

## CHAPTER 7

# Conclusion: A Turning Point for Liberal Democracy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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