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Democratization beyond the post-democratic turn: towards a research agenda on new conceptions of citizen participation

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ABSTRACT

Following extensive debates about *post-democracy* and *post-politics*, scholarly attention has shifted to conceptualizing the ongoing *transformation* of democracy. In this endeavour, the change in understandings, expectations and functions of political participation is a key parameter. Improving citizen participation is widely regarded as the hallmark of democratization. Yet, a variety of actors are also increasingly ambivalent about democratic institutions and the further expansion of participation. Meanwhile, new forms of participation are gaining in significance – neoliberal *activation*, the *responsibilization* of consumers, digital *data mining*, *managed behaviour* guided by choice architects – which some believe much improve representation, but which others perceive as a threat to the citizens' autonomy. This article introduces a special issue focusing on the participation-democratization nexus in well-established democracies in the economically affluent global North. Based on a critical review of popular narratives of *post-democracy* and *post-politics* we sketch the notion of the *post-democratic turn* – which offers a new perspective on emerging forms of participation and in this special issue serves as a conceptual lens for their analysis. We then revisit more traditional conceptualizations of democratic participation which are challenged by the post-democratic turn. The article concludes with an overview of the individual contributions to this special issue.

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1. Introduction

The diagnoses of *post-democracy* and *post-politics*,¹ predictably, have proved short-lived. For about a decade they energized and at the same time paralyzed debates about the condition and perspectives of Western liberal representative democracies. Yet, the banking and financial crisis since 2008, the tide of right-wing populism and the climate and sustainability crisis have initiated waves of politicization and triggered new claims for democratic empowerment at both ends of the ideological spectrum more

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powerful than anything Western, supposedly depoliticized and apathetic polities have experienced in decades. Not only has the voter turnout in many recent elections – such as the presidential elections in the US (2016), national elections in the UK (2017) or Germany (2017), and the last election to the European Parliament (2019) – once again increased. But the paralyzing consensus of hegemonic neoliberalism – that to the rule of the global market there is no alternative – seems to have collapsed, too, reopening the arena for a variety of new nationalisms, lively debates on the *end of capitalism*,² new forms of socialism or communism³ and competing visions of a *socio-ecological transformation* of capitalist consumer societies.⁴ So, are democratic polities, after the long debate about the recession and possible death of democracy,⁵ witnessing its resuscitation and the rebirth of the political? To be sure, diverse political actors are vociferously re-asserting the right to democratic self-rule; there are powerful demands for more citizen participation; the claim that “the dominant forces in today’s polities are not those of democratic will”⁶ seems rushed; and the diagnosis of a new “wave of autocratization”⁷ is rather undifferentiated. Still, the repoliticization of many western(ized) polities – as demonstrated also by the manifold forms of urban micro-politics and experimental niche movements, the *Gilets Jaunes* in France or the international protests of *Fridays For Future* and *Extinction Rebellion* – is, very evidently, also not simply the *rebirth* of the kind of politics which, according to theorists of post-democracy and post-politics, hegemonic neoliberalism had snuffed out. Despite some obvious similarities, this new politicization does not reinstate the *participatory revolution*⁸ and the emancipatory agendas of the 1980s, nor are these new social movements the organization and mobilization of the modern precariat, the post-industrial service proletariat, which many left-wing thinkers have long been waiting and hoping for.⁹ Instead, Western liberal representative democracies are experiencing a rapid and profound *transformation* of democratic institutions, democratic values and the democratic project. If only tentatively, focusing, in particular, on well-established democracies in the economically affluent global North – and explicitly rejecting the overly simplistic notion of “autocratization” – we refer to this transformation as *democratization beyond the post-democratic turn*.¹⁰

In this transformation, the change in understandings, expectations, forms and functions of political participation is a centrally important parameter. Participation is a constitutive element of democratic politics; enhancing the opportunities for and quality of citizen participation is widely perceived as the hallmark of democratization; and for democratic systems, participation is the most important source of legitimacy. Yet, depending on its understanding, the expansion of participation does not only entail a promise of democratic empowerment, but may also be perceived as a threat. Already in the early 1960s, when Almond and Verba first diagnosed what they called a *participation explosion*, they were concerned that the new emancipatory impulse may actually destabilize rather than improve liberal democracy.¹¹ In the mid-1970s, Huntington, Crozier, King and others raised concerns that the *democratic distemper*, energized by the value and culture change which Inglehart¹² then called the *silent revolution*, might lead to *state overload*, a condition of *ungovernability* and a crisis of democracy.¹³ Today, even in the most established democracies, demands and expectations in terms of participation continue to rise. But the recent tide of right-wing populist movements, in particular, has given new credence to the old belief that responsible and competent government necessitate less popular participation rather than more.¹⁴ Indeed, with the political culture in many polities becoming increasingly polarized, illiberal and post-deliberative, the expansion of citizen participation is, once again, widely regarded as

a potential threat, both to democratic norms and to competent and effective policy making. *Fridays for Future* protesters, for example, are not primarily demanding a democratization of climate politics, but they are calling on the state and its policy experts to translate, with no further delay, scientific findings into effective policy. And a range of other political actors, too, are, for a variety of reasons, increasingly ambivalent about democratic procedures and the desirability of the further democratization of policy making.¹⁵ Meanwhile, neoliberal thinking, the spread of the consumer culture, the digital revolution and advances in behavioural economics research prompt new understandings and forms of participation – the *activation* of citizens by the neoliberal state, the *responsibilization* of consumers, digital *data mining* to inform policy decisions, *managed behaviour* guided by choice architects aiming to correct erroneous beliefs of citizens about their true best interest – which would traditionally not have been regarded as democratic participation. These new forms of participation are said to empower citizens and facilitate much better representation of their interests and responsiveness to their needs than established forms of political articulation, organization and representation could ever achieve. Others, however, are concerned that these innovations are a threat to democracy, disempower and objectify citizens and, essentially, are a form of abuse.¹⁶

These new understandings, forms and functions of political participation – and the impact of their proliferation on democracy and the democratic project – are what the contributions to this special issue aim to explore. The transformation of democracy of which they are a part is, we are suggesting, the transformation towards a democracy *beyond* the norm of the *autonomous subject* and *mature citizen*.¹⁷ In eco-political theory, for example, some have toyed with the notion of “post-sovereign subjectivities”,¹⁸ but democratic theorists, tied by their established normative commitments – most notably to this idea of the autonomous subject – and torn between the lament for the “recession” or “retreat” of democracy¹⁹ and the struggle for its resuscitation, are still finding it difficult to grasp this transformation. Yet, as the narratives of post-democracy and post-politics as well as the hopes for an egalitarian, radically democratic post-capitalist society are proving increasingly questionable, empirically, the attempt to conceptualize it might become more feasible. For exactly this purpose we are using the notion of the *post-democratic turn*. It propels, we are suggesting, the transformation of democracy *beyond the autonomous subject and mature citizen*. And for the analysis of the well-established democracies of the affluent global North at least, it is exactly the conceptual tool which according to some has so far been missing.²⁰

In this article, our aim is to map out the terrain for the ongoing redefinition of political participation and to work towards an agenda for the academic investigation of its changing interpretations and functions. Based on a critical review of popular narratives of *post-democracy* and *post-politics* (Section 2) we begin to develop the much more ambitious notion of the post-democratic turn (Section 3) that, we suggest, offers an innovative perspective on changing notions, forms and functions of political participation, and that in this special issue serves as a conceptual lens for their analysis. Set against this concept’s background, section four calls to mind how major strands of democratic theory have traditionally conceptualized the role of participation and explores how these established understandings are being challenged by the post-democratic turn. In the concluding section, we provide an overview of the contributions to this special issue.

2. Approximations to post-democracy

The *post-democratic turn*²¹ marks the transition, and propels the transformation, to a new form of democracy that reflects distinctive features of modern consumer societies. The term draws on the debates on *post-democracy* and *post-politics* which have been ongoing since the late 1990s, but it is clearly distinct from both of these concepts. Yet, a critical engagement with these terms and debates is a useful steppingstone towards the much more radical diagnosis and ambitious concept of the *post-democratic turn*.

Post-democracy and post-politics have become enormously popular terms. They are widely used to describe a variety of phenomena and may articulate a range of concerns, normally implying some kind of critique of some deviation from established democratic norms or expectations – which often remain rather unspecific. Normally, users of these terms implicitly assume that this deviation can be reversed and that there is a strong societal desire to do so. In fact, they are commonly employed as mobilizing and campaigning tools and as conceptual vehicles for the articulation of democratic commitments – which, given the wide range of different understandings of democracy, may, however, be very diverse. Indeed, these concepts may carry diagnoses and agendas to which authoritarian right-wing populists subscribe, just as much as they may support political narratives promoted by liberals or by egalitarian radical democrats. In any case, they create a discursive space for the performance and celebration of – some kind of – democratic norms and commitments in a context where egalitarian, participatory, liberal, inclusive and redistributive values are openly challenged by a variety of political actors.²² And they allow for the discursive reassertion of such norms and values to go along with the radical deconstruction and reconstruction, normatively as well as empirically, of liberal representative democracy. In fact, as we will elaborate further below, precisely this may well be the reason for the impressive success and popular appeal of these terms. For the analysis of the transformation of contemporary consumer societies and their understandings of democracy, however, they are not very helpful, not least because they conceal – strategically or not – at least as much as they reveal.

From the perspective of social and democratic theory, especially the more popular versions of the post-democracy and post-politics diagnosis are unhelpful. Firstly, they seem to imply a uniform and consensual definition of democracy and politics, i.e. they do not spell out whether they refer to any particular variety of democracy or to the idea and project of democracy as a whole. Secondly, the prefix “post-” seems to suggest a linear trajectory and non-reversible development of democracy – and focusing on the alleged *recession*, *regression* or *retreat* of democracy and the political, these concepts make no attempt to capture what is, supposedly, emerging instead. And thirdly, the diagnoses of post-democracy and post-politics reliably trigger a range of academic reflexes and objections which are not only in themselves simplistic but which further deflect attention from the important task to conceptualize the ongoing transformation of contemporary politics and democracy. For example, theorists of post-democracy and post-politics have been accused, time and again, of romanticizing an alleged golden age of democracy; their diagnoses have been criticized as far too generalizing and systematically unable to do justice to the diversity of contemporary forms of activism, social movements and micro-politics²³ (also see Meyer in this special issue); and narratives of post-democracy and post-politics are widely portrayed as overly pessimistic and

politically paralyzing, and as the articulation of the psychological condition of the political left rather than a suitable diagnosis of contemporary democracy, politics and society.²⁴

Colin Crouch's well-known account of post-democracy²⁵ is the most prominent example of these rather simplistic narratives. The notion of post-politics – which is more prominent in the work of Rancière,²⁶ Žižek²⁷ or Mouffe²⁸ – does not play a significant role for Crouch; it is important only in that, like Boggs²⁹ and many others, too, he suggests that in contemporary Western democracies citizens just play “a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them”.³⁰ His understanding of post-democracy as a kind of democratic theatre disguising that, factually, “politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites”³¹ seems intuitively plausible and is much in line with the much older critique of *symbolic politics*.³² Crouch points to a number of interdependent reasons for the emergence of the post-democratic state of politics. Inter alia, he refers to a modernization-induced and supposedly irreversible “entropy of democracy”.³³ Ultimately, however, he locates the “true causes of the problems” in “the profit-seeking behaviour of the large corporations” which “are destroying communities and creating instability the world over”, and in “a political class which has become cynical, amoral and cut off from scrutiny and from the public”.³⁴ Constructing a clear cut opposition between, on the one hand, “small circles of overlapping business lobbyists and a politico-economic elite”³⁵ who are “reducing” citizens “to the role of passive, rare participants”³⁶ and, on the other, those “who were cowed by the apparent superiority”³⁷ of neoliberal ideology, but whose “massive escalation of truly disruptive actions”³⁸ will, at some stage, launch “a counter-attack on the Anglo-American model”,³⁹ Crouch mobilizes a well-known political logic and offers a narrative that talks to popular needs and sentiments well beyond the post-Marxist critical left. Sociologically, neither his claim that the decay of democratic processes and institutions has been induced primarily by sinister and corrupt elites is quite satisfactory, nor his narrative of an egalitarian counterattack on the prevailing order of socio-ecological exclusion and destruction. In fact, both suggestions directly contradict Crouch's own hypothesis of the *irreversible entropy* of democracy. Yet, by assigning unambiguous roles and responsibilities, he offers a perspective of clarity and hope and allows for the experience of collectivity, unity, empowerment and popular sovereignty. In fact, as signalled above, the contradictory simultaneity of this discursive celebration of egalitarian-democratic commitments and the likely empirical irreversibility of democratic entropy may be the very core of his booklet's irresistible appeal.

In comparison, Rancière's conceptualization of post-democracy and post-politics, which he actually developed well before Crouch popularized the term, is much less accessible, activist and prone to the temptations of popular simplification. It is, therefore, more resilient to the objections outlined above, and from an academic, rather than activist, point of view it is much more instructive. Rancière does not derive the notions of post-democracy and post-politics from the idea and critique of corrupt, power-seeking and oppressive elites; and he supplements the common understanding of the *end of politics* “as the end of a particular period of time” – namely “the century of the dream of *the people*, of promised *communities* and utopian islands”⁴⁰ – by a second understanding that is a-temporal: The end of politics, he notes, “seems to split into two endings which do not coincide – the end of promise and the end of division”.⁴¹ The former, he suggests, i.e. *the end of promise*, marks the starting point

for “the party of the new time” – that of pragmatic, managerial, day-to-day public administration; and the latter, i.e. the *end of division*, launches “the party of the new consensus” beyond all radical conflict.⁴² Thus, Rancière moves beyond the post-Marxist paradigm of domination and oppression, and opens up spaces for a much wider range of perspectives on post-democracy and post-politics. He also does not glorify any assumed golden age of democracy, nor any vision of a true and authentic democracy to be realized in some utopian future. And portraying the end of politics as a “party”, he furthermore does not share the one-dimensionally negative perspective that became prevalent when Crouch popularized the term post-democracy. Instead, Rancière – quite rightly – describes depoliticization as “the oldest task of politics”⁴³ and an indispensable and constitutive element of “the art of politics”.⁴⁴

Thus, in a number of respects, Rancière’s work provides cues which in the more popular debate remain largely unexplored. Two particularly instructive points concern, firstly, what Crouch may be sensing when he refers to the *irreversible entropy* and the *parabola* of democracy,⁴⁵ but which he then loses sight of due to his focus on power and domination: There is a dynamic inherent to democracy that propels its transition to post-democracy. And secondly, Rancière’s conceptualization of the consensual order of post-democracy and post-politics – which, in his model, is not simply imposed by hegemonic neoliberalism, but constituted, maintained and defended (*policed*) collaboratively by a wide range of societal actors. Both points are directly related to his specific understanding of the demos, of democracy and of politics. For Rancière the demos is, on the one hand, the collective and homogenous subject of political sovereignty and, at the same time, a *dispositif* of irreducible plurality, conflict and subjectivation. As a political subject, it is continually emergent and the process of its self-constitution (subjectivation) collapses in the moment of its fulfilment, i.e. when radical difference and conflict have been overcome, and unity and consensus achieved. Accordingly, democracy is the political struggle for subjectivation and inclusion by newly emerging identities who, as yet, do not have an equal voice. At the same time, however, it is also the struggle for the maintenance of difference, disagreement and conflict, which the idea of the collective, sovereign subject actually seems to annul. And politics, for Rancière, is the persistent contestation of the rules of inclusion and exclusion (the *police*) which constitute the demos, i.e. the continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of the subject of political sovereignty and the symbolic constitution of the social.⁴⁶

So, for Rancière, the demos, democracy and politics are inherently paradoxical notions. They are projects of reflexive self-negation. By implication, the dynamic of post-democracy and post-politics is not exogenous to these ideas but, as their dialectic counterparts, systematically built into them. Quite clearly, capitalism and neoliberalism play an important role but, ultimately, this dynamic unfolds irrespective of the forces of capital, capitalism and neoliberal ideology; and post-democracy and post-politics are not simply a deformation and pathology of late-modern and advanced capitalist societies. They may, indeed, be “better understood as a *modality of governance*”⁴⁷ which engages a variety of actors who collaboratively police a consensual – yet always precarious – order.⁴⁸ Putting it in Rancière’s words, post-democracy and post-politics are “a consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action”, “the practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy after the demos”.⁴⁹ These terms do not imply that this consensus policing the established order necessarily needs to be hegemonic; for, Rancière’s understanding of post-democracy and

post-politics does leave spaces for the continuation of political struggles and the performance of new subjectivities. But, very importantly, this understanding of post-democracy as a *collaborative* form of *consensual* governance policing the symbolic order of the social shines a bright light on the wide-ranging engagement and complicity of diverse actors in today's post-democratic politics.⁵⁰ The popular and populist narratives of post-politics, in contrast, as well as the analyses in terms of *autocratization*, are all about concealing and denying the very idea of any such complicity.

3. The post-democratic turn

For the diagnosis and notion of the *post-democratic turn*, which serves as the conceptual frame and analytical lens for the investigation of changing interpretations and functions of political participation in the contributions to this special issue, exactly this consensus and complicity are constitutive. The concept draws on Rancière's – dialectical and post-Marxist – rather than Crouch's understanding of post-democracy. Yet, it re-inserts Rancière's conceptual dialectic into the dimension of time and newly introduces an aspect that in his a-temporal thinking does not figure at all: the modernization-induced transformation of social value-preferences and notions of subjectivity, which Almond and Verba recognized when they diagnosed the *participation explosion*, which Crozier and colleagues saw as the trigger of a looming *Crisis of Democracy*,⁵¹ and which Inglehart then claimed⁵² would render modern societies ever more liberal and democratic.⁵³ Processes of “modernization and post-modernization”,⁵⁴ Inglehart has argued ever since, place ever greater importance on values of self-determination and self-expression, with modern citizens becoming increasingly articulate, participation-oriented and politically self-confident, and conditions for democracy, supposedly, becoming ever more favourable.⁵⁵ The notion of the post-democratic turn acknowledges that in contemporary consumer societies values of self-determination, self-expression and self-experience are, indeed, highly developed, and expectations in terms of democratic participation, representation and policy responsiveness are, unquestionably, articulated very vociferously. But rejecting Inglehart's rather undifferentiated understanding of *emancipative* values and his narrow fixation on *liberal* democracy, the concept focuses attention on the changing social norms on the basis of which a variety of actors in contemporary societies are challenging and (re)politicizing established societal arrangements, which condition the clearly visible reconstruction of democratic institutions, and which inform the current reformulation of the democratic project beyond its liberal understanding.

Centrally important in this respect is that in the wake of ongoing processes of value and culture-change, as signalled above, democratic norms have become highly ambivalent and are – for example in light of accelerating climate change or right-wing populist mobilization – perceived as a threat at least as much as they entail a promise. As regards democratic participation, citizen expectations are certainly rising, and decentralized, participatory procedures have, accordingly, become a constitutive part of public policy making and good governance.⁵⁶ At the same time, however, confidence in the efficiency and effectiveness of democratic institutions and participatory procedures is rapidly eroding. As modern societies' multiple crises are proliferating, so are doubts about the capability of democratic systems to resolve them.⁵⁷ And in many cases, initiatives for more engagement, participation and self-responsibility are not only perceived as enabling and empowering – for example, if they originate from the activating,

neoliberal state seeking to devolve established obligations, responsibilities and commitments. Instead, diverse social groups, ranging from the much-debated *losers of modernization* via the educated, cosmopolitan middle class to neoliberal elites are “losing faith in democratic government” and governance.⁵⁸ They are all affected, though each for different reasons, by modern societies’ “democratic fatigue syndrome”.⁵⁹ In fact, the spreading perception of a *dysfunctionality of democracy*⁶⁰ – discussed in much more detail in Blühdorn’s contribution to this special issue – has given rise to a *legitimation crisis*⁶¹ that affects not only the established institutions of liberal democracy, but the normative core of the democratic project in a much more encompassing sense.

Together, this rise in expectations of democratic participation and self-determination, on the one hand, and this legitimation crisis of democracy, on the other, are constitutive elements of the post-democratic turn and the post-democratic constellation to which the latter gives rise. Furthermore, drawing on the work of Žižek,⁶² Bauman,⁶³ Sennett,⁶⁴ Reckwitz⁶⁵ and others the diagnosis of the post-democratic turn acknowledges that ongoing processes of societal modernization have steadily chipped away – and continue to do so – at the protestant-Kantian-bourgeois understanding of the *autonomous subject* and *mature citizen*. This Enlightenment idea of the autonomous subject is the normative core of the democratic project. The Kantian-bourgeois tradition – working on the assumption of a universal, all-embracing reason from which the norms of autonomy, equality and all universal rights are derived – had conceptualized this autonomous subject as the reason-oriented, self-controlled, responsible, moral and, ideally, mature subject with a singular, consistent and stable identity and character. In contemporary consumer societies, however, this particular understanding of autonomy and subjectivity is being challenged – and perhaps superseded – by much more elastic, complex and dynamic ideals of subjectivity. And in contrast to their Kantian-bourgeois predecessor, contemporary notions of autonomy, identity and subjectivity are much less averse to the offerings of the consumer industry and much more relaxed about supposedly categorical imperatives of reason, responsibility, equality, morality, inclusion, truth, maturity and so forth.

In the literature on post-democracy and post-politics, these important cultural shifts – which Blühdorn’s contribution to this special issue elaborates in much more detail – receive very little attention. Yet, their impact on the condition and further development of democracy can hardly be overestimated. Taking this value and culture shift into account, the concept of the post-democratic turn suggests that in contemporary Western consumer societies the democratic project, as the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s had still conceptualized it – egalitarian, deliberative, inclusive, responsible, cosmopolitan – is becoming increasingly exhausted and is unlikely to be revived by any “massive escalation of the truly disruptive action”. Such escalations may well have to be expected – and, as signalled above, are already occurring. Yet, they are unlikely to reinstate earlier, more inclusive, redistributive and transnationally oriented visions of democracy and agendas of democratization. Whilst many commentators still emphasize that “generally the movement is towards greater distrust of authority and more desire for accountability, freedom, and political choice”;⁶⁶ whilst they reassure us that in view of the current “wave of autocratization” “panic is not warranted”,⁶⁷ and signs of democratic “retrogression” and “cultural backlash” are ephemeral phenomena set to subside as “the dynamics of modernization” take contemporary societies back onto their normal trajectory of democratization,⁶⁸ the notion of the post-democratic turn suggests that this dynamics effects a profound transformation of

democracy and democratization beyond liberal, egalitarian and inclusive understandings of the autonomous subject. In line with Rancière's thinking, it suggests that this transformation is not very well conceptualized as a *retrogression* or a *pathology* of late modern societies.⁶⁹ Also, it is not simply *imposed* on citizens by anti-egalitarian, autocratic elites, but the concept of the post-democratic turn holds that it needs to be understood, at least as much, as an *emancipatory*, a *progressive*, project that is actively pursued and jointly policed by a broad coalition of societal actors.

Thus, the notion of the post-democratic turn – as a value- and culture-shift taking contemporary consumer societies beyond the Kantian-bourgeois understanding of the *autonomous subject* and *mature citizen* – moves well beyond the established debates about post-democracy and post-politics. It radically changes the perspective on the ongoing transformation of democracy. One may well wish to reject the normative agenda that, according to this concept, propels this transformation. But in terms of its analytical capacities, the perspective of the post-democratic turn reaches well beyond the backward-looking lament for a lost, allegedly golden age of democracy and the sociologically implausible stories of an imminent relaunch of “the dream of the people, of promised communities and utopian islands”. It does not in any way imply a normative endorsement of the changes it diagnoses, but it turns to exploring how in contemporary consumer democracies, political institutions and the democratic project itself are being remoulded in line with a modernization-induced value- and culture shift. Whilst much recent work on political participation – and the literature on post-democracy and post-politics, in particular – still focus on the question how more and better citizen participation may improve governance and render democracy more authentic,⁷⁰ this new conceptual lens sheds light on the ambivalence of participation. It offers a new perspective on the activating state and various other actors redefining political participation so as to mobilize citizens as a resource for agendas which no longer contribute to democratic subjectivation and empowerment in the traditional sense. And it sheds new light on the fact that in increasingly polarized and post-deliberative polities, and in view of the erosion of *civic culture*, the further expansion of participation actually presents a major challenge. In a quite practical sense, the diagnosis of the post-democratic turn raises the questions: What may democracy, democratization and democratic governance mean in a scenario where processes of modernization and emancipation are taking modern societies beyond the established understandings of the autonomous subject and mature citizen? How may – and do – modern polities redefine participation to reflect the needs of diverse societal actors as well as the state's need for democratic legitimation? How may – and do – contemporary consumer societies accommodate ever rising demands for more direct and more effective participation and, even under conditions of post-factuality, post-deliberation and polarization, still avoid government overload and ungovernability? How may – and do – they manage the ever-rising complexity, volatility and irrationality of the democratic sovereign? How may – and do – they resolve the *post-democratic paradox*,⁷¹ i.e. the tension between the proliferation and radicalization of participatory demands, on the one hand, and the ambivalence towards democratic institutions, processes and values, on the other?

These are questions which the theorists of post-democracy, post-politics and auto-cratization prefer not to recognize, let alone address. But for the contributions to this special issue they delimit the research agenda. They all have an analytical as well as a normative dimension. The emphasis here is clearly on the former; for, the concept of

the post-democratic turn is no more than an analytical lens. Accordingly, the objective here is not to provide any form of advice on how governments *could* or *should* address or resolve the challenges that confront them. In particular, the objective is explicitly not to provide any form of justification or legitimation for the political practices and shifts that we investigate. Instead, we seek to shed light on new understandings, forms and functions of political participation, to help explain their factual proliferation, and to explore how they challenge established notions of democratic participation. With this latter point in mind – and as a final step of our effort to set an agenda for the investigation of political participation beyond the post-democratic turn – we therefore want to revisit how major strands of democratic theory have traditionally conceptualized political participation in democratic polities. In particular, we are interested in the central role they all assign to the norm of the autonomous subject and mature citizen – which is a key respect in which political participation beyond the post-democratic turn is radically different.

4. Traditional conceptualizations

In traditional democratic theory, political participation has mostly been investigated and conceptualized as organizing legitimation for political decision makers and government policies.⁷² Theories of liberal democracy, which for a long time represented the mainstream of democratic theory,⁷³ have derived the ability of political participation to generate legitimacy from every individual's right to self-determination and political equality.⁷⁴ They regarded individual interests as given and assumed that the diversity of interests articulated in the political arena invariably leads to societal conflicts which democratic systems need to pacify. Accordingly, the quality of democratic processes was to be measured by their ability to give a voice to these diverse interests and synthesize the related conflicts into political decisions carried by broad citizen support.⁷⁵ At the same time, participation understood in this way was seen to contribute to the two key functions of democratic procedures distinguished by Dahl in his classic work on democracy: the exercise of popular sovereignty and the contestation of power through electoral competition. Both are realized, according to liberal democratic theory, through the articulation and negotiation of interests mainly in democratic elections and by means of representation.⁷⁶ Because the competition for power and the regular exchange of government elites play a crucial role in this reading, liberal democratic theory has traditionally placed strong emphasis on institutions and societal macro-structures which are supposed to safe-guard inalienable individual rights and the equal consideration of individual interests.

When looking at today's Western democracies, it is this reading and repertoire of participation, in particular, that in many polities is visibly in decline. Established political institutions that for a long time had mobilized and coordinated democratic participation – political parties and associations, trade unions – are shrinking in line with the decline of confidence in liberal representative democracy as a mechanism to find a balance and compromise between the interests of different societal groups. Diverse political actors⁷⁷ from across the ideological spectrum⁷⁸ increasingly demand direct participation and political impact that is not mediated through representatives. In contemporary consumer societies the exercise of popular sovereignty and the contestation of power are ever less strongly associated with mediating political institutions, but

are increasingly understood as the direct and undistorted transmission of particular interests and an assumed *will of the people*.

Theorists of participatory and deliberative democracy, in contrast, have considered political participation as the key mechanism for nurturing and reproducing democratic values and a democratic culture. Both work on the assumption that the process of political participation influences and transforms the citizens involved, as well as the way in which they perceive their societal environment. Both strands of theorizing assume that for their own reproduction and stability democracies rely on socio-cultural preconditions which cannot be taken for granted but must carefully be cultivated.⁷⁹ Yet, they differ in terms of their respective focus. Participatory approaches highlight the effects of democratic participation on the individual: Engagement with the issues of common interest is expected to promote individual growth and self-efficacy.⁸⁰ This perspective takes up Alexandre de Tocqueville's accounts of North America's civil society of the nineteenth century and his perspective on participation through associations as a "school of democracy" guaranteeing the continuous reproduction of the "democratic citizen".⁸¹ Theories of deliberative democracy, in turn, place more emphasis on nurturing a discursive political culture and on the collective negotiation of the common good.⁸² Rather than just articulating and balancing individual interests, processes of deliberation are expected to reframe interests and reconfigure actor constellations. For, citizens deliberating upon matters of the collective are expected to provide public justification for their views, give full consideration to competing positions, establish a shared sense of responsibility and ideally achieve rational agreement between all parties involved.⁸³

Reaching well beyond the realm of democratic theory, participatory and deliberative ideals have, in recent decades, had major impact on the political practice of modern democratic polities.⁸⁴ Yet, the educative and transformative effects predicted by theorists of democracy have remained questionable. Many of their assumptions regarding, for example, the willingness to engage, deliberate, justify and transform have proven untenable. Most notably, but by no means exclusively, the suspension of deliberative discourse by right-wing populist movements and their intentional shift of focus from the overarching societal good to deliberate strategies of societal fragmentation, polarization and exclusion provide evidence that participation per se does not necessarily lead to more liberal, tolerant, inclusive and consensus-oriented attitudes, but may actually cultivate and reinforce social conflict (see Strassheim in this special issue).⁸⁵

All three strands of democratic theory – liberal, participatory and deliberative – understand political participation as facilitating the formation of political subjectivities commanding the right and ability to self-articulate, to engage in political discourse, and to secure equal recognition in the democratic negotiation of the common good. All three of them subscribe to the agenda of empowerment, autonomy and subjectivation; they are all based on the Enlightenment norm of the autonomous subject – which, as a normative ideal, is the precondition and, empirically, the envisaged outcome of the democratic process. But as outlined above, this Enlightenment norm, due to the commitments that come with it, has in modern consumer societies become rather ambiguous. The formation and stabilization of political subjectivities prove increasingly difficult; being an autonomous subject and mature citizen may even appear burdensome and undesirable. Against this background, described above as the post-democratic turn, new "objectifying" forms of political participation – such as survey research, mass data collection, political articulation via consumer choices and retrospective policy

approval – are gaining prominence. They relieve the pressure on citizens to exercise and demonstrate their status as autonomous subjects. They liberate citizens from the civic duties and commitments – such as political engagement, rational deliberation, public justification, equal recognition of others – that come with the norm of the autonomous subject and mature citizen. But in a revised way, they still convey a sense of citizen empowerment and popular sovereignty.

Policy analysis- and governance-centred approaches to democratic theory have been perceptive to these new conditions and requirements: they have conceptualized democratic participation, first and foremost, as a tool for enhancing the *output* of policy processes.⁸⁶ Given the shrinking mobilization capacity of the established channels of democratic interest aggregation, more information on local contexts and the citizens' preferences needs be obtained through other, more direct forms of citizen participation, so as to facilitate better-designed policy solutions. Rather than as an aim in itself, an exercise of subjectivation or the reproduction of democracy's socio-cultural foundations, these approaches frame participation as a strategic means to the end of generating output legitimacy for policies and democratic institutions.⁸⁷ Put differently: These approaches provide clear evidence of a major change in prevailing understandings of, and functions assigned to, political participation in contemporary democracies. Increasingly, participatory processes are evaluated either with regard to the skill levels of participants (participation is perceived as superior, if participants are more skilled and better informed)⁸⁸ – or in terms of their ability to express the attitudes and demands of citizens in a seemingly objective way, for example by gathering data about citizen behaviour or consumer choices (see Ulbricht and Maxton-Lee in this special issue).

Furthermore, political participation has, in the more recent literature, also been conceptualized as a top-down rather than bottom-up process, initiated and controlled by policy elites which activate and engage citizens in decision-making procedures in order to increase policy compliance, minimize public resistance at the stage of policy implementation, or prompt particular forms of behaviour (see Maxton-Lee and Strassheim in this special issue). From this perspective, expanding participation is a strategy to pre-empt societal opposition, to accommodate demands for co-determination in politics and society and to preserve a sense of self-determination even in contexts which leave citizens essentially no autonomy. Whilst critics have often highlighted the manipulative and abusive quality of such forms of managed participation,⁸⁹ others have conceptualized the simulative performance of equal interest recognition and popular sovereignty as a distinctive feature of political participation beyond the post-democratic turn, and as a way of maintaining the notion of democratic input-legitimation while allowing for more competent government and avoiding veto powers impairing policy efficiency.⁹⁰ Thus, the increase in importance of output-centred democratic legitimation seems to go along with the strengthening of efforts to discursively perform citizen empowerment, system responsiveness and the sovereignty of the people.⁹¹ Indeed, empirical studies show that these *objectivating* understandings of democratic participation, i.e. approaches which are not much concerned with citizen empowerment and autonomy, but regard citizens, first and foremost, as a resource to be mobilized, utilized and strategically managed, have been gaining traction of late.⁹² And the concomitant mainstreaming of participatory and deliberative procedures may have to be read as being part of a compensatory exercise of simulating subjectivation and empowerment. Table 1 indicatively summarizes how major strands of democratic theory have traditionally conceptualized political participation, how

Table 1 . Democratic participation and the post-democratic turn.

classical interpretations based on the autonomous subject	established assumptions challenged by the post-democratic turn	new interpretations beyond the autonomous subject
articulation of individual interests; assertion of individual rights; legitimation of power and policies (priority for liberal democracy)	consistent and stable values, interests, identities, subjectivities that can be organized and represented	harvesting information for better policies (governance and policy analysis approaches)
education and development of citizens (priority for participatory democracy)	willingness to engage and participate in the school of democracy	secure more efficient policy implementation (governance and policy analysis approaches)
negotiation of common good; transformation of articulated interests; formation of collective subjectivities; reconfiguration of actor coalitions (priority for deliberative democracy)	common rationality as a medium for deliberation and agreement; commitment to public justification and social inclusiveness; willingness to transform	performance of responsiveness, civic self-determination and popular sovereignty (simulative democracy)

socio-cultural developments conceptualized here as the post-democratic turn have rendered their assumptions questionable, and how in the wake of the post-democratic turn political participation is being reinterpreted.

5. The contributions to this special issue

Having outlined the conceptual frame and analytical lens for the investigation of new forms of political participation; having sketched the research questions to which the notion of the post-democratic turn gives rise, and having called to mind traditional conceptualizations of participation which today appear increasingly questionable, we finally want to provide a preview of the contributions to this special issue. First Ingolfur Blühdorn further develops the conceptual foundations for the contributions that follow. Starting out from the diagnosis of a *democratic fatigue syndrome* noticeable in many well-established consumer democracies, he describes the post-democratic turn as a dialectic process in which the dynamics of modernization, emancipation and democratization persistently chip away at the very foundations of democracy. In particular, Blühdorn further elaborates how in affluent consumer societies in the global North, prevailing understandings of subjectivity and autonomy have changed and how, accordingly, democratic values, needs and expectations are changing, too. He thus seeks to explain why diverse political actors have become strikingly ambivalent about democratic institutions and processes, and why demands for the expansion of participation are perceived as a threat as much as an opportunity. Blühdorn concludes by exploring how the ongoing change in prevailing understandings of subjectivity, autonomy and identity recondition the democratic project.

John Meyer elaborates on the critique of the notions of post-democracy and post-politics – and, to an extent, also takes issue with the much more ambitious notion of the post-democratic turn. The function of his contribution is to critically challenge and elaborate the limitations of the post-politics perspective. Meyer points to the temporality of the post-politics diagnoses and suggests that politicization and depoliticization are better understood with a cyclical approach and as recurring waves. He rejects the claim that ours is a distinctly post-political era, cautions against undue generalizations, and re-emphasizes that in a variety of forms, political action and participation are all around us.

Lena Ulbricht then actually turns to a new understanding and form of participation that is rapidly gaining significance as modern societies enter the digital era. Her focus is on practices of gaining information about citizens through automated analysis of digital trace data which are repurposed for political and policy-making purposes. She analyses how in increasingly complex, differentiated and *liquid*⁹³ societies, political actors are using automated data mining and data analysis as a strategy of identifying the people's will, i.e. as a form of democratic participation and representation that works even in a constellation where traditional understandings of the political subject have been superseded by much more complex, liquid, volatile and contradictory subjectivities. Data mining, *scraping the demos*, Ulbricht argues, is widely portrayed as a way of knowing the demos and its true interests that is superior to any form of election, opinion polls, census data or survey research. Yet, it is a form of participation that conflicts with established notions of the autonomous subject and mature citizen. In a sense, it responds to the specific condition and dilemmas beyond the post-democratic turn, yet the expansion of this kind of participation does not easily qualify as *democratization*.

Bernice Maxton-Lee investigates political consumerism as a contemporary form of political participation. In societies which are strongly market-based and conditioned by neoliberal thinking; in a context where the market has permeated even the most private areas of life and every form of activity is governed by market choices, consumer decisions, Maxton-Lee suggests, are widely portrayed as an increasingly important, powerful and influential form of political articulation and participation. Digitalization and the harvesting of consumer data are an important issue here, too. But Maxton-Lee focuses, more specifically, on the *responsibilization* of consumer-citizens whose consumer power, supposedly, puts them in a position to address particular problems – such as the multi-dimensional sustainability crisis – much more effectively than national governments can. Just like the mining of digital trace data, consumer choices also seem to be a form of political participation and policy legitimation that helps to confront the challenges and dilemmas of the post-democratic turn. Yet, the responsibilization of consumer-citizens, Maxton-Lee argues, instrumentalizes citizens for purposes which are not their own, assigns responsibilities to them which they cannot meaningfully take and reduces political issues to economic issues.

Holger Strassheim then sheds light on a third form of participation beyond the autonomous subject: His contribution deals with preconfigured choice architectures designed by behavioural experts. In terms of the instrumentalization of citizens for agendas which they may not even be aware of, let alone control, this behavioural management goes even a step further than the activation of consumer-citizens. But as the established ideal of the mature, responsible and rational citizen is in decline; as modern polities seem to become ever more polarized, and political discourse and deliberative procedures are increasingly perceived to amplify cognitive distortions and aggravate rather than appease social conflicts, Strassheim argues, modes of cognitive and behavioural corrections by policymakers and experts, may appear increasingly necessary and legitimate. However, behavioural governance is yet another form of citizen engagement that bypasses – the remains of – the autonomous subject and mature citizen. Rather than democratizing modern societies, it empowers experts and grants them undue epistemic authority.

In the concluding article Felix Butzlaff once again links each of the contributions back to the research questions specified earlier in this introduction. He elaborates

how, beyond the post-democratic turn, new technology-based, market-based and expert-led reinterpretations of political participation on the one hand preserve the norm of empowerment, autonomy and democratic sovereignty, but at the same time also move beyond the Kantian-bourgeois notions of subjectivity and maturity which have traditionally been the normative core of democracy. Drawing on Robert Dahl's understanding of democratization and his criteria for evaluating the quality of democratic systems, Butzlaff assesses how the new forms and interpretations of participation dealt with in the individual contributions to this special issue affect the quality of modern democracies. From Dahl's particular perspective, Butzlaff argues, these innovations invariably appear as regressive and in violation of democratic norms; yet, in the wake of the post-democratic turn, he concludes, these criteria must themselves be reviewed.

Notes

1. Boggs, *The End of Politics*; Crouch, *Post-Democracy*; Mouffe, *On the Political*; Wilson and Swynedouw, *The Post-Political and Its Discontents*.
2. Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End?"; Mason, *PostCapitalism*.
3. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*; Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*.
4. Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth*; Ferguson, *Post-Growth Politics*.
5. Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession"; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.
6. Crouch, "The March Towards Post-Democracy", 71.
7. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here".
8. Kaase, "The Challenge of the 'Participatory Revolution' in Pluralist Democracies".
9. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*; Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.
10. Blühdorn, "The Third Transformation of Democracy"; Blühdorn, "Democracy beyond the Modernist Subject".
11. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*.
12. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*.
13. Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*; King, "Overload".
14. Brennan, *Against Democracy*.
15. Blühdorn, "The Legitimation Crisis of Democracy"; Blühdorn and Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism".
16. See the contributions by Ulbricht, Maxton-Lee and Strassheim in this Special Issue.
17. Blühdorn, "Democracy Beyond the Modernist Subject"; Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*.
18. Arias-Maldonado, *La democracia sentimental*.
19. Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession".
20. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here".
21. Blühdorn, "The Governance of Unsustainability"; Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*.
22. Blühdorn, "Post-Ecologist Governmentality"; Blühdorn, "The Legitimation Crisis of Democracy"; Blühdorn and Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism".
23. Dean, "Tales of the Apolitical"; MacGregor, "Finding Transformative Potential in the Cracks?".
24. Dean, "Tales of the Apolitical"; Dean, "Radicalism Restored?"; Alexander and Welzel, "The Myth of Deconsolidation"; Alexander and Welzel, "Democratic Horizons".
25. Crouch, *Post-democracy*.
26. Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*.
27. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*.
28. Mouffe, *On the Political*.
29. Boggs, *The End of Politics*.
30. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 4.
31. *Ibid.*, 6.
32. Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*.
33. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 11f, 29.

34. Ibid., 10,119.
35. Crouch, "The March Towards Post-Democracy", 71.
36. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 21.
37. Ibid., 107.
38. Ibid., 123.
39. Ibid., 107.
40. Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 5, emphasis added.
41. Ibid., 7.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 19.
44. Ibid., 9, my emphasis.
45. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 5.
46. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 36.
47. Derickson, "Taking Account of the 'Part of Those That Have No Part'", 46, our emphasis.
48. Blühdorn and Deflorian, "The Collaborative Management of Sustained Unsustainability".
49. Rancière, *Disagreement*, 101f.
50. Blühdorn, "Post-Capitalism, Post-Growth, Post-Consumerism?"; Blühdorn, "The Legitimation Crisis of Democracy"; Blühdorn and Deflorian, "The Collaborative Management of Sustained Unsustainability".
51. Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*.
52. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*.
53. Alexander and Welzel, "The Myth of Deconsolidation"; Alexander and Welzel, "Democratic Horizons".
54. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*.
55. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*, 115.
56. Pierre, *Debating Governance*; Saurugger, "The Social Construction of the Participatory Turn"; Blühdorn and Deflorian, "The Collaborative Management of Sustained Unsustainability".
57. Shearman and Smith, *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*; Beeson, "The Coming of Environmental Authoritarianism".
58. Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End?", 44; Mair, "Ruling the Void?"; Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*; Brennan, *Against Democracy*; van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*.
59. Appadurai, "Democracy Fatigue".
60. Discussed in more detail by Blühdorn in this special issue.
61. Blühdorn, "The Legitimation Crisis of Democracy".
62. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*.
63. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.
64. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*.
65. Reckwitz, *Subjekt*. Reckwitz, *Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*.
66. Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession", 153–4.
67. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here", 1095.
68. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution*, 114–9.
69. Geiselberger, *Great Regression*; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*.
70. Smith, *Democratic Innovations*; Geissel and Joas, *Participatory Democratic Innovations in Europe*; Elstub and Escobar, *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*.
71. Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*, 158–66.
72. Zittel and Fuchs, *Participatory Democracy and Political Participation*.
73. Warren, "What Can Democratic Participation Mean Today?".
74. Dahl, *On Democracy*.
75. Ibid.
76. Teorell, "Political Participation and Three Theories of Democracy".
77. Blühdorn and Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism".
78. Butzlaff, *Die neuen Bürgerproteste in Deutschland*.
79. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*.
80. Teorell, "Political Participation and Three Theories of Democracy".
81. van der Meer and van Ingen, "Schools of Democracy?".
82. Ibid; Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science".
83. Goodin and Dryzek, "Deliberative Impacts".

84. Teorell, “Political Participation and Three Theories of Democracy”; Warren, “What can Democratic Participation Mean Today?”.
85. Lee, McQuarrie, and Walker, *Democratizing Inequalities*.
86. Heidebreder, Feller, and Frieß, “Demokratisierung durch Partizipation?”.
87. Scharpf, *Governing in Europe*.
88. Brennan, *Against Democracy*.
89. Davies, *Challenging Governance Theory*.
90. Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*; Greven, “The Erosion of Democracy”.
91. Walker, McQuarrie, and Lee, “Rising Participation and Declining Democracy”.
92. Boezeman et al., “Participation Under a Spell of Instrumentalization?”.
93. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

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