



Democratization

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The dialectic of democracy: modernization, emancipation and the *great regression*

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ABSTRACT

In some of the most established and supposedly immutable liberal democracies, diverse social groups are losing confidence not only in established democratic institutions, but in the idea of liberal representative democracy itself. Meanwhile, an illiberal and anti-egalitarian transformation of democracy evolves at an apparently unstoppable pace. This *democratic fatigue syndrome*, the present article suggests, is qualitatively different from the *crises of democracy* which have been debated for some considerable time. Focusing on mature democracies underpinned by the ideational tradition of European Enlightenment, the article theorizes this syndrome and the striking transformation of democracy in terms of a dialectic process in which the very norm that once gave birth to the democratic project – the modernist idea of the *autonomous subject* – metamorphoses into its gravedigger, or at least into the driver of its radical reformulation. The article further develops aspects of my existing work on *second-order emancipation* and *simulative democracy*. Taking a theoretical rather than empirical approach, it aims to provide a conceptual framework for more empirically oriented analyses of changing forms of political articulation and participation.

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1. Introduction

The Hegelian tradition understands *dialectic* as a process in which an idea or social arrangement (thesis) gives rise to its own counterpart (antithesis), thereby destabilizes and eventually destroys itself and triggers the emergence of something new (synthesis). In exactly this sense, the term *dialectic of democracy* is used here to conceptualize a process in which the normative core of democracy and democratization – the modernist idea of the *autonomous subject* – transmutes from a precondition, facilitator and driver of the democratic project into a powerful challenge to established notions of democracy and the motor of their radical transformation. This thinking in terms of a dialectic of

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democracy may be traced back right to Plato's *Republic* which states that the "excessive desire" for its core value, liberty, "is what undermines democracy" and eventually leads to "its downfall."¹ It draws on Dahl's understanding of democracy as a perennially open project,² and on the hypothesis that democracy is based on, and in a variety of ways depends on, preconditions or resources which it cannot itself produce, but which it persistently depletes.³ This hypothesis, too, is well known from Plato. In contemporary democratic theory the first dimension, i.e. democracy's dependence on resources which it does not itself (re)produce, recurred, in Lipset's⁴ argument that in order to thrive, democracy needs a certain level of economic development (*material* preconditions). And it had been implicit in Almond and Verba's⁵ argument that the "participation explosion" can only be governed democratically, if it is tamed and moderated by a strong "civic culture" (*cultural* preconditions). The second dimension, i.e. democracy's tendency to deplete these very resources on which it depends and thus endanger its own stability, had underpinned, inter alia, concerns in the 1970s that growing citizen demands might lead into a condition of "state overload" and "ungovernability"⁶, and much later resurfaced, for example, in Putnam's⁷ work on the erosion of "social capital."

Around the turn to the new millennium, theorists of *post-democracy* then pointed much more explicitly to a dialectic of democracy. Rancière, for example, suggested that the force of homogenization and consensus, on the one hand, and the preservation of plurality and conflict, on the other, are the two antipodes built into the democratic project, with the former persistently diminishing the potential for the latter and thus powering democracy's evolution towards post-democracy.⁸ Similarly, Colin Crouch diagnosed an "inevitable" and "irreversible entropy" of democracy and described the trajectory of politics and democracy in terms of a "parabola."⁹ More recently, Mitchell, Streeck, Hausknost and many others¹⁰ renewed the argument that for its own stabilization and reproduction modern democracy depends on *material* prerequisites which it does not (re)produce. And, focusing on the non-material side, Eribon, Lilla, Inglehart and many others,¹¹ argued that the rise of right-wing populism, which many perceive as the most serious threat to liberal democracy,¹² has to be understood as a *cultural* backlash¹³ triggered, more than anything, by the value preferences and pre-occupations of those well-educated, liberal and cosmopolitan middle classes, who since the 1970s have conceived of themselves as the avant-garde of the progressive democratic project.

So, at least implicitly, constitutive elements of what is conceptualized here as the dialectic of democracy have been debated for some considerable time. But the mainstream literature on democracy and democratization has so far not pursued them in any great detail – most probably because such debates raise fundamental questions about the *sustainability* of democracy, in both its democracy-related and eco-political meanings.¹⁴ Indeed, the idea that liberal democracy – or indeed democracy more generally – may not be sustainable, materially, culturally and/or ecologically, is radically incompatible with the self-perception and self-descriptions of industrialized countries in the northern hemisphere as the most advanced on the trajectory of modernization and democratization, signposting the path of development for others to follow. Hence, for normative democratic theory, in particular, the very thought of the possible unsustainability of democracy is highly problematic.

Empirically, however, the spread of the "democratic fatigue syndrome" now diagnosed by a wide range of observers,¹⁵ renders more detailed engagement with this idea imperative. For, in comparison to the *crises of democracy* which have been debated for a number of decades,¹⁶ this democratic fatigue syndrome has a new and

very different quality: In modern consumer societies, these observers say, diverse social groups, each for different reasons, are losing confidence not only in established democratic institutions, but in the very idea of democracy itself. Rancière even diagnoses “a new hatred of democracy,”¹⁷ which he traces to the perception of a dialectic metamorphosis of democracy from the promise of “the recognition, as equals and as political subjects”¹⁸ to all those whose rights and voice have so far remained oppressed, into “an anthropological catastrophe” and the “self-destruction of humanity.”¹⁹ Democratic innovations, ranging from changes to electoral systems via reforms to political parties to new means of democratic engagement and, most recently, experiments with digital democracy, have not been able, it seems, to cure this fatigue or even hatred of democracy. Instead, an illiberal, anti-egalitarian and authoritarian transformation of democracy evolves at an apparently unstoppable pace. How may this fatigue with democracy be explained? What is the apparently unstoppable dynamic that powers democracy’s ongoing transformation? Why do the manifold appeals and practical attempts to re-energize the democratic project have so limited impact?

Observers following the post-Marxist critical tradition see the “fundamental cause of democratic decline” in the growing imbalance “between the role of corporate interests and those of virtually all other groups.”²⁰ There is much to be said for this explanation. Yet, the diagnosis of a democratic fatigue syndrome points beyond post-Marxist notions of the *oppression* of democracy towards some kind of *exhaustion*. Aiming to supplement – not to refute – the well-rehearsed post-Marxist argument, the present article therefore follows up the above hypothesis that in contemporary consumer societies, liberal democracy – and other forms of democracy, too – fall victim to an inherent dialectic, i.e. that the dynamic of democratization itself persistently depletes and destroys the foundations of the democratic project. This thinking in terms of a dialectic further develops aspects of my earlier work on democracy in European(ized) consumer societies.²¹ More specifically, the article elaborates the idea that, in the wake of its own evolution, the very ideal which once initiated and propelled the democratic project – the modernist notion of the *autonomous subject* – incrementally metamorphoses into the most serious threat to liberal democracy and all other forms of democracy grounded on this norm.

The next section is devoted to this idea of the autonomous subject; it recalls different accounts of the status and significance of this norm in modern consumer democracies. Section three focuses in on the prevailing ways in which this norm is being interpreted in contemporary consumer societies. It develops the concept of *reflexive* or *second-order* emancipation which seeks to capture that processes of modernization and emancipation incrementally suspend established understandings of this norm and reframe its meaning. From this particular perspective, section four then explains the democratic fatigue syndrome and investigates the ongoing reconfiguration of the democratic project. The concluding section reflects on the conceptualization of the ongoing transformation of contemporary democracy as a “great regression.”²² Furthermore, it considers whether the diagnosis and analysis of a dialectic of democracy might itself be an anti-democratic and reactionary project.

2. The autonomous subject and its (in)significance

Beyond the more empirically applicable criteria which are commonly used to distinguish democratic from non-democratic systems and to assess their relative

democratic quality, the Enlightenment idea of the *autonomous subject*, i.e. the idea of the human being as the subject of inalienable freedom, rights and dignity, is the normative core of modern democracy.²³ It entails the *individual* right to liberty, equality and self-determination and the right of the *collective* subject, the people, to self-government, i.e. to sovereignty. Not all proponents of this ideal, which Enlightenment philosophy installed as the very foundation of European modernity more generally, have favoured democracy; but, on the other hand, all definitions of democracy (and the empirically applicable criteria to assess democratic systems) are based on this ideal. In practical terms, the autonomous subject has always been a promise and ambition rather than an accomplished reality. It has been interpreted in a variety of different ways and, accordingly, has given rise to diverse forms of democracy. Yet, democracy and democratization have always been about the formation of political subjects and their struggle for equal rights, recognition and self-determination. Had it not been for this norm and ideal of the autonomous subject, the democratic project would never have emerged in the first place; and ever since its emergence, the unfulfilled promise of autonomy has been the motor powering – and the norm legitimating – democratic movements and progressive politics. In any particular polity and at any given point in time, the dominant interpretations of the autonomous subject condition the shape and public perception of democracy. Hence, the understandings of autonomy and subjectivity prevailing in established post-industrial consumer democracies, and the overall significance of this central norm in these polities' public discourse, are the key to understanding both their democratic fatigue syndrome and the ongoing transformation of democracy.

With the transition of modern societies from their industrial to the post-industrial stage of development, this modernist norm of the autonomous subject gained substantially in political significance.²⁴ For the increasingly educated and politically articulate middle classes, in particular, values of self-determination, self-expression and self-realization became a priority concern.²⁵ Hence, the new social movements since the late 1960s pursued an agenda of democratization and *new politics*²⁶ aiming for the liberation from the imperatives of religion, tradition and state authority. Intellectually, these movements – and related, newly emerging academic sub-disciplines such as social movement research or environmental sociology – were strongly inspired by the Marxist and post-Marxist tradition of critical social theory, which placed the norm of the autonomous subject at the very centre of their societal analysis. Critical theorists were interested, in particular, in the societal power relations obstructing the realization of this norm. From their perspective, consumer capitalism was the primary obstacle. The advertising, culture and consumer industries were seen to colonize the human being and enforce its subjugation, manipulation and mutilation. They obstructed the realization of autonomy and the authentic self – not only for the working class, but for modern citizens in general. And beyond the power of capitalism, the instrumental rationality of technological and administrative modernity more generally, were seen to relentlessly oppress the human being, thwarting its ambition for autonomy.

Thus, the categories of alienation and liberation, oppression and emancipation, became constitutive to the agenda of the new social movements and the academic mainstream in the critical social sciences, often paired with the assumption that the authentic self, the autonomous subject and a good life for all can be realized only beyond the established order of consumer capitalism. In line with Weberian thinking, Horkheimer and Adorno had, early on, relativized the power and agency of capitalism pointing, in

addition, to a dynamic of modernization, a *dialectic of Enlightenment*,²⁷ that left much less agency and control to capitalist elites than orthodox Marxists might accredit them. Similarly, Marcuse had anticipated that “in advanced industrial society” the conveniences of the consumer culture might eventually “make the very notion of alienation questionable” and confront the (post-)Marxist critique of society “with a situation that seems to deprive it of its very basis.”²⁸ And Gramsci, too, had suggested that the victory of capitalism cannot be explained only as a process forcefully imposed by capitalist elites, but also relies on popular consent and cooperation.²⁹ His concepts of *cultural hegemony* and the *integral state* seek to capture a kind of consonance rather than antagonism between modern citizens and the logic ruling their societies. Still, critical theorists, social movement activists and politically committed social scientists firmly held on to the belief in the truly authentic self which may be realized only beyond consumer capitalism and the logic of industrial modernity. Indeed, the new social movements since the 1970s embedded the norm of the autonomous subject as well as the categories of alienation and liberation more broadly and firmly in western post-industrial societies than ever before.

Already in the mid-1970s, however, Niklas Luhmann’s *social systems theory* radically challenged this subject-centrism of the critical and activist tradition. Luhmann’s meta-critical project of *sociological enlightenment*³⁰ sought to reveal that, whatever the normative claims of political constitutions, social movements and critical theorists, the notion of the autonomous subject is not helpful as the central category of social theory and societal analysis. Factually, modern society and its ongoing development, Luhmann argued, are neither about the incremental realization of Enlightenment ideals, nor about processes of value and culture change that render contemporary societies ever more authentically democratic. Instead, they are driven by a logic of functional differentiation which renders modern societies ever more complex, progressively marginalizes the human individual and its value orientations, derides its claims to autonomy, and undermines the ability of politicians, and politics in general, to steer, coordinate and control societal development.

Similar to most critical theorists, social systems theorists, too, have taken no particular interest in the ongoing reframing of prevalent notions of identity, subjectivity or autonomy. Nor have they considered that the claims to self-determination and autonomy may not easily give way to the rule of modern society’s function systems.³¹ They underestimated the political energy which the persistent marginalization of individual and collective needs for identity, subjectivity and autonomy can release,³² and the agency and impact related counter-movements may have. Yet, their post-critical and post-subjective social theory, in a sense, further pursued Marcuse’s dystopian suspicion that in the wake of societal development the category of alienation – as well as the norm to which it refers – might incrementally lose its mobilizing force. Their analysis of political protest movements correctly highlighted that such movements actually reinforce the logic of modernization (differentiation) at least as much as they challenge it.³³ And systems-theoretical thinking anticipated a post-subjective condition and society which the neoliberal and the digital revolutions then rendered much more empirically tangible than Luhmann himself had ever imagined.

Indeed, the hegemony of neoliberal thought since the second half of the 1990s firmly anchored in mainstream societal discourse the belief that to the rule of the market there is no alternative and that the supposedly autonomous subject, if the category is to be retained at all, ought to be understood as the autonomous consumer freely selecting,

in any particular situation of their everyday life, from the range of choices provided by the market. The banking and financial crisis since 2008 then triggered a certain resurgence of post- and neo-Marxist thinking.³⁴ Yet, taking the neo-liberal marginalization of autonomy and subjectivity a major step further, the digital revolution has now set out to fully suspend not only the norm of the autonomous subject, but the entity of the human individual, too, as relevant points of reference. Whilst Luhmann had already relocated human beings and their claims to autonomy and subjectivity from the very centre of sociological theory and analysis into the *environment* of modern society's autonomous function systems, the digital revolution further radicalizes this marginalization: It perceives and calculates human individuals and their social relations as an infinite mass of digital data to be collected and selectively arranged into data profiles, which increasingly become the pertinent point of reference for *evidence-based* public policy, for economic decision making, for political strategists, and for any other data users.³⁵

Measured by this truly revolutionary sidelining of the very core of Enlightenment thinking and European modernity, the societal response to the digital revolution is revealingly restrained. Curiously, this progressive suspension of the norm of the autonomous subject does not seem to trigger major feelings of alienation; or, as Marcuse had put it already in the early 1970s, there is a striking “prevalence of a non-revolutionary – nay, antirevolutionary – consciousness” in contemporary consumer societies. Indeed, “the highest stage of capitalist development” seems to correspond to “the low of revolutionary potential.”³⁶ To the extent that the digital revolution, pushed by most governments as a priority project and widely perceived by the public as a welcome, or at least inescapable development, is a matter for critical debates at all, concerns focus on its impact on employment opportunities in automated factories and the digitalized service sector, on the probability of a further polarization of societal wealth and an aggravation of social inequality in artificial intelligence society,³⁷ or on the rise of the surveillance state well beyond the Orwellian dystopia.³⁸ As regards its impact on democracy, there are hopes that the digital revolution might entail new opportunities for citizen-empowerment and, contrarily, concerns about the impact of the digital revolution on the quality of public political discourse.³⁹ Yet, the really crucial issue that the digital revolution rapidly and radically erodes the factual relevance of the autonomous subject, whose free volition, inalienable rights, intrinsic value and intangible dignity had been the very core of democracy and its practices of participation, representation and legitimation, largely escapes public attention, and has not yet found much resonance in democratic theory either. Still, the digital revolution and the rise of artificial intelligence fully implement what, a fairly short time ago, the post-Marxist critics of social systems theory had still regarded as a horrendous and entirely unacceptable provocation: a society and modernity beyond the norm of the autonomous subject. Indeed, the digital revolution marks the transition to a post-subjective modernity – and to a new form of democracy beyond its established normative core.⁴⁰

3. Reflexive emancipation or the liberation from maturity

The conspicuous absence of any major “revolutionary potential” suggests that in contemporary consumer societies the norm of the autonomous subject and the claims of modern individuals to self-determination and self-realization are not simply oppressed – as post-Marxist analysis in terms of alienation, colonization and domination asserts;

but this norm and these expectations have either become exhausted or they have been reframed in such a way that they no longer conflict with the factual realities and development of digital consumer capitalism and, accordingly, no longer release much revolutionary energy. Neither critical theory nor systems theory had devoted much attention to spelling out what exactly the full realization of the *authentic* autonomous subject might imply in practical terms; nor had they been particularly interested in the continuous change of prevailing interpretations of *authentic* autonomy and subjectivity. The former had fully focused on the power structures which alienate, colonize and suppress the autonomy of the subject but had never been particularly explicit exactly what authentic self-determination and the liberated subject might imply in empirical terms. The latter had fully focused on modern society's function systems and their respective logics of operation and self-reproduction and had regarded human beings and their normative claims to autonomy as largely irrelevant. Yet, as regards the perception of democratic institutions and the transformation of the democratic project, exactly this ongoing reinterpretation of the norm of autonomy and subjectivity is crucial.

Social theorists such as Beck and Giddens⁴¹ had pointed out that in advanced modern societies, citizens not only have ever higher expectations in terms of self-determination and self-fulfilment, but increasingly pursue their identity construction and self-realization as a self-managed project seeking liberation from established social imperatives, authorities and predetermination by tradition. Beck had talked of a *reinvention of politics*⁴² and Giddens of a *new life politics*⁴³ which entail a significant increase in demands for democratic participation and better political representation. Beck, in particular, had suggested that this reinvention of politics and the *second modernity* which emerges in its wake would have the potential to address and repair the democratic deficits of the established institutions and socio-political order. Similarly, Inglehart had suggested that the persistent rise in values of self-determination and self-expression would be conducive to the emergence of democracy in countries where it does not already exist and its further deepening where it does. Empirically, he “finds a remarkably strong correlation between Self-expression values and effective democracy.” The “most important effect of modernization,” he argues, is that it “increases ordinary citizens’ capabilities and willingness to struggle for democratic institutions.”⁴⁴

Inglehart places great emphasis on the rise of self-expression values and on the significance of his political culture approach to explaining the development of democracy in contemporary societies. He conceptualizes “cultural change” as “a process through which societies adapt their survival strategies”⁴⁵ and regards “the underlying cultural demand”⁴⁶ as a key parameter determining the development of democracy. Strangely, however, he never explores in any detail *what kind of self* or *identity* these values are supposed to construct and express, *what kind of democracy* they might promote – and how *cultural change*, i.e. the continuous reframing of prevailing notions of autonomy, identity and subjectivity, might affect the dominant understandings of democracy. He works with a rather simplistic linear model according to which *more demand for freedom and choice* translates into *more democracy*, but he does not consider that the ongoing process of modernization and rising demands for self-determination and self-expression might also be detrimental to democracy or propel the adaptive reformulation of the democratic project. Even the current tide of right-wing populism he simply interprets as a “cultural backlash,” i.e. a return to earlier preferences for security values, effecting an unexpected “democratic recession” which will, however, he argues, be just a

short term deviation from the normal trajectory of modernization and democratization.⁴⁷ For the hypothesis of the dialectic of democracy, however, exactly this relationship between the rise of self-expression values and the supposedly linear improvement of democracy in modern consumer societies is the crucial point. For, it suggests that whilst in the 1970s and 1980s the modernization-induced, emancipatory shift in value preferences and the rise of self-expression values has indeed been conducive to the spread and deepening of (a particular kind of) democracy, the *further continuation* of this emancipatory agenda of self-determination, self-realization and self-expression, rather than its *reversal*, effects today's democratic fatigue syndrome, the recession of democracy and its obvious transformation into illiberal, exclusive and authoritarian varieties of democracy.

Indeed, in contemporary consumer societies, dominant notions of autonomy and subjectivity, and prevailing patterns of identity construction and self-realization have changed quite substantially. In particular, ongoing processes of modernization and differentiation – strongly reinforced by the neoliberal logic of competitiveness and self-responsibility – have continued to disembody modern individuals from traditional social contexts and relations and increased the relative significance of individual forms of self-realization as opposed to collective identities and subjectivity.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the consumer market has become the primary arena for self-construction, self-realization and self-articulation.⁴⁹ Already in the early 1960s Marcuse had noted that in advanced industrial societies people are ever less inclined to seek the realization of their autonomous Self and authentic identity beyond the market and the consumer industry: “People recognise themselves in their commodities,” he suggested, and “find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set” or other consumer items.⁵⁰ As in advanced post-industrial societies the consumer industry has permeated virtually all dimensions of individual experience and social relations, the project of self-determination and self-realization implies, less than ever, the emancipation from and radical abolition of the consumer industry, but aims, instead, for self-realization and self-optimization within the framework of digitalized consumer capitalism.⁵¹

Thirdly, the logic of differentiation and fragmentation, which according to systems theorists has restructured modern societies into an assemblage of mutually incompatible and exclusive function systems, has also recast the Christian-bourgeois ideal of the unitary, consistent and stable identity, and pushed what Sennett described as the *corrosion of character*.⁵² As in a context of ever accelerating innovation and change⁵³ contemporary individuals are, as Inglehart put it, “adapting their survival strategies,” traditional norms of character and identity are giving way to more flexible and multi-faceted forms of *liquid identity* which are more suited to the requirements of *liquid modernity*.⁵⁴ And alongside this differentiation of the (ideally) identical subject, the public space differentiates as well, breaking down into ever smaller, mutually insulated discursive arenas (filter bubbles, echo chambers), which do not interact with each other, i.e. which do not engage in cross-boundary communication and deliberation in the Habermasian agreement-oriented sense.⁵⁵ Instead, they fully focus on the generation and reproduction of their own internal and self-referential narratives of meaning. Even at the level of the individual, this differentiation and liquefaction of traditional norms of identity renders the project of subjectification, i.e. the constitution and maintenance of moral, rational and political subjects extremely difficult; for the constitution of collective political subjects this is even more pertinent. Whilst these mutually exclusive discursive spaces, quite evidently, do serve to constitute,

maintain, perform and experience identities, these are highly fractional identities with no physical equivalent outside the respective discursive arena. In particular, these fractional identities do not easily translate into political subjectivities which can participate and be represented in political systems assuming that one person speaks with *one voice* and, accordingly, is granted *one vote*.

At a more abstract level, this cultural change, this ongoing modernization of prevalent notions of autonomy, subjectivity and self-expression, may be conceptualized as the emancipation from restrictions, commitments and responsibilities which had come along with the Kantian notion of autonomy and maturity. Kant had famously conceptualized Enlightenment as *mankind's emergence from its self-imposed immaturity*.⁵⁶ For Kant this had implied the acquisition of the capability – individually and collectively – to be ruled by reason and commit to categorical imperatives (duties) which would tightly restrain (civilize) individual desires, impulses and instincts, engender the dignity of human beings, facilitate social equality, justice, inclusion and wellbeing, and eventually give rise to a *cosmopolitan society* and *perpetual peace*.⁵⁷ Exactly these were core ideas – though not the only ones – which had guided the emancipatory project of the progressive new social movements and which, up to the present, underpin the critique of right-wing populist movements as *regressive* and *uncivilized*.⁵⁸ Exactly this understanding of autonomy and subjectivity also informed those theories of democracy which understand democracy and democratization as an educational and transformative project aiming for the formation of the mature citizen, capable of organizing and managing public affairs based on the principle of communicative reason, collective agreement and for the benefit of the common good.⁵⁹

In as much as this cultural change described by Bauman, Sennett, Reckwitz and many others⁶⁰ entails the reflexive liberation from, or at least an emancipatory revision of, these core principles which had been constitutive to the Kantian understanding of autonomy and subjectivity, this “adaptation of survival strategies” may be conceptualized as *second-order emancipation*.⁶¹ The term suggests that one set of emancipatory values that once underpinned earlier progressive movements is being replaced by a revised set of values which guide today's forms of emancipation. Second-order emancipation is emancipatory in that it promises new means of and spaces for self-realization; it extends the boundaries of the possible and the range of opportunities for self-realization. In line with Beck's notion of *reflexive modernization* second-order emancipation might also be referred to as *reflexive emancipation* or, referring back to Kant, as the emergence of contemporary individuals and societies from their *self-imposed maturity*. From today's point of view, this Kantian maturity appears unduly restrictive, inflexible and overall incompatible with the requirements of contemporary consumer societies. The revision of this norm is powered by a *dialectic of emancipation* which, *qua* being emancipatory, cannot accept any boundaries, is inherently transgressive and, invariably, also questions (politicizes) its own foundations which had remained unchallenged (pre-political) so far. Second-order emancipation and the liberation from earlier commitments which are now experienced as unduly restrictive might be associated, in particular, with the educated and progressive middle classes which are well endowed with various forms of capital waiting to be made productive.⁶² Yet, it also underpins neoliberal thinking⁶³ as well as the right-wing populist project which explicitly revolts against established norms of decency, maturity and being civilized.⁶⁴ For a differentiated understanding of what is conceptualized here as the dialectic of democracy, this dialectic of emancipation is essential.

4. Democratic dysfunctionality and the reconfiguration of the democratic project

Against this background, the democratic fatigue syndrome and the transformation of democracy occurring in many of the most established democratic polities may now be explained in terms of a *multiple dysfunctionality* of democracy. More specifically, drawing on the distinction between the *systemic performance* (problem solving capacity) and *democratic performance* (ability to deliver to specifically democratic expectations) of political systems⁶⁵, the democratic fatigue syndrome may be explained as the effect of a perceived *systemic dysfunctionality* and *democratic dysfunctionality* of democracy. And in light of the digital revolution, in particular, these two are supplemented by a third form of dysfunctionality that might be labelled *mechanical dysfunctionality* in a quite literal sense.

The first of these three dimensions, systemic dysfunctionality, denotes the limited problem-solving capacity of democracy. It has been debated since the 1990s, at the very latest. Societal differentiation, technological development, the dynamics of globalization and so forth steadily increase the complexity of modern societies, render their problems and crises ever more unpredictable, and persistently reduce the steering capacity of government institutions. Democratic systems, in particular, become structurally inadequate for the government of advanced modern societies.⁶⁶ Whilst political institutions are creaking under the pressure of ever more, and ever more erratic, political participation,⁶⁷ citizens claiming their “right to competent government”⁶⁸ are “losing faith in democratic government and its suitability”⁶⁹ for resolving the mounting problems to be addressed. Already in the 1990s, reform governments set out to modernize democratic politics, seeking to increase its efficiency and effectiveness by devolving decision making capacities to non-majoritarian expert bodies. Yet, given the dynamic of modernization, these strategies did little to overcome the structural problems of democracy. Whilst challenges such as social inequality, global warming, migration and notoriously low rates of economic growth are becoming ever more complex and urgent, democratic institutions retain little ability to plan, direct, regulate and coordinate societal development. Most strikingly perhaps, the field of climate and sustainability policy has recently been affected by a notable collapse of confidence in democratic governance.⁷⁰

The second dimension, i.e. the *emancipatory dysfunctionality* of democracy, refers to the unsuitability of egalitarian and inclusive notions of democracy, in particular, as a political tool for purposes of self-realization, self-expression and self-experience. Given the value and culture shift outlined above, i.e. given the understandings of self-realization and self-experience prevailing in contemporary consumer societies, democracy and democratization, which had once been the most important tool for the emancipatory project, increasingly turn into a burden and obstacle. Democratic institutions and processes can neither articulate nor represent the complexity and flexibility of modern individuals and their identity needs, nor can they respond to the dynamics of modern lifestyles and the reality of the competitive struggle for social opportunities. And in a societal constellation where strongly consumption based (resource intensive) understandings of autonomy, subjectivity and identity clash, ever more openly, with biophysical limits and persistently low economic growth, the democratic principles of egalitarianism, social justice and social inclusion become a major obstacle to individual freedom and self-realization. Modern lifestyles, conceptualized

as the *imperial mode of living*⁷¹ in today's *externalization societies*,⁷² are fundamentally based on the principles of social as well as ecological inequality and exclusion; their defence demands that democracy is either abandoned or comprehensively reframed.

The third dimension of democratic dysfunctionality, labelled here *mechanical dysfunctionality*, refers to the breakdown of democracy due to the corrosion of its most central constitutive element, the idea of the autonomous subject. While the previous two forms of dysfunctionality consider the usefulness of democratic processes and institutions as a tool for particular purposes, this third dimension concerns the viability of the democratic project itself. More specifically, to the same extent to which claims to autonomy and subjectivity are not only oppressed by the forces of capitalism, and not just marginalized by functional differentiation and the rule of the function systems' codes, but reframed in consonance with the offerings of consumer capitalism and actually dissolved in the dual process of liquification and datafication (digitalization); put differently, to the same extent that in digitalized consumer societies the norm of the autonomous subject evaporates, the categories of alienation and emancipation become exhausted, and the democratic project – which had never been a purpose in itself, but a political tool for the realization of the unfulfilled promise of autonomy and subjectivity – simply implodes. “However far post-democracy advances,” Crouch had suggested, “it is unlikely that it will exhaust the capacity for new social identities to form, to become aware of their outsider status in the political system, and to make both noisy and articulate demands for admission.”⁷³ Yet, to the extent that these social identities are *based on*, rather than *opposed to*, the logic of consumer capitalism and its imperial mode of living, these “noisy and articulate demands” will be directed not against consumer capitalism, but against the egalitarian, inclusive or even redistributive institutions of democracy – which from this perspective are experienced as counter-productive and an obstacle. And to the same extent that the digital revolution suspends the project of subjectivation replacing it with the new project of objectification, i.e. to the extent that it makes the empirical data set rather than the autonomous subject the relevant point of reference for political, economic and any other form of decision making, democratic procedures become simply irrelevant.

In this scenario, a dual transformation of democracy is predictable – and indeed empirically occurring. Firstly, democracy, which has always been an essentially contested concept and a perennially open project, metamorphoses from a regime protecting the inviolable rights of every human being, guaranteeing equality and inclusion, and favouring the political emancipation of minorities into a regime that secures the power of majorities, generates political legitimation for ever higher levels of social inequality, and organizes the socio-ecological exclusion which for the defence of modern lifestyles and aspirations for self-realization is *conditio sine qua non*. This is most visible in the politics of right-wing populism which – by no means solely for the benefit of the often-cited *losers of modernization*⁷⁴ – demands more direct democracy so as to push the fortification of external borders and, internally, the exclusion of *non-deserving* minorities and *enemies of the people*.

Secondly, the performative – in a theatrical sense – dimension of democracy gains much in significance. Crouch and other theorists have suggested that in what they are calling *post-democracy*, democratic processes and institutions degenerate into a mere spectacle and empty ritual. But these procedures and institutions are, in fact, neither an empty spectacle, nor are they just a strategy employed by self-interested elites to manipulate and deceive the masses. In a context where traditional notions of

subjectivity, identity, character, dignity and so forth have become counter-productive and are being revised, but have, as yet, by no means been fully abandoned; in a context where the digital revolution determinedly pursues the objectification and depoliticization of the supposedly autonomous self, taking the liquification of subjectivity further towards its liquidation, these processes and institutions are much better understood as practices and arenas for the *recreational performance* of subjectivity. Rather than as the transition to *post*-democracy, the ongoing transformation of liberal representative democracy is, therefore, more suitably conceptualized as the emergence of *simulative democracy*.⁷⁵ The practices and institutions of simulative democracy cater to the desire to reconstruct, maintain and experience the kind of subjectivity that second-order emancipation critically challenges, but which still retains some normative force. They cater, in a sense, to the remains of post-Marxian experiences of alienation and the paradox that in modern consumer societies, expectations in terms of democratic participation, representation and responsiveness continue to rise whilst, at the same time, the structural transformation of political subjectivities, the public sphere and society at large destroy the constitutive elements of which democracy consists.

This performative dimension is not categorically new but has always been constitutive to democracy. Yet, in contrast to the anticipatory performance of subjectivity, autonomy and sovereignty which has always been at the heart of progressive, avant-garde politics, the practices of simulative politics are *recreational* or *regenerative*, not *prefigurative*.⁷⁶ Rather than with the experimental anticipation of alternatives waiting to be upscaled to the level of society at large, simulative politics is concerned with the experiential niche-cultivation of the echoes of first-order emancipation. Its practices are *recreational* firstly in the sense that they focus on the performative *reconstitution* of notions and norms of subjectivity which, beyond the respective arenas, are being liquefied and liquidated. And secondly, these practices and arenas allow for a *recuperative break* from the agenda and logic that, outside these recreational arenas, govern individual life and modern societies at large. As the (emancipatory) liquefaction and (digital) objectification of subjectivity move ahead, this recreational performance of subjectivity has a compensatory and therapeutic function. Practices of simulative democracy are the performative recentralization of the marginalized, liquefied and objectivated subject. Whilst actual policy- and decision-making – in order to be *evidence-based*, *fair* and *efficient* – becomes increasingly based on data-mining and algorithms, and political discourse and competition are relocating into the realm of post-rationality, post-truth and alternative facts, democracy evolves into a set of practices and institutions concerned with the recreational performance and experience of those norms which the new modernity leaves behind.⁷⁷

5. A great regression?

Where does this leave us with regard to the *democratic fatigue syndrome*, the apparently unstoppable transformation of democracy, and the limited impact of the manifold moral appeals and practical attempts to re-energize the democratic project. This article has argued that beyond the simplistic narratives offered by post-Marxist critical theorists, on the one hand, and systems- or complexity-theorists, on the other, the proliferation of anti-democratic sentiments, the recession of liberal democracy and the radical reformulation of the democratic project may be traced to a dialectic of emancipation that, by hollowing out democracy's normative core and point of reference, gives

rise to the perception of a multiple dysfunctionality of democracy which, in turn, triggers the reformulation of the democratic project. The analysis has demonstrated that the development of democracy can indeed be described in terms of a *parabola*. But while Crouch and many others remain confident that the old democratic project can somehow be revived and the direction of the democratic parabola reversed, the argument here has been that the dialectic of emancipation and the dynamic driving the transformation of the democratic project can most probably not be unhinged. In contrast to Inglehart's reassurances that "there is no need to panic" because the current "recession of democracy" and the tide of right-wing populism are but cyclical phenomena which "in the long run" will not disrupt the normal "dynamics of modernization and democracy,"⁷⁸ the argument developed here has been that exactly this dynamics of modernization accounts for the democratic fatigue syndrome. And whilst Inglehart is convinced that the "rising emphasis on Self-expression values erodes the legitimacy of authoritarian systems,"⁷⁹ the argument here is that – beyond a certain point – exactly this emphasis triggers an authoritarian dynamic. Yet, for democracy and the democratic project this is, indeed, not "the end of the line,"⁸⁰ but the metamorphosis into a new phenotype that is radically different from the forms of democracy (liberal, pluralist, egalitarian, justice-oriented and deliberative) associated with first-order emancipation. The dialectic of emancipation leads to the reconstruction of the democratic project on very different normative foundations.

Thus, analysis in terms of a dialectic makes an important contribution to understanding (post-)democracy and (de-)democratization in affluent consumer societies – yet, a normatively contentious one. In a number of respects, it takes up concerns which had been articulated in Plato's *Republic*, which fuelled the *ungovernability* debate of the 1970s, and which Rancière returns to when discussing the "democratic paradox"⁸¹ that in modern societies, democratic institutions are no longer "capable of controlling [...] democratic life":⁸² What provokes the crisis of democracy, Rancière suggests, "is nothing other than the intensity of democratic life,"⁸³ and worries about "democratic excess"⁸⁴ trigger concerns about democracy turning into "the great catastrophe of civilization, the synonyms of which are consumerism [...] and immaturity."⁸⁵ Yet, in the 1970s, the debate on state overload and ungovernability had an explicitly conservative orientation; and Rancière, too, rejects the critique of the "democratic excess" as the misguided analysis of intellectuals whose *hatred of democracy* just plays into the hands of those harbouring the "intense wish [...] to govern without the people."⁸⁶ These intellectuals' critique is complicit, Rancière argues, with the elites' "natural compulsion for oligarchic government: the compulsion to get rid of the people and of politics."⁸⁷ By way of conclusion it is, therefore, appropriate, firstly, to reconsider the more common assessment of the crisis and metamorphosis of democracy in terms of an "authoritarian reflex"⁸⁸ and "great regression"⁸⁹ and, secondly, to reflect whether the above analysis in terms of second-order emancipation and the dysfunctionality of democracy may itself be regressive or reactionary.

From the perspective of traditional, first-order emancipation, the proliferation of anti-democratic sentiments and the noticeable transformation of democracy does, of course, appear as *regressive decivilization* and a *silent counter-revolution*.⁹⁰ Yet, such conceptualizations are closer to political campaigning than academic analysis. They are based on normative foundations which they are unable and unwilling to question. Rather than contributing to the explanation and analysis of societal and political transformations, they focus, primarily, on the construction and maintenance of particular

self-perceptions and self-descriptions. They tend to assign responsibility for the crisis of democracy to particular social groups who are accused of being irrational, immoral and anti-democratic. In that they draw a clear line between the *civilized* and the *uncivilized*, such normative discourses have a strongly performative and experiential quality. Academically, however, they are even counter-productive because they conceal that the post-democratic and authoritarian dynamic visible in some of the most established democratic societies is, arguably, at least as much about the defence of progressive emancipatory achievements – which are, however, socially exclusive and ecologically destructive, as they are about a regressive “backlash against cultural change.”⁹¹ And they conceal that in this *politics of unsustainability*⁹² there is a close relationship, indeed a tacit complicity, between those portraying themselves as the stronghold of Enlightenment values and civilization and the anti-democratic and authoritarian agenda of the supposedly *uncivilized*. For, For the defence of their *imperial mode of living*⁹³, the most emancipated, educated and privileged parts of society may be said to rely on the political energies of the “threatened majority”⁹⁴ which they mobilize in order to organize the social and ecological exclusion on which their *progressive* understandings of subjectivity and self-realization vitally depend. A meta-critical approach as sketched above, in contrast, is analytically more powerful. It is neither about romanticizing an allegedly more democratic past when subjects were, supposedly, still autonomous⁹⁵, nor does it ignore or deny that in present consumer societies there is a wealth of initiatives, movements and discourses portraying themselves as the vanguard of socio-ecological alternatives.⁹⁶ But it sheds light, *inter alia*, on exactly this complicity and the simultaneity of these practices of political outsourcing, on the one hand, and the maintenance of progressive self-descriptions, on the other.

As regards the second point, the diagnosis of the dialectic of democracy may, indeed, easily be misread as a deterministic and apologetic normative theory of the illiberal, anti-egalitarian metamorphosis of democracy. The notions of second-order emancipation and democratic dysfunctionality, in particular, may appear anti-democratic or even reactionary. To these concepts, Rancière’s critique of what he calls “incessant denunciations of the democratic”⁹⁷ by “a dominant intelligentsia, whose situation is not obviously desperate and who hardly aspire to live under different laws”⁹⁸ might be fully applicable. In fact, Rancière strongly warns not to put the critical “machine into reverse gear, inverting the logic of cause and effect.”⁹⁹ “The evils of which our *democracies* suffer,” he stresses, “are primarily evils related to the insatiable appetite of oligarchs.”¹⁰⁰ He thus reverts to the well-known argument that contemporary democratic polities are not really democratic but “a solid alliance of State oligarchy and economic oligarchy,”¹⁰¹ and that the problem is not rooted in democracy, but in its absence. In this scenario, “the antidemocratic discourse of today’s intellectuals,” he believes, just “adds the finishing touches to the consensual forgetting of democracy that both state and economic oligarchies strive toward.”¹⁰² But the analysis above is not about putting the critical machine in reverse gear, nor is it about the “consensual forgetting of democracy.” It is about making the critical machine reflexive so that, *inter alia*, it may reveal how the narratives of *decivilization* and the *great regression* contribute themselves to the reproduction of what they claim to reject. Rancière, for his part, thus only paves the way for an analysis of the dialectic of democracy, but he refuses to follow it through and, instead, falls back into the logic of post-Marxist analysis. With the reflexive erosion and repackaging of democracy’s normative core he, ultimately, refuses to engage. But for democracy and democratization in liquefied, digitalizing

and in multiple ways profoundly unsustainable consumer democracies exactly this is the crucial point.

Notes

1. Plato, *The Republic*, 299.
2. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*.
3. Greven, "The Erosion of Democracy."
4. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy."
5. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture Political Attitudes and Democracy*.
6. Crozier et al., *The Crisis of Democracy*; King, "Overload."
7. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
8. Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*; Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*.
9. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*.
10. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*; Streeck, *Buying Time*; Hausknost, "The Environmental State and the Glass Ceiling of Transformation"; Pichler et al., "The Double Materiality of Democracy."
11. Eribon, *Returning to Reims*; Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*; Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*; Fraser, "Progressive Neoliberalism Versus Reactionary Populism."
12. Müller, *What is Populism?*
13. Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.
14. Blühdorn, "The Governance of Unsustainability"; Blühdorn, "Post-Ecologist Governmentality"; Blühdorn and Deflorian, "The Collaborative Management of Sustained Unsustainability."
15. Mair, *Ruling the Void*; van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*; Appadurai, "Democracy Fatigue"; Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*.
16. Crozier et al., *The Crisis of Democracy*; Dalton and Wattenberg, *Parties Without Partisans*; Warren, "What Can Democratic Participation Mean Today?"; Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*.
17. Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 4.
18. *ibid.*, 55.
19. *ibid.*, 24.
20. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 104.
21. Blühdorn, "The Third Transformation of Democracy"; Blühdorn, "Democracy beyond the Modernist Subject"; Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*; Blühdorn, "The Legitimation Crisis of Democracy"; Blühdorn and Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism."
22. Geiselberger, *The Great Regression*.
23. Held, *Models of Democracy*, 295–334; van Parijs, *Just Democracy*.
24. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*; Beck and Beck-Gernstein, *Individualization*.
25. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*; Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*; Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*.
26. Müller-Rommel and Poguntke, *New Politics*. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics*.
27. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
28. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*. 9–11, xii.
29. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*.
30. Luhmann, *Social Systems*; Zolo, "Function, Meaning, Complexity."
31. Habermas and Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie*.
32. Blühdorn and Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism."
33. Blühdorn, "Self-Experience in the Theme Park of Radical Action?"
34. e.g. Streeck, *Buying Time*; Mason, *Post-capitalism*; Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*.
35. See the contribution by Lena Ulbricht in this issue.
36. Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, 5.
37. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*.
38. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.
39. Bernhard et al., "A Digital Society for All?"; Hoff, "The Internet and Democratic Citizenship."
40. Blühdorn, "The Third Transformation of Democracy"; Blühdorn, "Democracy beyond the Modernist Subject"; Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*.
41. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
42. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics*.

43. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
44. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*, 121, 136, 123, 135.
45. *ibid.*, 140.
46. *ibid.*, 126.
47. *ibid.*
48. Beck, Giddens and Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*.
49. Bauman, *Consuming Life*; Gergen, *The Saturated Self*.
50. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 9.
51. Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*.
52. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*.
53. Rosa, *Social Acceleration*.
54. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.
55. Habermas, "The New Obscurity."
56. Kant, *Political Writings: What is Enlightenment*.
57. Kant, *Political Writings: Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*; Kant, *Political Writings: Perpetual Peace*.
58. Geiselberger, *The Great Regression*.
59. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*; Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy*.
60. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*; Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*.
61. Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*; Blühdorn, "Post-Ecologist Governmentality."
62. Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*.
63. Fraser, *Progressive Neoliberalism versus Reactionary Populism*.
64. Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.
65. Roller, *The Performance of Democracies*.
66. Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity*; Greven, "The Erosion of Democracy."
67. Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*.
68. van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*.
69. Streeck, *Buying Time*, 44.
70. Shearman and Smith, *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*; Wainwright and Mann, "Climate Leviathan"; Chen and Lees, "The New, Green, Urbanization in China"; Blühdorn, "The Legitimation Crisis of Democracy."
71. Brand and Wissen, *Limits to Capitalist Nature*.
72. Lessenich, *Living Well at Others' Expense*.
73. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 116.
74. Blühdorn and Butzlaff, *Rethinking Populism*.
75. Blühdorn, "Post-Ecologism and the Politics of Simulation"; Blühdorn, "Sustaining the Unsustainable"; Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*; Blühdorn and Deflorian, "Environmental Governance as Performance."
76. Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration."
77. For a more differentiated consideration of the transformation and new functions of democracy see Blühdorn, "The Legitimation Crisis of Democracy."
78. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*, 116.
79. *ibid.*, 125.
80. *ibid.*, 138.
81. Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*, 6.
82. *ibid.*, 7.
83. *ibid.*
84. *ibid.*, 68.
85. *ibid.*, 27.
86. *ibid.*, 80.
87. *ibid.*, 81.
88. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*, 174–189.
89. Geiselberger, *The Great Regression*.
90. Nachtwey, "Decivilisation"; Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*.
91. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*, 174.

92. Blühdorn, “Sustaining the Unsustainable”; Blühdorn, “The Politics of Unsustainability”; Blühdorn, “The Governance of Unsustainability.”
93. Brand and Wissen, *Limits to Capitalist Nature*.
94. Krastev, “Majoritarian Futures.”
95. e.g. Dean, “Tales of the Apolitical.” Also see John Meyer’s contribution to this special issue.
96. e.g. MacGregor, “Finding Transformative Potentials.”
97. Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*, 27.
98. *ibid.*, 71.
99. *ibid.*, 87.
100. *ibid.*, 73.
101. *ibid.*
102. *ibid.*, 92.

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