full political, personal use of the society of the selfie. Since 2016, Trump has been on the frontline of the use of digital media and entertainment culture as ideological fields to spread polarization and authoritarianism (Fuchs 2018; Muelrath 2018) via the management of his own image on social media. Decisionism, the critique of political correctness and the strong affirmation of the leader play an important role in this confused mixture of spectacular 'authenticity' and self-promotion. Similar moves have taken place in Brazil since the election of the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. Brazil has more than 116 million users of the internet (IBGE 2016); it is the fourth country in Facebook (Statista 2020a) and in Twitter users (Statista 2020b). According to the 2019 report of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (2019, 57–63), Brazil has the largest proportion with access to internet in the region, with 90% of adults using cell phones and 73% also with full access via PCs at home. The three most popular platforms of social media in Latin America include WhatsApp (64% of adults in Latin America use it), Facebook (56%) and Twitter (8%). More than 95% of users check updates daily or at least

a few times a week, and frequent social media users are less trusting in the country's liberal institutions like the Supreme Court, mainstream media, Congress and even elections.

Social media is reshaping politics in democratic societies. The society of the selfie disperses a rhapsody of political themes and messages and 62% of users in Latin America read political contents frequently. The hyper-politicization of social media in the region since the early 2010s has paved the way for discourses that were not comprised by traditional media and the liberal *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s and the 2000s. The new thing is not properly the rise of authoritarianism or extremist discourse, but rather the fact that these movements that earlier were at the margins of democratic systems – far-right extremism and distrust in democratic institutions – have had greater voice and have even been normalized since the 2010s. While the majority of users seem to support tolerance and an abstract definition of liberal democracy (elections, freedom of association, etc.), the sense of polarization has spread, accompanied by political conflict. Data from the Digital Democracy Room, an initiative of Getúlio Vargas Foundation (a Brazilian institution of research and higher education), show how deep the political conflict in social media has penetrated in Brazil since 2016 (FGV 2018). Disinformation campaigns, adopted as a systematic political strategy (Benites 2018; Fatima 2019), marked the presidential election of 2018. The far-right's use of social media counted on mass text/image campaigns (containing fake news and hatred) that promoted sensationalism and exacerbated the sense of moral disorder and abnormality of the opposition (Costa and Blanco 2019). The spectacular effects of the society of the selfie, with image editing software, reinforced the emotional appeal of engagement via provocation and shock (attacking the sense of moral order, traditional values, etc.), delivered in attention-grabbing messages that went viral.

In Latin America, the political use of digital infrastructure played a major role in the articulation of the far right alongside the expansion of Web 2.0. From marginal groups in the early 2000s (Reyes and Smink 2011) to the electoral presence in Chile and above all in Brazil after 2013, the far-right presence in the society of the selfie pointed to the ideological realignment in the region after the end of the Cold War (Caro 2005). If the countries in the region (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia) were aligned to American policy – especially after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the spread of guerrillas – and ruled by military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s against a common enemy (communism), post-socialist conflicts tend to disseminate political conflict in many branches (gender, LGBT rights, etc.). The new world order after the 1990s, moreover, challenged nationalist positions in light of the subjection of national states to multilateral and transnational policy in many issues (climate change, sanitary measures, economic deregulation, etc.). At the end of the 'pink tide' (leftist and centre-leftist governments that ruled Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Chile, Venezuela, Uruguay and Venezuela in the 2000s and 2010s), the combination between economic crisis and progressive public policy committed to

dismantle social asymmetries grounded in gender and ethnic inequalities (Narita and Kato 2020) has been followed by a strong conservative reaction grounded in Christianity and Hispanic whiteness as sources to correct a destabilized moral order (Weld 2020). The far right, which comprises from ultra-nationalist groups to neo-Nazis and skinheads gathered by social media and active in the biggest cities, promotes a radical defence of nationalism and traditional cultural values that are under threat (Sanahuja and Burian 2020); and digital networks, with the exhibition of symbols and protests, accelerate the mobilization.

The popularity of WhatsApp in Latin America is symptomatic of the society of the selfie: the groups are administered (which implies a strict selection of who is in and who is out) and they can radicalize echo chamber effects in times of political polarization and distrust in democratic institutions (Nemer 2018; Morelock and Narita 2018a). Besides that, the diffusion of emojis, memes and fake news is much faster than other formats of social media, which was proven in many social protests that took place in Brazil between 2015 and 2018, in the wake of economic crisis and the rising force of rightist movements (Narita 2018). The strong use of presidential accounts on Twitter and Facebook mobilized hatred and political affects that fed into populism and polarization. The opposition between the people and the elite is taken up in the rhetoric of authoritarian orators, in a way that receptive listeners are encouraged to feel demoralized about democratic procedures (Morelock and Narita 2021). The touting of an ideology of authenticity, and the pretension of immediate contact between the leader and the people, plays an important role in political agitation against the elites (who are portrayed as corrupt and distant from people's needs). As a strategy for government, the use of social media allows the president to work on his spectacular image as the primary avenue for engagement of his supporters. The importance of Trump's Twitter feed throughout his presidency (Gounari 2018) is difficult to overstate. This importance is evidenced by the dramatic significance of his Twitter account being cancelled following the storming of the capitol building on January 6, 2021, propelled into action by Trump's incessant public banter about voter fraud and the election being stolen from him (citing no legitimate evidence). Social media also gave voice to many Brazilian far-right digital influencers who do not count on having space in mainstream media. In this case, the sense of promoting 'alternative truths' against the cultural elites embedded in traditional media and research institutions, paved the way for many forms of political denialism, from shallow historical revisionism to attacks against mainstream institutions, for example regarding the World Health Organization and recommended protective measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. No wonder Brazil, according to the COVID-19 Dashboard of the Johns Hopkins University, has more than 510,000 deaths, being the second country with the highest death tolls (in absolute numbers), only behind the United States, which counts on more than 600,000 deaths.

In what follows, we will tie together the political implications of the trends discussed in previous chapters and discuss these political implications at length

in reference to the ideas of a variety of theorists, centring on the thought of Debord, Fromm, Foucault, Goffman and Giddens. We argue that all five theorists can shed important light on how the culture of the society of the selfie feeds authoritarianism and populism, and how it can provide platforms of action for social movements today. Ultimately, Web 2.0 has an ambiguous relation with liberal democracy. Platforms per se are not inherently democratic or authoritarian (Tucker et al. 2017; Deibert and Rohozinski 2010). At the same time as social media facilitates and even encourages authoritarianism and division, it is also a milieu for new social movements and progressive platforms. It empowers people to a peculiar kind of political participation and public engagement, but this process does not necessarily lead to an amplified *agora*. Instead of seeing social media in narrow, oppositional, non-dialectical terms, like a pendulum oscillating between democratic and anti-democratic trends, it can be useful to see it as a dynamic contested field.

There are a few basic pathways we will outline for how the society of the selfie plays into the crisis of liberal democracy. The first is sociopsychological – the nature of spectacular subjectivity. To discuss this, we will refer specifically to theoretical concepts developed in the preceding three chapters, in sequence. Before, we gestured to ways that these theories had important political implications, namely the propensity to feed into authoritarian sensibilities. Now, we will draw out in a more directed fashion the nature of these implications as well as some contradictory implications that feed into resistance movements. The following preoccupations ground our analysis: we are interested in outlining the spectacular subject, i.e., the cultural tendencies that proliferate in the dovetailing of late capitalist subjects and psychologies with the type of social selves that social media promotes. And we are interested particularly in how these cultural tendencies feed into the psychology of authoritarianism and resistance. The second pathway concerns the populist reaction against rationality and expert knowledge, which is today facilitated by the ready availability of an astronomical quantity of information on the internet. The rejection of higher education and scientific expertise finds alliance in religious fundamentalism, and points towards the emaciation if not abandonment of rational deliberation. In the 'post-truth' context, and via social media news feeds, conspiracy theories have considerable opportunity to spread. The third pathway concerns what we will call 'agitation games' that the authoritarian leader or would-be leader engages in, now substantially over the internet, employing a combination of strategy and dramaturgy to secure a motivated following and a polarized opposition. Finally, we will discuss the place of information technologies in political activism and resistance movements.

6.3 Sociopolitical Psychology of the Spectacular Subject

As we said earlier: social conditions influence psychological dispositions, and these in turn influence political persuasions. Relying on the expositions we

gave in the previous three chapters, which speak to the first clause (social conditions influence psychological dispositions) we will now focus primarily on illustrating the second clause. In brief, the dynamics we outline below follow this reasoning: (1) Neoliberal impression management thrives on, and thus feeds, competitiveness and individualism, which increasingly eclipse morality. (2) The splitting public sphere feeds political polarization. (3) Authenticity strain and the dialectics of alienation and abnormality feed authoritarianism.

6.3.1 Neoliberal Impression Management

The ascent of neoliberal impression management is also the descent of authentic social interaction without an alternate motive. As described in Chapter 3, this phenomenon is rampant in such a way that narcissistic personality traits become assets to success, normalized and framed in strategic or pragmatic – rather than moral – terms. Essentially this is an emaciation of moral consciousness that accompanies social estrangement. If everyone is your competitor (implicitly if not explicitly), and social interaction always contains a hefty component of strategy for personal gain, then nobody can be trusted, at least not on a personal level, especially when they get no payoff in human capital. The logic of personal ambition is amplified.

When narcissism and ambition become cherished and flourishing personality traits, characters like Donald Trump are a natural extension. Trump's aggressive strategy of stretching the rules is an amoral opportunism. The system in place is not 'respected' in anything approaching an allegiance to its moral essence. Instead, it is approached strategically, as so many strings that might be pulled in order to come out ahead. In Trump's games, exploitation of the rules is evidently included in the notion of fair play, if indeed any pretence of 'fairness' as a value is maintained. He likes 'winners' not 'losers', and he considers himself a winner. He displays a moral emaciation and naked self-serving ambition that has not only become very familiar, but actively encouraged and cultivated by the citizenry, striving autonomously to be successful (at the expense of others, implicitly if not explicitly). The ruthlessness of Trump may appeal to the sense of pragmatism many people feel in a world where 'dog eat dog' rules. Who has time anymore to pretend that diplomacy and consideration of others is effective? In the 'real world', there are winners and losers, and it is better to be a winner than a loser. This cutthroat pragmatic sense of the world is the sense that Trump embodies, and thus he reflects more accurately the experience of life and the personal ideals that the society of the selfie engenders. To the extent that Trump mirrors familiar attributes and ideals, it becomes easier for the citizen to identify with him, and even to adopt him as their 'ego-ideal'.

Cutthroat individualism and boastful narcissism are traits associated with 'toxic masculinity', and in this sense Trump's persona may be more prone to identification from men than from women (Pizarro-Sirera 2020), which in turn might help explain the persistent gender gap in Trump voters, typically around

10% in 2020, and being 12% at the 2020 election (Center for American Women and Politics 2021; Delmore 2020). Yet this cannot explain a large portion of Trump's support, as 43% of the female vote in the election still went to him. Prior research into the demographics and attitudes of Trump voters in the 2016 election has shown that racial animosities and sexism were very strong and significant predictors of female Trump voters, as they also were for male Trump voters (Setzler and Yanus 2020). Other studies have shown that not just prejudice and sexism, but also authoritarian attitudes, were marked among Trump's following (Smith and Hanley 2018; Smith 2019; Dean and Altemeyer 2020).

This framework of authoritarian trends reinforced by neoliberal impression management fits with what Christian Fuchs (2018, 51–52) identified as the four dimensions of right-wing authoritarianism. Alongside the strong leader, ultranationalism (based on the superiority of a particular cultural/ethnic community) and friend-enemy scheme for political conflict, the conservative belief in traditional gender roles, reinforced by a politics directed towards the body and the celebration of order and military power, tends to divide society between strength and weakness and reinforce subaltern positions for female and LGBT groups. In this sense, as a social system that extends from physical superiority (sexual harassment, aggression, etc.) to symbolic violence (stigma, jokes, etc.) (Amorós 1993), patriarchy structures asymmetrical positions assigned to gender roles and stretches the limits of liberal democracy (Walby 1991) since it is grounded in a political contract that normalizes gender domination with its reproduction via state policies (Saffioti 1978) embedded in the attitude of authoritarian leaders. Trump used social media to spread misogyny and Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil, used it to attack 'gender ideology' and reinforce his veto against any policy connected to the feminist agendas (Correa 2020) – it is worth mentioning that the opposition took to the streets in 2018 in the #EleNão (NotHim) movement, which was organized, above all, by feminist groups. In digital networks, however, the problem extends far beyond the individual attitude of the leaders: diffuse profiles and groups use micro-publics and filters not only to rail against identity politics and feminism, but to attack reputation and social esteem (Ging and Siapera 2018). The affective dynamic reinforces shaming (Sunden and Paasonen 2018) and the hypersexualized performance of femininity (Alvares 2018), at the same time as it emphasizes pudency and allocates blame towards female victims of rape in Brazil and India (Prange and Neher 2014), pointing to a retraditionalization of gender roles (Rajagopalan 2019) entangled with misogyny. As we discuss in section 6.5, the diffuse effects of social media can also favour a counterpart for misogyny embedded in molecular movements of resistance that can rapidly become transnational trends.

As toxic masculinity displays traits consonant with a reified capitalist society, they are also held in higher general esteem than traits identified as 'feminine'. In this regard, it should be no surprise that the neoliberal wing of the feminist movement has been much quicker to honour 'masculine' traits in women than to honour 'feminine' traits in men. Women push for liberation from being

narrowly confined to the domestic sphere, but men do not push for liberation from their narrow confinement to the world of work. That women should have the same opportunities to 'succeed' as men is of course a very important movement, and we do not mean to downplay the significance of this for gender equality. But this tendency is in no sense a fundamental critique of the notion of 'success' in a competitive environment. Even while the feminist movement has been an enormously progressive force in society, its popular neoliberal variant does not fundamentally question the masculine-capitalist ideal; it simply extends the ideal a little more evenly between the sexes.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2009) described several ways that liberal democracy tends to lead towards fascism. Much hinges on responses people have to the reified world of late capitalism – its individualism and moral emaciation. One of the ways this leads to fascism is that there is an internal logic in both cases that is much the same. Self-serving, atomized, amoral personalities have no moral basis to react against fascism, and they may be so used to viewing people as things that the inhuman treatment or even genocide of subpopulations can be accepted without horror or repugnance (Menillo 2021). Trump's manipulations lack the moral compass that would make him relate to the electoral system in anything other than a series of levels to be pulled and regulations to be gamed, and this attitude is precisely the sort that the competitive world of business is honed to raise to the top. The fact that Trump comes from the super-rich business class, and his background is in money-making rather than, for instance, law or political science, is also consonant. When neoliberalism has colonized politics with the logic of the market, when the route to personal success is paved with cutthroat games and manipulations, and when society's moral horizon withers down to an imperative to consume, compete and be rational, a leader who reflects society is one who believes in winning at all costs, and represents little to nothing in the way of other substantive values.

The Republican Senate headed by Mitch McConnell operated in a lockstep fashion, as an extension of Trump's will and narratives.[1] The enmeshment of the Senate majority under Trump's shadow created an unstoppable force in many situations, which could be seen strikingly in the rhetoric delivered from Republican congresspersons during his impeachment inquiry and trial. The unified actions of the Republican members of congress, which presented as impervious to the challenges of Democratic challenges, operated as a group mind mirroring Trump's aggressive and manipulative modus operandi. To a great degree they capitalized upon silence and refusal to engage, which stunted the capacity of Democrats to gather evidence against Trump. The refusal, in itself, would be an admission of guilt, if not for the fact that no such admission was voiced. And in this, the shape of the charade was very clear to interpret, but interpretation is not enough to convict. And then again, even in the face of evidence, all that the Senate had to do was refuse to engage, and cry 'foul'. This is what they did, and it worked. The event became a 'media spectacle' (Kellner 2003b) of partisan

bickering, with the Democrats presenting evidence, and the Republicans replying with outrage, saying 'they have presented no evidence' and pinning responsibility for the hyper-partisanship on the Democrats. There was no serious interrogation of the truth, only the strategic manipulation of narratives, pulling of strings and presenting of a unified, impenetrable front of silence, anger and denial. After Biden won the presidency, Trump proceeded as predicted to challenge the outcome, claiming voter fraud, seeking litigation. And McConnell and others stood with him, once again.

There is also much in the nature of this kind of 'racket'[2] (Horkheimer and Adorno 2009) that is an extension of the logic of capital. The nihilism that accompanies reification lends itself to the abandonment of all abstract ethics and protecting and advancing one's own position at all costs becomes the guiding ethos. With the erosion of moral inhibitions, the manipulation of guidelines and state levers becomes a natural extension of strategic politics. Without inhibitions against nakedly wielding power for personal gain, loyalty to the powerful becomes a survival strategy. In this way, those who do not prove their loyalty and obedience are weeded out, purged, 'fired', or they resign. With passing time, the government is filled with a close-knit group of loyalists working in lockstep, in absolute loyalty to the leader and to the party. Once tied in, their own success or failure hinges on the success or failure of the leader and the party, and so their loyalty is secured even further, for self-preservation.

The nature of the discourse in Trump's impeachment proceedings exemplified another of the pathways from liberal democracy to fascism that Adorno and Horkheimer laid out. This pathway is in some sense the logical opposite of the one previously mentioned. In the pathway above, the individualism and moral emaciation that take place in the development of capitalism are in some sense the reduction of life according to the logic of capital – because all that is left is instrumental reason and exchange value, other humans are viewed in instrumental ways, and moral inhibition against inhumane treatment is curtailed if not obliterated. The opposite pathway is a reaction against the reification of society. With the rapid extension of instrumental reason and overturning of traditional ways of life, many people are driven to rebel against the rationalization of modern society, and instead to look distastefully on reason and on the domination of society by logic and instrumentality. In the impeachment proceedings, the Democrats generally often argued through presenting a wealth of carefully crafted arguments and gathered evidence, with level-heads and tones displaying rational knowledge and conviction. As convincing as this might arguably be to those who would listen carefully to their arguments, their strategy capitalized on the power and authority of *logos*, and the Republicans placed emphasis instead on *pathos*. In terms of convincing the citizenry of the salience of their positions, the Republicans were acting out an emotional rebellion against the logic and reason of the Democrats. The Democrats presented as professional and impersonal. The Republicans emoted and presented as if personally affronted. On the level of rhetorical styles, the two were speaking

past one another, enacting a culturally resonant battle between the rationality of one side and the emotionality of the other.

6.3.2 Invisible Audience and Echo Chamber Effects

If the pervasiveness of neoliberal impression management rewards narcissism, the invisible audience and echo chamber effects further solidify narcissism's fortress with solipsism. As we described before, the form of the 'status update' participates in a tendency to expressively broadcast one's own ideas without considering, or even experiencing, the reactions of other flesh and blood humans. While comments, likes, shares, and so on are hoped for, and depending on the person are a more or less expected part of the process, the act of posting the status update is more like putting a message in a bottle than talking to a friend. Neoliberal impression management is an alienated affair, and the broadcasting to an invisible audience is a similarly alienated form of interaction, where speech is not delivered to any specific persons, informed by their body languages and who the broadcaster anticipates about catering etiquette or style based on relationships or context. Speech is delivered according to the proclivities of the broadcaster, without reference to others except in a very general sense – to an 'invisible audience'. True, there are some trends that develop in the world of social media, and these are considered when status updates are formed. Certain forms are repeated, such as in playing with autocorrect, or the reproducing of a picture or set of pictures with new captions, such as was done with a picture of Bernie Sanders wearing mittens that was taken from Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021. Yet even these are repeated as part of a general social media culture, within the emaciated context of online presence. Relationships, social situations and body language are absent in all ways but a vague anticipatory residue.

The echo chamber effect, developed out of a combination of automatic algorithms and manually instituted preferences, tends towards the ossification of worldviews. The effect involves the unrepresentative experience of most people or everyone on the newsfeed thinking close to the way the viewer feels comfortable with. Correspondingly, the viewer experiences a relative consensus of intolerance regarding dissenting opinions and those of others who harbour them. In situations where disparate opinions are articulated over social media, inhibitions against extreme language are lessened considerably. Extreme opinions can be voiced belligerently without normal real-time informal social sanctions, and without the experience of the other person in co-presence, aggression without guilt may be more common. Further, with intolerance for difference and dissent already greatly facilitated, the rejection of Others' dissenting views may be fuelled in its severity.

Research indicates that online 'homophily' (e.g., people who express similar values tending to associate together) may contribute to political polarization

(Yanagizawa-Drott et al. 2020). For example, political polarization has been shown to decrease for people who take a month off from Facebook (Allcott et al. 2020). Together, the invisible audience and the echo chamber effect constitute a splitting public sphere that facilitates tribalism and extremism. Rejection of people with different opinions or ways of life is both fomented and more readily voiced, and in being voiced it is also broadcast simultaneously to large numbers of people. The status update and the newsfeed work according to a logic that is something of a breeding ground for political polarization and extremism.

6.3.3 Dialectics of Alienation and Abnormality

The alienation and intolerance for others that the society of the selfie breeds, is also self-agitating. The alienated society splits up more and more into two hostile camps: the normal and the abnormal. They are pitted against one another – primarily the normal are pitted against the abnormal, while the abnormal implicitly threaten the normal – but it is not a clean system. Neither the normal nor the abnormal are internally unified in their groups, and each one contains the germs of the other within itself. In fact, many ostensibly 'normal' individuals could in fact be closeted abnormals, and of course persons who have already been socially branded as abnormal, might otherwise contain 'normal' psychologies. The two are not so far apart really, and this may help to explain part of the severe antagonism between them. In a more structural sense, 'normal' society is terrified of its 'abnormal' unconscious. Both sides are constituted heavily by their positions within an alienated social structure, both characterized by the nature of their relationships to their own alienation, and their reactions to it, and both susceptible to authoritarian temptation, among other reasons, also in specific ways related to their subject positions in the dialectics of alienation and abnormality.

For Fromm, sadomasochistic desires are bred from modern alienation (estrangement from self and others), and these desires can fuel authoritarian social movements. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm's (1941) book on the socio-psychological motivations behind fascism, the main thesis is the following. Modern capitalism fosters anxiety and feelings of aloneness, and these feelings often lead to sadomasochistic character, sadomasochism being the primary character trait that drives fascist social movements. In the last chapter, we associated sadomasochism with the abnormal individual who is pathologically driven to violate the status quo unhappy but familiar distance between people. We proposed that the fear of abnormal individuals fuels a common reluctance to transgress the alienated status quo – the relation is dialectical: fear of abnormality fuels further alienation, which fuels abnormality, etc. As discussed in Chapter 5, while there is not a hard pattern of imagined gendered alignment here, the typical feared abnormal person is male, and the typical concern about victimization contains a normal female as the victim. The authenticity strain,

as we called it, that befalls the abnormal male, manifests in transgressions having to do with gaining intimate access to the female. In this way, for female influencers, the ethic of online authenticity may overlap with an injunction to, in some sense, satisfy the 'male gaze'. And in doing so, the female influencer opens herself up to, on the one side, the threat of perversely obsessed fans who could become stalkers or harassers, and on the other side, the accusation that she is unworthy of respect due to readily/abnormally showing too much or by attention-seeking. For the abnormal male, the strain of desired but thwarted authenticity or intimacy is compounded in cases of sexual attraction by the fact that part of the patriarchal script is that female affection is directly associated with male status and power. For the alienated male frustratedly seeking access to the private worlds of female influencers, the lack of authentic relatedness is fused with the insult of symbolic castration. The 'success' embodied and symbolized in sexual conquest occupies here the position of strain, compounding the strain surrounding authenticity.

The abnormal individual is always alienated. Whether in their motivations, in their misleading persona, or in the reactions of others, despite their pathological defiance this person is always an alienated subject. The normal are also typically alienated, as Fromm has discussed. The difference between the two may not be so great as the binary of normality/abnormality seems to imply. Not only do they fuel one another, but they struggle within the same alienated society. In fact, they may both harbour considerable sadomasochism; it is just that in the one case (normality), it can be channelled into socially accepted directions, whereas in the other case (abnormality), it cannot. In fact, part of the vitriol and terror with which normals frame abnormals may have more to do with their similarities than their differences. With psychodynamic defences such as projection and reaction formation, a normal might be unconsciously drawn towards abnormality and respond to this ego-dystonic draw by transforming it into conscious repulsion, to be more ego-syntonic. In the case of sexuality, repression of one's own sexual preoccupations may manifest in the preoccupation of decrying the sexual excesses of others.[3] In the case of violence, the same principle may operate.

Fromm posited sexual sadomasochism and violent sadomasochism as potential expressions of the sadomasochistic personality, the latter being more defined by the broad existential and interpersonal nexus of self and others and the desire to transcend one's anxiety-provoking sense of alienation. He posited destructiveness as largely of the same origins. And yet abnormal individual acts of sexual or violent transgression do not exhaust the expressions that sadomasochism can take, especially – as is the case in capitalist society – when sadomasochistic personality traits harmonize with social norms pertaining to economic 'success'. An important implication here is that when people internalize social norms that allow them to partially satisfy their sadomasochism, they are vulnerable to changing strategies of sadomasochistic satiation when their accustomed or predicted means break down. In this case, the normal

sadomasochist may revert to abnormality to satisfy the same broad underlying impulses. The difference between many normals and abnormals might often be largely a matter of social position and inhibition, rather than of underlying desire, and in times of crisis, the stabilizing forces of social position and inhibition are likely to break down, which in turn is likely to mean a rise in abnormal sadomasochistic acts *and* a rise in crusading against abnormal individuals, the crusade perhaps operating as a two-directional defence against the abnormality inside as well as outside the ostensibly normal individual. It is maybe perfectly fitting that the crusade against abnormality is prone to abnormal intensities (Foucault 2003a, 2003b; Furedi 2007; Glassner 2010).

For those who consider themselves to be in the normal majority, the threat of the abnormal is also the threat of chaos against the social order. It is the threat of the degeneration and entropy of society. And in this respect, the anxiety of freedom and existential aloneness is compounded with the anxiety concerning the vulnerability of normal society to abnormal decadence. Fromm (1941, 1973) identifies several pathways in which authoritarian social movements can speak so compellingly to the anxious capitalist subject. To outline in brief: the dominance celebrated within the movement can appeal to the sadomasochist's longing for 'symbiosis' – both as a way to sadistic and destructive gratification through identifying with the movement, and also for masochistic gratification by submitting one's will and merging one's identity into the movement. Orienting against a scapegoat subpopulation identified as the source of the degeneration of society is a further mechanism for solidifying in-group commitment and identification on the one hand and constructing a comfortingly simplistic view of the source of society's ills on the other hand. The binary worldview of friend vs. enemy, and the collective conviction that following the authoritarian leader will lead to a better society, is a great palliative against all of the uncertainties of late capitalist society (Morelock 2018, 2021c).

In France, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right party Rassemblement National, and Gilbert Collard, member of the European Parliament, were involved on a political polemic since they posted on Twitter in 2015 three pictures of the executions and public atrocities of the Islamic State (Le Monde 2021). This problem goes hand in hand with a change after the terrorist gun and bomb attacks on Paris in 2015: if those events were coordinated by organized groups with previous experience in Syria and Iraq, the last attacks in France, since 2017, have been committed by individuals who were not associated with formal groups (Pezet 2021). French security agencies are dealing with the signs of the society of the selfie, since the last attackers watched on the internet videos glorifying acts of jihad and extremism (Chrisafis 2021). The far-right explores popular concerns with public security by associating it with immigration, which has become a major topic since the terrorist attacks of 2012, with direct influences on the vote in the party (Amengay 2019). The use of grotesque images to feed popular reaction is also a political strategy of the society of the selfie, which targets the other as abnormal by radicalizing abjection through

the stimuli of the spectacle and it functions as a moral fuel of indignation that connects immigration and terrorism.

It should be no surprise that authoritarian orators will tend to associate social degeneration and abnormality with the scapegoated subpopulation. Mapping normality/abnormality constructions and anxieties onto friend–enemy constructions reinforces the power of both sets of constructions to fuel the movement with convictions. Foucault identifies the merging of schemas like this as a major impetus or at least ideological backdrop behind the rise of Nazism. In his description, these two forms of 'racism' – biological racism and ethnic racism – were brought together in the eugenics movement, where the Aryan race was claimed to be objectively superior to other races, the Jews being the particularly onerous subpopulation that required weeding out. The hatred of Other ways of life could be legitimated with the narrative of biological superiority, to produce a particularly strong set of convictions for the Aryans and against the Jews. And yet Foucault (2003b) sees the Nazi example not as a lone exception so much as particular expression of the biopolitical logic of contemporary society. Ethnic genocide is in this sense quite consonant with the primary mechanisms of and justifications for state power today – that 'society must be defended' against the inferior or abnormal others who threaten the security of the normal majority.

Still, there are contrary tendencies that present reason for hope. Fromm's theory of alienation and anxiety leading to sadomasochism was not deterministic. He suggested that flight into authoritarian sadomasochism was one option, but a much better response under the woes of modern capitalism was possible. People have the intrinsic capacity to rise above it all, but developing a more mature form of independence and relatedness with others, where connection is not based on 'symbiosis', but was rather predicated on preserving the integrity of the differentiated self and other. In this nexus, he proposed that authentic relatedness was possible. He referred to all this as the 'productive orientation'. An important point to understand here is that Fromm's theory was historical. It was the experience of modern alienation and anxiety that sets the stage for the transition of humanity into a 'sane society' where the productive orientation is the rule rather than the exception. Fromm never articulated a theory of what exactly motivates and facilitates a particular person or collection of persons to move towards authoritarianism vis-à-vis the productive orientation, although the answer would appear to involve some combination of structure and agency. There is something of a crapshoot in this theory. Nevertheless, hope is always there, and in fact it is the experience of the particular pathologies of modern capitalism that may yet motivate humanity to create a much better world. In Chapter 5, we indicated that the dialectics of alienation and abnormality are structurally unavoidable, at least to some extent, on an individual level, in the society of the selfie. This, we said, is leading people to the realistic sense that the only way to really get out of this mess is a more profound revolutionary transformation of society. The character of such a transformation is still open to a great deal

of debate, and is likely to be complex and varying. Yet in this sense, the threat of authoritarianism exists where the possibility for a sane society also opens up.

6.4 Communication and Authoritarian Populism: Other Factors

6.4.1 'The People' Contra Rationality, Science and Expertise

Giddens (1991a, 1991b) says in 'late modernity' people long for authenticity, lose concern with morality, distrust experts and fixate on avoiding risk. The use of social media and digital infrastructure to spread conspiracy theories and the attacks against the cultural establishment (mainstream media, universities, research institutions, etc.) are a signal of this mood. So far, we have discussed the first of these two dynamics. We will now discuss the second two.

The internet's democratizing tendencies also facilitate considerable self-education of 'lay' persons in issues ostensibly relegated to the realm of experts. Getting information on health care and nutrition is now very simple to do online, and this new facility with self-education has contributed to a change towards more egalitarian doctor–patient relationships over the past few decades. Consumers of health care feel more empowered with knowledge that either replicates what they would get from their physician or challenges it. Either way, it serves the 'consumers movement' in health care and lessens the dominance of the physician, contributing to their 'deprofessionalization' (Haug 1972). At the same time, the internet is full of contradictory information, since there are so many sources available. Voices from outside of mainstream Western medical practice can also be readily heard, just as easily as the mainstream voices. Advocates of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) at times have beliefs specifically counter to those of a typical M.D. (Goldstein 2000). In all, the ready availability of in-depth and conflicting information on the internet feeds into the deprofessionalization of physicians, as well as the decline in public confidence in medical professionals and even the [contradictory and changing] scientific knowledge their practice is predicated on. Science and expertise in medicine fall in stature and public confidence.

This decline in faith in expertise is not generated solely through information technologies. Like so many other tendencies we have discussed throughout this book, information technologies facilitate social dynamics that harmonize and dovetail with these social trends that also have other sources. In the United States, confidence in medicine has been in decline since the 1970s, as has confidence in education and other institutions (Pescosolido et al. 2001; Twenge et al. 2014). The only social institution that has gained in confidence over this period of time is the military (Burback 2017, 2019; King and Karabell 2003). In the case of medicine, the decline could be explained through a number of factors. For instance, in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century, medical science was making great strides in protecting people against infectious disease.

With vaccines for measles, polio, smallpox and others, the leading causes of death in the United States changed from infectious diseases to chronic diseases such as cancer and heart disease. In the period of change, average lifespans lengthened. From the 1970s onward, the gains of medical science were less strikingly positive. The newfound problem of rampant chronic diseases, since the threat of deadly infectious diseases seemed a thing of the past, proved stubborn to combat. Tremendous progress has been made in cancer treatment and heart surgery, but unlike the polio and MMR vaccines, these treatments do not fully protect people. The damage can be slowed or lessened in many cases, but medicine has not overcome the threat. Then in the 1980s, the AIDS pandemic hit the world, showing again the impotence of medical science to overcome a health crisis, except through protective measures. Since then, deadly infectious diseases have risen again as public health crises, including with Ebola, Swine Flu, Bird Flu, West Mile Virus, MERS, MRSA, SARS, ZIKA, and now COVID-19, which continues to wreak havoc all across the world. The 'chronic disease era' is now said to be over, as newly emergent deadly contagions arise and medical science struggles to find solutions (Susser and Susser 1996a, 1996b; Armelagos and Harper 2016). These solutions – at least partial solutions – do come, it seems, as with AIDS, Ebola and COVID-19. Yet their benefits are realized after considerable damage has been done, and many lives have been lost.

The rejection of medicine of the grounds of its basis in Western science is another factor, and this rejection can be traced to a complex origin. Confidence in science has had a mild decline since the 1970s, with the primary source of the decline being among political conservatives. During this same period of time, scientific research has moved towards the life sciences, namely exploring biotech and the environment. Note that reproductive technologies and environmental protections are decidedly leftist interests, and right-wing adversities. Thus, to some extent, the decline in conservative confidence in science might be explained by an aligning of the scientific community with projects that the left support and the right stand against (Agar 2012; Otto 2016; Morelock 2021a).

Progress in scientific knowledge has also increased in speed, and in so doing, we witness the public voice of 'experts' seemingly changing their minds so frequently that none of their conclusions feel particularly sound anymore. Everything is provisional, up to dispute, and open to further research. If we understand the promises of modern science intertwined with the promises of Enlightenment, the decline of metanarratives may also imply a delegitimation of the objective pretensions of science (Lyotard 1979). With the rampant subjectivist principle of the society of the selfie (as discussed earlier), a sense of relativism surrounds the rhapsody of contradictory information and fake news in social media networks. The pretension to objectivity of science is further overturned with Popper's criterion of falsification replacing any pretension at 'proof', and with subatomic physics undermining the notion that science can be fully associated with a coherent and stable sense of reality. The A-bomb, H-bomb and nuclear power, have all shown the extraordinary power

of science, as which includes its capacity for massive destruction. World War II ended with a particularly charged yet ambivalent space for science in the United States. It had proved indispensable in winning the way against the Nazis, and it has also proven to unleash inhumane and catastrophic death and destruction. An enormous amount of federal funding was channelled into the sciences following World War II, and this was pushed along as well by an arms race and space race against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Nuclear power was originally touted as a clean energy source, but then after the Chernobyl meltdown, the terrible risks associated with it also came to the fore in common knowledge.

This heightened ambivalence about scientific progress and the experts who run the show is highlighted by Giddens (1991a, 1991b) and Beck (1992) as intrinsic elements of the 'risk society' of late modernity. Essentially, we are dependent upon 'abstract systems' and the experts who steer them, for our well-being, and yet we also know the power they wield is unpredictable and can have catastrophic consequences. Giddens and Beck say this fear of catastrophe and the sense of constant risk is all pervasive now in late modernity. Giddens further notes that morality tends to wither away under these conditions, as risk assessment rises to the front of decision-making in so many situations. Assuming the portrayal of 'risk society' is basically correct, there are several dimensions to this that feed into authoritarianism and populist mentalities. First, a widespread experience of powerlessness before 'elites' whose untrustworthy decisions could result in catastrophe. Second, the general threat of catastrophe and the predictable desire to be rescued from the threat. Third, the emaciation of morality towards a preoccupation with self-interested risk-assessment.

Science and technology are not all that spawn this sense of impending doom and vulnerability. Giddens and Beck point out that globalization plays a part too. Because the world has become so interconnected, the risks we face are numerous and can have larger consequences. We are vulnerable, for instance, to pandemics like COVID-19 that begin on distant continents; in the same way, we are more vulnerable to the spread of the effects of socioeconomic crises, like the 2008 financial crisis. This can trigger a desire to resist globalization, halt or at least slow immigration, double-down on local culture and values, and so on. Essentially, the 'porousness' of national borders feels vulnerable, and in such a situation the promise of plugging some of those pores, shoring up the flow of Others in the interests of defending 'our' society can be compelling. Note that this calls for greater legal involvement, tighter restrictions, etc., to prevent the invasion of Others. The bidirectionality of metaphorical connections between military and medicine has an extensive history, and in this way the fear of global pandemics can metaphorically fuse with militaristic xenophobia (Sontag 1989; Schweitzer 2018; Morelock 2021a).

With the rise of global social media networks, there is further fuel to the reaction against globalization. With social media, the porousness of national boundaries is again amplified due to the capacity for Web 2.0 to facilitate

disembodied co-presence. The internet transcends geographical space, to make it possible for foreign Others to have a greater presence in the culture without even having to immigrate or visit. In this way, the internet facilitates cosmopolitanism and multicultural sensibilities, and as mentioned, the further development of geoculture. The internet is not typically explicitly rejected by the far-right for these reasons, but it may play a part due to escalating the internationalization of culture that xenophobes react against. Facing porous national boundaries due to the capacity for disembodied co-presence, many people push back against multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism, seeing it as a threat to their social order. Xenophobia and authoritarian responses are thus fuelled. We are not saying that the internet is a cause for xenophobia nor anti-globalization movements. The point is: the society of the selfie with its sociotechnical processes (diffusion of data, instantaneous reaction, impression management, etc.) amplify social contradictions (scapegoating subpopulations, xenophobia, etc.) at the extent that every individual is empowered to express himself in confrontation with the pressures of the generalized other – be it his ideological peers, his political opponents or the abnormal. Xenophobic sentiments rose dramatically in Latin America from 2012 to 2016. In 2012, 39.4% of LAPOP respondents said foreigners take jobs away, and by 2016, it had risen to 71.4%. Part of the fear of invading Others is surely this basic sense of vulnerability to catastrophe, which international terrorism fits exactly. This is perhaps one reason why xenophobia has been so commonly linked to the fear of terrorism in the twenty-first century. During the Cold War, fear of foreigners was tied to anti-Communist paranoia (Hendershot 2001). There is a condensation in these fears' icons, of cultural difference and devious destruction. The fear that foreigners might be openly hostile and planning terrible acts, is all the more compelling to adopt when there is a concomitant fear that foreigners will erode the domestic culture one has grown so accustomed to identifying with.

With so much fear of chaos and porousness, and the longing for order and security against intrusion, catastrophe, cultural dislocation, decadent or predatory sexuality and random acts of violence, the normal individual is susceptible to voices who would provide a simple solution – the allegation that a scapegoated subpopulation is the harbinger of society's ills. Get rid of them, and things will be back to the way they used to be, which is the way they are supposed to be. This longing to return to the past is what Zygmunt Bauman (2017) refers to as an impulse towards 'retrotopia', which he argues drives much authoritarian populism today. Often this desire to return to the past is coupled with reactionary romantic nostalgia, such as captured in the far-right slogans 'Make America Great Again' (in reference to the 1950s) and 'Make Brazil Great Again' (in reference to the military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s). The romanticized past portrayed in this reactionary way can differ considerably, and it is not even all that important what the past was like. What matters is that the past is significant enough in cultural memory that it can be used symbolically to inspire reverence, longing and indignation.

Elsewhere (Morelock and Narita 2021), we have divided populist narratives into three binary categories, for purposes of analysis. These categories are people/elite (liberation), people/outsiders (nationalism) and people/non-people. Any of these types can be authoritarian, but it is the third type, which combines the first two, that is the unmistakably authoritarian type. In the liberation narrative, 'the people' have to rise up against the elite. In the nationalism narrative, 'the people' have to defend their territory and way of life from outsiders. In the third case, we identify three basic categories again: infiltration, betrayal and mixed (a combination of the other two). In the case of infiltration, 'the elites' are also 'the outsiders' whereas in betrayal, the elites and the outsiders are different, but both groups are deemed problematic, and the elites are said to bestow unjust advantages on the outsiders over the people. In terms of the theories of Giddens and Beck, the 'risk society' aligns popular unrest in a way primed for authoritarian populist movements, since 'elite' status can be mapped onto 'experts', while 'outsider' status can be mapped onto foreigners.

The authoritarian populist agitator also appeals to the longing for authenticity that runs deep in the society of the selfie. In 1967, Adorno argued that existential phenomenology's fetish of authenticity operated in service to authoritarianism in that it rendered negative connotations to rational argument, as if the latter were inauthentic and so a lesser form of relation to knowledge:

> In a recent polemic against a professor who does not suit their agenda, for example, the right-wing extremists said, 'We will not have any discussions with her; it is a matter of existential opposites'. So you can see from this how directly the concept of the existential is placed in the service of irrationalism, of the rejection of rational argumentation, of discursive thought as such. (Adorno 2020, 22)[4]

Whether normal or abnormal, alienation and artificiality are rampant in late capitalism and the ethic of self-disclosure, combined with the desire to experience The 'real thing', as well as whatever impatience or burnout people feel from having so much of their lives focused on neoliberal impression management and communicating to an invisible audience, can find some claim of satiation in the unrefined communications of the authoritarian leader. The agitator often seems 'off-the-cuff' and spontaneous and is willing to commit many social transgressions (Adorno 1951). To the alienated and impression-managing, this smells like freedom, and moreover suggests that the leader can be trusted, unlike the opaque political establishment which always sounds clean and esoteric enough but feels unreachable while life at the local level remains very difficult. Once again, the transgressions of the authoritarian speak to the authenticity strain of the organic self that feels so stifled underneath all of the bureaucracy of late capitalist society. This emotional tug is much more compelling for many people, than the continued droning of career politicians with their appeals to rationality and their mild temperaments.

The authoritarian's style of leadership carries the banner of authenticity as well. The leader's unilateral actions, unhampered by checks and balances, provides a direct line of affect from the leader to the people. The leader's unilateral policies are not negotiated or diplomatic, they are what he 'really' thinks should happen. It is in this way that the 'strongman' seems to have a more 'authentic' style of leadership. The less mediation there is between his will and the implementation of policies, the more dictatorial he is, and the closer his personal impact on the lives of the people. Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt (2005) supported this style of 'decisionism' as an expression of true democracy. The idea is that the leader embodies the will of the people, and as such, his strongman actions carry the authentic will of the people to fruition without the middling mediation of establishment checks and balances (Antonio 2021). And as Löwenthal and Guterman (1949) and Adorno (1951) described, the narcissistic 'great little man' veneer facilitates considerable identification of the people with the leader. Because they can imagine themselves as him, his actions seem like a direct expression of their will. We suggest that when political leaders use Twitter and Facebook they too can project spectacular selves, posting messages that make them appear more authentic and connected to 'the people'. This is part of the search for authenticity in the society of the selfie.

The turn towards the authoritarian's authenticity is also a turning away from rational evidence and logical reasoning (Langman and Schatz 2021). As discussed above in reference to Trump's impeachment trial, and the divergent styles of the Republicans and the Democrats, this makes the leader's grandiose and paranoiac claims more believable to his followers than the arguments and evidence mustered against them by his detractors. The leader, whom perhaps they have already introjected as their ego-ideal (Leeb 2021), 'tells it like he sees it', and this is all they need to believe him. His aura of authenticity is much more compelling as evidence for them than the stagnant and entrenched rationality mustered by the other side. The speeches of authoritarian agitators are marked by a lack of logical reasoning and even a scarcity of coherent platform positions (Adorno 1951). The function of these speeches is not to rationally convince, but to exercise an 'erotic tie' between leader and followers, to stir up emotions, and to further pit 'the people' against the elites and outsiders, i.e., what we have called 'the non-people'. The eschewing of logical reasoning and the decrying of academic and professional elites overdetermines the people's rejection of scientists and scientific evidence.

In the Netherlands, in the wake of the curfew introduced on January 2021 to curb the spread of COVID-19, violence was incited through social media (especially Telegram groups, Snapchat, Instagram stories and WhatsApp) in various cities by anti-curfew rioters (Derks and Gercama 2021). Conspiracy theories and extremist rhetoric fed political agitation (Fleck 2021) that counted on social media to spread indignation with images of mobs, videos of violence, individual self-promotion with gasoline and fireworks and the exposition of the addresses of Dutch ministers. Hundreds were arrested after

nights of chaos in main cities involving the most dramatic and violent measures in 40 years.

In the 'post-truth' condition, doors are opened to the proliferation and rapid spread of all sorts of outrageous claims and conspiracy theories. Their spread has to do with their emotional appeal – they run primarily on *pathos*, not *logos*. At the same time, the venerated leader is especially suited to make any claims and have them spread and be taken up with a fervour by his followers. The leader's claims that demonize the non-people are especially compelling and inspiring to those who seek solace in him. And, of course, social media also facilitates the instantaneous dissemination of bogus claims and conspiracy theories among millions of users. The post-truth condition is bolstered by the typical lack of quality control on social media, and consequently of the volume of blatantly fabricated news that can flood popular experience, much of it strategically intended to stoke division and animosity, which helps maintain and even raise the agitator's following.

6.4.2 Agitation Games

The spectacular nature of contemporary politics has to be considered in this connection, as well as the dialectical relations between polarized political factions that represent – for the authoritarian populist movement – the people and the non-people. First of all, the drama or 'opera' (Muelrath 2018) enacted by the agitator is witnessed by his followers as well as his adversaries and adds fuel to both sides. Again, the rapidity with which news travels in the society of the selfie, coupled with the omnipresent capacity to vent and bicker through comments, amplifies the intensity and frequency of the drama, which through smartphones, and compulsive desires to check them, follow users around in their pockets and purses, almost as if an electronic extension of the self. This heightened and heightening intensity is also an intensifying polarization, and broadly speaking, the movement and its opposition feed off one another's growth.

To the authoritarians, the other side are authoritarian. Movement and opposition both adopt a discourse of 'resistance' or 'liberation' in relation to the other side (Morelock and Narita 2019, 2021). In some sense, this is not just misinformation or rhetoric. Between two opposing factions, 'resistance' and 'domination' describe the relationship towards the reins of political power more fundamentally than they describe the political values of those ostensibly dominating or resisting. This is not at all to say that political values matter less than political power to denote who are the authoritarians and who are the liberators, but it does mean that the accusation by those who hold authoritarian values of their opposition as holding an authoritarian relation towards them, is not entirely unfounded. If the opposition 'wins', the followers of the authoritarian movement will be effectively prevented from having the nation managed

according to their desires (or rather according to the desires of their leader who exploits their grievances).

Especially in the post-truth context, with the aid of echo chamber effects, and with the abandonment of empirical proof and rational argument as bases of the legitimation of knowledge, the leader's demonization of the opposition can go a very long way towards inspiring his following. Yet his ability to attract new followers and maintain those already there is always bolstered by the experiences 'the people' have of the opposition expressing hostility or intolerance towards them. The aggression of the authoritarian movement is experienced by them as defence against the potential or actual oppression by the opposition. The more that the opposition, then, can be stoked into adversarial language and tactics towards the movement, so the more the behaviour of the opposition fit the narrative of the leader that they are a threat to 'the people', and thus that the movement is a resistance movement against the authoritarian opposition.

Agitation is successful not only inspiring the immediate assent of 'the people' that it reaches, but also by inspiring the immediate dissent of 'the non-people' that it reaches. It thus serves multiple immediate purposes, even as these multiple purposes converge on the goal of building an activated following.

It is helpful to frame this issue in terms of complex gamesmanship in communication. As in a game of chess, good players will anticipate their opponent's move before they make their own, and in fact will do this several steps out, anticipating multiple moves ahead. The issue of anticipating one's opponent's moves and preempting them perhaps even more than one iteration out, is covered explicitly by Goffman (1969) in his work on 'strategic interaction'. He explicitly defines the 'move' in this sense:

> A move, analytically speaking, in not a thought or decision or expression, or anything else that goes on in the mind of a player; it is a course of action which involves real physical consequences in the external world […] Furthermore, a move is a course of action chosen from a small number of radically different alternative ones in the situation. (Goffman 1969, 90–91)

Goffman distinguishes between two levels of communication: the literal information that is explicitly communicated by a speaker, and the various verbal and nonverbal techniques and devices that are employed in the act of information transmission. One version of this is in the impact that a shift in tone of voice or body language can have on the way a communication is framed, which Gregory Bateson referred to as 'metacommunication' (Ruesch et al. 2017). For instance, the same information could be conveyed with playful or aggressive overtones.

Goffman describes the 'expression game' as a part of strategic interaction: 'we can, in fact, excise from any occasion of strategic interaction an expression game' (Goffman 1969, 145). In 'expression games' there are various types of moves, such as 'unwitting' (uncalculated with reference to interpersonal

gamesmanship), 'naïve' (a response to a move of another when one assumes the other's move was unwitting) and 'control' (oriented to influencing the other person for one's own benefit). One prominent type of control move is the 'covering' move, where a communicator intentionally conceals select information. Then there are counter moves, such as the 'uncovering' move to break through the other's cover and expose the truth, and the 'counter-uncovering' move, a defensive response to the uncovering move. Goffman also distinguishes between 'real' and 'tacit' moves, the former taking place actively and openly, the latter occurring within a player's private calculations. Tacit moves are the type which especially may preemptively set the communicative landscape several moves ahead and ensure victory in a more secured way.

'During occasions of strategic interaction, a move consists of a structured course of action available to a player which, when taken, objectively alters the situation of the participants' (Goffman 1969, 145). In chess, 'positional' play is the general term of a strategic approach focused primarily on manipulating the broad context of the board, which tends to garner more distant – and ultimately more substantial, if played well – rewards than the more aggressive, 'tactical' style of play, the latter focusing more on attacking combinations that involve more immediate relations between pieces. A basic tenet of positional play is to gain control of the board, in other words to move in ways that increase one's own space and options for future movement as they progressively constrain one's opponent's range of available moves. Some of the most effective moves combine tactics with positional play, for instance, developing a piece which simultaneously threatens a centre pawn, thereby simultaneously advancing one's position and posing an immediate threat. Another, more aggressive example is putting the opponent unexpectedly in check, while also gaining more control of the centre of the board. In other words, in can be particularly effective to simultaneously threaten one's opponent, forcing them to choose among a small range of defensive options, and simultaneously, perhaps in a way disconnected from the immediate threat to the king, advancing one's position in the broader terrain. It is also very common in tactical play to simultaneously threaten two pieces, or one piece immediately, and another piece or set of pieces with an implied threat of a sequence of forced moves or exchanges. While good players will master this complex art with intention, it is possible in principle for any player of basic proficiency to unintentionally pose a complex threat such as what has just been described. This is because, as Goffman noted with strategic interaction, the effects of a move are irrespective of the intentions of the player; the objective positions of the pieces on the board determine the situation the opponent must respond to.

But still, Goffman's discussion places questions of intentional deception at the centre of interaction strategy, and this description makes too much of the alleged motivations internal to the player/speaker, which – especially considering the psychoanalytic perspective – cannot be known through distant speculation.

What can be observed, however, are the patterns of action and reaction, and their sequences, and in light of this, what 'game' it is that plays out. In this sense, games of agitation can function in form regardless of the private intentions, conscious or otherwise, of the leader or agitator. Especially important for us here is that one episode of communication can be simultaneously strategic and dramaturgical. In our sense, games of agitation can work as strategic moves and as dramaturgical moves, in complex and perhaps sometimes contradictory configurations. Some moves can, for instance, work to make the leader appear strong in the eyes of his followers, and at the same time force his political opposition into engaging in a losing sequence of responding moves. A leader in power can communicate the enactment of policies that as communications are layered in just this way while as actions, they simultaneously advance his own policy agenda by making tangible changes.

Now let us return to the issue of the game in question, that played by an authoritarian leader (would-be or actual) seeking to build and maintain the assent of 'the people'. The words of the leader function to inspire (1) his followers to heated words and action for him, (2) his detractors to heated words and action against him, and finally, (3) his followers to even greater allegiance by way of their experience of the heated words and actions of non-people. Polarization works in the agitator's favour in two directions at once – one as an affirmation, the other as a negation of a negation. Whether intentionally, unintentionally, or somewhere between, this is the effective bidirectional effect of agitation.

To inspire the direction of second negation, the leader can use a variety of tactics. Some relation to his own words. This second type is typically somewhere within or between three styles: shocking, humorous or ominous (Morelock 2021d). In each of these styles, in different ways, the literal neofascist content can be simultaneously uttered and disavowed. The opposition can react primarily to one or the other aspects – to content of the utterance or the claim of disownment. If they react to the content of the utterance, treating as if it was meant in the authoritarian sense, or they can ignore it, treating the claim to disowning as primary. In some sense, either reaction helps the agitator. When the opposition reacts loudly to the content, decrying the agitator's authoritarianism, the agitator can point to the 'overreaction' of the opposition, and claim the victim role in relation to their outright hostility. If the opposition treats the disowning as primary, and lets the statement pass without protest, it normalizes the message's occurrence, and when this all takes place through mainstream media channels in high-profile communications, it normalizes such messages in mainstream political discourse.

A similar element here is that extremist messages can gain great power of dissemination over social media when they are couched in irony or shock value. It is not only that these messages feel legitimating to 'the people' and alarming to 'the non-people'. It is also their gossip-provoking quality that can make them

very 'catchy' to talk about, especially among those who disagree with them. Whether in outrage at the transgression or disregarding laughter at the absurdity, the discussion of these messages raises their presence in popular discourse and spreads them further (Seymour 2019, 2020). When such statements or memes are blatantly extreme or idiotic, they still carry within them the implication of a conviction that is much more subdued by contrast, different in degrees from the explicit message in the shock or joke, but not different in kind.

As we began to discuss in Chapter 4, the openness of the internet, the lack of face-to-face accountability in online interaction, and the capacity to often spread messages incognito or entirely anonymous, all contribute to the greater ease with which extremist messages can be expressed in public space ('public space' being virtual space in this case). When they are frequently expressed openly and publicly, they are more likely to be normalized than when people keep them closeted due to fear of social disapproval. These same elements also facilitate the posting of specifically inflammatory 'news' reports, which may be designed to further polarize, in similar ways that shock value does, but under the pretension of factual reporting, which cannot be decried in the same way as the inflammatory opinions and quips of an agitator. They can be dispelled only by being called out as fabrications designed to divide and instigate. This sort of spreading of inflammatory disinformation over social media was revealed to be a major tactic in the Russian interference targeted towards African Americans leading up to the 2016 election in the United States (United States Senate 2019).

The more shocking a headline, the more likely it is to get noticed. This phenomenon of 'click-bait' is an unfortunate side-effect of the attention economy (Wu 2016): it pushes even legitimate news sources to present themselves more like tabloids. Surely it has always been the case that sharp, alarming headlines would grab attention (and sell papers, etc.) better than headlines that were not designed to strike through consciousness. But when so many people get their news through the internet, often through scrolling down a newsfeed quickly, for instance, it becomes all the more important for headlines to make a quick impression and give the reader a sense that they *must* click and find out. In the attention economy, this might also be assumed to exert an upward pressure akin to what Marx (1962 [1867], 335) referred to as the 'coercive laws of competition' that drive businesses to endlessly strive to better their competitors with more efficient means of production. In a forest of headlines designed to shock and grab, *not* playing the game is a losing strategy. Opinions published, and especially the headlines that represent them, will be the sort that will demand attention through extreme presentation.

Not only shock, but also, once again, ominosity can work for this purpose. A headline can indicate something terrible but not quite reveal what it is unless the viewer clicks to read more. A headline can imply something specific and terrible, prompting the viewer to click, only to discover that the truth is not so bad, and makes clear a double meaning of the original headline. And so on. The

effect of gaining clicks, page views, readers, shares, and so on, is a boon for the news source. At the same time, the proliferation of shocking stories and headlines normalize the sense of shock and urgency in society, and in so doing can feed into the political polarization that can develop from the sense of urgent and extreme tensions in society. In other words, the shock economy of news stories can be something of a self-fulfilling prophesy, similar to the way that fabricated and extreme news stories that present the country as divided and hostile, can encourage the country to become divided and hostile. This is not at all to say that if news sources were honest then news would be uneventful, mild and pleasant. Terrible things happen every day, inhumanities and atrocities are real, and especially in recent years, the tensions between 'peoples' and 'non-peoples', between authoritarian populist movements and their oppositions, have genuinely been inflamed to astounding degrees, for plenty of reasons outside of how news is framed online. The point is that they play a role. As with so many other issues discussed throughout this book, the society of the selfie did not invent the dynamics behind the attention economy, nor did it invent the dynamics behind authoritarian populism; but some of its own dynamics have dovetailed with and amplified the dynamics of the others.

Similarly to 'fake news', fake profiles can be set up, to be used for 'trolling', to much the same effect as the over-the-top memes and the offensive speech of the leader, as well as the fraudulent news reporting (Im et al. 2020; Howard 2020). Instigators from the movement will pose as aggressive members of the opposition, and make statements that are over-the-top on their end, spread fraudulent news, or simply make loud and provocative statements that promote an extreme version of the movement's message, which will feed into gossip, and spread and normalize the message of the movement. In the case of posing as the opposition, this can work in a bidirectional fashion just as the shock, humour and ominosity of the leader. Directly, posing as an aggressive member of the opposition is likely to alarm those in the movement, and it may also turn off some of the more moderate members of the opposition, who are drawn to the opposition's promotion of logos but are turned off when the message turns militant or aggressive. If it does not convert these moderates to the movement, it will at least dampen their loyalty to the opposition. Indirectly, this may feed into the normalization of extreme statements among the opposition. This can happen by members of the opposition being drawn to the troll's method of expression, perhaps finding it cathartic, honest or just satisfying. To normalize these expressions, maybe to have them shared, retweeted, liked or otherwise publicly affirmed, feeds into the polarization that the movement thrives on to solicit and maintain its base.

Another tactic that the agitator, the leader or his political entourage might adopt is effectively in the tradition of Pee Wee Herman: 'I know you are, but what am I?' This can happen after the opposition levels its criticism, or before, preemptively, thus casting the opposition into the Pee Wee Herman role, as far

as the opera is concerned. It is the levelling of symmetrical accusations against the opposition, essentially mirroring their criticisms. This is helpful for sowing confusion and uncertainty among the population following the opera. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (1934) once declared that the 'cleverest trick used in propaganda against Germany during the war was to accuse Germany of what our enemies themselves were doing'. To use another analogy, it is like the famous cliché from science fiction or superhero films, where the villain can shapeshift, and assumes the exact appearance of the hero. A third party has the power to destroy one of them, and both of them claim to be the 'real' hero. 'Shoot him! He's an imposter! I'm the *real* hero!'

The simultaneous agitation of movement and opposition, the raising of the heat on both sides, stoking intensified polarization, is at best a high-stakes gamble. This is perhaps the greatest flaw in the agitative method of the authoritarian populist – it mobilizes the opposition, and in fact the mobilization of the opposition is integral to the mobilization of the movement. The logic is, more or less, of provoking war, and in war, loss is one of the few possible outcomes. There is one reason, however, that these provocations work more to the advantage of the movement than the opposition, at least in principle. This is the split along the lines of logos and pathos. The 'moral high ground' of the opposition relies on its commitment to logos. When it is pushed towards pathos, it loses claim to that ground. To the extent that the opposition is defender of logos, being stoked into a war of pathos is, at least initially, a losing prospect. When the opposition is decentred in this way, it has to rely on other alignments. It can do this, but not without an awkward transition that may never be successful. To the degree that it is successful in transitioning to pathos, the contest between movement and opposition has to take on more of the character of a naked contest of wills, numbers and strength. In other words, the opposition is forced to use power tactics rather than the force of reason.

In a sense, any sort of political activism that does not take place through deliberation, voting, legislation, litigation or economic choice, uses direct pressure to attain goals, rather than logos. This pressure can take many forms, and often has multiple functions. Awareness is raised, concern is displayed, commitment is nurtured. Yet frequently as well, there may be elements of dismantling, threatening or jamming, which are meant to directly exert *power* through extra-legal means. In no sense should simply operating outside of the rule of law be considered 'authoritarian', and there may be very good reasons to suspect that the electoral system, under various entrenchments and business influences, is not going to be an effective or efficient route to pursue desired change. Still, the use of power tactics by a mobilized political faction to seek desired ends that a large portion of the population stand opposed to, can reasonably be considered an authoritarian phenomenon, even if the desired ends are overtly democratic. This is a risk, of course, that any opposition movement faces – that of slipping into authoritarianism itself. And yet even if its authoritarian

quotient is relatively low, it is the implicit authoritarian nature of power tactics that the truly authoritarian movement will focus on in decrying it. And with the splitting of the public sphere, the defence against the accusation will often not even reach deaf ears.

To note that 'resistance' and 'domination' are dialectically intertwined (Morelock and Narita 2018b, 2019, 2021), that the difference between them is often in degree rather than in kind, is not to insist that in the face of domination, resistance is somehow fatally flawed. Far from it – in the face of domination, mobilized resistance is often the only option. In some contexts, oppressing the oppressors is the only way to liberate the oppressed. It makes the danger of authoritarian slips more real, but strategically speaking, acceptance of this risk may be a choice of 'the lesser of two evils'. That logos is the claim of the opposition, pathos of the authoritarian movement, is a point of the movement's advantage. Yet the same dynamics place a great advantage, generally speaking, in the hands of the opposition: the movement needs the opposition, the opposition does not need the movement. In other words, the movement feeds off the sense that 'the people' must be defended against the threat of 'the non-people', of which the political opposition is likely to play an important role (in the opera). Their dependence of this necessitates that the movement is always truly in a tenuous position because the opposition must be stoked and generated, and the opposition, at any point, truly could win out over the movement. Yet the opposition can thrive with or without the presence of the authoritarian movement. The opposition is flexible, the movement is not.

6.5 Political Uses of Information Technologies

The scope and scale of the mobilization of contemporary social movements would be inconceivable without Web 2.0. In the early 2000s, social networks like Friendster, Orkut, Tribe.net, LiveJournal and blogs were based on individual profiles and communities. The newsfeed setups of Facebook, Twitter, etc., opened up a new logic: social networks became *social platforms*. Interactions have been exponentially amplified, with a list of services and data that are integrated into text, image, video and sound, promoting collective individuation (Yuk and Halpin 2013). In this sense, the features of the society of the selfie – like echo chamber effects, neoliberal impression management and one-dimensional expression to an invisible audience – affirm the individual as both an *agent* and a *milieu* that produces content. In other words, with social media one is empowered to express one's authenticity against standards and moral constraints at the same time as one is dependent on an invisible audience and users that pressure atomized individual expression with the force of the generalized other. Individual engagement takes shape as a remote point among immaterial groups and mobile collectives.

Of course, the splitting of the public sphere and the fragmentation of information it involves can blur the prospects of collective action (González-Bailón and Wang 2016). Along with an inhuman amount of data, one-dimensional communication proliferates, and sociality is damaged. However, the society of the selfie does not supress individual autonomy nor collective agency. Social media can favour progressive action and empower activism committed to social development – and this may be the most distinctive feature of political agency in contemporary societies. The first massive use of social media appeared in the early 2010s (Castells 2012) with the multifaceted Arab civil uprisings (Zayani 2015; Faris 2012) and the street protests of Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the Spanish Indignados and the multitudinary movements against austerity in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and in a context of precarization reinforced by sociotechnical transformations in labour with platforms (Woodcock 2021) and reforms that promoted deregulation of the labour market (like in 2012 in Spain and in 2017 in Brazil). The Spanish protests of 2011, when the young generation that was hit hard by the financial crisis and austerity policies came to the streets, social media was crucial for the identity and scope of their public demonstrations (Taibo 2011). The power of digital networks has replaced the rule of physical spaces of solidarity (neighbourhood associations, trade unions, political party headquarters, etc.) and opened up the local to the trends of the global. Resources and demands circulate much faster and the strong presence of Facebook, personal videos, Twitter and SMS messages can be decisive in the constitution of the multitude, as was already the case in the Spanish example (Candón Mena 2013, 119–124).

The political use of technology is not confined to diffusing opinions and aggregating information about political issues. It can also affirm a social image embedded in prosocial behaviour (Bernabou and Tirole 2006) concerned with the recognition of the individual's active voice in politics. The Russian protests of 2011–2012 for fair elections are a good example. In the wake of suspicions of electoral fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections, protests were mobilized via Facebook, Twitter and especially VKontakte – the most popular online social network in the country (Carbonnel 2011; Northam 2012). The street protests occurred in 103 cities, and were the largest since the end of the Soviet Union (Gabowitsch 2017). For individual users, the spectacular spread of videos and images of what was happening in the streets fed a dynamic where users' actions were dependent on what they observed or anticipated in the actions of others. Participation was connected to a kind of 'social signalling', where engaging with and reproducing influential loops of information disseminated through chains of status updates affected one's social stature, registered in the metrics assigned to the user's spectacular self. The split between spectacular and organic selves notwithstanding, the online life of the social movement had repercussions far beyond the newsfeed. Digitally shared emotional benefits and political motivations could aggregate subjects due to the greater visibility and interaction with

digital surfaces of Web 2.0 (Enikolopov et al. 2020). The 2011–2012 protests also marked a turning point in a political dispute about information technologies (Klyueva 2016): the government tried to restrict online activists at the same time as other platforms (besides Twitter and VKontakte, YouTube became an important tool) gained significance for political communication in Russia (Litvinenko 2021). And here, the invisible audience, animated with the pressures of the generalized other, plays an important role. Under implicit pressure regarding the reactions of others in the form of likes, views, shares and comments, the individual user announces and disseminates their political beliefs – and via loops of influence running through masses of people, a political network and common drives to protest become palpable and recognizable, with constructed collective image in tow. The process constitutes a collection of new political tools to gather resources for mobilization.

Social media involves new channels and tools for protest and shows potential for creative, spectacle-based political activity. It offers great flexibility to spread contents (Shepard 2015; Penner 2019; Narita 2019), gather many subjects and unite diverse struggles through building 'chains of equivalence' among different political demands (Larkin 2013). Due to the individual productivity of contents in the society of the selfie, the new social movements that emerged from the early 2010s involved a sense of exhibition grounded in their hypervisibility, with the impact of images of crowds on the ground. It has rendered social protests more mobile (Elliott and Urry 2010; Cumiskey and Hjorth 2013) and independent from traditional news media, because the portability of personal smartphones facilitates democratized and decentralized information flows, implying more authentic, on the ground reporting. It also feeds the sense of presentism in contemporary culture, since the use of social media changes the temporal orientation of protest, affecting – via diffuse communication – the speed and organization of groups (Barassi 2015; Poell 2020), promoting the disruptive capacities of crowds and mobs that suddenly rapidly organize, act and disband.

With the cultural landscape of the society of the selfie, the opportunities for civic engagement have changed significantly. Counter to the sense of democratic systems' elitization (Higley and Burton 2006), the society of the selfie favours a more direct and horizontal form of political action. The digital means of communication among activists have empowered individuals and affected their collective organizations, political repertoires and targets (Norris 2010). The traditional avenues for political participation (i.e., established parties, unions, churches and elections) are forced to contend with a modernizing move under a main feature of the society of the selfie, which enables the individual to engage with the generalized other without the traditional mediation of the individual other in embodied copresence. Engagement depends mostly on how the individual is affected by the digital visibility of contentious politics. At this point, the lack of conventional leadership in the construction of public demonstrations

is an important sign since it challenges one of the main principles of modern democratic systems: the belief in the correlation between effective leaders and effective democracy (Ruscio 2004). When Hong Kong protesters started using AirDrop to breach Chinese firewalls in 2019 (Hui 2019), they started a spectacular spread of Bruce Lee's dictum: 'be formless, shapeless, like water'. Although some movements, like Black Lives Matter, have relatively known leaders, the street dynamics moved by digital media are leaderless. If this echoes the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s (Zirakzadeh 2006), it also points to the appeal of social media that turned every individual demand into something visible. With the multitudinary movements of the 2010s, the subject is not the class nor the ethnic nation, but the 'indignant citizen' (Gerbaudo 2017) – an individual who is morally outraged and deprived of citizenship.

The gendered fractures in citizenship gained political visibility within the surfaces of society of the selfie. The political reaction to patriarchy and misogyny is an important counterpart of the authoritarian trends in neoliberal impression management, because it also points to contexts for autonomy and agency, and prospects to broaden political participation. The spread of #MeToo since October 2017 in the United States, especially on Twitter, constructed a political milieu that has enabled subjects to share their experiences and use the new visibility of digital surfaces to diffuse affects involving solidarity and strategies of resistance (Williams et al. 2019). From celebrities to ordinary people, a chain of personal experiences was established and politicized micro-publics according to gender issues. Moreover, many hashtags and topics of the #MeToo movement have become a transnational trend that has been circulating through England, Brazil, Morocco, France, Egypt, Mexico, South Korea and the Philippines, above all, due to the pervasive effects of the society of the selfie. The strategies have varied from individuals and small groups that gained voice with social media to vast networks of solidarity (Bicker 2018; Shaw 2019; BBC 2018a; TST 2018; Creedon 2021). On the one hand, the diffusion of mobilizations counts on intersectional forms of oppression that combine gender, race, class and physical appearance, that is, across different domains of power that affect individual identity (Collins and Bilge 2016, 27–28) simultaneously with the rapid circulation of information. On the other hand, new social movements operate as a kind of catalyst mobilization, which starts from molecular problems (a case of rape, a local problem with public transport, etc.) that can constitute multitudinary subjects that, despite their internal individual differences, are politically affected by similar circumstances.

The circulation of political affects, thus, is also a space for political creation embedded in sociotechnical relations in the society of the selfie. Even before the #MeToo movement, many feminist struggles based on social media were underway in peripheral countries. During the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign, which took place in 2016 in Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan, ordinary women (not celebrities, like #MeToo) started the mobilizations that were extended to the problems of reproductive rights and also gained the streets in

Poland with the 'Black Protests' (Kubisa and Rakowska 2018; Sedysheva 2018). The Latin American problems with gendered violence have been voiced due to the impression management and the spectacle of the society of the selfie. In 2015 and 2016, the Argentinian protest #NiUnaMenos (NotOneLess) gathered crowds in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Bogotá, La Paz and Mexico City, via personal profiles and small groups in social media, to critique the subalternization and gendered violence (Iglesias 2015). But the best example of the role played by the society of the selfie in progressive movements is the Chilean anti-rape song 'The Rapist is You!', which started circulating in the streets of Santiago to expose gendered violence (Aguirre 2019) and rapidly became viral in Washington, London, Istanbul, São Paulo and Madrid due to Instagram and YouTube. This campaign has proposed a different form of social movement that combines the aesthetics of flash-mob sequences (with imagistic appeal and strong *mots d'ordre*), rapid diffusion of hashtags and very fluid strategies for mobilization and demobilization.

Those demonstrations encompass the main features of political mobilization in the digital age: fast circulation of data, strong slogans, direct messages and a grass-roots organization grounded in network structures (Carty and Barron 2018). Even traditional political symbols – for example, banners of political parties – have changed with Web 2.0. When Occupy Wall Street diffused 'We Are the 99%', a new field for political participation was underway: the use of memes to simplify communication and rapidly be shared in surfaces. As digital images that become iconic due to rapid diffusion and infinite iteration (Shifman 2014), memes can often be exemplars of one-dimensional communication that spreads hatred, they can also be good for progressive causes and resistance. The same strategy grounded in hashtags and didactic memes – with millions of videos from personal profiles – played a major role in October 2019 in the Chilean streets (Bonnin 2020), which saw the biggest protests since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1990. During the large street protests of May and June 2021 in the biggest Colombian cities (Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla and Cúcuta), social media played an important role in citizens' political participation. Against austerity policies, the strong perception of inequality, unemployment and the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemics under the rightist government, activists have been using personal profiles on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to stream police violence, social demands, aggregate resources for mobilization and spread hashtags and images (Meza 2021). In times of disinformation campaigns and fake news, the de-centred public sphere of the society of the selfie, with each individual being the producer of contents and spectacle (instead of being dependent on traditional news channels), has been used to update citizens about the situation in the streets (Bustamante 2021).

Black Lives Matter is a paradigmatic case of the political use of information technologies and social media. The movement gathered many diffuse indignations (Maraj, Prasad and Roundtree 2018), sparked a hashtag and counted

upon an anonymous multitude of citizens. This use of digital language was based on the rhetoric of dignity and moral recognition in relation to intersecting issues of gender, race, class and transnational demands. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in 2020, for example, many similar anti-racist demonstrations, critical of police brutality and inequality, took place in England, France, Brazil, Australia, Portugal and Germany (Al Jazeera 2020; BBC 2020). Black Lives Matter is able to be a global network due to the capacities afforded it by the tools of the society of the selfie. With the hashtag, the movement counts on the individual as a producer of spectacular contents: the use of digital images by individual activists has rendered every engagement with a hashtag in social media a political act. From Ariana Grande to Lady Gaga, the iconic figures of the society of the selfie illustrate how the strategic use of social media can also feed a progressive agenda: even personal branding, a sign of the society of the selfie, is not merely about individual exhibitionism. The participatory nature of the spectacle in the digital age opens up new spaces for resistance and this is changing how democracy works.

6.6 Conclusion

Social media played a major role in the articulation of the far right in India, Chile, Brazil, the United States and France. Authoritarianism is spread through spectacular subjects in four directions: (1) neoliberal impression management as the reification of individual exhibition when neoliberal logics colonize interpersonal relations with the need for personal success, ambition, narcissism and human capital; (2) the splitting public sphere that tends to feed polarization and radicalism; (3) the search for authenticity as a motivation for far-right populist leaders pretending to overcome the social distance and the reified effects of the society of the selfie; (4) the tension between alienation and abnormality in light of the problem of difference in globalized, post-colonial societies. These trends stretch the very foundations of liberal democracies, as representative political systems that have been expanded and established since the 1980s with the promises of popular participation and institutional control of decision-making procedures. But the pressure on liberal democracy does not come only from the authoritarianism and political extremism that explore the visibility mechanisms of the society of the selfie. The multitudinary protests in the early 2010s were the first massive use of the society of the selfie for political mobilization. They pointed to a specific crisis in liberal democracy: the problem of colonization of the market ('the 99%') and the importance of the society of the selfie in constructing new ways of engagement and democratic transformations that can move beyond the broken promises of popular representation, demanding effective mechanisms for participation and progressive policies. The society of the selfie, being a sociocultural structure that promotes turns in individuation and defines a cultural landscape of human relatedness in contemporary capitalism, implies strong transformations in contemporary democracy. Fast mobilizations, rapid aggregation of heterogeneous subjects

(the multitude), circulation of demands and resources embedded in digital data and the spectacular appeal of images and surfaces. Citizen participation has changed and political systems will have to consider more than ever the social effects of the society of the selfie on contemporary life.

Notes

[1] Mitt Romney was an exception.

[2] For more on the theory of 'rackets', see Stirk (1992), Rensmann (2018) and Brittain (2021).

[3] In *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno et al. (2019 [1950]) included this sort of exaggerated concern with and condemnation of others' sexual indulgences as one of the elements on their personality assessment the 'F-scale', their device to identity pre-fascist persons. Sexual repression occupied an even more central place in Wilhelm Reich's work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1980 [1946]).

[4] Adorno's anecdote describes a far-right extremist's cognitive framing that resonates very consonantly with our description of the splitting public sphere. See also Morelock (2017).

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: A Turning Point for Liberal Democracy

The survey we have given here, in outline, proposes a number of theoretical interpretations. We have discussed many concepts, such as spectacle, surfaces, neoliberalism, impression management, one-dimensionality, echo chamber effects, authenticity strain, dialectics of alienation and abnormality, risk society, retrotopia, agitation games, etc. Some could be investigated further in other research. Concepts could be operationalized and tested, understandings and experiences could be investigated, and so on. Some probably just have to remain up to the interpretation of readers, who can decide whether they strike a resonant chord, whether they require adjustment or whether they just do not seem relevant. We find strength in the variety of thinkers and interpretations assembled here, and conjecture that a major element of their strength is their descriptive power, rather than their objective place in a causal chain – although we assume they point towards some aspects of empirical and causal explanatory nature. This descriptive power, which includes causal relations but exceeds them with speculation, concerns – to refer back to Benjamin's analogy – the constellations they assemble out of the objects to which they refer, and these constellations can be 'seen' when 'looking' at the topics we discuss, and by virtue of this, they illustrate patterns that can only be understood through such interpretive leaps, i.e., through social theory.

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And yet constellations, we emphasize, can be drawn in multiple overlapping or interpenetrating ways, so that the same facts can be understood as truly fitting into multiple patterns simultaneously, and even multiple causal relations. This does not at all mean that all of these patterns, theories, and so on, are 'just' interpretations, relative, etc. If you see them, they are there. They cannot explain everything, and there may even be more pressing, powerful patterns that can be located in other constellations than these. But the fact that they are not organized in a closed 'architectonic', does not invalidate them. It means that multiple concepts (constellations) can inhabit the same reality and can even contradict one another. In such a complex world, we find it essential that social theory be enlisted to draw such constellations, and that overlaps, contradictions, and interpenetrations need to be allowed space, if we want to understand in broader ways how the social world operates and changes.

We have argued that on a global scale, information technologies dovetailed with neoliberalism to amplify social tendencies that were already underway throughout the world-system. Capitalist development always coincided with technological development, constituting a geoculture, and thus coincided with the spread of new means of communication and transportation that revolutionized human relations. The society of the selfie arose within the convergence of two structural processes. On the one hand, there was the material transformation of capitalism since the 1980s. The expansion of the world market went hand in hand with new dynamics of individuation. The crisis of the welfare state, in the wake of the Fordist crisis in the late 1970s, was not only about the restructuration of state policies and capital. Privatization and the grammar of individual entrepreneurship led to a new cultural constellation embedded in neoliberal capitalism. Human capital and individual self-investment became rampant signs of the new epoch. On the other hand, the digital infrastructure rendered the Debordian spectacle much more diffuse and powerful. The advent of the spectacle was inseparable from capitalist socialization mediated by images; it was part of capitalist expansion since the mid- nineteenth century. Digital technologies accelerated the diffusion of images via immaterial networks by *reinforcing* individual self-investment: in other words, the individual became a producer of its own contents and personal brands, mediated by structures and logics of capital accumulation.

The spectacular self, when sociality is subsumed under coercive norms of competitive self-valorization, is a *punto di fuga* of the main features of the society of the selfie. By projecting our data, we try to manage impressions: the new visibility via surfaces fuels attention-seeking and innovation of ways to 'authentically' disclose the private sphere (sexuality, marriage, family, etc.) as a component of spectacular exhibition. With the pervasive effects of digital networks, much posted content circulates rhizomatically, rather than being directed towards a deliberate and specific recipient. Here, in the culture of the newsfeed, the generalized other is the main character of this new form of relatedness.

The dispersion of public profiles among many kinds of social media – from professional networks to 'mass' social media like Facebook and Instagram – illustrates how the need for self-investment in personal skill and branding meets a kind of audience that is much different from the culture industry of traditional mass communication. The audience is not passive and not formatted according to unidirectional communication – like the propagandistic effects of TV, where contents are designed to a generic, massive audience. In the society of the selfie, everyone sees everyone and can stalk everyone's online presence at any time.

The new visibility and the immediation of the generalized other converge with new pressures for spectacular authenticity and intimate disclosure. The diffusion of fears of abnormality is a rampant phenomenon in digital culture. From internet hoaxes to real threats, information about abnormal persons and trends is encountered in a closer-up way to provoke a more visceral experience with the imagistic and auditory effects of surfaces than in other historical moments, for example in the late nineteenth-century visual culture. In this context, extremism finds fertile terrain: the individual does not depend on traditional media and traditional forms of sensationalism to spread terror. With the popularization of smartphones in the early 2010s, the individual is able to use the infrastructure of the society of the selfie to produce their own 'media spectacle' (Kellner 2003b) via massacres, public threats, etc.

The introduction of new communication technologies always works in two directions at once – we become more connected in some ways, more alienated in others. The story of Web 2.0 and the discontents of the society of the selfie are, in this sense, a different genre of the same basic tendency. On the whole, social connections are more spread out than before and also more mediated. In some ways, ethnic and cultural difference is experienced more routinely in globalized, information capitalism via social media and immigration, as opposed to in prior eras. Many react to this with heightened ethnic intolerance. Feeding off the alienation, anxiety and frustration of many millions of people trying to make life function, and even possibly have a sense of meaning or purpose in 'liquid' or 'risk' capitalist society, mobilized largely in most explicit reaction to multiculturalism, but also in reaction to global economic crisis, authoritarianism is booming across the globe. The society of the selfie is not the cause of this widespread immiseration, but it is historically inseparable from it, and in some significant ways contributes to the social changes and dislocations that authoritarian movements react against with their militant retrotopic visions.

Yet radically democratic resistance movements are also fed in this climate of crisis. The 'extinction anxiety' rampant in some areas is partly a reaction to a very real and powerful shift towards multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism across the globe, the progressive changes being more prominent among younger generations (Langman 2020). These progressive changes are real, and the extreme reactions of authoritarian agitators and movements feed their

opposition – the cosmopolitans and anti-capitalists of all stripes – at the same time as they attempt to strongarm a hegemonic grip on the world stage. And the desire for progressive change to a more inclusive, egalitarian form of society is influenced by the same dislocations and crises that impact the authoritarians, in this case the cosmopolitans and anti-capitalists reacting not just against economic deprivation but also against a competitive, reified social world that has imposed rigid norms about work, strength and individualism, while depriving them of belonging, cooperation and 'the good life' (Langman and Lundskow 2016; Morelock and Hussain 2020).

The digital condition accelerated in the 2010s, and the COVID-19 pandemic is a turning point for the modern world-system. It is not fortuitous that selfies became a common visual language especially in the 2010s. More than a democratization of devices and acceleration of connections, it illustrates a new neoliberal *Zeitgeist* where individuals are pressured to put themselves on display for an invisible audience. If it favours threats that reify contemporary sociality and warp communication dynamics, it also feeds mechanisms of engagement and the production of new social ties based on the multitude (gathering multiple singularities around social and political causes) and new ways for subjectivation (that is, how individuals reflect on their own political situation and became conscious of their actions). In some ways the participatory qualities of social media facilitate new forums for civic engagement and political mobilization, as well as new expectations for participation and empowerment in society (Langman 2005; Hands 2010; Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2014). On a global scale, the threat of authoritarianism is real, but so are opportunities for new, vibrant forms of civic community emerging from the society of the selfie.

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THE SOCIETY OF THE SELFIE

This book explores how the internet is connected to the global crisis of liberal democracy. Today, self-promotion is at the heart of many human relationships. The selfie is not just a social media gesture people love to hate. It is also a symbol of social reality in the age of the internet. Through social media people have new ways of rating and judging themselves and one another, via metrics such as likes, shares, followers and friends. There are new thirsts for authenticity, outlets for verbal aggression, and social problems. Social media culture and neoliberalism dovetail and amplify one another, feeding social estrangement. With neoliberalism, psychosocial wounds are agitated and authoritarianism is provoked. Yet this new sociality also inspires resistance and political mobilisation.

Illustrating ideas and trends with examples from news and popular culture, the book outlines and applies theories from Debord, Foucault, Fromm, Goffman, and Giddens, among others. Topics covered include the global history of communication technologies, personal branding, echo chamber effects, alienation and fear of abnormality. Information technologies provide channels for public engagement where extreme ideas reach farther and faster than ever before, and political differences are widened and inflamed. They also provide new opportunities for protest and resistance.

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CDSMS CRITICAL DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA STUDIES

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