

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Information Technology and Authoritarian Populism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.1 Note on Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 Outline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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