Rethinking Populism: Peak democracy, liquid identity and the performance of sovereignty

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Abstract

Despite the burgeoning literature on right-wing populism, there is still considerable uncertainty about its causes, its impact on liberal democracies and about promising counter-strategies. Inspired by recent suggestions that (1) the emancipatory left has made a significant contribution to the proliferation of the populist right; and (2) populist movements, rather than challenging the established socio-political order, in fact stabilize and further entrench its logic, this article argues that an adequate understanding of the populist phenomenon necessitates a radical shift of perspective: beyond the democratic and emancipatory norms, which still govern most of the relevant literature. Approaching its subject matter via democratic theory and modernization theory, it undertakes a reassessment of the triangular relationship between modernity, democracy and populism. It finds that the latter is not helpfully conceptualized as anti-modernist or anti-democratic but should, instead, be regarded as a predictable feature of the form of politics distinctive of today's third modernity.

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Towards a shift of perspective

The ongoing tide of right-wing populism rapidly and profoundly is remoulding the political culture of Western liberal democracies. Yet, despite the burgeoning literature on the subject, there is still considerable uncertainty as to the triggers of populist movements, the drivers powering their proliferation, the prospects of their further development, the transformative impact they are having on established democratic orders, and effective political responses. Two irritating suggestions which have recently gained considerable attention are, first, that the emancipatory democratic left, despite being the most vociferous opponent of the populist right, has made a significant contribution to its proliferation: by neglecting the concerns of the working class and focusing, instead, on the libertarian post-materialist interests of the privileged middle class (e.g. Michea, 2009; Eribon, 2013; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Second, it has been proposed that populist movements may have to be understood not so much 'as *subversive* of the existing state of things and as the starting point for a more or less radical *reconstruction* of a new order' (Laclau, 2005: 177), but rather as 'post-utopian' (Krastev, 2017: 35) and 'perfectly suited to societies where citizens are consumers above all else' (Krastev, 2017: 35). They may have to be seen as a kind of anti-political *performance* or *theatre* that while appearing to challenge the prevailing order, ultimately actually stabilizes it (Rosanvallon, 2008; Milanovic, 2016; Appadurai, 2017). Both these suggestions seem very intriguing but, as yet, neither of them has been fully developed for the theorization of the populist phenomenon, although they do raise a number of questions calling for more detailed exploration: Exactly what is the contribution of the emancipatory movements? How legitimate is the critique that the left has let its voters down? How convincing are suggestions that in order to stop the right-wing tide, the progressive left ought to reconnect with those social groups which it had originally represented (Mouffe, 2016; Fraser, 2017)? And as regards the second point: what exactly is being performed in these anti-political movements? Why do they keep growing, if they do not really specify any perspective of change for those to whom they appeal? How are we to make sense of the counter-intuitive assertion that they challenge but at the same time reconfirm the established socio-economic order?

In trying to address these questions, this article focuses specifically on contemporary right-wing populist movements in Europe and liberal democracies whose political culture has European origins. It does not deal with historically earlier varieties of populism such as the US farmers' movements of the latter part of the nineteenth century (e.g. Goodwyn, 1976; Hofstadter, 1955), nor with contemporary left-wing populisms as, for example, in Latin America (e.g. De la Torre, 2015). Leaving the complex debate about the definition and 'many faces' (Woods and Weijnert, 2014) of populism to one side (e.g. Canovan, 1999; Arditi, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2007, 2010, 2013; Kriesi, 2014; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Müller 2016), it understands right-wing populism as the political beliefs and logic of movements, parties and individuals, which invoke the idea of a homogeneous people with a unified collective will and claim this people as the sole source of political legitimacy; whose discourse is shaped by a logic of othering, exclusion and portraying the good people as victims of corrupt elites, sinister conspiracies and parasitic social free-riders; and which swiftly translate all substantive issues into moral

debates displaying anti-pluralist, illiberal and xenophobic value orientations. Working from this generalist understanding, the article rethinks the current proliferation of right-wing populism: (1) from the perspective of recent democratic theory, notably the diagnosis of a *post-democratic turn* (Blühdorn, 2013a, 2013b) moving contemporary societies into a post-democratic constellation (Blühdorn, 2014, 2017) that is not well described by polemic notions of post-democracy as popularized by Colin Crouch (2004); and (2) from an explicitly *modernization-theoretical* perspective that interprets contemporary right-wing populism as indicative of a new phase of modernity beyond Ulrich Beck's second or reflexive modernity (Beck et al., 1994; Beck, 1997).

As regards democratic theory, it is striking that populism has so far mostly been analysed from the normative perspective of liberal, representative democracy (Canovan, 1999; Arditi, 2004). It has been conceptualized either as a pathology of and threat to democracy (Mudde, 2010; Müller, 2016), or as a redemptive phenomenon placing new emphasis on the true core of democracy and thus as a potential corrective for the perceived deformations of contemporary representative democracies (Laclau, 2005; Abts and Rummens, 2007; Arditi, 2010; Kaltwasser, 2012). Yet, in either case, the possibility is systematically eclipsed that in contemporary western(ized) societies the emancipatory progressive ideal of democracy, as the new social movements since the 1970s had once again articulated it, may actually have become – at least partially – outdated, dysfunctional and undesirable (Zolo, 1992; Rancière, 2007; Dean, 2009; Blühdorn, 2013b, 2014). But if, and to the extent that this actually is the case, the populist phenomenon should no longer be investigated as a threat to, or crisis of, liberal representative democracy but, if anything, from the perspective of its radical transformation into something new.

In respect of modernization theory, populist movements are commonly conceptualized as an explicitly anti-modernist phenomenon, specific to the contemporary era of 'regressive modernity' (Inglehart and Norris, 2017; see also Geiselberger, 2017) and typically mobilizing the losers of modernization (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016). From this perspective, the proliferation of populism then appears either as a response to rising levels of economic inequality as described by Piketty (2014) and Milanovic (2016), or as a 'cultural backlash' by social strata that have not moved along with the modernization-induced shift towards cosmopolitan liberal value orientations (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Yet, neither of these approaches accounts for the fact that populist movements and parties often explicitly present themselves as modern, forward-looking and progressive, and have an appeal well beyond the often-cited losers of modernization (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2007; Lengfeld, 2017). Also, in focusing either on the material or the cultural dimension of the populist phenomenon, both of them fail to grasp the intricate relationship between the two dimensions which are, in fact, inseparably connected to each other and both equally relevant.

Hence, in following up the above two ideas, this article at the same time addresses deficits in much of the literature in terms of both democratic and sociological theory and undertakes a thorough reassessment of the relationship between modernity, democracy and populism. The second and third sections fully develop our argument that the threat-or-corrective dichotomy is distinctly unhelpful, and specify a categorically new perspective from which, we believe, the populist phenomenon ought to be investigated. Section

four outlines the challenges of the late-modern politics of identity, begins to specify, from this new perspective, the political role of populist movements in contemporary neoliberal societies and explains why their conceptualization as regressive or reactionary is misconceived. The concluding section then synthesizes our theoretical considerations in line with the model of a new *third modernity* (Blühdorn, 2013a, 2017). It elaborates how – as a discursive arena for the performance of sovereignty – populist movements are a constitutive feature of the particular brand of politics that is characteristic of this new era.

Peak democracy and the democratic parabola

The decline in public support for democratic institutions and in confidence in democratic procedures is, we are suggesting, the first constitutive element of the new perspective from which we have to rethink populism. This decline has been widely debated as a *crisis of democracy*, conceptualized, inter alia, in terms of a crisis of political parties and representation (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Mair, 2013), the decline of political ideologies and the bipolar order of left and right (e.g. Bell, 1976; Fukuyama, 2006), the evaporation of societal coherence and social capital under conditions of differentiation and complexity (Zolo, 1992; Putnam, 2000), and a marker of the neoliberal era of post-democracy and post-politics (Crouch, 2004; Dean, 2009). The diagnosis of a post-democratic constellation (Blühdorn, 2014, 2017) takes up elements of all of these, but distinguishes itself from the latter, in particular, in suggesting that democracy is not simply threatened by neoliberal elites who have suspended democratic processes, with-held democratic rights, and obstructed the fulfilment of democratic promises but that, in the wake of a post-democratic turn (Blühdorn, 2013a, 2013b), democratic norms them-selves have actually become exhausted or at least highly ambivalent and are, in advanced modern societies, perceived as a threat at least as much as they entail a promise. Furthermore, this diagnosis suggests that this post-democratic turn has occurred in the wake of a progressive, emancipatory process that has profoundly remoulded both core principles of liberal democracy, i.e. the principle of liberty and self-determination and that of equality and the egalitarian distribution of power, resources and social opportunities. Hence, the post-democratic turn is, arguably, not easily reversible; the demand or attempt to reinstate or revitalize earlier democratic norms is neither particularly promising, nor is it normatively unproblematic. Exactly this ambivalent relationship of contemporary citizens to democratic values is, we suggest, crucial for understanding the contemporary proliferation of populism.

At one level, this ambivalence can be explained by factors such as: (1) the failure, or at least entirely unexpected outcomes, of the new social movements' participatory revolution; (2) the increasing depoliticization and managerialism of contemporary policy-making; or (3) the neoliberal appropriation of democracy and civil society as tools for a profoundly anti-egalitarian agenda. Ultimately, the triggers and shaping parameters of populist movements are, arguably, located at a more profound level. But not least with regard to the suggestion that the failures of the emancipatory progressive left have made a significant contribution to the proliferation of the populist right (e.g. Eribon, 2013;

Inglehart and Norris, 2016, 2017; Goodhart, 2017), exploring these three factors is a helpful preliminary exercise:

First, the emancipatory social movements, which since the late 1960s had raised extensive expectations for political participation and individual self-realization, not only failed on their promise to give an equal political voice to all those whose rights and concerns had previously been marginalized or oppressed, but they have actually even exacerbated already existing social and political inequalities (Gilens, 2012): They prioritized the post-materialist identity needs of post-industrial middle-class cohorts, created new modes and avenues of political participation, which were disproportionately used by highly educated, politically articulate and well-networked social groups, and thus provided these sections of the citizenry with additional means of political influence. Furthermore, these movements were not successful in constructing any alternative to the established societal order which they perceived as socially and ecologically destructive. They systematically propelled the differentiation, individualization and internationalization of modern societies, but were unable to specify any integrative principle to counterbalance the centrifugal forces they had unleashed. Thus, the new social movements' 'reinvention of politics' and their 'renaissance of political subjectivity' (Beck, 1997: 100) benefited only some, while for many others the promise of self-determination and self-responsibility turned into a daunting challenge. Unintentionally, the 'renaissance of political subjectivity' actually gave rise to a new kind of risk society at least as threatening – although for other parts of society – as the one (Beck, 1992) which the new social movements had set out to combat. In a dialectical turn, it soon nurtured new desires for a renaissance of political objectivity that would, perhaps, facilitate the effective management of ever more complex societal interests and needs.

Second, it is against this background that from the mid-1990s – in the name of progressive politics – strategies of depoliticization were promoted, as a tool to increase the efficiency, legitimacy and effectiveness of policy-making (e.g. Burnham, 2001; Wood and Flinders, 2014). It was assumed that restricting the realm of political negotiation and democratic decision-making would reduce the distorting influence of interest-group politics, lessen the impact of paralysing power struggles and give more space to the actual delivery of societal well-being and the common good. Demands to limit the role of citizens had been articulated already in the 1970s, when the Trilateral Commission voiced concern that the increasing politicization of citizens and their rising expectations for political influence and policy outcomes might lead to government overload and a condition of ungovernability (Crozier et al., 1975; King, 1975). But two decades later, depoliticization also meant to curtail the role of elected politicians, which was to be restricted to those fields where expert planning would not sufficiently legitimize the results (Mair, 2013). Given the complexity of issues to be addressed and the pace at which policy-responses are required in modern societies, non-majoritarian institutions were regarded as more competent and efficient than majority rule and elected representatives. The reduction of traditional-style democratic input-legitimacy was to be compensated for by improved output-legitimacy (Scharpf, 1999). Yet, the promise that strategies of depoliticization would once again bring power closer to the people (Flinders and Buller, 2005) remained unfulfilled. Instead, increased reliance on supposedly more knowledgeable expert bodies and their evidence-based policy-suggestions further

removed politics from citizens and reinforced popular feelings of disempowerment. Thus, practices of depoliticization, in fact, propelled the reassertion of popular sovereignty, yet public confidence in the democratic processes whose complexity-related problems had triggered the agenda of depoliticization in the first place could not be restored. Instead, the depoliticizing agenda of objectivation only reinforced the disillusionment with the new social movements' politicizing agenda of subjectivation. Exactly this double disillusionment is the very crux of the post-democratic constellation, and the neoliberal appropriation of democratic values and civil society further exacerbated the problem.

Third, indeed, in western liberal societies, governments, public institutions and economic actors, too, seem to have firmly embraced the values which the emancipatory social movements had once forced onto the political agenda. Yet today's rhetoric of social justice, equal opportunities, democratic empowerment, citizen engagement, sustainability, and so forth, contrasts starkly not only with the reality of ever increasing social inequality (Gilens, 2012) and tightening sustainability crises, but also with neoliberal narratives about the primacy of market imperatives to which there is, allegedly, no alternative (Dean, 2009). In fact, in the neoliberal era, the core values on which the emancipatory movements had once based their normative challenge to the established order, have been discovered as a resource, and refashioned into tools, for the stabilization, resilience and legitimization of the status quo (Dörre et al., 2015). As the activating state has adapted decentralization, self-responsibility and many other items from the activist toolkit for its own use, the neoliberal agenda, democracy and democratization are no longer a promise made to the socially underprivileged, nor is civil society still the arena, subject and motor of any genuine alternative (Eribon, 2013). Indeed, democracy and democratization have become 'inadequate as a language and frame for left political aspiration' (Dean, 2009: 20). To struggle for democracy, Jodi Dean notes, is today to struggle 'for more of the same' and 'demand what is already present, accepted and agreed on' (2009: 24). Yet, a new political idiom that reaches beyond the neoliberal status quo has not yet been found. And the coincidence of highly developed expectations for autonomy and self-determination, on the one hand, and the decline or even unavailability of the political means to even articulate – let alone realize – them, on the other, is a core feature of the post-democratic constellation.

Thus, there are a number of quite specific factors which are important in explaining the socio-political climate in which populist narratives and movements thrive. Ultimately, however, the causes of the post-democratic turn – and the populist phenomenon – are located at a more profound level: they have, arguably, been triggered and are being propelled by the ongoing process of modernization itself. Indeed, modernity and democracy are connected to each other not only in that it was modernity – modernist Enlightenment thinking – which had initially created the idea of the *autonomous subject* that, ever since, has been the beacon and driving force of all emancipatory progressive movements, but the ongoing process of modernization, at the same time, also undermines the foundations and resources of democracy – as Bobbio (1987), Zolo (1992), Luhmann (1995) and many others powerfully argued well before all contemporary debates about post-democracy and post-politics. Technological development, processes of individualization, societal differentiation, cultural disembedding, the dynamics of

globalization and so forth incrementally undermine the foundations of democracy and give rise to risks and complexities which render democratic processes increasingly dysfunctional: democracy becomes structurally inadequate for advanced modern societies (Macpherson, 1977; Greven, 2009). Ordinary citizens as well as elites, radical activists as well as the bourgeois pillars of society, are, although for different reasons, all 'losing faith in democratic government and its suitability' (Streeck, 2014a: 44) for the tasks ahead (Rancière, 2007; Brennan, 2016; van Reybrouck, 2016).

The relationship between modernity and democracy may, therefore, be described in terms of a parabola with the turning point, *peak democracy*, being located at the height of the new social movements' participatory revolution. Peak democracy is the point in the ongoing modernization of contemporary societies beyond which the marginal utility of more democracy and further democratization becomes smaller or indeed negative. The image of the democratic parabola is very familiar, of course, from Crouch's work on post-democracy (Crouch, 2004). Yet, for Crouch, the primary reason for the decline of democracy is neither the exhaustion of democratic ideals, nor the process of modernization but, more than anything, the self-empowerment of neoliberal elites. And firmly in line with the post-Marxist critical tradition, Crouch is fully preoccupied with the attempt to somehow reverse the direction of the parabola and revive the project of democracy. The argument here, in contrast, is that the advance of modernity itself renders such efforts unpromising. The post-democratic turn renders the progressive project, as traditionally conceived, outdated. And it raises the question how the particular tensions which are distinctive of the post-democratic constellation play out in practice, how the established notions of democracy and progressiveness are being reframed, and how all this may contribute to the understanding of right-wing populism.

Second-order emancipation and liquid identities

So peak democracy is, we are suggesting, the first constitutive element of the new perspective from which we have to rethink populism. From this perspective it is immediately evident why the traditional-style, moralizing condemnation of right-wing populist movements as anti-democratic and illiberal (e.g. Müller, 2016) is – sociologically, at least – unacceptably simplistic. Also, while observers are surely right in saying that such movements are 'the expression of a crisis of liberal-democratic politics' (Mouffe, 2016; see also Krastev, 2007), closer analysis of this 'crisis' has already revealed that it is insufficient to simply conceptualize them as 'rejecting post-politics and post-democracy', claiming back for 'the people the voice that has been confiscated by the elites', and trying to reinstate 'legitimate democratic aspirations' (Mouffe, 2016). Furthermore, the above discussion has signalled how, in the evolution of the post-democratic constellation, the emancipatory progressive left has indeed played a significant role, but that the suggestion that right-wing populism should – or indeed can – be countered through 'the construction of a progressive populist movement' (Mouffe, 2016), or by left-wing parties *remembering* their earlier political commitments, is not particularly plausible. Moving on from here, a specifically subject-theoretical point of view can help to further develop these points and elaborate the modernization-theoretical analysis, illuminating how the

modernization of prevalent notions of subjectivity and identity has fundamentally reconfigured the emancipatory – and the democratic – project.

The democratic project, Dahl (1998) tells us, is never complete but always remains an open-ended struggle. Democratic norms and institutions have never been fixed; they have always evolved and continuously been redefined in line with ongoing societal development. This ongoing redefinition can usefully be conceptualized in terms of the 'democratic dilemma' that 'system effectiveness and citizen effectiveness' (Dahl, 1994: 34), i.e. 'the ability of citizens to exercise democratic control over the decisions of the polity' and 'the capacity of the system to respond satisfactorily to the collective preferences of its citizens' (Dahl, 1994: 28), always remain in an unstable balance. Using the term 'democratic dilemma' differently – but also drawing on Dahl, Kaltwasser (2014) has suggested that the driver for this ongoing struggle is, first of all, that the notion of the people claiming the right to political self-determination always remains contested and, second, that there is an irresolvable tension in democratic systems between the principle of constitutionalism, which aims to protect fundamental rights, and the principle of popular sovereignty which accepts no such *ex ante* restrictions. Within this framework, Kaltwasser then interprets populist movements as 'responses' to these 'democratic dilemmas'. He convincingly argues that – rather than being external or alien to democracy – such movements need to be regarded as 'something internal to democracy' (2014: 484; also see Kaltwasser, 2012: 196–7), i.e. 'populism is neither democratic nor anti-democratic in itself' (2014: 483), but essentially a manifestation of the open-ended struggle. Yet, in line with Canovan (1999), Arditi (2004) and many others, he still conceptualizes these 'responses' as being triggered by *imbalances* between conflicting democratic principles for which populist movements may be a re-balancing 'corrective' (Kaltwasser, 2012; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Trying to avoid any such notion of a fault – imbalance, asymmetry, disease, pathology – waiting to be corrected (Mudde, 2010; see also Müller, 2016; van Reybrouck, 2016), we suggest understanding right-wing populism as signalling a transformation of democratic values, hopes and expectations – which in the post-democratic constellation have evolved well beyond the emancipatory project in an earlier sense. We are thus returning to the 'democratic dilemma' as defined by Dahl: the ongoing contestation of the effectiveness and efficiency of democracy.

The yardstick by which citizens measure the effectiveness and efficiency of established democratic norms and institutions is their understanding of their own personal 'self' and their collective identity (Butzlaff, 2016: 274–81). More specifically, the criterion is the extent to which these norms and institutions reflect and represent their prevalent values, interests and concerns. Theorists of modernization have highlighted that over time the ways in which contemporary individuals perceive of themselves – and accordingly their ideals of a good life, effective political representation and efficient societal institutions – have profoundly changed: Already in the 1970s, Inglehart noted that in post-industrial societies, issues of self-realization and the quality of life were becoming ever more prominent (Inglehart, 1977). Processes of 'modernisation and post-modernisation', he suggested (Inglehart, 1997), effect a shift of emphasis towards concerns of identity and self-expression, with contemporary citizens becoming increasingly elite-challenging, participation-oriented and politically self-confident. Giddens (1991a)

and many others have noted that individual identity is ever less socially predetermined and increasingly turns into a matter of individual choice and self-construction (Cortois and Laermans, 2017). Sennett (1999) has pointed to the increasing complexity and flexibility of individual norms and objectives, which he conceptualized as the 'corrosion of character'. Bauman (2000) has described how the goals of individual self-construction are becoming ever more fuzzy and how this makes all forms of collective action increasingly difficult. Still, Inglehart and many others have suggested that these ongoing processes of modernization and post-modernization render contemporary societies, including established democracies, ever more democratic. As late as 2005, Inglehart still conceptualized this assumed trajectory as the 'human development sequence' or even 'syndrome' (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005: 4). Yet, the proliferation of right-wing populism sheds radical doubt on the idea of a steady progression towards an ever more liberal, pluralistic, tolerant and democratic society. Indeed, these processes suggest that the relationship between modernization-induced value change and the political culture of advanced consumer societies needs to be thoroughly rethought.

For this purpose, the notion of *second-order emancipation* (Blühdorn 2013a, 2013b) is an instructive conceptual tool. Already Giddens (1991a, 1991b) and Beck (1992, 1997) had started to think through – with their notion of *reflexive modernization* – the implications of modernity's own norms and principles being themselves critically challenged. Inglehart, too, had suggested that the value orientations to which the process of modernization gives rise may not always be stable but that, under certain conditions, the 'human development sequence' may switch into 'reverse direction' and 'bring retrogression toward authoritarian and xenophobic societies' (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005: 4). Yet, the notion of reflexive modernity implied, ultimately, little more than a renewed attempt to bring, through a second modernity (Beck et al., 1994), the emancipatory project to completion. And Inglehart clearly conceives of this 'retrogression' as a short-term deviation from a developmental trajectory – the human development sequence – to which modern societies will eventually return. Thus, in either case the normative core of modernization and progressive politics remains essentially unchanged. The notion of *second-order emancipation*, in contrast, suggests that the ongoing modernization of emancipatory values pushes the progressive project beyond its traditional – liberal, democratic, inclusive, ecological, egalitarian – understanding and profoundly redefines what is being conceptualized as progressive. To the analysis of right-wing populism, this notion of second-order emancipation is, therefore, much more conducive. It unhinges the very idea of a renewed emancipatory effort in a second modernity, and it discards the notions of 'retrogression' (Inglehart and Norris, 2017) or a 'great regression' (Geiselberger, 2017).

Second-order emancipation implies that, in the wake of the ongoing processes of modernization, the particular ideals of identity which once underpinned the Marxist and post-Marxist critique of alienation, the vision of the liberation of the authentic, autonomous self, and thus the whole emancipatory democratic project as traditionally understood, have become outdated (Blühdorn, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). Kellner (1992), Gergen (1995) and many others have pointed to the rise of the 'fragmented subject' (Reckwitz, 2010: 125; see also Žižek, 2000) in advanced modern societies. They have convincingly argued that contemporary individuals no longer pursue traditional notions of identity – centred,

consistent, stable and rationally integrated, but maintain a fragmented and dynamic patchwork of multiple identities that do not add up to a coherent and unified self. And rather than being evidence of a pathological deviation, a 'corrosion of character' (Sennett, 1999) or the failure to realize an aspired ideal, this shift towards new notions of the self, arguably, has to be interpreted as signalling the liberation from the boundaries and constraints imposed by the idealist-bourgeois notion of identity. In a context of the post-modern liberation from the grand narratives of modernity (Lyotard, 1997), it creates new space for the non-rational or alternative rationalities, for inconsistence and incompatibility. It has emancipatory potentials in that it allows for the coexistence and pursuit of contradictory values, behaviours and life perspectives to match the diverse opportunities provided by an increasingly differentiated, complex and ever faster changing social reality. In line with Bauman's (2000) model of liquid modernity, this shift might also be described as the rise of *liquid identity* – which, in a way, of course, also implies the *liquidation* of identity. Yet, if the norms and institutions which at one point underpinned and supported the progressive democratic project have turned into constraints on further emancipation and self-development; if they are no longer perceived as efficient, effective and profitable for the realization of prevailing notions of the self, their liquidation may well be perceived as emancipatory and progressive.

All this has significant implications for democracy: One the one hand, ever-rising expectations for self-realization, self-determination and self-experience, paired with declining confidence in existing political institutions, are leading to ever more vociferously articulated demands for more direct participation, better representation and, overall, more authentic political sovereignty. At the same time, however, the points elaborated earlier, i.e. the participatory social movements' failure to reverse the continuous rise of political inequality, growing concerns about the unsuitability of democratic processes to match conditions of high differentiation and complexity, and the neoliberal instrumentalization of democracy and civil society all trigger profound democratic disillusionment. Societal differentiation and the fragmentation of identities (individual and collective) render social organization, consensual decision-making and collective action ever more difficult. To the same degree that even at the level of the single individual, values and interests are becoming ever more diverse, inconsistent and volatile, their organization and consistent articulation – through political parties, movements or programmes – turns into a formidable challenge. Indeed, the transformation of traditional notions of identity shatters established understandings of the key categories at the very core of democracy – participation, representation, sovereignty, legitimacy – and implies that for contemporary citizens these ideas may adopt a very different meaning: Liberal, representative democracy is set to metamorphose into something categorically new (Blühdorn, 2007a, 2009, 2013a). And of this metamorphosis, the proliferation of right-wing populism is, arguably, a central part.

The dilemma of late-modern identity politics

This subject-theoretical analysis further elaborates the intricate relationship between modernization and democracy. The concepts of second-order emancipation and liquid identity further explain why the much-debated *crisis* of democracy should rather be

theorized as a profound and lasting, modernization-induced *transformation* of democracy. These concepts are a constitutive element of the condition in which right-wing populist movements thrive and are the second core pillar of the new perspective from which, we are suggesting, such movements need to be investigated. In particular, these concepts help to grasp that the post-democratic constellation, irritatingly, has to be understood as an emancipatory achievement. Indeed, the transformation of prevalent notions of subjectivity and identity plunges democracy, as traditionally understood, into a profound legitimation crisis. As democracy has never been a value in itself, but derives its value and legitimacy solely from the modernist norm of the autonomous subject, any erosion and reconfiguration of this norm clearly affect the legitimacy of established notions of democracy and its institutions. Thus, under the conditions of advanced modern societies (differentiation, complexity, acceleration, etc.), traditional-style representative democracy is not only increasingly dysfunctional and inefficient in terms of its systemic performance (factual problem-solving capacity), but in terms of its emancipatory performance as well.

Accordingly, any attempts to interpret populist movements from the perspective of liberal representative democracy and conceptualize them as either a threat to democracy or a potential corrective to perceived deformations are ill-conceived. The idea that they respond to a 'representation deficit' – or indeed any democratic deficit at all – entirely misses the central point: Such movements are not simply a backward-oriented response to the perceived corruption and abuse of a still-cherished political form, but should be seen, at least as much, as indicative of a new socio-cultural condition that is, as yet, in search of a suitable political form. They articulate and address the needs of individuals who, in line with their own emancipatory aspirations and the pressures of a changing societal context, are moving beyond the constraints inherent in earlier norms of subjectivity and the related forms of democracy. Hence the portrayal and critique of these movements as backward and regressive is, at least sociologically, rather simplistic. Similarly, their conceptualization as the revolt of the losers of modernization is inappropriate, first, because the ambivalence towards the established norms and institutionalizations of democracy is, as Mair (2013), Rancière (2007) and many others have rightly pointed out, spread widely throughout modern societies at large. And, second, as evidenced by election analyses (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2007; Berbuir et al., 2015; Lengfeld, 2017), populist movements are quite clearly not just addressing the needs of those who have been left behind by modernization and have not embraced the newly emerging value orientations. They appeal at least as much to those, who have gone along with the modernization of social norms and values preferences, and are making every effort to confront what emerges as the insidious dilemma of advanced modern societies: that prevalent aspirations and expectations in terms of self-determination and self-realization are more highly developed than ever before, while the conditions for actually realizing them are increasingly unfavourable.

This dilemma affects different social groups in different ways and to a different extent. Yet, its experience is common to significant parts of advanced modern societies, perhaps even the majority of contemporary individuals. It entails, inter alia, that the progressive liberation from traditional norms and predetermination demands modern individuals pursue their objectives of self-realization and self-experience as a primarily

personal project without 'the psychological supports and sense of security provided by more traditional settings' (Giddens 1991a: 33); and they have to do so in a context where, beyond this ever-increasing individualization, other constitutive features of modernization – differentiation, acceleration, globalization, flexibilization, etc. – render the formation and maintenance of a distinct and recognizable identity ever more difficult. While in Beck's risk society collective and coordinated action – either through the state or through civil society institutions – still appeared as the most appropriate defence against risks and as a source of security, the neoliberal *opportunity society* demands, more than ever, individualized self-activation and self-responsibility (Sennett, 1999). Accordingly, the attempt to cut loose from established commitments has become a core feature of today's struggle for competitive advantages.

Furthermore, as emancipatory movements keep chipping away at all traditional values and challenge any categorical principles that might underpin the formation of identity as traditionally understood, consumption-based forms of self-realization and self-articulation are becoming ever more prevalent. As Kellner (1992), Reckwitz (2010), Bauman (2000) and many others have pointed out, for significant – and ever larger – parts of contemporary societies, the consumer market has become the primary arena of identity construction, and consumption-based lifestyles have become the primary mode of self-articulation (Kleine et al., 1993; Miles, 1996; Firat and Dholakia, 1998). Yet, advanced capitalist societies in Europe and elsewhere have entered a phase where economic growth rates are consistently low – far too low to sustain established arrangements for social justice and inclusion (e.g. Streeck, 2014b, 2016). And accordingly, the neo-materialist and consumption-based forms of self-realization and self-expression, idealized and resolutely claimed by virtually all parts of society, can be realized and sustained only by some – and at the expense of others. Put differently, the defence and maintenance of what is commonly referred to as *our freedom, our values and our lifestyles* necessitate, more visibly than ever, external as well as internal boundaries and lines of exclusion. Egalitarian and redistributive forms of politics (and notions of democracy) are therefore, unsurprisingly, turning into a serious problem – not just for some social groups, but for anybody concerned about the defence of their emancipatory achievements and the further realization of their aspirations. The new big project – for society at large! – is to organize the legitimation and execution of a politics of increasing inequality and exclusion.

Exactly this fusion of peak democracy, second-order emancipation and the shortage of the resources (cultural as well as material), on which progressive identity formation and self-realization crucially depend, releases, we are suggesting, the political energy that powers right-wing populist movements. And counter to suggestions that these movements are subversive of the established order, they do not in any way challenge the prevalent principles and logic of modernization. Neither in material economic terms, nor in terms of identity politics do they offer any alternative to the status quo, but they emerge as *key players in the new politics of exclusion*. Their economic policies do not in any sense endeavour to reinstate egalitarian or redistributive commitments, but tend to continue neoliberal agendas of austerity and modernization (e.g. Swank and Betz, 2003; Kitschelt, 2007). They entail no attempt to redress the persistent rise of social inequality, but merely extend the logic of exclusion to the bottom of society and refocus political

energies on migrants and supposedly undeserving minority groups (Bale, 2012). Essentially, they *democratize the politics of exclusion*, provide it with bottom-up legitimacy and activate the underprivileged themselves as agents to further entrench its logic. In terms of culture and identity, right-wing populist movements are far from surrendering the emancipatory achievements of past decades. There is little to suggest that they reject the ideals of the flexible subject or no longer aspire to the liquid lifestyles and consumption-based forms of self-realization. In a context where the resources for non-materialist and solid forms of identity are becoming increasingly scarce, they are, instead, activating those parts of society for the defence of these exclusive patterns of self-realization, who are concerned about not being able to sustain their own participation in them.

For these reasons, any interpretation of right-wing populist movements in terms of a political backlash either against economic inequality or the loss of cultural identity seems profoundly inadequate, indeed, dangerously misleading. Inglehart and Norris have suggested that these contemporary movements ought to be read as 'an angry and resentful counter-revolution' to 'the silent revolution of the 1970s' (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 5) and a 'retro reaction by once-predominant sectors of the population to progressive value change' (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 1). More curiously, still, they are predicting that, having been triggered by a generational cleavage, contemporary European and North American right-wing populism is set to 'fade over time, as older cohorts with traditional attitudes are gradually replaced in the population by their children and grandchildren, adhering to more progressive values' (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 5). Undoubtedly, right-wing movements are addressing themselves, inter alia, to social groups who cannot capitalize on the erosion of traditional social ties and securities, and who experience their social and economic environs as a risk society rather than an opportunity society. Romanticizing an allegedly better past, they may well militate against liquid lifestyles and consumerist identities and glorify, instead, the supposedly superior values of tradition, common sense, simplicity and nativeness. Yet, despite this rhetoric, there is no evidence of right-wing movements genuinely challenging the achievements and logic of modernization. Accordingly, the hypothesis of a 'new cultural cleavage' with populist values 'representing one pole of a cultural continuum' and 'cosmopolitan liberal values' being located 'at the opposite pole' (Inglehart and Norris, 2016: 7–8) seems fundamentally misconceived. And the suggestion that right-wing populism will in due course fade away dangerously obstructs a clear view of the ongoing – and very significant – transformation of liberal democracy.

Third modernity and practices of simulation

Thus, it has become clear why a radical shift of perspective beyond the democratic and emancipatory norms which still govern most of the literature on right-wing populism is overdue. For an adequate understanding of the populist phenomenon a thorough grasp of what has been conceptualized here as peak democracy, the post-democratic constellation, second-order emancipation and contemporary ideals – as well as the politics – of self-realization is a prerequisite. The approach via democratic theory has demonstrated that it is simplistic to portray right-wing populism as the enemy of, or a threat to,

democracy; nor should it be interpreted as the reassertion of any democratic fundamentals or a corrective for any contemporary pathology of liberal, representative democracies. Instead, it should be seen as indicative of the incremental exhaustion of the old democratic project and the search for a new political form that best matches the values, preferences and needs of contemporary societies and individuals. Accordingly, any moralizing critique of the progressive left which, supposedly, has let down its clientele is just as misguided as the critique of right-wing populism which is said to endanger emancipatory democratic values. In the ongoing process of modernization, this progressive left has dissolved – witness the wealth of literature asking for its whereabouts – and so have the working class which it once represented and the emancipatory democratic ideals for which it once stood. Other notions of progressiveness and emancipation have taken over.

The approach via modernization theory, in turn, has revealed that right-wing populism is not satisfactorily interpreted as anti-modernist or a phenomenon of a *regressive modernity*, but is, at least as much, indicative of second-order emancipation and the progressive evolution of modernity. Our focus on changing notions of subjectivity and contemporary needs and patterns of self-realization has placed the emphasis on the demand side. This does not mean to deny the significance and justification of supply side approaches, which focus, for example, on political entrepreneurs, the resources and opportunity structures they mobilize, or the question whether right-wing populism qualifies as a political ideology. But the objective here has been to reveal that the recent tide of populism is much more than the work of menacing demagogues and ideologues: it is a constitutive – and probably lasting – feature of a new era that distinguishes itself through categorically different understandings of modernity, emancipation and progressiveness beyond the old political conflict lines. This new era takes contemporary societies beyond Ulrich Beck's first and second modernities (1992, 1997). For both of these – and the entirety of social science in the critical tradition – the Cartesian, Christian and Kantian notion of the autonomous subject was the central norm of reference. The distinctive feature of the new *third modernity* (Blühdorn, 2013a), in contrast, is that, in the wake of second-order emancipation, this very norm has itself been left behind – or at least comprehensively reconfigured. Exactly this, we have aimed to demonstrate, is the new perspective from which the populist phenomenon ought to be explored, i.e. not from the traditional position – and with the normative tools – of first and second modernity, but from the new perspective of third modernity which recognizes right-wing populism as catering to specific needs that are distinctive of this new form of modernity.

These needs, we have argued, include, first of all, the practical organization and legitimation of the politics of exclusion, which for contemporary aspirations and expectations of self-realization is *conditio sine qua non*. Thus, right-wing populist movements organize *societal inclusion into the politics of exclusion*; they secure the *democratization of exclusion* and thus help to maintain – for those included – our freedom, our values and our lifestyles. But they are also addressing social needs in a very important second respect: In a scenario where, across all parts of modern societies, the desire and demand for freedom, self-determination and sovereignty have increased to an unprecedented level, while, at the same time, second-order emancipation keeps chipping away at the very foundations of the identical subject and the political order that was meant to

guarantee and realize its autonomy and sovereignty, populist movements offer an escape route, or a coping strategy, for the dilemma that the demand for autonomy and sovereignty, on the one hand, and the pursuit of second-order emancipation, on the other, are mutually incompatible: They organize the performative regeneration of what second-order emancipation strives to leave behind and thus facilitate the experience of subjectivity, collective identity and political sovereignty.

Quite rightly, Müller (2016) and many others have pointed out that right-wing populists, more than anything, celebrate the *unified people* (e.g. Mudde, 2010; Kriesi, 2014; Spruyt et al., 2016). Eribon (2013) and others have suggested that by voting for populist parties, the modern precariat aims to defend their collective identity. And as Krastev states, 'the more governments are constrained (by the IMF, the EU, or investors and the bond market) from changing economic policies, the more political competition comes to revolve around identity issues' (2014: 12). First, however, identity politics is, contrary to what Krastev seems to imply, not a substitute for material politics, but the latter is, as we discussed, more than ever an integral part of the former. Second, any focus on the precariat distracts from the important point that under conditions of contemporary modernity, the construction and maintenance of identity are a major challenge not just for some, but for all social groups. And, third, the moralizing critique that with their celebration of the people, of collective identity and popular sovereignty, populist movements make promises which they can never fulfil (Müller, 2016: 28), entirely fails to recognize that in the era of third modernity fulfilling these promises is not the point and would actually be counter-productive – even regressive. Instead, this celebration is, arguably, about managing the contradiction that is distinctive of third modernity: that contemporary individuals and societies, with their project of second-order emancipation, consistently pursue the liberation from all established identities, norms and commitments, but at the same time also have ever higher expectations in terms of self-realization, self-expression and political self-determination. For an appropriate understanding of the populist phenomenon, this point is crucial: Beyond the political function specified above, the particular service and appeal of populist movements are, we are suggesting, that they perform, and facilitate the experience of something that, in third modernity, is no longer possible, and beyond second-order emancipation and the post-democratic turn also not really desirable – but, nevertheless, more than ever, vociferously in demand. In this self-contradictory constellation, the objective is not the actual *realization* of individual and collective identity, autonomy and sovereignty as understood in the Enlightenment tradition, but their *performance* and *experience*.

Exactly this is, arguably, what populist movements deliver, why they have so strong an appeal well beyond the so-called losers of modernization, why they keep proliferating, although they have no articulate vision and plausible political offer, and why the search for political counter-strategies has so far remained futile. Populist movements can, therefore, very productively be interpreted within the model of *simulative politics* (Blühdorn, 2007b, 2007c, 2013a), i.e. as set of *societal practices* which pursue the discursive regeneration, and facilitate the experience of, norms, values and political constellations, which, in the wake of modernization and second-order emancipation, have become unwanted and outdated – and yet, also more desirable than ever (Blühdorn, 2007a, 2013b, 2014). Borrowing the words of Ulrich Beck, what right-wing populist

movements offer is 'not the renaissance of the people, but the renaissance of the staging of the people (or the staging of the renaissance of the people)' (Beck, 1997: 150). In a similar vein, but with stronger moral overtones, others have talked of the 'theatre of sovereignty' (Appadurai, 2017: 2–3), which does not aim for 'conquering power in order to exercise it' (Rosanvallon, 2008: 258), but criticizes political elites while 'tacitly renouncing joint responsibility for creating a shared world' (Rosanvallon, 2008: 253). The moralizing overtones are, at least from a sociological perspective, inappropriate and unhelpful, but as we have tried to demonstrate throughout this article, populist movements are indeed not about unhinging the anti-egalitarian and exclusive logic of the established order, but about sustaining and further entrenching it. Their practices of simulation may, in a sense, be compared to Laclau's (2005) empty signifiers, and they may be said to populate Lefort's (1988) empty space of democracy. But Laclau, too, understands populism as aiming for a political transformation that materially addresses the social grievances and resolves the 'crisis in the old structure' (2005: 177) from which it emerges. Simulative politics, in contrast, is about the simultaneity of incompatibles. It allows for an experience of sovereignty that does not compromise the agenda of second-order emancipation.

Thus, ultimately, right-wing populism articulates the conflict between second and third modernity. This conflict is not well understood as a conflict between different social groups – losers vs. winners of modernization; retrogressives vs. cosmopolitans (Inglehart and Norris, 2016); somewheres vs. anywheres (Goodhart, 2017) – but much more adequately as a battle playing out – although to differing degrees – within contemporary individuals: a conflict between different sets of norms which are mutually incompatible. It is, arguably, for this reason that the populist rhetoric resonates – again to differing degrees, of course – in very diverse parts of contemporary societies and that it is so difficult to develop effective political responses. Accordingly, the populist phenomenon is also much better described in terms of a *discourse* than a political movement. Political movements – although lesser so than political parties – are commonly assumed to have members whose political ideals, values and identities they articulate and represent. Political discourses, in contrast, can, drawing on Luhmann's theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1995), be understood as communicative arenas or systems of meaning, which are integrated by particular communicative codes, but never include full individuals. In this Luhmannite sense, populist movements may have a core membership whose thinking and communication do not go much beyond the boundaries of the populist communicative code, but, beyond these, populist discourse also caters for a wide range of other individuals who partially, occasionally or selectively sympathize with populist ideas, while at the same time, and in different discursive contexts, also maintain entirely different values and agendas. Populist discourses thus have the quality of a *communicative theme park* (Blühdorn, 2006, 2007b) used – with differing intensity – by diverse parts of advanced modern societies. And in that they allow, in the era of third modernity, for the articulation and experience of norms of autonomy and sovereignty, they have a significant social and political function.

For the mainstream of the existing literature that remains committed to the established norms of democracy and emancipation, this new perspective on populism may well be difficult to accept. But we believe that the model developed here provides an extremely

promising framework for rethinking populism and for new empirical studies which may build, for example, on Bull's work on the Italian Lega Nord (Bull, 2010). Reaching beyond this article's narrow focus on Euro-American right-wing populism, the model is, with some adaptation, probably also applicable to other varieties of populism and geographical areas. The established mainstream narratives on populism, on the other hand, and the refusal to engage with the realities conceptualized here as peak democracy, liquid identity and third modernity, arguably, only contribute to the maintenance of societal self-descriptions which are just as delusionary and self-deceptive as the right-wing rhetoric which they condemn.

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