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# Between empowerment and abuse: citizen participation beyond the post-democratic turn

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## ABSTRACT

In this special issue on “Democratization beyond the Post-Democratic Turn. Political Participation between Empowerment and Abuse”, we have explored changing understandings of participation in contemporary Western representative democracies through the analytical lens of the concept of the post-democratic-turn. We have investigated technology-based, market-based, and expert-led innovations that claim to enhance democratic participation and to provide policy legitimization. In this concluding article, I revisit the cases made by the individual contributors and analyse how shifting notions of participation alter dominant understandings of democracy. I carve out how new and emerging ideas of participation are based on different understandings of political subjectivity; furthermore, how constantly rising democratic expectations and simultaneously increasing scepticism with regard to democratic processes and institutions point to a growing democratic ambivalence within Western societies. Making use of Dahl’s conceptualization of democracy, in this article, I review changing understandings of participation in light of their contribution to further democratization. The article shows how under post-democratic conditions the simulative performance of autonomy and subjectivity has become central to democratic participation. It emphasizes that what in established perspectives on democratization might appear as an abuse of participation, through the lens of a post-democratic-turn might be perceived as emancipatory and liberating.

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## 1. Introduction

In this special issue, we have embarked on a journey to explore shifting understandings, forms, and functions of political participation and their impact on (Western) democracies and further democratization. Various accounts suggest a rise of participatory demands, from the current tide of right-wing populists – demanding more participation by the people<sup>1</sup> – to new waves of protests in (Western) societies against the increasing climate and sustainability crisis.<sup>2</sup> However, these accounts are confronted with the

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parallel diagnosis of a new and more subtle *wave of autocratization*<sup>3</sup> taking place in established democracies that might roll back previous democratic achievements. Building on the diagnosis of an increasing democratic ambivalence that is shown by simultaneously rising democratic expectations *and* scepticism, we have suggested to use the concept of a *post-democratic turn*<sup>4</sup> as an analytical lens to understand how readings of what is perceived as democratic participation are changing. Established readings of post-democracy and post-politics by Colin Crouch<sup>5</sup> and others have pointed to a normatively problematic development of vested interests and economic elites hollowing out the process of democratic decision-making while preserving its formal shell. In contrast, we strongly emphasize to further develop these lenses to account for much more ambiguous democratic realities.

For instance, traditional understandings of post-democracy have romanticized an alleged golden age of democracy and have therefore called for a resuscitation of “true” and “genuine” democratic empowerment that leaves traditional perspectives of democratization and increasing democracy unchanged.<sup>6</sup> However, critics of this understanding of post-democracy have pointed beyond these diagnoses of an *oppression* of democracy and have underscored that it is not just democracy’s capture by undemocratic elites that is transforming the concept of democracy.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they have stressed that with societal modernization, the desire and demand for freedom, self-determination and sovereignty have increased to unprecedented levels<sup>8</sup> whilst, at the same time, confidence in the efficiency and effectiveness of participation and in the performance of established institutions has declined.<sup>9</sup> As we have developed in the introductory chapter to this special issue, the concept of a *post-democratic turn* takes these potentially contradictory developments and ambivalences into account. It suggests that processes of societal modernization are continuously chipping away at the foundations of the democratic norms and values that were built upon the norm of the sovereignty of the *autonomous subject* and the *mature citizen* (see also the introduction by Blühdorn and Butzlaff as well as the contribution by Blühdorn in this special issue).<sup>10</sup> Consequently, through the lens of a post-democratic turn, what is understood as liberating, emancipatory and democratic might shift – and what for established understandings of democratization might appear as autocratic and as an abuse of participation might instead be perceived as an increase in freedom, emancipation, and democracy.

In the post-1945 world, traditional identities and lifestyles had structured Western societies into more or less stable social strata, which shaped the foundations of comparatively stable democratic representations. Democracy and democratic participation rested on the idea that the political sovereignty of a collective subject depended on the realization of the rational, self-controlled, and responsible *autonomous subject* and *mature citizen*. However, as Bauman,<sup>11</sup> Sennet<sup>12</sup> and Reckwitz<sup>13</sup> have indicated, this idea of an autonomous and coherent individual subject has been revised, as traditional sources of identity – social milieus, working biographies – have become fragile and have led to much more fluid and ever evolving individual identities. The Enlightenment ideal of an autonomous subject embodying the democratic self-determination has crumbled with social modernization. Contemporary individuals develop an increasingly fragmented and dynamic patchwork of multiple identities that does not necessarily add up to a coherent and unified self (anymore). Whereas, on the one hand, this liberation from traditional and patronizing social contexts can be perceived as an emancipatory achievement, on the other hand, modern subjects can ever less rely on sources other than themselves for the task of identity production. This does not only enable liberation

from past social constrictions, but also imposes new burdens on modern citizens: Some are able to capitalize on the promises of emancipation from universalist norms and political obligations and feel at home with the seemingly limitless potentials to carve out the own self – a process which Andreas Reckwitz has conceptualized as “singularization”.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, others lacking the resources to make use of these new liberties might feel overburdened by the constant need for identity reconstruction. They might, as the contemporary rise of right-wing populism seemingly implies, turn to new forms of apparently solid identities, which are firmly embedded into a collective of a unified people.<sup>15</sup> Yet, this is not just a regressive reflex of defense, but also entails the promotion of a different form of liberation and emancipation while, in many respects, it is holding on to the promises of modern lifestyles and flexible identities.

However, the dissolution of the traditional subject might render social organization, consensual decision-making and collective action ever more complicated, if the established institutions – such as political parties, trade unions, etc. – that were built upon the notion of stable social belonging, face increasing societal differentiation and the fragmentation of identities.<sup>16</sup> As empirical and theoretical assessments show, established forms of political representation and the realization of individual identities *through* democratic participation are increasingly put into question.<sup>17</sup> For example, flexible and fluid subjectivities not only challenge democracy’s suitability to efficiently administer more and more complex societies (due to overly slow and clumsy mechanisms of political negotiation and democratic veto powers) but also democracy’s emancipatory potential to organize further liberation and empowerment (as the Enlightenment ideal of a solid and autonomous individual that realizes its subjectivity through democratic participation is turning into a burden).<sup>18</sup> Yet, through the lens of the post-democratic turn, the dissolution of the autonomous subject is not the result of suppression and domination, but part of an emancipatory process or at least a development that is perceived as such. It emphasizes the ambivalence of simultaneously increasing flexible subjectivities, rising democratic expectations and hopes for direct engagement on the one hand, *and* growing scepticism about democracy as a tool to provide well-being and liberation on the other. Through this lens, democratic participation might entail as much a burden as it might entail an emancipatory promise. Hence, in this special issue we have explored changing repertoires of political participation<sup>19</sup> and have scrutinized their understandings of and impacts on democracy and the democratic project.

Scholars conceptualizing post-democratic conditions have pointed to the growing number of participatory processes that merely *simulate* democratic empowerment and participation and promise more efficient policy solutions devoid of the complicated and time-consuming sides of democratic engagement while keeping existing power structures intact.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, they have underscored that these forms of participatory simulation might also be understood as relieving the individual from the burden of the diagnosed democratic ambivalence while at the same time leaving the ideal of individual emancipation and liberation untouched. Accordingly, established perspectives on democratization and democratic development cannot remain unchanged. As an analytical perspective, the post-democratic turn, it seems, might not only remould ideas and expectations of democratic participation, but might also affect the normative underpinnings of democratization (see Blühdorn and Butzlaff in this special issue).

In this article, I review how the individual contributions to this special issue have explored new understandings of political participation and their impact on democracy;

how they challenge established notions and conceptualizations of participation; and how these shifts might affect current understandings of democratization.

In the following second section, I focus on the conceptual foundation and analytical lens for the investigation of new forms of political participation: Ingolfur Blühdorn's conceptualization of a post-democratic turn and John Meyer's critique of the notions of post-democracy and post-politics. In his contribution to this special issue, and building on the *dissolution* of the notion of the autonomous subject and mature citizen, Blühdorn spells out a contemporary *legitimation crisis of democracy* and a symptom of *democratic fatigue*. In contrast, Meyer emphasizes that different democracies and forms of participation have always been contested and questions a uniform post-democratic trend.

In a third section, I recap three cases made in this special issue, which assess changing understandings of democratic participation. Turning to technology-based, market-based, and expert-led innovations that claim to enhance democratic responsiveness and participatory effectiveness, I link the individual contributions back to the research questions of the special issue. I interrogate how the explored innovations remould the idea, form and function of political participation and show that these innovations defend the ideal of participation as providing empowerment and democratic sovereignty while at the same time they abandon the traditional norm of the autonomous subject and the mature citizen as the normative core of democracy. In a fourth section, I then examine these reinterpretations of political participation against the background of Robert Dahl's classical conceptualization of democratization.<sup>21</sup> I ask whether established criteria for democratization and democratic quality still prove useful in light of new forms of participation and increasingly flexible subjectivities. Through the lens of a post-democratic turn, I revisit the assumptions of Dahl's theorization of democratic participation, which hold on to the notion of an autonomous and solid subject at the core of democratic participation. In the fifth and concluding section, I finally tie these perspectives back to the lens of the post-democratic turn and the research framework of this special issue. Whereas the account of a current *wave of autocratization*<sup>22</sup> has diagnosed a gradual and regressive trend in many established democracies (which I do not question as a factual observation), in this article I emphasize that through the analytical (and by no means normative!) lens of a post-democratic turn, it seems, what established criteria of democratization might detect as autocratic and as an abuse of participation, might instead by some be perceived as liberating, emancipatory, and democratizing.

## 2. Holding on to the autonomous subject?

In his conceptualization of a *legitimation crisis of democracy* (see the contribution by Blühdorn in this special issue), Ingolfur Blühdorn approaches the shifting normative foundations of liberal and representative democracy by zooming in on the formerly solid reference point of the autonomous subject. Reviewing past narratives of its decline, he carves out three lines along which the demise of the autonomous subject has been conceptualized and which have led to different claims for a democratic resuscitation. First, (Post-)Marxists have diagnosed an oppression and alienation of the subject by capital (Marx), other-directed hegemony (Gramsci), culture- and consumer industries (critical theory) or the colonization by instrumental reason (Habermas). Whereas the Post-Marxian conceptualization assumed politico-economic elites to be

responsible for the repression of the individual, Gramscian and Habermasian readings point at social modernization altering ideas of liberty, authenticity and autonomy. Second, systems-theoretical approaches have deemed the autonomous subject irrelevant due to societal modernization subordinating the subject under the logic of autopoietic systems. In this perspective, the category of functional differentiation through systems has replaced the idea of social development through the emancipation of the individual subject. Third, technological modernization and digitalization have dissolved the autonomous subject and have replaced it with the automatic representation of citizens and their preferences through data. Consequently, not the norms and the free will of the individual have become points of reference for policy-decisions, but instead have been replaced by the legitimation-inducing observation of social facts.

The subsequent cases made by Ulbricht, Maxton-Lee and Straßheim in this special issue take up particular elements of these discussions and trace what might be understood as democratic participation and how this changes the role of an autonomous subject. They focus on technology-based, market-based, and expert-led innovations. Whether these innovations of data mining, political consumerism and behavioural politics can be rightly understood as political and democratic participation, is still an ongoing dispute. However, in that they assert (a) an enhancement of political responsiveness and a superior tracking of individual preferences and (b) a relief of the individual subject from some of the burdens of complex societies, thus promising an “enhanced emancipation” (Straßheim in this special issue), they bear witness to changing understandings of how participation, individual emancipation and democracy relate to each other. Along these lines, as Blühdorn emphasizes, the idea of democratic participation has been increasingly understood as the provision of “objectifying” data points and has abandoned the idea of an autonomous subject realizing and re-producing its complex identity *through* means of participation. So whereas the autonomous subject had been the core democratic value to be realized *through* participation, under conditions of the post-democratic turn and a legitimation crisis of democracy, further democratization (at least partly) might be understood as moving beyond the restrictions of this autonomous individual.

John Meyer, in his contribution challenges the basic assumptions of post-democracy and post-politics and criticizes post-democratic claims of temporality and universality: First, rejecting the notion of a “post” indicating a “pre”-time of democratic flourishing, John Meyer stresses that democratic regimes have never been truly hegemonic, but that democracy has always been realized in multiple ways. Instead, he emphasizes the contesting and disrupting potential of ongoing political struggles. Movements and mobilizations around the globe show, Meyer argues, that democratic participation is still perceived of as a tool for further empowerment and liberation. Second, and drawing on discourses on climate change and the Anthropocene, he carves out that besides post-political and post-democratic claims of prevailing political managerialism and depoliticizing consensus, the “normative validity of agonistic conflict” (Meyer in this special issue) is still an important pillar of democratic core values. Democracy, in his reading, is far from being subordinate to a hegemony of only superficial democratic practice, but is in contrast well able to organize contention and empowerment. The same applies, following Meyer, to the contemporary changes in political participation. In his perspective, it would undermine the post-democratic argument if substantial forms of political resistance can be observed in the contemporary. Making use of Sheldon Wolin’s concept of a “fugitive democracy”,<sup>23</sup> Meyer underlines that



enforced consensus has been the norm in history, citing the 1960s that were often portrayed as *the* cliché decade of political contention and conflict but that, as Meyer calls to mind, had been characterized just as much by societal and political agreement and consent. Depoliticizing and paralyzing consensus and universality in society, in his reading, is not a condition particular to the post-democratic turn. In contrast, an “agonistic eruption of the political” (Meyer in this special issue), which many of the advocates of a post-democracy have idealized for a democratic resuscitation, has historically always remained an exception. Following Meyer, disruptive and transformative democratic participation cannot be the norm against which contemporary conditions and patterns are evaluated, but instead remain limited to very short periods in time. Whereas agonistic and contentious politics depend on social conditions that are not easily constructed, depoliticization as a process of enclosing and pacifying social conflict has always been a core task of politics.

However, as the introductory chapter to this special issue hypothesizes, through the lens of a post-democratic turn, these hopes for periodically re-emerging democratic contention *through democratic participation* might seem less likely to materialize when changing notions of participation increasingly lead to simulative forms of participation that (a) do not challenge existing hierarchies and (b) have abandoned the idea of an autonomous subject as the core of the free will.<sup>24</sup> Yet, new forms and interpretations of participation beyond the autonomous subject might address the diagnosed democratic ambivalence by upholding the notion of democratic empowerment while promising more efficient policy solutions.

As we have spelled out in the introduction to this special issue, different strands of democratic theory – liberal, participatory and deliberative – have conceptualized political participation as enabling the formation of political subjectivities by granting the opportunity to self-articulate, to engage in political discourse, and to secure recognition in the democratic negotiation of the common good.<sup>25</sup> Although different in their line of argument, all three strands provide a narrative of empowerment, autonomy and subjectivation, which is based on the notion of an autonomous and authentic subject and mature citizen. For example, deliberative democracy claims to democratically counteract domination by means of deliberation and reasonable arguments and has become the most successful democratic innovation in theory and practice since the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> In turn, participatory democracy focuses on the education of a democratic subjectivity, while theories of liberal democracy understand participation as a legitimation-inducing integration of an ever conflicting plurality of citizens’ autonomous subjectivities and interests (see introduction by Blühdorn and Butzlaff in this special issue). In all of these established perspectives, the emergence of interests and empowered political subjectivities *through* participation forms a crucial part of the understanding of democracy.

Consequently, contemporarily shifting framings of democratic participation ought to be (a) analysed carefully with regard to the idea of democracy and subjectivity they relate to and (b) scrutinized in light of their ability to facilitate further democratization. In their articles, Lena Ulbricht, Holger Straßheim and Bernice Maxton-Lee have addressed three innovations that have reshaped the landscape of what might be called democratic participation in the last decades – each based on different mechanisms: technological, market-based, expert-led. By focusing on the philosophical change and the theoretical approach of datafication, participatory consumerism and behavioural politics, the authors went far beyond questions of technical details and participation design but instead have zoomed in on how these new forms and patterns have reframed



political participation. Whereas all three are not established or undisputed forms of democratic participation, they claim to improve democratic decision-making, as well as to alter the notion of an autonomous subject. In this sense, they indicate shifting understandings of participation and democratization.

### **3. Improving participation beyond the autonomous subject and the free will**

In her contribution on big data, Lena Ulbricht turns to new techniques of opinion mining and the datafication of participation that account for a different relationship between the individual and democracy. She looks at technologies that have not yet been analysed as part of the established repertoire of political participation, but that are increasingly framed as such and put into practice: data mining, web scraping, big data analysis. These formats and practices have been successfully established as important foundations for state regulation and policy design and have increasingly been justified as addressing the shortcomings of established channels of democratic participation. The data used is gathered by automatic compilation of large number data sets and contains citizen's expressions and any behaviour that can be observed in the digital realm.

Ulbricht highlights a widespread enthusiasm about these political innovations that is driven by digitalization and a "narrative of data mining as an instrument for more democratic responsiveness" (Ulbricht in this special issue). Processes of data mining rely on much larger numbers, promise to provide superior details, cover more aspects of life, and construct a dense and differentiated image of the preferences of citizens. Furthermore, because they rely on a seemingly unmediated and undistorted observation of behaviour and expression, they indirectly reformulate the ideas of representation and participation in Western democracies. Making use of the work of Michael Saward,<sup>27</sup> she carves out how the notion of a seemingly objective measure of the will of the people facilitates a feeling of being represented and having the own preferences noticed. Providing data for legitimate policy decisions, data mining stages and performs a democratic experience in that it creates a narrative of responsiveness and descriptive representation through data that pictures the demos and its interests in a much better and detailed way compared to any traditional form of democratic participation. This technocratic conception of democracy alters the understanding of political participation in that it discards the requirement of intentionality of the people participating. Intentional action in order to influence the sphere of politics has for a long time been understood as a core ingredient for any participation to be conceptualized as political. However, through the lens of a post-democratic turn, intentional political engagement might increasingly be perceived as a burden. With digitalization making expressions of citizen preferences available in real-time, this analytical restriction has been questioned.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, in light of a post-democratic turn, any expression of values, attitudes or interests that is publicly accessible might be considered democratic participation – whether it was intended to influence a political discourse or not. In the case of data mining, this is portrayed as the methodology's big advantage. It promises a more objective and undistorted democratic responsiveness by avoiding the distractions caused by political strategy and bias and by observing true and genuine expressions of preferences. However, it alters the relationship between the individual subject and the democracy he or she lives in. The subjectivity, which, as we have

developed drawing on the concept of the post-democratic turn, is dissolving into much more fragile and liquid expressions of identity, is replaced by the idea of a technocratic automatism efficiently picturing what citizens need and wish for. The individual becomes the consumer of political decisions in return for his observable behaviour and expressions. By measuring and picturing an increasingly dense image of data regarding citizens, the notion of data mining as a form of political participation also speeds up societal individualization and differentiation: Political decisions based on large number data sets promise to empower by forgoing mechanisms of mediation, consensus, and an equalizing middle ground that is characteristic of representative liberal democracies. In line with the frame of a post-democratic turn and changing notions of subjectivity developed in the introduction, data mining can provide democratic experiences that perform representation, participation and responsiveness in a way other forms of democratic participation are not able to provide (anymore). Without the need to purposely express and articulate one's preferences, let alone vote or engage in political deliberations, the behaviour of citizens is automatically converted into a political decision-making which is framed as responsive and democratic. Against the background of the assumed role of subjectivity for any democratic participation, however, data mining discards an important pillar of democracy as it is not the free will and the voluntary decision of an autonomous individual that is transferred into a legitimate decision via democratic participation, but instead a digital and electronic reproduction of preferences with the help of big datasets.

Furthermore, the promise of technological mapping of citizen preferences leads, following Ulbricht, to a democratic experience that is even more exclusive due to the technological requirements and hurdles of taking part. People or social groups that are not able (or willing) to engage in the digital arena are automatically left out. Additionally, to picture citizen preferences with the help of technological automatism and algorithm also means letting go of democracy's visionary imagination. Data mining restricts democracy to the imaginary of already existing behaviour and preferences and gives up the idea of a democratic transformation fuelled by the imaginary of autonomous subjects. In addition, with data mining, the notion of political representation is reduced to the reproduction of a societal status quo, and abandons the idea of envisioning social utopias, as it does not assume the existence of any visionary subjectivities (anymore).

Returning to the questions spelled out at the start of the special issue, data mining "objectifies" individual citizens as resources for legitimate decision-making; it restricts the range of decisions to already empirically observable behaviour; and it dissolves the notions of the autonomous subject as well as the mature and coherent citizen as the normative foundation of democratic participation into a collection of data points. Yet, through the lens of a post-democratic turn, it is not necessarily perceived as less democratic. Quite to the contrary, while performing an "enhancement" of democratic responsiveness and a liberation from the duty to participate intentionally as a mature and autonomous citizen, data mining represents a clear example of remoulding participation and democratization beyond the autonomous subject.

Taking up the notion of citizens as a resource for political decisions developed by Lena Ulrich, Bernice Maxton-Lee analyses the responsabilization of consumer-citizens through processes of participation. This perspective on participation assumes that through their behaviour and choices as consumers, citizens are able to exert power over the market and help realize more sustainable modes of production or reduce

environmental impact. Consumer choices and the purchase of products are assumed to be an effective form of participation because they constitute incentives for the market (and the state) and therefore shape the way societal problems are perceived and addressed. Critically reviewing these expectations, in her contribution on “Activating Responsible Citizens” Bernice Maxton-Lee addresses the contradiction between forms of participation providing democratic empowerment on the one hand, and a performative activation and management of citizens on the other. She spells out forms of consumer-based participation and the notion of consumer-citizens so as to shed light on what she calls a participatory illusion, understood as a deliberate tool to de-politicize civil society with the aim of reinforcing and legitimating the status quo. Maxton-Lee makes use of cases from market-based environmentalism and draws on the work of Miles<sup>29</sup> and Fontenelle<sup>30</sup> to demonstrate how consumption has become a means to reformulate and flexibly recraft identity and the individual subject. It is through consumption that we can continuously express who we are and who we aspire to be. Notions of responsible consumerism are used to construct spaces for participation that are framed as opportunities for identity production and expression. Maxton-Lee pays special attention to the power-imbalances that arise as citizens’ expectations of democratic participation are reduced to varieties of consumer choices and as the market structure is portrayed as the most effective way to (a) engage politically and (b) express and reproduce the own subjectivity. This way, participation is largely depoliticized and reduces citizens to the role of market participants as responsible consumers. They are made responsible for the outcome of their free and deliberate choices (suggesting an emancipation of the individual) whilst at the same time remain controlled in the pre-selection of choices they have available and in the way they perceive of themselves (as consumers). In consumer-based participation, after Maxton-Lee, narratives of consumer-(em)power(ment) blend into experiences of disempowerment and abuse, as they pretend influence and sovereignty yet *de facto* remain an illusive promise. And by accepting the term of the responsible citizen, she argues, citizens themselves become complicit in de-legitimizing alternative modes of engagement and imagination. Yet, in light of the post-democratic turn, these experiences might be perceived as empowering and emancipating, as they provide opportunities of identity formation, preference expression, and reinforce the idea of consumer power making use of the supposedly superior coordination capacities of market economies.

Adopting a similar perspective on how changing notions of the individual subject call for a reformulation of democratic participation, Holger Straßheim addresses the spread of behavioural politics. Assuming that human behaviour is prone to irrationalities and bias affecting the outcome of democratic procedures and deliberation,<sup>31</sup> behavioural politics seek to avoid and correct these by setting individualized and “thought-provoking” nudges (Straßheim in this special issue). Avoiding the time- and energy-consuming process of thorough deliberation, these nudges are supposed to enable citizens to individually make better and more efficient decisions. Straßheim highlights that the last decades have seen an exceptional rise of this idea of managing and guiding citizen decisions throughout the world, in autocratic and democratic systems alike. Guided by the concept of a “libertarian paternalism”,<sup>32</sup> behavioural politics address a democratic ambivalence demanding efficient regulation *and* autonomy of decisions. Straßheim emphasizes that with behavioural politics notions of autonomy and rationality are being remoulded and that the role of the state is reformulated in order to help citizens realize an authentic and unbiased well-being. Making use of

social and economic sciences studying subjective well-being as guidelines for social and individual decisions, behavioural politics not only promise a better life, but also relies on political and epistemic authorities to create a new point of reference other than the demos to define this superior life standard. The individual's seemingly free and subjective decisions are then expected to rise up to this new standard. However, through the lens of the post-democratic turn, the organization of seemingly unbiased choices is not necessarily perceived as restricting or disempowering, but in contrast as a liberation from the Kantian-bourgeois notion of an autonomous and mature citizen.

Turning to the initially formulated research interest, these forms of “objectivation” and post-subjective understandings of participation show that the lens of a post-democratic turn might be indeed helpful in assessing that it is not authoritarian oppression, which has made these reframings of democratic participations convincing, but evolving notions, needs and democratic expectations. Understood through the lens of a post-democratic turn, all three cases help to shed light on the impressive proliferation and widespread acceptance of these new notions of participation.

#### 4. Reviewing democratization

As has been spelled out in the first section, part of the concept of a post-democratic turn is that new readings of democratic participation might entail not only a dissolution of an autonomous subject, but also that this might be perceived as an emancipatory or liberating experience. To assess if and how these contemporary developments and changing readings of participation affect democracy and further democratization, one may draw on scalar conceptualizations of different democratic regimes and democratic quality.<sup>33</sup> With the help of a scalar perspective, small and gradual shifts and changing notions are detectable, whereas they would remain hard to trace otherwise. How democracies slowly evolve and subsequently either become “more” or “less” democratic, becomes much better observable than by asking if a country “is” democratic or not.<sup>34</sup>

In his classical concept, Robert A. Dahl has operationalized democracy with the help of two pillars – participation and competition. These two pillars are then differentiated into five criteria that can be measured and that help to assess whether a society and its political regime are becoming more or less democratic.<sup>35</sup> Following Dahl, this scalar and additive perspective on democratization includes (a) equal opportunities for all citizens to effectively introduce their interests into binding political decision-making (*effective participation*), (b) equal and effective access to influence decision-making (*voting equality*), (c) equal access to comprehensive information on the issues at stake (*enlightened understanding*), (d) extensive citizen control of the political agenda (*agenda control*), (e) equal and substantial citizen rights to all adults (*inclusion*).<sup>36</sup>

However, using the notion of a post-democratic turn as an analytical lens to explore new forms of participation would require revisiting and carefully challenging Dahl's criteria of democratization, as the criteria themselves might have become ambivalent and contradictory for the understanding of further democratization.

In light of Dahl's criteria of democratization, the use of data mining would entail a serious democratic deterioration, if participation (a) became less effective in enabling binding decisions, (b) contained shrinking control of the agenda or (c) must be regarded as facilitating less inclusive opportunities to participate or learn about the issues at stake (for example, due to technological hurdles or hidden power-relations). However, central to the conceptualization of the post-democratic turn is the idea of a

democratic ambivalence and a legitimation crisis of Western liberal and representative democracy, which lead to a changing understanding of what is perceived as democratic. As Ulbricht has emphasized, processes that simulate and perform a democratic participation that can be controlled top-down, less inclusive, and ineffective, might still be perceived as empowering, as superior to established mechanisms and as a further enhancement of the democratic management of our societies. Whereas data mining has abandoned the idea of an autonomous subject as foundation of democratic participation, it automatically pictures the (online and offline) behaviour and preferences of citizens instead and liberates the subject from the burden of active participation. In that it stages an increase in democratic responsiveness, while at the same time providing an increase in decision-making efficiency, data mining might cater to the demands of contemporary subjectivities and the democratic ambivalence.

Similarly, from a Dahlian perspective on democratization, forms of consumer responsabilization as described by Maxton-Lee may constitute a decline in the democratic empowerment of citizens. They create only very mediated and non-binding forms of engagement in decision-making and contain an agenda that is not controlled by those participating, but by a variety of pre-defined choices to pick from. Yet, participation through consumer choices might offer an emancipatory potential for many people that helps to deal with the burdens of identity reproduction the modern subject is exposed to. As consumption has become the primary arena of identity construction, and consumption-based lifestyles have become the primary mode of self-articulation,<sup>37</sup> participation through consumption has as much an internal purpose (performing the autonomous and free subject) as it encompasses the idea of a societal transformation (disciplining the market). This way, staging consumer-power might possibly contribute to the citizens' ability to cope with the conflicting ambivalence between the ideal of subjective democratic empowerment on the one hand and the scepticism regarding the efficiency of established democratic institutions on the other.

As with the two other cases, behavioural politics might be read as a decrease of inclusion and individual empowerment through the lens of a Dahlian understanding of democratization. However, through the lens of the post-democratic turn this is not necessarily the case: Behavioural politics are not political participation in the classical sense, but they restrict acceptable participation of citizens to rational and unbiased decision making. In that they formulate an "efficient free will" or an "enhanced emancipation," behavioural politics embody the democratic ambivalence that is characteristic to modern Western societies. They promise a seemingly superior autonomy and free will of the individual liberating the subject from the burden of its own irrationalities – which in complex societies and the rise of the liquid subject may well be on the rise. As Straßheim shows, by going beyond the subject-centred democratic decision-making, behavioural politics incorporate and reconcile the professionalized techno-scientific promise of democratic efficiency with the expectations of democratic responsiveness and autonomy of the citizens. Whereas the enlightenment idea of democracy relied on a consistent and authentic subject, under conditions of the post-democratic turn and the diagnosis of liquid subjectivities, democratic participation has turned into a burden for the subject *and* the system. Nevertheless, behavioural politics speak very well to the performative diagnosis already made by Ulrich, and Maxton-Lee in this special issue. As Straßheim has underscored, they deeply remould past ideas of emancipation, liberation and the requirements of democratization. Only by liberating the subject from the burden of democracy (without letting go of the ideal of democratic

participation!) it will be empowered: “choose not to choose, and you will be free” (Straßheim in this special issue).

Emphasizing the disconnection between changing subjectivities and the idea of democratic participation, Ulbricht, Maxton-Lee and Straßheim underline how behavioural politics, consumer responsabilization and data mining promote a managerial perspective not only on the notion of subjectivity, but on democratic decision-making as well. These readings of participation do not abandon the ideal of an autonomous subject at the core of democracy, but understand this subject as open for enhancement and recrafting. In this regard, the cases discussed here raise the question if under conditions of the post-democratic turn the criteria proposed by Dahl still serve their purpose as a measure of democratic quality and democratization. At least, the possibility that what Dahlian criteria would define as regressing democracy might be perceived as democratically empowering needs to be taken into account in further research on contemporary participation.

That increasing participation might not equal democratization has been stressed by many scholars.<sup>38</sup> Social bias and limited representativeness, conflicts between collective and individual interests, decreasing policy effectiveness, as well as an openness for instrumentalization are among the main reservations.<sup>39</sup> Still, many of these analyses focus on imperfections of participatory process design and emphasize that, in line with the liberal, participative or deliberative democracy approaches and the so-called participatory revolution since the 1960s and 1970s, an increase of participation in the democratic culture of a society and its citizens contributes to further democratization. Through the lens of a post-democratic turn, however, changing readings of democratic participation might alter the understanding of democratization, too. Not only can some of the contemporary innovations in the field of participation appear as slowing down or even reversing democratization. In light of the post-democratic turn and a democratic ambivalence it might be just these developments, which through the lens of a classical, Dahlian understanding of democratization lead to less democratization, which are being perceived as empowering and emancipatory, as they relieve the individual citizen from the burdens placed upon it by the imperatives of democratic engagement and constant identity reproduction.

## 5. Participation between abandoning and enhancing the subject

The forms of participation that are scrutinized in this special issue – data mining, consumer responsabilization, behavioural politics – are challenges and innovations to the established repertoire of democratic participation. While not undisputed parts of what democratic participation comprises, all of them suggest that under conditions of the post-democratic turn readings of what might be considered as democratic participation are shifting.<sup>40</sup> As the analyses have shown, all three forms of involvement are perceived as contributing to a democratization (at least by some, as this understanding might be challenged by others). In that they claim to address shortcomings of classical and established forms of citizen involvement, all three – a seemingly objective and automatic digital reproduction of social facts through big data collections, the reading of consumer choices as participation, or the enhancement of democratic decision-making through behavioural politics – underscore how post-democratic conditions have altered the relationship between the individual subject and the democracy he or she lives in. They address (a) specific burdens of identity reproduction the modern subject is



exposed to and (b) might offer a reconciliation for the democratic ambivalence characteristic to the post-democratic condition (see the introduction and the article by Blüh-dorn in this special issue). For instance, consumer responsabilization stages a democratic performance to help citizens experience empowerment while leaving societal power-relations and a structural status quo unchallenged. Yet, this is not perceived as oppressive or a suppression of democratic participation but resolving the tension between the demand for democracy and the claims for an efficient political regulation of society.

However, in the light of Robert A. Dahl's five criteria of democratization, the analysed repertoires of citizen involvement might be understood as regressing democracy. Yet, through the lens of a post-democratic turn, this is not necessarily the case, as they seem to reduce the burdens of identity and subjectivity reproduction on the individual as well as to mediate the simultaneous imperatives of democratic empowerment and efficiency. Furthermore, especially notions of democratic output-legitimacy, that have become ever more important in democratic theory and practice,<sup>41</sup> might render some of the Dahlian criteria contradictory. First, as Ulrich, Maxton-Lee and Straßheim have shown, a techno-managerial understanding of enhanced top-down agenda control (i.e. what can be decided upon in participatory processes) is widely perceived as contributing to democratic legitimacy, yet it contradicts Dahl's criterion of equal access to agenda control. Second, unbinding and consultative participation is often perceived as deepening democracy in that it allows for a reconciliation and easing of the tensions of democratic ambivalence. An objectivation of citizens, the understanding that they constitute a data resource to be harvested through participatory processes, is part of the analysed new forms of democratic participation. Third, participatory processes that require considerable prior technical or epistemic knowledge affect the equal inclusion of citizens and introduce new social bias. Yet they are often understood as contributing to good and well-informed decisions that legitimize democracy.<sup>42</sup> Fourth, especially the performative subjectivation effects of many of the analysed forms do not necessarily lead to an empowerment of the subject but function as a simulation of the increasingly implausible but indispensable norm of the autonomous subject as the core of any democracy.

The new understandings, forms and functions of participation that were addressed in this special issue underscore how the relationship between the idea of an autonomous subject and democratization deeply remoulds: Whereas data mining abandons the idea of subjectivity and reduces it to the observation of data points, the responsabilization of consumers leads to a control of subjectivity, and behavioural politics understand subjectivity as something that can be technically enhanced and optimized. In this light, all three readings constitute a form of post-subjective and objectifying participation. The concept of the post-democratic turn as the conceptual frame of this special issue has proven very helpful in exposing these shifts. Whereas through the lens of other concepts of post-democracy and post-politics these developments would appear as a regression and as an abuse of political participation (which would call for more "genuine" and "true" democratization), the lens of a post-democratic turn allows to understand why these new understandings of participation can be perceived as empowering and emancipatory.<sup>43</sup> This does not mean neglecting the diagnoses of a current *wave of autocratization*,<sup>44</sup> nor does it entail a normative plea for less or restricted forms of participation. It does, however, underline that through a more differentiated analytical lens of a post-democratic turn, what appears to be a slowly and gradual



regression of established democracies actually should be interpreted very carefully, as for others this might entail notions of liberation and empowerment. What is perceived to be democratic and political participation; what is perceived as democratization; which ideals of political subjectivity proliferate, that is the bottom line, is also constantly evolving.

Still, John Meyer's initial critique of the post-democratic perspective has to be taken very seriously. In fact, the contentious and empowering potential of current social movement participation and its interplay with a different performance of subjectivity remains to be carefully scrutinized in further research, as it seems to contradict the cases made here. Indeed, there might be many other forms of participation that object the perspective of a post-democratic turn. The current rise of right-wing populism, which radicalizes exclusionary ideals of democracy, the proliferating innovations of deliberative democracy, participatory budgeting or referenda – further research will have to follow closely which ideas of democratic participation are held upright under conditions that increasingly question the conception of free and autonomous individuals. Under conditions of the post-democratic turn, this is the quintessence, Dahl's five criteria might have to be overhauled in light of a proliferating democratic ambivalence and demands for the performance of subjectivity, both of which have become important parts of established Western democracies. What democratic empowerment or democratization mean – if more participation is actually desirable at all – might be changing under these conditions and call for further research.

## Notes

1. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here."
2. Wahlström et al., "Protest for a Future."
3. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here."
4. Blühdorn, "The Governance of Unsustainability"; Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*.
5. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*.
6. Crouch, "The March Towards Post-Democracy."
7. Appadurai, "Democracy Fatigue"; van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*; Mair, *Ruling the Void*; Rancière, *Dissensus*.
8. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.
9. Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, "Undermining or Defending Democracy?"; Weßels, "Political Culture, Political Satisfaction and the Rollback of Democracy."
10. Blühdorn, "Post-Ecologist Governmentality."
11. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.
12. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*.
13. Reckwitz, *Subjekt*.
14. Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*.
15. Bauman, *Retrotopia*.
16. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.
17. Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End?"; van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*; Blühdorn, "Post-Ecologist Governmentality"; Levi and Stoker, "Political Trust and Trustworthiness."
18. Blühdorn and Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism."
19. Vráblíková, *What Kind of Democracy?*; Kersting, *Electronic Democracy*.
20. Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*.
21. Bernhagen, "Measuring Democracy and Democratization"; Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 106–31.
22. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here."
23. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy."
24. Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*.

25. Teorell, "Political Participation and Three Theories of Democracy."
26. Pateman, "Participatory Democracy Revisited."
27. Saward, "The Representative Claim."
28. Theocharis and van Deth, "The Continuous Expansion of Citizen Participation"; van Deth, "A Conceptual Map of Political Participation"; Kersting, "Online Participation."
29. Miles, "The Neoliberal City and the Pro-active Complicity of the Citizen Consumer."
30. Fontenelle, "From Politicisation to Redemption through Consumption."
31. Sunstein, *Why Nudge?*
32. Sunstein and Thaler, "Libertarian Paternalism Is Not An Oxymoron."
33. Bernhagen, "Measuring Democracy and Democratization."
34. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here"; Munck, "What is Democracy?"
35. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 106–31.
36. Bernhagen, "Measuring Democracy and Democratization," 27.
37. Miles, "The Cultural Capital of Consumption"; Firat and Dholakia, *Consuming People*.
38. Innes and Booher, "Reframing Public Participation"; McNulty, *Democracy from Above?*
39. Heidbreder et al., "Demokratisierung durch Partizipation?"; Walker et al., "Rising Participation and Declining Democracy."
40. Theocharis and van Deth, "The Continuous Expansion of Citizen Participation"; Kersting, "The Future of Electronic Democracy."
41. Buchstein and Jörke, "Das Unbehagen an der Demokratietheorie."
42. Brennan, *Against Democracy*.
43. Blühdorn and Butzlaff, "Rethinking Populism."
44. Lührmann and Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here."

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