

## CHAPTER 6

# Authoritarianism and Resistance

### 6.1 Introduction

As we have indicated throughout this book, we argue that the social psychology of the society of the selfie contributes to the crisis of liberal democracy engulfing so much of the world today. These various conditions we outlined, from neoliberal impression management to authenticity strain, do not control the political beliefs and inclinations of subjects in any totalizing sense. The individual is still, at least by definition, capable of critical insight and reflexivity, of not being entirely hypnotized and ‘taken in’ by the spectacle. Agency still exists. And yet they can only make their moves within a terrain already established, with qualities, possibilities and limits determined largely outside of their control. As Marx (1960 [1852], 115) once reflected: ‘[people] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please [*freien Stücken*]; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances that are immediately found [*unmittelbar vorgefundenen*], given and transmitted’. The dialectics between agency and structure is conceived as the capacity of conscious mobilization (constituting subjects) within the reified world of the society of the selfie.

In the following exposition we finally turn our attention entirely to the political question. We start from an assumption very important for the early Frankfurt School: sociological conditions influence psychological dispositions, which in turn influence political persuasions. In the preceding chapters we have discussed at length some of what we believe to be the psychological dispositions

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fostered within spectacular capitalism in the digital age. Here we will draw connections between the political and the psychological. We will also discuss how information technologies are used by political actors to agitate, propagandize, organize and resist. These technologies serve authoritarian movements and leaders at the same time that they serve resistance movements and activists. On both of these levels – the sociopolitical psychology of spectacular subjects, and the forms of political persuasion and engagement – social media plays an integral role. The crisis of liberal democracy, tumultuous as such a global crisis is bound to be, is not only a pathological condition. It is also a response to a pathological society, and in this respect provides opportunities for change for the better.

## 6.2 The Crisis of Liberal Democracy in the Society of the Selfie

Before we get into the social psychology of the spectacular subject (as outlined in previous chapters) and its relation to politics, we will here ground the reader in what exactly we are talking about when we refer to a ‘crisis of liberal democracy’ in the context of the society of the selfie. The sense of political polarization and division in contemporary democratic systems is inseparable from the pervasive effects of digital media. Brexit and the election of Trump in 2016 demonstrated the use of digital media to manipulate data, produce sensationalist content and foment anger (Gentzkow 2016; Neudert and Nahema 2019). An onslaught of fake news and buzzwords, *pari passu* with the effects of a generalized crisis (be it the scars of the 2008 financial crisis or the socioeconomic shock of COVID-19), lead to a dangerous terrain for liberal democracy.

With the end of World War II in advanced industrial countries and in the 1970s and 1980s, after the dissolution of military regimes in Latin America and the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, different institutional processes converged in some key points that constitute liberal democratic regimes. This development has structured new relationships between state and society with the need for monitoring political structures to avoid decisionism and autocratic moves (Keane 2009). Expanded political participation (via electoral mechanisms, community decision-making, etc.) and the construction of civil rights counted on the freedom of political association (the party system). It was a system that was open to the demands of civil society, a system of checks and balances among branches of government (Held 2006). A new sense of citizenship emerged, combining the liberal idea of sociocultural plurality (Kymlicka 1995) and the belief that public policy should reinforce individual freedom and human rights. In this context, established media played an important role in presenting political processes and debates to broader audiences and subjecting political decisions to public scrutiny.

This sociocultural and political landscape has shaped the promises of liberal democracies with a normative principle in the public sphere: the need for

tolerance and the positive role of individuation and difference in heterogeneous, multicultural societies (Turner 2006). The pervasive presence of social media and digital data has added new elements into the political grammar. Participation in public affairs and discussions goes hand in hand with the diffusion of social conflict and the manipulation of popular *ressentiment* (Langman and Schatz 2021). The presence of far-right groups and supremacist propaganda on the internet is not new: since the 1990s, online groups, electronic bulletins and websites marked the presence of radical contents on the web via racial stigma, pro-weapon campaigns, neo-Nazi propaganda, suspicion about election results, etc. (Betz 2003; Statzel 2008). Digital networks offered reduced costs and logistics in relation to former methods of communication (i.e., letters, physical meetings, posters and printed magazines). In turn, many molecular neo-Nazi groups, with precarious or almost no financial support (Whine 1999), could slowly spread throughout the digital landscape of fragmented micro-publics. This kind of digital activism was far from being mainstream. It developed subterraneously and rhizomatically, beneath the dominant, rampant discourses of the times that were busy loudly proclaiming the stability and inevitability of liberal democracy. Then over the last decade, this rhizomatic form of communication went mainstream.

India presents a good example. With the election of Narendra Modi in 2014, the country established transnational ties with the global far right, echoing a political agenda of reaction against the expansion of democratic rights and policies for social inclusion (Heller 2020). In October 2019, the visit of rightist politicians from the European Parliament to Kashmir was a symbolic event that took place just two months after the Indian government removed the region's semiautonomous status (Leidig 2020b; Kildis 2021). In January 2020, Modi invited the far-right Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro as his main guest for India's most important national holiday. India is one of the countries with the highest number of internet users (Statista 2021); since the 1990s – long before the election of Modi – Hindu ultra-nationalists have used the internet for online political groups (the 'Internet Hindus'), operating at the margins of the mainstream media (Mohan 2015). Religious nationalism arising from the digital network counts on the educated middle-class youth from urbanized areas, like Mumbai and New Delhi (Udupa 2015), and reacts against secularism and multi-ethnic society. Right-wing extremism grounded in Hindutva ideology was latent in India's nation-building identity (Leidig 2020a). It became more visible through the digital network infrastructure (Therwath 2012; Anderson and Longkumer 2018), with extremist groups inciting disinformation campaigns and hate, especially against Indian Muslims (Banaji and Bhat 2020).

Two moves point to a new moment of the threat to democracy coming from the structures of digital communication. On the one hand, recent literature on the presence of the far right focuses on linkages for radical politics against difference, and the spread of conspiracy theories via Parler, 4Chan, 8Chan, Reddit, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter (Burris et al. 2000; Von Behr et al. 2013;

Koehler 2014; Ernst et al. 2017). On the other hand, the popularization of social media and mobile devices overlaps with a succession of crises (i.e., refugee, economic downturns, precarization of labour conditions and the erosion of middle classes), accompanied by destabilization and strong disaffection towards traditional parties. And the overlap is not entirely coincidental, since the new visibility tends to convert crises into viral, attention-grabbing representations. The electoral success and new mobilization of rightist extremism via digital networks (Caiani et al. 2012) is also a sign of cultural fragmentation, threats to traditional social ties and deep instability that are generated by modernization processes.

The participatory potential of digital networks is used by authoritarian groups because it can also give voice to radicalism. One of the main features of the society of the selfie is the 'produsage' (Bruns 2008) of digital contents: if the individual becomes a productive cell and the tip of a dense network of others, the use of forums and communities can empower conspiracy theorists and political groups that were poorly organized or had no voice in mainstream media/institutions. The participatory, continuous, unlimited creation and diffusion of data facilitates cohesion and coordinated rapid action that otherwise could not be possible. The perma-orgy of produsage is a rhizomatic force, invisible on the surface of 'real' life but very tangible as a tangle of relations. It is an assemblage of remote cohesion with units everywhere, since it generates the main traits of a remote *community* (Rheingold 1993) – relative duration, belonging, common purpose and common (cyber)spaces for interaction.

When a mob stormed the Capitol in January 2021 to contest the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States, it was an unprecedented crisis in American history. The event was planned and immediately broadcasted via many smartphones in far-right forums and networks (Timberg et al. 2021). This new form of disruptive movement – which shares many features of terrorism – could not exist without the society of the selfie: it combines mediation of sociality by the spectacle, individual production and rapid mobility of contents facilitated by digital technologies, distrust in traditional democratic procedures and a deep resentment against the elite, and transgression of boundaries into the 'back stage' territory of government officials.

Many state institutions have implemented policies to deal with the agitating effects of Web 2.0 on popular resentment and anti-democracy. Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has come under polemical criticism for their online surveillance of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) (DW 2021), the country's most successful far-right party since 1945. This reaction is part of a broader context of suspicion. Since the 2017 general elections (Hegelich et al. 2017) and the 2018 regional elections in the country, the AfD used social media to spread polarizing messages via memes, images, posts, emojis and sound, designed to stoke people to react. The party has relentlessly posted content on structural problems that attract public concerns – such as unemployment, and crimes committed by migrants (Busvine 2018) – and

shares a vast network with connections to other far-right groups like the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident and the Identitarian Movement (Havertz 2021).

Political control of digital infrastructure is another threat to democratic liberties. Since the digital is omnipresent in the society of the selfie, one of the main concerns for democratic policy is how to plan public policy that recognizes in the network a vital forum for pluralism, conceiving digital infrastructure as a permanent area of focus for state policy committed to democracy. The coup d'état in Myanmar in February 2021 illustrates this political impasse. Statistics from online data have shown a constant collapse of connectivity in the days that followed the military coup (NetBlocks 2021). Internet connectivity had dropped to 50% of normal levels after the army cut off the infrastructure and operators like the state-owned Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) and Telenor. Access to Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger was severely restricted, since the network has been used by political parties and independent activists to assemble opposition to the coup (Giles 2021). More than ever, Web 2.0 is a disputed realm comprising political strategies of autocratic regimes that seek to control information and the exhibition of discontents (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). In Myanmar the state apparatuses became evident as an authoritarian move of the government to intervene in digital infrastructure, but this trending is not new; rather, it has been latent since the 2010s. In Iran, during the large street protests in 2018, which counted on social media to spread the spectacular effects of public demonstrations (BBC 2018a), the government used bots (embedded in hashtags and social media profiles) and even cyber warfare to dissuade protestors. Basically, the tools of the society of the selfie are an important front for political confrontation and social conflict in contemporary times.

From the presence of diffuse groups to the rise of Web 2.0 in the 2010s, there was a turning point with the full political, personal use of the society of the selfie. Since 2016, Trump has been on the frontline of the use of digital media and entertainment culture as ideological fields to spread polarization and authoritarianism (Fuchs 2018; Muelrath 2018) via the management of his own image on social media. Decisionism, the critique of political correctness and the strong affirmation of the leader play an important role in this confused mixture of spectacular 'authenticity' and self-promotion. Similar moves have taken place in Brazil since the election of the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. Brazil has more than 116 million users of the internet (IBGE 2016); it is the fourth country in Facebook (Statista 2020a) and in Twitter users (Statista 2020b). According to the 2019 report of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (2019, 57–63), Brazil has the largest proportion with access to internet in the region, with 90% of adults using cell phones and 73% also with full access via PCs at home. The three most popular platforms of social media in Latin America include WhatsApp (64% of adults in Latin America use it), Facebook (56%) and Twitter (8%). More than 95% of users check updates daily or at least

a few times a week, and frequent social media users are less trusting in the country's liberal institutions like the Supreme Court, mainstream media, Congress and even elections.

Social media is reshaping politics in democratic societies. The society of the selfie disperses a rhapsody of political themes and messages and 62% of users in Latin America read political contents frequently. The hyper-politicization of social media in the region since the early 2010s has paved the way for discourses that were not comprised by traditional media and the liberal *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s and the 2000s. The new thing is not properly the rise of authoritarianism or extremist discourse, but rather the fact that these movements that earlier were at the margins of democratic systems – far-right extremism and distrust in democratic institutions – have had greater voice and have even been normalized since the 2010s. While the majority of users seem to support tolerance and an abstract definition of liberal democracy (elections, freedom of association, etc.), the sense of polarization has spread, accompanied by political conflict. Data from the Digital Democracy Room, an initiative of Getúlio Vargas Foundation (a Brazilian institution of research and higher education), show how deep the political conflict in social media has penetrated in Brazil since 2016 (FGV 2018). Disinformation campaigns, adopted as a systematic political strategy (Benites 2018; Fatima 2019), marked the presidential election of 2018. The far-right's use of social media counted on mass text/image campaigns (containing fake news and hatred) that promoted sensationalism and exacerbated the sense of moral disorder and abnormality of the opposition (Costa and Blanco 2019). The spectacular effects of the society of the selfie, with image editing software, reinforced the emotional appeal of engagement via provocation and shock (attacking the sense of moral order, traditional values, etc.), delivered in attention-grabbing messages that went viral.

In Latin America, the political use of digital infrastructure played a major role in the articulation of the far right alongside the expansion of Web 2.0. From marginal groups in the early 2000s (Reyes and Smink 2011) to the electoral presence in Chile and above all in Brazil after 2013, the far-right presence in the society of the selfie pointed to the ideological realignment in the region after the end of the Cold War (Caro 2005). If the countries in the region (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia) were aligned to American policy – especially after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the spread of guerrillas – and ruled by military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s against a common enemy (communism), post-socialist conflicts tend to disseminate political conflict in many branches (gender, LGBT rights, etc.). The new world order after the 1990s, moreover, challenged nationalist positions in light of the subjection of national states to multilateral and transnational policy in many issues (climate change, sanitary measures, economic deregulation, etc.). At the end of the 'pink tide' (leftist and centre-leftist governments that ruled Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Chile, Venezuela, Uruguay and Venezuela in the 2000s and 2010s), the combination between economic crisis and progressive public policy committed to

dismantle social asymmetries grounded in gender and ethnic inequalities (Narita and Kato 2020) has been followed by a strong conservative reaction grounded in Christianity and Hispanic whiteness as sources to correct a destabilized moral order (Weld 2020). The far right, which comprises from ultra-nationalist groups to neo-Nazis and skinheads gathered by social media and active in the biggest cities, promotes a radical defence of nationalism and traditional cultural values that are under threat (Sanahuja and Burian 2020); and digital networks, with the exhibition of symbols and protests, accelerate the mobilization.

The popularity of WhatsApp in Latin America is symptomatic of the society of the selfie: the groups are administered (which implies a strict selection of who is in and who is out) and they can radicalize echo chamber effects in times of political polarization and distrust in democratic institutions (Nemer 2018; Morelock and Narita 2018a). Besides that, the diffusion of emojis, memes and fake news is much faster than other formats of social media, which was proven in many social protests that took place in Brazil between 2015 and 2018, in the wake of economic crisis and the rising force of rightist movements (Narita 2018). The strong use of presidential accounts on Twitter and Facebook mobilized hatred and political affects that fed into populism and polarization. The opposition between the people and the elite is taken up in the rhetoric of authoritarian orators, in a way that receptive listeners are encouraged to feel demoralized about democratic procedures (Morelock and Narita 2021). The touting of an ideology of authenticity, and the pretension of immediate contact between the leader and the people, plays an important role in political agitation against the elites (who are portrayed as corrupt and distant from people's needs). As a strategy for government, the use of social media allows the president to work on his spectacular image as the primary avenue for engagement of his supporters. The importance of Trump's Twitter feed throughout his presidency (Gounari 2018) is difficult to overstate. This importance is evidenced by the dramatic significance of his Twitter account being cancelled following the storming of the capitol building on January 6, 2021, propelled into action by Trump's incessant public banter about voter fraud and the election being stolen from him (citing no legitimate evidence). Social media also gave voice to many Brazilian far-right digital influencers who do not count on having space in mainstream media. In this case, the sense of promoting 'alternative truths' against the cultural elites embedded in traditional media and research institutions, paved the way for many forms of political denialism, from shallow historical revisionism to attacks against mainstream institutions, for example regarding the World Health Organization and recommended protective measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. No wonder Brazil, according to the COVID-19 Dashboard of the Johns Hopkins University, has more than 510,000 deaths, being the second country with the highest death tolls (in absolute numbers), only behind the United States, which counts on more than 600,000 deaths.

In what follows, we will tie together the political implications of the trends discussed in previous chapters and discuss these political implications at length



in reference to the ideas of a variety of theorists, centring on the thought of Debord, Fromm, Foucault, Goffman and Giddens. We argue that all five 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. Ultimately, Web 2.0 has an ambiguous relation with liberal democracy. Platforms per se are not inherently democratic or authoritarian (Tucker et al. 2017; Deibert and Rohozinski 2010). At the same time as social media facilitates and even encourages authoritarianism and division, it is also a milieu for new social movements and progressive platforms. It empowers people to a peculiar kind of political participation and public engagement, but this process does not necessarily lead to an amplified *agora*. Instead of seeing social media in narrow, oppositional, non-dialectical terms, like a pendulum oscillating between democratic and anti-democratic trends, it can be useful to see it as a dynamic contested field.

There are a few basic pathways we will outline for how the society of the selfie plays into the crisis of liberal democracy. The first is sociopsychological – the nature of spectacular subjectivity. To discuss this, we will refer specifically to theoretical concepts developed in the preceding three chapters, in sequence. Before, we gestured to ways that these theories had important political implications, namely the propensity to feed into authoritarian sensibilities. Now, we will draw out in a more directed fashion the nature of these implications as well as some contradictory implications that feed into resistance movements. The following preoccupations ground our analysis: we are interested in outlining the spectacular subject, i.e., the cultural tendencies that proliferate in the dovetailing of late capitalist subjects and psychologies with the type of social selves that social media promotes. And we are interested particularly in how these cultural tendencies feed into the psychology of authoritarianism and resistance. The second pathway concerns the populist reaction against rationality and expert knowledge, which is today facilitated by the ready availability of an astronomical quantity of information on the internet. The rejection of higher education and scientific expertise finds alliance in religious fundamentalism, and points towards the emaciation if not abandonment of rational deliberation. In the ‘post-truth’ context, and via social media news feeds, conspiracy theories have considerable opportunity to spread. The third pathway concerns what we will call ‘agitation games’ that the authoritarian leader or would-be leader engages in, now substantially over the internet, employing a combination of strategy and dramaturgy to secure a motivated following and a polarized opposition. Finally, we will discuss the place of information technologies in political activism and resistance movements.

### 6.3 Sociopolitical Psychology of the Spectacular Subject

As we said earlier: social conditions influence psychological dispositions, and these in turn influence political persuasions. Relying on the expositions we



gave in the previous three chapters, which speak to the first clause (social conditions influence psychological dispositions) we will now focus primarily on illustrating the second clause. In brief, the dynamics we outline below follow this reasoning: (1) Neoliberal impression management thrives on, and thus feeds, competitiveness and individualism, which increasingly eclipse morality. (2) The splitting public sphere feeds political polarization. (3) Authenticity strain and the dialectics of alienation and abnormality feed authoritarianism.

### *6.3.1 Neoliberal Impression Management*

The ascent of neoliberal impression management is also the descent of authentic social interaction without an alternate motive. As described in Chapter 3, this phenomenon is rampant in such a way that narcissistic personality traits become assets to success, normalized and framed in strategic or pragmatic – rather than moral – terms. Essentially this is an emaciation of moral consciousness that accompanies social estrangement. If everyone is your competitor (implicitly if not explicitly), and social interaction always contains a hefty component of strategy for personal gain, then nobody can be trusted, at least not on a personal level, especially when they get no payoff in human capital. The logic of personal ambition is amplified.

When narcissism and ambition become cherished and flourishing personality traits, characters like Donald Trump are a natural extension. Trump's aggressive strategy of stretching the rules is an amoral opportunism. The system in place is not 'respected' in anything approaching an allegiance to its moral essence. Instead, it is approached strategically, as so many strings that might be pulled in order to come out ahead. In Trump's games, exploitation of the rules is evidently included in the notion of fair play, if indeed any pretence of 'fairness' as a value is maintained. He likes 'winners' not 'losers', and he considers himself a winner. He displays a moral emaciation and naked self-serving ambition that has not only become very familiar, but actively encouraged and cultivated by the citizenry, striving autonomously to be successful (at the expense of others, implicitly if not explicitly). The ruthlessness of Trump may appeal to the sense of pragmatism many people feel in a world where 'dog eat dog' rules. Who has time anymore to pretend that diplomacy and consideration of others is effective? In the 'real world', there are winners and losers, and it is better to be a winner than a loser. This cutthroat pragmatic sense of the world is the sense that Trump embodies, and thus he reflects more accurately the experience of life and the personal ideals that the society of the selfie engenders. To the extent that Trump mirrors familiar attributes and ideals, it becomes easier for the citizen to identify with him, and even to adopt him as their 'ego-ideal'.

Cutthroat individualism and boastful narcissism are traits associated with 'toxic masculinity', and in this sense Trump's persona may be more prone to identification from men than from women (Pizarro-Sirera 2020), which in turn might help explain the persistent gender gap in Trump voters, typically around

10% in 2020, and being 12% at the 2020 election (Center for American Women and Politics 2021; Delmore 2020). Yet this cannot explain a large portion of Trump's support, as 43% of the female vote in the election still went to him. Prior research into the demographics and attitudes of Trump voters in the 2016 election has shown that racial animosities and sexism were very strong and significant predictors of female Trump voters, as they also were for male Trump voters (Setzler and Yanus 2020). Other studies have shown that not just prejudice and sexism, but also authoritarian attitudes, were marked among Trump's following (Smith and Hanley 2018; Smith 2019; Dean and Altemeyer 2020).

This framework of authoritarian trends reinforced by neoliberal impression management fits with what Christian Fuchs (2018, 51–52) identified as the four dimensions of right-wing authoritarianism. Alongside the strong leader, ultra-nationalism (based on the superiority of a particular cultural/ethnic community) and friend-enemy scheme for political conflict, the conservative belief in traditional gender roles, reinforced by a politics directed towards the body and the celebration of order and military power, tends to divide society between strength and weakness and reinforce subaltern positions for female and LGBT groups. In this sense, as a social system that extends from physical superiority (sexual harassment, aggression, etc.) to symbolic violence (stigma, jokes, etc.) (Amorós 1993), patriarchy structures asymmetrical positions assigned to gender roles and stretches the limits of liberal democracy (Walby 1991) since it is grounded in a political contract that normalizes gender domination with its reproduction via state policies (Saffioti 1978) embedded in the attitude of authoritarian leaders. Trump used social media to spread misogyny and Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil, used it to attack 'gender ideology' and reinforce his veto against any policy connected to the feminist agendas (Correa 2020) – it is worth mentioning that the opposition took to the streets in 2018 in the #EleNão (NotHim) movement, which was organized, above all, by feminist groups. In digital networks, however, the problem extends far beyond the individual attitude of the leaders: diffuse profiles and groups use micro-publics and filters not only to rail against identity politics and feminism, but to attack reputation and social esteem (Ging and Siapera 2018). The affective dynamic reinforces shaming (Sunden and Paasonen 2018) and the hypersexualized performance of femininity (Alvares 2018), at the same time as it emphasizes pudency and allocates blame towards female victims of rape in Brazil and India (Prange and Neher 2014), pointing to a retraditionalization of gender roles (Rajagopalan 2019) entangled with misogyny. As we discuss in section 6.5, the diffuse effects of social media can also favour a counterpart for misogyny embedded in molecular movements of resistance that can rapidly become transnational trends.

As toxic masculinity displays traits consonant with a reified capitalist society, they are also held in higher general esteem than traits identified as 'feminine'. In this regard, it should be no surprise that the neoliberal wing of the feminist movement has been much quicker to honour 'masculine' traits in women than to honour 'feminine' traits in men. Women push for liberation from being

narrowly confined to the domestic sphere, but men do not push for liberation from their narrow confinement to the world of work. That women should have the same opportunities to ‘succeed’ as men is of course a very important movement, and we do not mean to downplay the significance of this for gender equality. But this tendency is in no sense a fundamental critique of the notion of ‘success’ in a competitive environment. Even while the feminist movement has been an enormously progressive force in society, its popular neoliberal variant does not fundamentally question the masculine-capitalist ideal; it simply extends the ideal a little more evenly between the sexes.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2009) described several ways that liberal democracy tends to lead towards fascism. Much hinges on responses people have to the reified world of late capitalism – its individualism and moral emaciation. One of the ways this leads to fascism is that there is an internal logic in both cases that is much the same. Self-serving, atomized, amoral personalities have no moral basis to react against fascism, and they may be so used to viewing people as things that the inhuman treatment or even genocide of subpopulations can be accepted without horror or repugnance (Menillo 2021). Trump’s manipulations lack the moral compass that would make him relate to the electoral system in anything other than a series of levels to be pulled and regulations to be gamed, and this attitude is precisely the sort that the competitive world of business is honed to raise to the top. The fact that Trump comes from the super-rich business class, and his background is in money-making rather than, for instance, law or political science, is also consonant. When neoliberalism has colonized politics with the logic of the market, when the route to personal success is paved with cutthroat games and manipulations, and when society’s moral horizon withers down to an imperative to consume, compete and be rational, a leader who reflects society is one who believes in winning at all costs, and represents little to nothing in the way of other substantive values.

The Republican Senate headed by Mitch McConnell operated in a lockstep fashion, as an extension of Trump’s will and narratives.<sup>1</sup> The enmeshment of the Senate majority under Trump’s shadow created an unstoppable force in many situations, which could be seen strikingly in the rhetoric delivered from Republican congresspersons during his impeachment inquiry and trial. The unified actions of the Republican members of congress, which presented as impervious to the challenges of Democratic challenges, operated as a group mind mirroring Trump’s aggressive and manipulative *modus operandi*. To a great degree they capitalized upon silence and refusal to engage, which stunted the capacity of Democrats to gather evidence against Trump. The refusal, in itself, would be an admission of guilt, if not for the fact that no such admission was voiced. And in this, the shape of the charade was very clear to interpret, but interpretation is not enough to convict. And then again, even in the face of evidence, all that the Senate had to do was refuse to engage, and cry ‘foul’. This is what they did, and it worked. The event became a ‘media spectacle’ (Kellner 2003b) of partisan

bickering, with the Democrats presenting evidence, and the Republicans replying with outrage, saying ‘they have presented no evidence’ and pinning responsibility for the hyper-partisanship on the Democrats. There was no serious interrogation of the truth, only the strategic manipulation of narratives, pulling of strings and presenting of a unified, impenetrable front of silence, anger and denial. After Biden won the presidency, Trump proceeded as predicted to challenge the outcome, claiming voter fraud, seeking litigation. And McConnell and others stood with him, once again.

There is also much in the nature of this kind of ‘racket’<sup>2</sup> (Horkheimer and Adorno 2009) that is an extension of the logic of capital. The nihilism that accompanies reification lends itself to the abandonment of all abstract ethics and protecting and advancing one’s own position at all costs becomes the guiding ethos. With the erosion of moral inhibitions, the manipulation of guidelines and state levers becomes a natural extension of strategic politics. Without inhibitions against nakedly wielding power for personal gain, loyalty to the powerful becomes a survival strategy. In this way, those who do not prove their loyalty and obedience are weeded out, purged, ‘fired’, or they resign. With passing time, the government is filled with a close-knit group of loyalists working in lockstep, in absolute loyalty to the leader and to the party. Once tied in, their own success or failure hinges on the success or failure of the leader and the party, and so their loyalty is secured even further, for self-preservation.

The nature of the discourse in Trump’s impeachment proceedings exemplified another of the pathways from liberal democracy to fascism that Adorno and Horkheimer laid out. This pathway is in some sense the logical opposite of the one previously mentioned. In the pathway above, the individualism and moral emaciation that take place in the development of capitalism are in some sense the reduction of life according to the logic of capital – because all that is left is instrumental reason and exchange value, other humans are viewed in instrumental ways, and moral inhibition against inhumane treatment is curtailed if not obliterated. The opposite pathway is a reaction against the reification of society. With the rapid extension of instrumental reason and overturning of traditional ways of life, many people are driven to rebel against the rationalization of modern society, and instead to look distastefully on reason and on the domination of society by logic and instrumentality. In the impeachment proceedings, the Democrats generally often argued through presenting a wealth of carefully crafted arguments and gathered evidence, with level-heads and tones displaying rational knowledge and conviction. As convincing as this might arguably be to those who would listen carefully to their arguments, their strategy capitalized on the power and authority of *logos*, and the Republicans placed emphasis instead on *pathos*. In terms of convincing the citizenry of the salience of their positions, the Republicans were acting out an emotional rebellion against the logic and reason of the Democrats. The Democrats presented as professional and impersonal. The Republicans emoted and presented as if personally affronted. On the level of rhetorical styles, the two were speaking

past one another, enacting a culturally resonant battle between the rationality of one side and the emotionality of the other.

### *6.3.2 Invisible Audience and Echo Chamber Effects*

If the pervasiveness of neoliberal impression management rewards narcissism, the invisible audience and echo chamber effects further solidify narcissism's fortress with solipsism. As we described before, the form of the 'status update' participates in a tendency to expressively broadcast one's own ideas without considering, or even experiencing, the reactions of other flesh and blood humans. While comments, likes, shares, and so on are hoped for, and depending on the person are a more or less expected part of the process, the act of posting the status update is more like putting a message in a bottle than talking to a friend. Neoliberal impression management is an alienated affair, and the broadcasting to an invisible audience is a similarly alienated form of interaction, where speech is not delivered to any specific persons, informed by their body languages and who the broadcaster anticipates about catering etiquette or style based on relationships or context. Speech is delivered according to the proclivities of the broadcaster, without reference to others except in a very general sense – to an 'invisible audience'. True, there are some trends that develop in the world of social media, and these are considered when status updates are formed. Certain forms are repeated, such as in playing with autocorrect, or the reproducing of a picture or set of pictures with new captions, such as was done with a picture of Bernie Sanders wearing mittens that was taken from Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021. Yet even these are repeated as part of a general social media culture, within the emaciated context of online presence. Relationships, social situations and body language are absent in all ways but a vague anticipatory residue.

The echo chamber effect, developed out of a combination of automatic algorithms and manually instituted preferences, tends towards the ossification of worldviews. The effect involves the unrepresentative experience of most people or everyone on the newsfeed thinking close to the way the viewer feels comfortable with. Correspondingly, the viewer experiences a relative consensus of intolerance regarding dissenting opinions and those of others who harbour them. In situations where disparate opinions are articulated over social media, inhibitions against extreme language are lessened considerably. Extreme opinions can be voiced belligerently without normal real-time informal social sanctions, and without the experience of the other person in co-presence, aggression without guilt may be more common. Further, with intolerance for difference and dissent already greatly facilitated, the rejection of Others' dissenting views may be fuelled in its severity.

Research indicates that online 'homophily' (e.g., people who express similar values tending to associate together) may contribute to political polarization

(Yanagizawa-Drott et al. 2020). For example, political polarization has been shown to decrease for people who take a month off from Facebook (Allcott et al. 2020). Together, the invisible audience and the echo chamber effect constitute a splitting public sphere that facilitates tribalism and extremism. Rejection of people with different opinions or ways of life is both fomented and more readily voiced, and in being voiced it is also broadcast simultaneously to large numbers of people. The status update and the newsfeed work according to a logic that is something of a breeding ground for political polarization and extremism.

### 6.3.3 *Dialectics of Alienation and Abnormality*

The alienation and intolerance for others that the society of the selfie breeds, is also self-agitating. The alienated society splits up more and more into two hostile camps: the normal and the abnormal. They are pitted against one another – primarily the normal are pitted against the abnormal, while the abnormal implicitly threaten the normal – but it is not a clean system. Neither the normal nor the abnormal are internally unified in their groups, and each one contains the germs of the other within itself. In fact, many ostensibly ‘normal’ individuals could in fact be closeted abnormals, and of course persons who have already been socially branded as abnormal, might otherwise contain ‘normal’ psychologies. The two are not so far apart really, and this may help to explain part of the severe antagonism between them. In a more structural sense, ‘normal’ society is terrified of its ‘abnormal’ unconscious. Both sides are constituted heavily by their positions within an alienated social structure, both characterized by the nature of their relationships to their own alienation, and their reactions to it, and both susceptible to authoritarian temptation, among other reasons, also in specific ways related to their subject positions in the dialectics of alienation and abnormality.

For Fromm, sadomasochistic desires are bred from modern alienation (estrangement from self and others), and these desires can fuel authoritarian social movements. In *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm’s (1941) book on the socio-psychological motivations behind fascism, the main thesis is the following. Modern capitalism fosters anxiety and feelings of aloneness, and these feelings often lead to sadomasochistic character, sadomasochism being the primary character trait that drives fascist social movements. In the last chapter, we associated sadomasochism with the abnormal individual who is pathologically driven to violate the status quo unhappy but familiar distance between people. We proposed that the fear of abnormal individuals fuels a common reluctance to transgress the alienated status quo – the relation is dialectical: fear of abnormality fuels further alienation, which fuels abnormality, etc. As discussed in Chapter 5, while there is not a hard pattern of imagined gendered alignment here, the typical feared abnormal person is male, and the typical concern about victimization contains a normal female as the victim. The authenticity strain,

as we called it, that befalls the abnormal male, manifests in transgressions having to do with gaining intimate access to the female. In this way, for female influencers, the ethic of online authenticity may overlap with an injunction to, in some sense, satisfy the 'male gaze'. And in doing so, the female influencer opens herself up to, on the one side, the threat of perversely obsessed fans who could become stalkers or harassers, and on the other side, the accusation that she is unworthy of respect due to readily/abnormally showing too much or by attention-seeking. For the abnormal male, the strain of desired but thwarted authenticity or intimacy is compounded in cases of sexual attraction by the fact that part of the patriarchal script is that female affection is directly associated with male status and power. For the alienated male frustratedly seeking access to the private worlds of female influencers, the lack of authentic relatedness is fused with the insult of symbolic castration. The 'success' embodied and symbolized in sexual conquest occupies here the position of strain, compounding the strain surrounding authenticity.

The abnormal individual is always alienated. Whether in their motivations, in their misleading persona, or in the reactions of others, despite their pathological defiance this person is always an alienated subject. The normal are also typically alienated, as Fromm has discussed. The difference between the two may not be so great as the binary of normality/abnormality seems to imply. Not only do they fuel one another, but they struggle within the same alienated society. In fact, they may both harbour considerable sadomasochism; it is just that in the one case (normality), it can be channelled into socially accepted directions, whereas in the other case (abnormality), it cannot. In fact, part of the vitriol and terror with which normals frame abnormals may have more to do with their similarities than their differences. With psychodynamic defences such as projection and reaction formation, a normal might be unconsciously drawn towards abnormality and respond to this ego-dystonic draw by transforming it into conscious repulsion, to be more ego-syntonic. In the case of sexuality, repression of one's own sexual preoccupations may manifest in the preoccupation of decrying the sexual excesses of others.<sup>3</sup> In the case of violence, the same principle may operate.

Fromm posited sexual sadomasochism and violent sadomasochism as potential expressions of the sadomasochistic personality, the latter being more defined by the broad existential and interpersonal nexus of self and others and the desire to transcend one's anxiety-provoking sense of alienation. He posited destructiveness as largely of the same origins. And yet abnormal individual acts of sexual or violent transgression do not exhaust the expressions that sadomasochism can take, especially – as is the case in capitalist society – when sadomasochistic personality traits harmonize with social norms pertaining to economic 'success'. An important implication here is that when people internalize social norms that allow them to partially satisfy their sadomasochism, they are vulnerable to changing strategies of sadomasochistic satiation when their accustomed or predicted means break down. In this case, the normal



sadomasochist may revert to abnormality to satisfy the same broad underlying impulses. The difference between many normals and abnormals might often be largely a matter of social position and inhibition, rather than of underlying desire, and in times of crisis, the stabilizing forces of social position and inhibition are likely to break down, which in turn is likely to mean a rise in abnormal sadomasochistic acts *and* a rise in crusading against abnormal individuals, the crusade perhaps operating as a two-directional defence against the abnormality inside as well as outside the ostensibly normal individual. It is maybe perfectly fitting that the crusade against abnormality is prone to abnormal intensities (Foucault 2003a, 2003b; Furedi 2007; Glassner 2010).

For those who consider themselves to be in the normal majority, the threat of the abnormal is also the threat of chaos against the social order. It is the threat of the degeneration and entropy of society. And in this respect, the anxiety of freedom and existential aloneness is compounded with the anxiety concerning the vulnerability of normal society to abnormal decadence. Fromm (1941, 1973) identifies several pathways in which authoritarian social movements can speak so compellingly to the anxious capitalist subject. To outline in brief: the dominance celebrated within the movement can appeal to the sadomasochist's longing for 'symbiosis' – both as a way to sadistic and destructive gratification through identifying with the movement, and also for masochistic gratification by submitting one's will and merging one's identity into the movement. Orienting against a scapegoat subpopulation identified as the source of the degeneration of society is a further mechanism for solidifying in-group commitment and identification on the one hand and constructing a comfortingly simplistic view of the source of society's ills on the other hand. The binary worldview of friend vs. enemy, and the collective conviction that following the authoritarian leader will lead to a better society, is a great palliative against all of the uncertainties of late capitalist society (Morelock 2018, 2021c).

In France, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right party *Rassemblement National*, and Gilbert Collard, member of the European Parliament, were involved on a political polemic since they posted on Twitter in 2015 three pictures of the executions and public atrocities of the Islamic State (Le Monde 2021). This problem goes hand in hand with a change after the terrorist gun and bomb attacks on Paris in 2015: if those events were coordinated by organized groups with previous experience in Syria and Iraq, the last attacks in France, since 2017, have been committed by individuals who were not associated with formal groups (Pezet 2021). French security agencies are dealing with the signs of the society of the selfie, since the last attackers watched on the internet videos glorifying acts of jihad and extremism (Chrisafis 2021). The far-right explores popular concerns with public security by associating it with immigration, which has become a major topic since the terrorist attacks of 2012, with direct influences on the vote in the party (Amengay 2019). The use of grotesque images to feed popular reaction is also a political strategy of the society of the selfie, which targets the other as abnormal by radicalizing abjection through

the stimuli of the spectacle and it functions as a moral fuel of indignation that connects immigration and terrorism.

It should be no surprise that authoritarian orators will tend to associate social degeneration and abnormality with the scapegoated subpopulation. Mapping normality/abnormality constructions and anxieties onto friend–enemy constructions reinforces the power of both sets of constructions to fuel the movement with convictions. Foucault identifies the merging of schemas like this as a major impetus or at least ideological backdrop behind the rise of Nazism. In his description, these two forms of ‘racism’ – biological racism and ethnic racism – were brought together in the eugenics movement, where the Aryan race was claimed to be objectively superior to other races, the Jews being the particularly onerous subpopulation that required weeding out. The hatred of Other ways of life could be legitimated with the narrative of biological superiority, to produce a particularly strong set of convictions for the Aryans and against the Jews. And yet Foucault (2003b) sees the Nazi example not as a lone exception so much as particular expression of the biopolitical logic of contemporary society. Ethnic genocide is in this sense quite consonant with the primary mechanisms of and justifications for state power today – that ‘society must be defended’ against the inferior or abnormal others who threaten the security of the normal majority.

Still, there are contrary tendencies that present reason for hope. Fromm’s theory of alienation and anxiety leading to sadomasochism was not deterministic. He suggested that flight into authoritarian sadomasochism was one option, but a much better response under the woes of modern capitalism was possible. People have the intrinsic capacity to rise above it all, but developing a more mature form of independence and relatedness with others, where connection is not based on ‘symbiosis’, but was rather predicated on preserving the integrity of the differentiated self and other. In this nexus, he proposed that authentic relatedness was possible. He referred to all this as the ‘productive orientation’. An important point to understand here is that Fromm’s theory was historical. It was the experience of modern alienation and anxiety that sets the stage for the transition of humanity into a ‘sane society’ where the productive orientation is the rule rather than the exception. Fromm never articulated a theory of what exactly motivates and facilitates a particular person or collection of persons to move towards authoritarianism vis-à-vis the productive orientation, although the answer would appear to involve some combination of structure and agency. There is something of a crash in this theory. Nevertheless, hope is always there, and in fact it is the experience of the particular pathologies of modern capitalism that may yet motivate humanity to create a much better world. In Chapter 5, we indicated that the dialectics of alienation and abnormality are structurally unavoidable, at least to some extent, on an individual level, in the society of the self. This, we said, is leading people to the realistic sense that the only way to really get out of this mess is a more profound revolutionary transformation of society. The character of such a transformation is still open to a great deal

of debate, and is likely to be complex and varying. Yet in this sense, the threat of authoritarianism exists where the possibility for a sane society also opens up.

## 6.4 Communication and Authoritarian Populism: Other Factors

### 6.4.1 *'The People' Contra Rationality, Science and Expertise*

Giddens (1991a, 1991b) says in 'late modernity' people long for authenticity, lose concern with morality, distrust experts and fixate on avoiding risk. The use of social media and digital infrastructure to spread conspiracy theories and the attacks against the cultural establishment (mainstream media, universities, research institutions, etc.) are a signal of this mood. So far, we have discussed the first of these two dynamics. We will now discuss the second two.

The internet's democratizing tendencies also facilitate considerable self-education of 'lay' persons in issues ostensibly relegated to the realm of experts. Getting information on health care and nutrition is now very simple to do online, and this new facility with self-education has contributed to a change towards more egalitarian doctor–patient relationships over the past few decades. Consumers of health care feel more empowered with knowledge that either replicates what they would get from their physician or challenges it. Either way, it serves the 'consumers movement' in health care and lessens the dominance of the physician, contributing to their 'deprofessionalization' (Haug 1972). At the same time, the internet is full of contradictory information, since there are so many sources available. Voices from outside of mainstream Western medical practice can also be readily heard, just as easily as the mainstream voices. Advocates of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) at times have beliefs specifically counter to those of a typical M.D. (Goldstein 2000). In all, the ready availability of in-depth and conflicting information on the internet feeds into the deprofessionalization of physicians, as well as the decline in public confidence in medical professionals and even the [contradictory and changing] scientific knowledge their practice is predicated on. Science and expertise in medicine fall in stature and public confidence.

This decline in faith in expertise is not generated solely through information technologies. Like so many other tendencies we have discussed throughout this book, information technologies facilitate social dynamics that harmonize and dovetail with these social trends that also have other sources. In the United States, confidence in medicine has been in decline since the 1970s, as has confidence in education and other institutions (Pescosolido et al. 2001; Twenge et al. 2014). The only social institution that has gained in confidence over this period of time is the military (Burbach 2017, 2019; King and Karabell 2003). In the case of medicine, the decline could be explained through a number of factors. For instance, in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century, medical science was making great strides in protecting people against infectious disease.

With vaccines for measles, polio, smallpox and others, the leading causes of death in the United States changed from infectious diseases to chronic diseases such as cancer and heart disease. In the period of change, average lifespans lengthened. From the 1970s onward, the gains of medical science were less strikingly positive. The newfound problem of rampant chronic diseases, since the threat of deadly infectious diseases seemed a thing of the past, proved stubborn to combat. Tremendous progress has been made in cancer treatment and heart surgery, but unlike the polio and MMR vaccines, these treatments do not fully protect people. The damage can be slowed or lessened in many cases, but medicine has not overcome the threat. Then in the 1980s, the AIDS pandemic hit the world, showing again the impotence of medical science to overcome a health crisis, except through protective measures. Since then, deadly infectious diseases have risen again as public health crises, including with Ebola, Swine Flu, Bird Flu, West Nile Virus, MERS, MRSA, SARS, ZIKA, and now COVID-19, which continues to wreak havoc all across the world. The 'chronic disease era' is now said to be over, as newly emergent deadly contagions arise and medical science struggles to find solutions (Susser and Susser 1996a, 1996b; Armelagos and Harper 2016). These solutions – at least partial solutions – do come, it seems, as with AIDS, Ebola and COVID-19. Yet their benefits are realized after considerable damage has been done, and many lives have been lost.

The rejection of medicine of the grounds of its basis in Western science is another factor, and this rejection can be traced to a complex origin. Confidence in science has had a mild decline since the 1970s, with the primary source of the decline being among political conservatives. During this same period of time, scientific research has moved towards the life sciences, namely exploring biotech and the environment. Note that reproductive technologies and environmental protections are decidedly leftist interests, and right-wing adversities. Thus, to some extent, the decline in conservative confidence in science might be explained by an aligning of the scientific community with projects that the left support and the right stand against (Agar 2012; Otto 2016; Morelock 2021a).

Progress in scientific knowledge has also increased in speed, and in so doing, we witness the public voice of 'experts' seemingly changing their minds so frequently that none of their conclusions feel particularly sound anymore. Everything is provisional, up to dispute, and open to further research. If we understand the promises of modern science intertwined with the promises of Enlightenment, the decline of metanarratives may also imply a delegitimation of the objective pretensions of science (Lyotard 1979). With the rampant subjectivist principle of the society of the selfie (as discussed earlier), a sense of relativism surrounds the rhapsody of contradictory information and fake news in social media networks. The pretension to objectivity of science is further overturned with Popper's criterion of falsification replacing any pretension at 'proof', and with subatomic physics undermining the notion that science can be fully associated with a coherent and stable sense of reality. The A-bomb, H-bomb and nuclear power, have all shown the extraordinary power

of science, as which includes its capacity for massive destruction. World War II ended with a particularly charged yet ambivalent space for science in the United States. It had proved indispensable in winning the way against the Nazis, and it has also proven to unleash inhumane and catastrophic death and destruction. An enormous amount of federal funding was channelled into the sciences following World War II, and this was pushed along as well by an arms race and space race against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Nuclear power was originally touted as a clean energy source, but then after the Chernobyl meltdown, the terrible risks associated with it also came to the fore in common knowledge.

This heightened ambivalence about scientific progress and the experts who run the show is highlighted by Giddens (1991a, 1991b) and Beck (1992) as intrinsic elements of the ‘risk society’ of late modernity. Essentially, we are dependent upon ‘abstract systems’ and the experts who steer them, for our well-being, and yet we also know the power they wield is unpredictable and can have catastrophic consequences. Giddens and Beck say this fear of catastrophe and the sense of constant risk is all pervasive now in late modernity. Giddens further notes that morality tends to wither away under these conditions, as risk assessment rises to the front of decision-making in so many situations. Assuming the portrayal of ‘risk society’ is basically correct, there are several dimensions to this that feed into authoritarianism and populist mentalities. First, a widespread experience of powerlessness before ‘élites’ whose untrustworthy decisions could result in catastrophe. Second, the general threat of catastrophe and the predictable desire to be rescued from the threat. Third, the emaciation of morality towards a preoccupation with self-interested risk-assessment.

Science and technology are not all that spawn this sense of impending doom and vulnerability. Giddens and Beck point out that globalization plays a part too. Because the world has become so interconnected, the risks we face are numerous and can have larger consequences. We are vulnerable, for instance, to pandemics like COVID-19 that begin on distant continents; in the same way, we are more vulnerable to the spread of the effects of socioeconomic crises, like the 2008 financial crisis. This can trigger a desire to resist globalization, halt or at least slow immigration, double-down on local culture and values, and so on. Essentially, the ‘porousness’ of national borders feels vulnerable, and in such a situation the promise of plugging some of those pores, shoring up the flow of Others in the interests of defending ‘our’ society can be compelling. Note that this calls for greater legal involvement, tighter restrictions, etc., to prevent the invasion of Others. The bidirectionality of metaphorical connections between military and medicine has an extensive history, and in this way the fear of global pandemics can metaphorically fuse with militaristic xenophobia (Sontag 1989; Schweitzer 2018; Morelock 2021a).

With the rise of global social media networks, there is further fuel to the reaction against globalization. With social media, the porousness of national boundaries is again amplified due to the capacity for Web 2.0 to facilitate

disembodied co-presence. The internet transcends geographical space, to make it possible for foreign Others to have a greater presence in the culture without even having to immigrate or visit. In this way, the internet facilitates cosmopolitanism and multicultural sensibilities, and as mentioned, the further development of geoculture. The internet is not typically explicitly rejected by the far-right for these reasons, but it may play a part due to escalating the internationalization of culture that xenophobes react against. Facing porous national boundaries due to the capacity for disembodied co-presence, many people push back against multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism, seeing it as a threat to their social order. Xenophobia and authoritarian responses are thus fuelled. We are not saying that the internet is a cause for xenophobia nor anti-globalization movements. The point is: the society of the selfie with its sociotechnical processes (diffusion of data, instantaneous reaction, impression management, etc.) amplify social contradictions (scapegoating subpopulations, xenophobia, etc.) at the extent that every individual is empowered to express himself in confrontation with the pressures of the generalized other – be it his ideological peers, his political opponents or the abnormal. Xenophobic sentiments rose dramatically in Latin America from 2012 to 2016. In 2012, 39.4% of LAPOP respondents said foreigners take jobs away, and by 2016, it had risen to 71.4%. Part of the fear of invading Others is surely this basic sense of vulnerability to catastrophe, which international terrorism fits exactly. This is perhaps one reason why xenophobia has been so commonly linked to the fear of terrorism in the twenty-first century. During the Cold War, fear of foreigners was tied to anti-Communist paranoia (Hendershot 2001). There is a condensation in these fears' icons, of cultural difference and devious destruction. The fear that foreigners might be openly hostile and planning terrible acts, is all the more compelling to adopt when there is a concomitant fear that foreigners will erode the domestic culture one has grown so accustomed to identifying with.

With so much fear of chaos and porousness, and the longing for order and security against intrusion, catastrophe, cultural dislocation, decadent or predatory sexuality and random acts of violence, the normal individual is susceptible to voices who would provide a simple solution – the allegation that a scapegoated subpopulation is the harbinger of society's ills. Get rid of them, and things will be back to the way they used to be, which is the way they are supposed to be. This longing to return to the past is what Zygmunt Bauman (2017) refers to as an impulse towards 'retrotopia', which he argues drives much authoritarian populism today. Often this desire to return to the past is coupled with reactionary romantic nostalgia, such as captured in the far-right slogans 'Make America Great Again' (in reference to the 1950s) and 'Make Brazil Great Again' (in reference to the military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s). The romanticized past portrayed in this reactionary way can differ considerably, and it is not even all that important what the past was like. What matters is that the past is significant enough in cultural memory that it can be used symbolically to inspire reverence, longing and indignation.

Elsewhere (Morelock and Narita 2021), we have divided populist narratives into three binary categories, for purposes of analysis. These categories are people/elite (liberation), people/outside (nationalism) and people/non-people. Any of these types can be authoritarian, but it is the third type, which combines the first two, that is the unmistakably authoritarian type. In the liberation narrative, 'the people' have to rise up against the elite. In the nationalism narrative, 'the people' have to defend their territory and way of life from outsiders. In the third case, we identify three basic categories again: infiltration, betrayal and mixed (a combination of the other two). In the case of infiltration, 'the elites' are also 'the outsiders' whereas in betrayal, the elites and the outsiders are different, but both groups are deemed problematic, and the elites are said to bestow unjust advantages on the outsiders over the people. In terms of the theories of Giddens and Beck, the 'risk society' aligns popular unrest in a way primed for authoritarian populist movements, since 'elite' status can be mapped onto 'experts', while 'outsider' status can be mapped onto foreigners.

The authoritarian populist agitator also appeals to the longing for authenticity that runs deep in the society of the selfie. In 1967, Adorno argued that existential phenomenology's fetish of authenticity operated in service to authoritarianism in that it rendered negative connotations to rational argument, as if the latter were inauthentic and so a lesser form of relation to knowledge:

In a recent polemic against a professor who does not suit their agenda, for example, the right-wing extremists said, 'We will not have any discussions with her; it is a matter of existential opposites'. So you can see from this how directly the concept of the existential is placed in the service of irrationalism, of the rejection of rational argumentation, of discursive thought as such. (Adorno 2020, 22)<sup>4</sup>

Whether normal or abnormal, alienation and artificiality are rampant in late capitalism and the ethic of self-disclosure, combined with the desire to experience 'The real thing', as well as whatever impatience or burnout people feel from having so much of their lives focused on neoliberal impression management and communicating to an invisible audience, can find some claim of satiation in the unrefined communications of the authoritarian leader. The agitator often seems 'off-the-cuff' and spontaneous and is willing to commit many social transgressions (Adorno 1951). To the alienated and impression-managing, this smells like freedom, and moreover suggests that the leader can be trusted, unlike the opaque political establishment which always sounds clean and esoteric enough but feels unreachable while life at the local level remains very difficult. Once again, the transgressions of the authoritarian speak to the authenticity strain of the organic self that feels so stifled underneath all of the bureaucracy of late capitalist society. This emotional tug is much more compelling for many people, than the continued droning of career politicians with their appeals to rationality and their mild temperaments.



The authoritarian's style of leadership carries the banner of authenticity as well. The leader's unilateral actions, unhampered by checks and balances, provides a direct line of affect from the leader to the people. The leader's unilateral policies are not negotiated or diplomatic, they are what he 'really' thinks should happen. It is in this way that the 'strongman' seems to have a more 'authentic' style of leadership. The less mediation there is between his will and the implementation of policies, the more dictatorial he is, and the closer his personal impact on the lives of the people. Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt (2005) supported this style of 'decisionism' as an expression of true democracy. The idea is that the leader embodies the will of the people, and as such, his strongman actions carry the authentic will of the people to fruition without the middling mediation of establishment checks and balances (Antonio 2021). And as Löwenthal and Guterman (1949) and Adorno (1951) described, the narcissistic 'great little man' veneer facilitates considerable identification of the people with the leader. Because they can imagine themselves as him, his actions seem like a direct expression of their will. We suggest that when political leaders use Twitter and Facebook they too can project spectacular selves, posting messages that make them appear more authentic and connected to 'the people'. This is part of the search for authenticity in the society of the selfie.

The turn towards the authoritarian's authenticity is also a turning away from rational evidence and logical reasoning (Langman and Schatz 2021). As discussed above in reference to Trump's impeachment trial, and the divergent styles of the Republicans and the Democrats, this makes the leader's grandiose and paranoid claims more believable to his followers than the arguments and evidence mustered against them by his detractors. The leader, whom perhaps they have already introjected as their ego-ideal (Leeb 2021), 'tells it like he sees it', and this is all they need to believe him. His aura of authenticity is much more compelling as evidence for them than the stagnant and entrenched rationality mustered by the other side. The speeches of authoritarian agitators are marked by a lack of logical reasoning and even a scarcity of coherent platform positions (Adorno 1951). The function of these speeches is not to rationally convince, but to exercise an 'erotic tie' between leader and followers, to stir up emotions, and to further pit 'the people' against the elites and outsiders, i.e., what we have called 'the non-people'. The eschewing of logical reasoning and the decrying of academic and professional elites overdetermines the people's rejection of scientists and scientific evidence.

In the Netherlands, in the wake of the curfew introduced on January 2021 to curb the spread of COVID-19, violence was incited through social media (especially Telegram groups, Snapchat, Instagram stories and WhatsApp) in various cities by anti-curfew rioters (Derks and Gercama 2021). Conspiracy theories and extremist rhetoric fed political agitation (Fleck 2021) that counted on social media to spread indignation with images of mobs, videos of violence, individual self-promotion with gasoline and fireworks and the exposition of the addresses of Dutch ministers. Hundreds were arrested after

nights of chaos in main cities involving the most dramatic and violent measures in 40 years.

In the ‘post-truth’ condition, doors are opened to the proliferation and rapid spread of all sorts of outrageous claims and conspiracy theories. Their spread has to do with their emotional appeal – they run primarily on *pathos*, not *logos*. At the same time, the venerated leader is especially suited to make any claims and have them spread and be taken up with a fervour by his followers. The leader’s claims that demonize the non-people are especially compelling and inspiring to those who seek solace in him. And, of course, social media also facilitates the instantaneous dissemination of bogus claims and conspiracy theories among millions of users. The post-truth condition is bolstered by the typical lack of quality control on social media, and consequently of the volume of blatantly fabricated news that can flood popular experience, much of it strategically intended to stoke division and animosity, which helps maintain and even raise the agitator’s following.

#### 6.4.2 Agitation Games

The spectacular nature of contemporary politics has to be considered in this connection, as well as the dialectical relations between polarized political factions that represent – for the authoritarian populist movement – the people and the non-people. First of all, the drama or ‘opera’ (Muelrath 2018) enacted by the agitator is witnessed by his followers as well as his adversaries and adds fuel to both sides. Again, the rapidity with which news travels in the society of the selfie, coupled with the omnipresent capacity to vent and bicker through comments, amplifies the intensity and frequency of the drama, which through smartphones, and compulsive desires to check them, follow users around in their pockets and purses, almost as if an electronic extension of the self. This heightened and heightening intensity is also an intensifying polarization, and broadly speaking, the movement and its opposition feed off one another’s growth.

To the authoritarians, the other side are authoritarian. Movement and opposition both adopt a discourse of ‘resistance’ or ‘liberation’ in relation to the other side (Morelock and Narita 2019, 2021). In some sense, this is not just misinformation or rhetoric. Between two opposing factions, ‘resistance’ and ‘domination’ describe the relationship towards the reins of political power more fundamentally than they describe the political values of those ostensibly dominating or resisting. This is not at all to say that political values matter less than political power to denote who are the authoritarians and who are the liberators, but it does mean that the accusation by those who hold authoritarian values of their opposition as holding an authoritarian relation towards them, is not entirely unfounded. If the opposition ‘wins’, the followers of the authoritarian movement will be effectively prevented from having the nation managed

according to their desires (or rather according to the desires of their leader who exploits their grievances).

Especially in the post-truth context, with the aid of echo chamber effects, and with the abandonment of empirical proof and rational argument as bases of the legitimization of knowledge, the leader's demonization of the opposition can go a very long way towards inspiring his following. Yet his ability to attract new followers and maintain those already there is always bolstered by the experiences 'the people' have of the opposition expressing hostility or intolerance towards them. The aggression of the authoritarian movement is experienced by them as defence against the potential or actual oppression by the opposition. The more that the opposition, then, can be stoked into adversarial language and tactics towards the movement, so the more the behaviour of the opposition fit the narrative of the leader that they are a threat to 'the people', and thus that the movement is a resistance movement against the authoritarian opposition.

Agitation is successful not only inspiring the immediate assent of 'the people' that it reaches, but also by inspiring the immediate dissent of 'the non-people' that it reaches. It thus serves multiple immediate purposes, even as these multiple purposes converge on the goal of building an activated following.

It is helpful to frame this issue in terms of complex gamesmanship in communication. As in a game of chess, good players will anticipate their opponent's move before they make their own, and in fact will do this several steps out, anticipating multiple moves ahead. The issue of anticipating one's opponent's moves and preempting them perhaps even more than one iteration out, is covered explicitly by Goffman (1969) in his work on 'strategic interaction'. He explicitly defines the 'move' in this sense:

A move, analytically speaking, is not a thought or decision or expression, or anything else that goes on in the mind of a player; it is a course of action which involves real physical consequences in the external world [...] Furthermore, a move is a course of action chosen from a small number of radically different alternative ones in the situation. (Goffman 1969, 90–91)

Goffman distinguishes between two levels of communication: the literal information that is explicitly communicated by a speaker, and the various verbal and nonverbal techniques and devices that are employed in the act of information transmission. One version of this is in the impact that a shift in tone of voice or body language can have on the way a communication is framed, which Gregory Bateson referred to as 'metacommunication' (Ruesch et al. 2017). For instance, the same information could be conveyed with playful or aggressive overtones.

Goffman describes the 'expression game' as a part of strategic interaction: 'we can, in fact, excise from any occasion of strategic interaction an expression game' (Goffman 1969, 145). In 'expression games' there are various types of moves, such as 'unwitting' (uncalculated with reference to interpersonal

gamesmanship), 'naïve' (a response to a move of another when one assumes the other's move was unwitting) and 'control' (oriented to influencing the other person for one's own benefit). One prominent type of control move is the 'covering' move, where a communicator intentionally conceals select information. Then there are counter moves, such as the 'uncovering' move to break through the other's cover and expose the truth, and the 'counter-uncovering' move, a defensive response to the uncovering move. Goffman also distinguishes between 'real' and 'tacit' moves, the former taking place actively and openly, the latter occurring within a player's private calculations. Tacit moves are the type which especially may preemptively set the communicative landscape several moves ahead and ensure victory in a more secured way.

'During occasions of strategic interaction, a move consists of a structured course of action available to a player which, when taken, objectively alters the situation of the participants' (Goffman 1969, 145). In chess, 'positional' play is the general term of a strategic approach focused primarily on manipulating the broad context of the board, which tends to garner more distant – and ultimately more substantial, if played well – rewards than the more aggressive, 'tactical' style of play, the latter focusing more on attacking combinations that involve more immediate relations between pieces. A basic tenet of positional play is to gain control of the board, in other words to move in ways that increase one's own space and options for future movement as they progressively constrain one's opponent's range of available moves. Some of the most effective moves combine tactics with positional play, for instance, developing a piece which simultaneously threatens a centre pawn, thereby simultaneously advancing one's position and posing an immediate threat. Another, more aggressive example is putting the opponent unexpectedly in check, while also gaining more control of the centre of the board. In other words, it can be particularly effective to simultaneously threaten one's opponent, forcing them to choose among a small range of defensive options, and simultaneously, perhaps in a way disconnected from the immediate threat to the king, advancing one's position in the broader terrain. It is also very common in tactical play to simultaneously threaten two pieces, or one piece immediately, and another piece or set of pieces with an implied threat of a sequence of forced moves or exchanges. While good players will master this complex art with intention, it is possible in principle for any player of basic proficiency to unintentionally pose a complex threat such as what has just been described. This is because, as Goffman noted with strategic interaction, the effects of a move are irrespective of the intentions of the player; the objective positions of the pieces on the board determine the situation the opponent must respond to.

But still, Goffman's discussion places questions of intentional deception at the centre of interaction strategy, and this description makes too much of the alleged motivations internal to the player/speaker, which – especially considering the psychoanalytic perspective – cannot be known through distant speculation.

What can be observed, however, are the patterns of action and reaction, and their sequences, and in light of this, what 'game' it is that plays out. In this sense, games of agitation can function in form regardless of the private intentions, conscious or otherwise, of the leader or agitator. Especially important for us here is that one episode of communication can be simultaneously strategic and dramaturgical. In our sense, games of agitation can work as strategic moves and as dramaturgical moves, in complex and perhaps sometimes contradictory configurations. Some moves can, for instance, work to make the leader appear strong in the eyes of his followers, and at the same time force his political opposition into engaging in a losing sequence of responding moves. A leader in power can communicate the enactment of policies that as communications are layered in just this way while as actions, they simultaneously advance his own policy agenda by making tangible changes.

Now let us return to the issue of the game in question, that played by an authoritarian leader (would-be or actual) seeking to build and maintain the assent of 'the people'. The words of the leader function to inspire (1) his followers to heated words and action for him, (2) his detractors to heated words and action against him, and finally, (3) his followers to even greater allegiance by way of their experience of the heated words and actions of non-people. Polarization works in the agitator's favour in two directions at once – one as an affirmation, the other as a negation of a negation. Whether intentionally, unintentionally, or somewhere between, this is the effective bidirectional effect of agitation.

To inspire the direction of second negation, the leader can use a variety of tactics. Some relation to his own words. This second type is typically somewhere within or between three styles: shocking, humorous or ominous (Morelock 2021d). In each of these styles, in different ways, the literal neo-fascist content can be simultaneously uttered and disavowed. The opposition can react primarily to one or the other aspects – to content of the utterance or the claim of disownment. If they react to the content of the utterance, treating as if it was meant in the authoritarian sense, or they can ignore it, treating the claim to disowning as primary. In some sense, either reaction helps the agitator. When the opposition reacts loudly to the content, decrying the agitator's authoritarianism, the agitator can point to the 'overreaction' of the opposition, and claim the victim role in relation to their outright hostility. If the opposition treats the disowning as primary, and lets the statement pass without protest, it normalizes the message's occurrence, and when this all takes place through mainstream media channels in high-profile communications, it normalizes such messages in mainstream political discourse.

A similar element here is that extremist messages can gain great power of dissemination over social media when they are couched in irony or shock value. It is not only that these messages feel legitimating to 'the people' and alarming to 'the non-people'. It is also their gossip-provoking quality that can make them

very ‘catchy’ to talk about, especially among those who disagree with them. Whether in outrage at the transgression or disregarding laughter at the absurdity, the discussion of these messages raises their presence in popular discourse and spreads them further (Seymour 2019, 2020). When such statements or memes are blatantly extreme or idiotic, they still carry within them the implication of a conviction that is much more subdued by contrast, different in degrees from the explicit message in the shock or joke, but not different in kind.

As we began to discuss in Chapter 4, the openness of the internet, the lack of face-to-face accountability in online interaction, and the capacity to often spread messages incognito or entirely anonymous, all contribute to the greater ease with which extremist messages can be expressed in public space (‘public space’ being virtual space in this case). When they are frequently expressed openly and publicly, they are more likely to be normalized than when people keep them closeted due to fear of social disapproval. These same elements also facilitate the posting of specifically inflammatory ‘news’ reports, which may be designed to further polarize, in similar ways that shock value does, but under the pretension of factual reporting, which cannot be decried in the same way as the inflammatory opinions and quips of an agitator. They can be dispelled only by being called out as fabrications designed to divide and instigate. This sort of spreading of inflammatory disinformation over social media was revealed to be a major tactic in the Russian interference targeted towards African Americans leading up to the 2016 election in the United States (United States Senate 2019).

The more shocking a headline, the more likely it is to get noticed. This phenomenon of ‘click-bait’ is an unfortunate side-effect of the attention economy (Wu 2016): it pushes even legitimate news sources to present themselves more like tabloids. Surely it has always been the case that sharp, alarming headlines would grab attention (and sell papers, etc.) better than headlines that were not designed to strike through consciousness. But when so many people get their news through the internet, often through scrolling down a newsfeed quickly, for instance, it becomes all the more important for headlines to make a quick impression and give the reader a sense that they *must* click and find out. In the attention economy, this might also be assumed to exert an upward pressure akin to what Marx (1962 [1867], 335) referred to as the ‘coercive laws of competition’ that drive businesses to endlessly strive to better their competitors with more efficient means of production. In a forest of headlines designed to shock and grab, *not* playing the game is a losing strategy. Opinions published, and especially the headlines that represent them, will be the sort that will demand attention through extreme presentation.

Not only shock, but also, once again, ominosity can work for this purpose. A headline can indicate something terrible but not quite reveal what it is unless the viewer clicks to read more. A headline can imply something specific and terrible, prompting the viewer to click, only to discover that the truth is not so bad, and makes clear a double meaning of the original headline. And so on. The

effect of gaining clicks, page views, readers, shares, and so on, is a boon for the news source. At the same time, the proliferation of shocking stories and headlines normalize the sense of shock and urgency in society, and in so doing can feed into the political polarization that can develop from the sense of urgent and extreme tensions in society. In other words, the shock economy of news stories can be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, similar to the way that fabricated and extreme news stories that present the country as divided and hostile, can encourage the country to become divided and hostile. This is not at all to say that if news sources were honest then news would be uneventful, mild and pleasant. Terrible things happen every day, inhumanities and atrocities are real, and especially in recent years, the tensions between ‘peoples’ and ‘non-peoples,’ between authoritarian populist movements and their oppositions, have genuinely been inflamed to astounding degrees, for plenty of reasons outside of how news is framed online. The point is that they play a role. As with so many other issues discussed throughout this book, the society of the selfie did not invent the dynamics behind the attention economy, nor did it invent the dynamics behind authoritarian populism; but some of its own dynamics have dovetailed with and amplified the dynamics of the others.

Similarly to ‘fake news,’ fake profiles can be set up, to be used for ‘trolling,’ to much the same effect as the over-the-top memes and the offensive speech of the leader, as well as the fraudulent news reporting (Im et al. 2020; Howard 2020). Instigators from the movement will pose as aggressive members of the opposition, and make statements that are over-the-top on their end, spread fraudulent news, or simply make loud and provocative statements that promote an extreme version of the movement’s message, which will feed into gossip, and spread and normalize the message of the movement. In the case of posing as the opposition, this can work in a bidirectional fashion just as the shock, humour and ominosity of the leader. Directly, posing as an aggressive member of the opposition is likely to alarm those in the movement, and it may also turn off some of the more moderate members of the opposition, who are drawn to the opposition’s promotion of logos but are turned off when the message turns militant or aggressive. If it does not convert these moderates to the movement, it will at least dampen their loyalty to the opposition. Indirectly, this may feed into the normalization of extreme statements among the opposition. This can happen by members of the opposition being drawn to the troll’s method of expression, perhaps finding it cathartic, honest or just satisfying. To normalize these expressions, maybe to have them shared, retweeted, liked or otherwise publicly affirmed, feeds into the polarization that the movement thrives on to solicit and maintain its base.

Another tactic that the agitator, the leader or his political entourage might adopt is effectively in the tradition of Pee Wee Herman: ‘I know you are, but what am I?’ This can happen after the opposition levels its criticism, or before, preemptively, thus casting the opposition into the Pee Wee Herman role, as far



as the opera is concerned. It is the levelling of symmetrical accusations against the opposition, essentially mirroring their criticisms. This is helpful for sowing confusion and uncertainty among the population following the opera. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (1934) once declared that the ‘cleverest trick used in propaganda against Germany during the war was to accuse Germany of what our enemies themselves were doing’. To use another analogy, it is like the famous cliché from science fiction or superhero films, where the villain can shapeshift, and assumes the exact appearance of the hero. A third party has the power to destroy one of them, and both of them claim to be the ‘real’ hero. ‘Shoot him! He’s an imposter! I’m the *real* hero!’

The simultaneous agitation of movement and opposition, the raising of the heat on both sides, stoking intensified polarization, is at best a high-stakes gamble. This is perhaps the greatest flaw in the agitative method of the authoritarian populist – it mobilizes the opposition, and in fact the mobilization of the opposition is integral to the mobilization of the movement. The logic is, more or less, of provoking war, and in war, loss is one of the few possible outcomes. There is one reason, however, that these provocations work more to the advantage of the movement than the opposition, at least in principle. This is the split along the lines of logos and pathos. The ‘moral high ground’ of the opposition relies on its commitment to logos. When it is pushed towards pathos, it loses claim to that ground. To the extent that the opposition is defender of logos, being stoked into a war of pathos is, at least initially, a losing prospect. When the opposition is decentred in this way, it has to rely on other alignments. It can do this, but not without an awkward transition that may never be successful. To the degree that it is successful in transitioning to pathos, the contest between movement and opposition has to take on more of the character of a naked contest of wills, numbers and strength. In other words, the opposition is forced to use power tactics rather than the force of reason.

In a sense, any sort of political activism that does not take place through deliberation, voting, legislation, litigation or economic choice, uses direct pressure to attain goals, rather than logos. This pressure can take many forms, and often has multiple functions. Awareness is raised, concern is displayed, commitment is nurtured. Yet frequently as well, there may be elements of dismantling, threatening or jamming, which are meant to directly exert *power* through extra-legal means. In no sense should simply operating outside of the rule of law be considered ‘authoritarian’, and there may be very good reasons to suspect that the electoral system, under various entrenchments and business influences, is not going to be an effective or efficient route to pursue desired change. Still, the use of power tactics by a mobilized political faction to seek desired ends that a large portion of the population stand opposed to, can reasonably be considered an authoritarian phenomenon, even if the desired ends are overtly democratic. This is a risk, of course, that any opposition movement faces – that of slipping into authoritarianism itself. And yet even if its authoritarian

quotient is relatively low, it is the implicit authoritarian nature of power tactics that the truly authoritarian movement will focus on in decrying it. And with the splitting of the public sphere, the defence against the accusation will often not even reach deaf ears.

To note that ‘resistance’ and ‘domination’ are dialectically intertwined (Morelock and Narita 2018b, 2019, 2021), that the difference between them is often in degree rather than in kind, is not to insist that in the face of domination, resistance is somehow fatally flawed. Far from it – in the face of domination, mobilized resistance is often the only option. In some contexts, oppressing the oppressors is the only way to liberate the oppressed. It makes the danger of authoritarian slips more real, but strategically speaking, acceptance of this risk may be a choice of ‘the lesser of two evils.’ That logos is the claim of the opposition, pathos of the authoritarian movement, is a point of the movement’s advantage. Yet the same dynamics place a great advantage, generally speaking, in the hands of the opposition: the movement needs the opposition, the opposition does not need the movement. In other words, the movement feeds off the sense that ‘the people’ must be defended against the threat of ‘the non-people’, of which the political opposition is likely to play an important role (in the opera). Their dependence of this necessitates that the movement is always truly in a tenuous position because the opposition must be stoked and generated, and the opposition, at any point, truly could win out over the movement. Yet the opposition can thrive with or without the presence of the authoritarian movement. The opposition is flexible, the movement is not.

## 6.5 Political Uses of Information Technologies

The scope and scale of the mobilization of contemporary social movements would be inconceivable without Web 2.0. In the early 2000s, social networks like Friendster, Orkut, Tribe.net, LiveJournal and blogs were based on individual profiles and communities. The newsfeed setups of Facebook, Twitter, etc., opened up a new logic: social networks became *social platforms*. Interactions have been exponentially amplified, with a list of services and data that are integrated into text, image, video and sound, promoting collective individuation (Yuk and Halpin 2013). In this sense, the features of the society of the selfie – like echo chamber effects, neoliberal impression management and one-dimensional expression to an invisible audience – affirm the individual as both an *agent* and a *milieu* that produces content. In other words, with social media one is empowered to express one’s authenticity against standards and moral constraints at the same time as one is dependent on an invisible audience and users that pressure atomized individual expression with the force of the generalized other. Individual engagement takes shape as a remote point among immaterial groups and mobile collectives.

Of course, the splitting of the public sphere and the fragmentation of information it involves can blur the prospects of collective action (González-Bailón and Wang 2016). Along with an inhuman amount of data, one-dimensional communication proliferates, and sociality is damaged. However, the society of the selfie does not suppress individual autonomy nor collective agency. Social media can favour progressive action and empower activism committed to social development – and this may be the most distinctive feature of political agency in contemporary societies. The first massive use of social media appeared in the early 2010s (Castells 2012) with the multifaceted Arab civil uprisings (Zayani 2015; Faris 2012) and the street protests of Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the Spanish Indignados and the multitudinarian movements against austerity in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and in a context of precarization reinforced by sociotechnical transformations in labour with platforms (Woodcock 2021) and reforms that promoted deregulation of the labour market (like in 2012 in Spain and in 2017 in Brazil). The Spanish protests of 2011, when the young generation that was hit hard by the financial crisis and austerity policies came to the streets, social media was crucial for the identity and scope of their public demonstrations (Taibo 2011). The power of digital networks has replaced the rule of physical spaces of solidarity (neighbourhood associations, trade unions, political party headquarters, etc.) and opened up the local to the trends of the global. Resources and demands circulate much faster and the strong presence of Facebook, personal videos, Twitter and SMS messages can be decisive in the constitution of the multitude, as was already the case in the Spanish example (Candón Mena 2013, 119–124).

The political use of technology is not confined to diffusing opinions and aggregating information about political issues. It can also affirm a social image embedded in prosocial behaviour (Bernabou and Tirole 2006) concerned with the recognition of the individual's active voice in politics. The Russian protests of 2011–2012 for fair elections are a good example. In the wake of suspicions of electoral fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections, protests were mobilized via Facebook, Twitter and especially VKontakte – the most popular online social network in the country (Carbonnel 2011; Northam 2012). The street protests occurred in 103 cities, and were the largest since the end of the Soviet Union (Gabowitsch 2017). For individual users, the spectacular spread of videos and images of what was happening in the streets fed a dynamic where users' actions were dependent on what they observed or anticipated in the actions of others. Participation was connected to a kind of 'social signalling', where engaging with and reproducing influential loops of information disseminated through chains of status updates affected one's social stature, registered in the metrics assigned to the user's spectacular self. The split between spectacular and organic selves notwithstanding, the online life of the social movement had repercussions far beyond the newsfeed. Digitally shared emotional benefits and political motivations could aggregate subjects due to the greater visibility and interaction with

digital surfaces of Web 2.0 (Enikolopov et al. 2020). The 2011–2012 protests also marked a turning point in a political dispute about information technologies (Klyueva 2016): the government tried to restrict online activists at the same time as other platforms (besides Twitter and VKontakte, YouTube became an important tool) gained significance for political communication in Russia (Litvinenko 2021). And here, the invisible audience, animated with the pressures of the generalized other, plays an important role. Under implicit pressure regarding the reactions of others in the form of likes, views, shares and comments, the individual user announces and disseminates their political beliefs – and via loops of influence running through masses of people, a political network and common drives to protest become palpable and recognizable, with constructed collective image in tow. The process constitutes a collection of new political tools to gather resources for mobilization.

Social media involves new channels and tools for protest and shows potential for creative, spectacle-based political activity. It offers great flexibility to spread contents (Shepard 2015; Penner 2019; Narita 2019), gather many subjects and unite diverse struggles through building ‘chains of equivalence’ among different political demands (Larkin 2013). Due to the individual productivity of contents in the society of the selfie, the new social movements that emerged from the early 2010s involved a sense of exhibition grounded in their hyper-visibility, with the impact of images of crowds on the ground. It has rendered social protests more mobile (Elliott and Urry 2010; Cumiskey and Hjorth 2013) and independent from traditional news media, because the portability of personal smartphones facilitates democratized and decentralized information flows, implying more authentic, on the ground reporting. It also feeds the sense of presentism in contemporary culture, since the use of social media changes the temporal orientation of protest, affecting – via diffuse communication – the speed and organization of groups (Barassi 2015; Poell 2020), promoting the disruptive capacities of crowds and mobs that suddenly rapidly organize, act and disband.

With the cultural landscape of the society of the selfie, the opportunities for civic engagement have changed significantly. Counter to the sense of democratic systems’ elitization (Higley and Burton 2006), the society of the selfie favours a more direct and horizontal form of political action. The digital means of communication among activists have empowered individuals and affected their collective organizations, political repertoires and targets (Norris 2010). The traditional avenues for political participation (i.e., established parties, unions, churches and elections) are forced to contend with a modernizing move under a main feature of the society of the selfie, which enables the individual to engage with the generalized other without the traditional mediation of the individual other in embodied copresence. Engagement depends mostly on how the individual is affected by the digital visibility of contentious politics. At this point, the lack of conventional leadership in the construction of public demonstrations

is an important sign since it challenges one of the main principles of modern democratic systems: the belief in the correlation between effective leaders and effective democracy (Ruscio 2004). When Hong Kong protesters started using AirDrop to breach Chinese firewalls in 2019 (Hui 2019), they started a spectacular spread of Bruce Lee's dictum: 'be formless, shapeless, like water'. Although some movements, like Black Lives Matter, have relatively known leaders, the street dynamics moved by digital media are leaderless. If this echoes the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s (Zirakzadeh 2006), it also points to the appeal of social media that turned every individual demand into something visible. With the multitudinary movements of the 2010s, the subject is not the class nor the ethnic nation, but the 'indignant citizen' (Gerbaudo 2017) – an individual who is morally outraged and deprived of citizenship.

The gendered fractures in citizenship gained political visibility within the surfaces of society of the selfie. The political reaction to patriarchy and misogyny is an important counterpart of the authoritarian trends in neoliberal impression management, because it also points to contexts for autonomy and agency, and prospects to broaden political participation. The spread of #MeToo since October 2017 in the United States, especially on Twitter, constructed a political milieu that has enabled subjects to share their experiences and use the new visibility of digital surfaces to diffuse affects involving solidarity and strategies of resistance (Williams et al. 2019). From celebrities to ordinary people, a chain of personal experiences was established and politicized micro-publics according to gender issues. Moreover, many hashtags and topics of the #MeToo movement have become a transnational trend that has been circulating through England, Brazil, Morocco, France, Egypt, Mexico, South Korea and the Philippines, above all, due to the pervasive effects of the society of the selfie. The strategies have varied from individuals and small groups that gained voice with social media to vast networks of solidarity (Bicker 2018; Shaw 2019; BBC 2018a; TST 2018; Creedon 2021). On the one hand, the diffusion of mobilizations counts on intersectional forms of oppression that combine gender, race, class and physical appearance, that is, across different domains of power that affect individual identity (Collins and Bilge 2016, 27–28) simultaneously with the rapid circulation of information. On the other hand, new social movements operate as a kind of catalyst mobilization, which starts from molecular problems (a case of rape, a local problem with public transport, etc.) that can constitute multitudinary subjects that, despite their internal individual differences, are politically affected by similar circumstances.

The circulation of political affects, thus, is also a space for political creation embedded in sociotechnical relations in the society of the selfie. Even before the #MeToo movement, many feminist struggles based on social media were underway in peripheral countries. During the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign, which took place in 2016 in Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan, ordinary women (not celebrities, like #MeToo) started the mobilizations that were extended to the problems of reproductive rights and also gained the streets in

Poland with the 'Black Protests' (Kubisa and Rakowska 2018; Sedysheva 2018). The Latin American problems with gendered violence have been voiced due to the impression management and the spectacle of the society of the selfie. In 2015 and 2016, the Argentinian protest #NiUnaMenos (NotOneLess) gathered crowds in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Bogotá, La Paz and Mexico City, via personal profiles and small groups in social media, to critique the subalternization and gendered violence (Iglesias 2015). But the best example of the role played by the society of the selfie in progressive movements is the Chilean anti-rape song 'The Rapist is You!', which started circulating in the streets of Santiago to expose gendered violence (Aguirre 2019) and rapidly became viral in Washington, London, Istanbul, São Paulo and Madrid due to Instagram and YouTube. This campaign has proposed a different form of social movement that combines the aesthetics of flash-mob sequences (with imagistic appeal and strong *mots d'ordre*), rapid diffusion of hashtags and very fluid strategies for mobilization and demobilization.

Those demonstrations encompass the main features of political mobilization in the digital age: fast circulation of data, strong slogans, direct messages and a grass-roots organization grounded in network structures (Carty and Barron 2018). Even traditional political symbols – for example, banners of political parties – have changed with Web 2.0. When Occupy Wall Street diffused 'We Are the 99%', a new field for political participation was underway: the use of memes to simplify communication and rapidly be shared in surfaces. As digital images that become iconic due to rapid diffusion and infinite iteration (Shifman 2014), memes can often be exemplars of one-dimensional communication that spreads hatred, they can also be good for progressive causes and resistance. The same strategy grounded in hashtags and didactic memes – with millions of videos from personal profiles – played a major role in October 2019 in the Chilean streets (Bonnin 2020), which saw the biggest protests since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1990. During the large street protests of May and June 2021 in the biggest Colombian cities (Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla and Cúcuta), social media played an important role in citizens' political participation. Against austerity policies, the strong perception of inequality, unemployment and the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemics under the rightist government, activists have been using personal profiles on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to stream police violence, social demands, aggregate resources for mobilization and spread hashtags and images (Meza 2021). In times of disinformation campaigns and fake news, the de-centred public sphere of the society of the selfie, with each individual being the producer of contents and spectacle (instead of being dependent on traditional news channels), has been used to update citizens about the situation in the streets (Bustamante 2021).

Black Lives Matter is a paradigmatic case of the political use of information technologies and social media. The movement gathered many diffuse indignations (Maraj, Prasad and Roundtree 2018), sparked a hashtag and counted

upon an anonymous multitude of citizens. This use of digital language was based on the rhetoric of dignity and moral recognition in relation to intersecting issues of gender, race, class and transnational demands. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in 2020, for example, many similar anti-racist demonstrations, critical of police brutality and inequality, took place in England, France, Brazil, Australia, Portugal and Germany (Al Jazeera 2020; BBC 2020). Black Lives Matter is able to be a global network due to the capacities afforded it by the tools of the society of the selfie. With the hashtag, the movement counts on the individual as a producer of spectacular contents: the use of digital images by individual activists has rendered every engagement with a hashtag in social media a political act. From Ariana Grande to Lady Gaga, the iconic figures of the society of the selfie illustrate how the strategic use of social media can also feed a progressive agenda: even personal branding, a sign of the society of the selfie, is not merely about individual exhibitionism. The participatory nature of the spectacle in the digital age opens up new spaces for resistance and this is changing how democracy works.

## 6.6 Conclusion

Social media played a major role in the articulation of the far right in India, Chile, Brazil, the United States and France. Authoritarianism is spread through spectacular subjects in four directions: (1) neoliberal impression management as the reification of individual exhibition when neoliberal logics colonize interpersonal relations with the need for personal success, ambition, narcissism and human capital; (2) the splitting public sphere that tends to feed polarization and radicalism; (3) the search for authenticity as a motivation for far-right populist leaders pretending to overcome the social distance and the reified effects of the society of the selfie; (4) the tension between alienation and abnormality in light of the problem of difference in globalized, post-colonial societies. These trends stretch the very foundations of liberal democracies, as representative political systems that have been expanded and established since the 1980s with the promises of popular participation and institutional control of decision-making procedures. But the pressure on liberal democracy does not come only from the authoritarianism and political extremism that explore the visibility mechanisms of the society of the selfie. The multitudinary protests in the early 2010s were the first massive use of the society of the selfie for political mobilization. They pointed to a specific crisis in liberal democracy: the problem of colonization of the market ('the 99%') and the importance of the society of the selfie in constructing new ways of engagement and democratic transformations that can move beyond the broken promises of popular representation, demanding effective mechanisms for participation and progressive policies. The society of the selfie, being a sociocultural structure that promotes turns in individuation and defines a cultural landscape of human relatedness in contemporary capitalism, implies strong transformations in contemporary democracy. Fast mobilizations, rapid aggregation of heterogeneous subjects



(the multitude), circulation of demands and resources embedded in digital data and the spectacular appeal of images and surfaces. Citizen participation has changed and political systems will have to consider more than ever the social effects of the society of the selfie on contemporary life.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mitt Romney was an exception.
- <sup>2</sup> For more on the theory of ‘rackets’, see Stirk (1992), Rensmann (2018) and Brittain (2021).
- <sup>3</sup> In *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno et al. (2019 [1950]) included this sort of exaggerated concern with and condemnation of others’ sexual indulgences as one of the elements on their personality assessment the ‘F-scale’, their device to identify pre-fascist persons. Sexual repression occupied an even more central place in Wilhelm Reich’s work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1980 [1946]).
- <sup>4</sup> Adorno’s anecdote describes a far-right extremist’s cognitive framing that resonates very consonantly with our description of the splitting public sphere. See also Morelock (2017).