

## CHAPTER 4

# Invisible Audience and Echo Chamber Effects

### 4.1 Introduction

Having extended Debord's theory of the spectacle to the self in the last chapter, emphasizing how neoliberal transformations dovetail with digital devices and structure a sociotechnical milieu that we call the society of the selfie, we now proceed to move from the self to the interpersonal. The two are deeply intertwined, and arguably inseparable, as many argue that the self is a construction built upon a foundation of communication with other persons. Below, we will begin with an explanation of this theory of the self as a reflection of the interpersonal, as it is found in the microsociological theorists who greatly influenced Goffman. From there, we will suggest that the world of the online spectacle fosters curious twists in the communicative relationship between self and other, even beyond the commerce between spectacular selves discussed in the previous chapter. In many situations, the relationship is between self and what we will refer to as the 'invisible audience.' Simultaneous with this trend, is a kind of discursive and normative narrowing, facilitated by the ubiquity of Flusserian surfaces in the online Debordian spectacle. Communication is narrowed in the direction of 'one-dimensionality' (Marcuse 1991), with nuanced understanding and moral complexity emaciated. We will also discuss normatively splitting

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and fragmenting tendencies of social media, where morally and discursively divergent communities solidify and insulate themselves from deliberation with dissenting views.

#### 4.2 Immediation of the Generalized Other

Goffman's notion of impression management comes from the tradition of symbolic interactionism in sociological theory, which stems back to the work of Charles Horton Cooley and his colleague George Herbert Mead, from the early twentieth century. In *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902), Cooley articulated the concept of the 'looking-glass self'. His theory states that the self-image is experienced as if a person were looking into a mirror that captures their mind, body and evaluations of their characteristics, value, and so on. Yet this sense of immediate and true reflection is a distortion. Really it is a person's projected approximation of what other people think about them. One always sees oneself as if looking through other people's eyes. Mead (1913) was interested in how individual social conduct was connected to a double transformation of objects into subjects and conversely: when one acts with reference to oneself as one does towards others, one becomes a subject; when one is affected by the impression of one's own conduct, one becomes one's own object. He transformed Cooley's concept into a theory about the internalization of the attitudes of the 'generalized other', which he considered to be integral and intertwined with not just self-consciousness, but with *consciousness* as such and the use of language or 'significant gestures' (Mead 1934). For Mead the self is in two dimensions: the 'I' being the self as an acting subject who perceives, chooses and has agency, and the 'me' being the self as an object to the 'I', an internal reflection of the attitudes of the generalized other. When self-conscious, the 'I' perceives the 'me'.

The generalized 'other' that determines the 'me' is a conglomeration of responses the individual has received from other people over the course of the individual's life, that becomes taken-for-granted within the fabric of the individual's reality. 'The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called "the generalized other"' (Mead 1934, 154). One does not see it or experience it as a 'thing', so much as it is always already present. It is through the 'me' that the attitudes of the generalized other become embodied in an object, but the 'I' experiences the 'me' internally, as if the attitudes represented are the organic persuasions of the 'I'. One experiences self-consciousness as if it is a direct, organic apprehension of the truth of the self, as if the 'me' that is experienced is unmediated. This is an illusion. The self that is experienced as a 'thing' intrinsically embodies the mediation of the experienced attitudes of the generalized other towards the self (Mead 1934).

Yet the generalized other is not one pool of static responses that manifest in a uniform way. It is a complex set of expectations or rather predictions, about

how others want one to act, and will respond if one takes this or that course of action. It shapes behaviour differently in different situations, according to social norms one has internalized from prior experience of others' reactions. What a person 'should' do in any given situation is not only based on patterns and predictions, but also imbued with moral force. People are normatively invested in the reactions of the generalized other in a deep way, in that the perceptions of the self are constituted out of this understanding of the self in relation to others.

Mead connects the co-development of the self and the generalized other to the individual's participation in rule-governed games. The self does not project itself into the other: the other and the self act together (Mead 1932, 169), since sociality is composed of interrelated acts in which the self occupies the attitudes of the others at the same time as it occupies its own attitude in the role of the other (Mead 1932, 86–87). In baseball, for example, each player bases their actions on the reasonable predictions of what other players will do, based on the rules of the game, and on the individual's position in relation to the other players. Yet in total, the generalized other becomes so broad and pervasive that it is typically experienced on the horizontal level, as an existential condition rather than a set of particular rules and responses. 'The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community' (Mead 1934, 154). In being 'the whole community', the generalized other is thus a placeholder for 'everyone', and in being everyone, it refers to no one in particular. The generalized other concept does not, however, refer to an objective, bounded community, much less to a universalistic claim about the individual's access to the perspective of 'everyone'. The concept refers to an internal process, akin to an inherent cognitive faculty that develops inextricably from social interaction, but not a 'thing out there' nor an objective standard of measurement (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007). Every generalized other is part useful, and part delusory. It is experienced as anonymous and invisible, and this grants it a kind of omniscience. One constructs it inevitably, composing it out of the collection of reactions from concrete others in one's own life, and due to the ability to take the role of the other in concrete encounters. Being anonymous and omniscient, it also tends towards the pretension of universality, i.e., 'what people think'. Still, expectations congregated in the generalized other are checked in real social encounters by how individuals actually respond to us. Neither the generalized other nor the self is ever fixed once and for all, as one is always taking in new information. Especially in 'late modern' times, the generalized other has to be understood as not fixed, but instead as something like 'a complex and untidy process of bricolage' (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007).

The generalized other is brought into every interaction, but it is also modified with every interaction. This is a mainstay of symbolic interactionist theory from Blumer to Goffman and beyond: every social interaction is an enactment *and a transformative negotiation* of the relational (and by extension individual) identities, roles and norms of the participants. It is common knowledge that people are more impressionable and more powerfully formed by their childhood

experiences than their adult ones, but this does not mean people are wholly *fixed* in identity or personality at any point in life. People are always learning from and adapting to their social circumstances as they vary and change.

The negotiation of self, other and relationship, the negotiation of expectations and revisioning of the generalized others is not an ordered set of distinct operations. It is a synchronous process that makes interpretation possible. For Kant, the manifold of sensory experience comes into existence with the capacity to unify it according to concepts or forms of thought under the regulatory principle of reason. And yet concepts can only be constructed on the condition of their being built using the sensory experience of reciprocal influences (*wechselseitiger Einfluß*) rooted in how the community (*Gemeinschaft*) of phenomena (*Erscheinungen*) are interrelated and affect the way thought conceives objects simultaneously (Kant 1956, B260, 261–263). Without negotiation and the dense/fluid exchange between consciousness and the objects (Kant uses the Latin word *commercium*, which emphasizes the principle of exchange in the perceptive movement), the existence of the manifold at the same time for the perceiving subject becomes an empty sensory experience. In a similar sense, for Mead the facility with symbolic communication renders conscious thought possible and constitutes the matter out of which it can form. Mead (1934) uses the realm of consciousness to the Kantian field of sensory experience via the 'I', whereas he refers self-consciousness to social relatedness and to the 'awakening in ourselves of the group of attitudes which we are arousing in others'. The negotiation can be more or less conscious in different ways and in different situations, but it runs very deep, to the point of being the building blocks out of which experience of reality is constructed. This model about identity negotiation and social cognition is founded on the privileging of face-to-face communication, where feedback loops containing complex mixtures of verbal and non-verbal (e.g., eye contact), conscious and unconscious communication, are rapidly expressed, delivered, received, reacted to, etc. The self-and-other unit in embodied co-presence is the basic unit of interaction, and as such, the self actively 'reads' the other all throughout the interaction and takes the signals from the other as an enormous component of the reality within which the self is framed and guided. Goffman (1963a, 17) says that the 'richness of information flow and facilitation of feedback' specific to this type of interaction 'provide enough structuring significance to provide one analytical rationale for [...] separate treatment'.

In written symbols, the depth of communication in embodied co-presence is deferred, and the missing information in the exchange has to be inferred on the part of the reader (the self) from stocks of past experience. And yet in this loss of a particular kind of depth, there are other gains. The history of communication technologies is largely a history of the expansion of opportunities for communication to occur across distances of space and time, which face-to-face communication does not allow. This brings people together in new and

important ways. Written symbols allow practical benefit, such as when supplying written instructions, or learning about the world. They also permit various forms of artistic expression, such as in poetry and literature – and these can convey a considerable amount of information and intimacy about the experiences, understandings and emotions of other persons, even hundreds or thousands of years after the words are written.

Social media can facilitate old friends being connected for much longer than they might otherwise. Whereas before the internet, a scarcity of ‘free time’ and an abundance of geographical distance might encourage a particular social connection to fade out to the point of dissolution more rapidly, social media can facilitate this sort of a connection to be maintained, even if at a low level of intensity, without having to set aside specific time or overcome travel limitations. Because staying connected with people requires less of an investment of time and energy, it is possible to stay connected with many more people. It is commonly understood that a person’s ‘friends’ on Facebook are by no means to be assumed to be ‘real’ friends; but conversely it is true that social media permits people to stay in some sort of regular contact with more friends and family than in days prior.

The connection across distance brings people together in profound ways, but it also drives them apart, in that mediated forms of communication always contain a loss of the particular kind of information and intimacy that face-to-face interaction naturally contains. And as mediated forms of communication become more readily available, easier to use and cheaper, people defer to them more readily not just in situations where people could not communicate otherwise, but in situations where face-to-face interaction would be almost as convenient, but not quite. This is also the case with the telephone – even with the capacity to call one another from virtually any location via mobile phones, text messages are extremely popular, and in some sense are used instead of using the phone to talk, which would include using and hearing human voices in an interactional exchange where timing, tone, and so on, still play an active role. In other ways, social media stands in where the telephone otherwise might. A ‘direct message’ will suffice instead of a phone call, for many communications.

The handwritten letter is often portrayed as an intimate form of communication, as a particularly heartening overcoming of distance through a very personal use of language. The typed letter, first on a typewriter and then on a word-processor, is given less of a romantic framing, but it is still seen as a form of putting effort into reaching out, perhaps because it requires some effort that is not expended regularly on any chance interaction. Letters are folded and addressed, stamps are applied, a mailbox is approached, etc. The world of email, on the other hand, is not granted any such nostalgic honour. It is still treated as purely utilitarian. It is a transformation in the technology of writing, since the new devices are not mere exterior tools, but they imply interior transformations of consciousness (Ong 2002, 80–82). Of course, the sight of a loved one’s

name popping up in bold in one's inbox can be an emotional experience, but as a medium, the email is not typically considered an intimate channel of connection. Regardless, in all forms of letter-writing, people have at least the potential to express their thoughts, emotions, intentions, meanings, and so on, at length and in some sense of approximately full complexity. In some sense, then, the loss of information and intimacy from speech to writing is partly made up for by the capacity for lengthy description and expression, and rapid transmission from one person to another.

The grammar of the digital milieu is a twist in human relatedness. The manifold stimulation of sensory experiences (Türcke 2002, 192–194) by digital surfaces counts on the aesthetic effect of images to project the self in spectacular form. Snapchat, Slingshot, Frankly Chat and Yik Yak promise the appeal of 'live stories' to 'share the moment': the ephemeral logic of exhibition, since the digital contents are erased after a short period, implies new forms of attention to stimuli among users (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck and Falk 2015). It also places an emphasis on privacy (Kotfila 2014) – Snapchat, for example, notifies the sender that someone else's screen captured a snap – as the user must share content from the present, that is, the system does not allow users to use files from the archives of the device. Snapchat maintains the expression from one person to another in a peculiar way: the audience is known and this can reinforce existing social ties (Campbell 2015), but this relationship between the sender and the audience is totally mediated by lived contents embedded in images and emotional moods, promoting the spectacular self in a digitally mediated person-to-person interaction. It is also a sense of connected presence (Liccope 2004) with the growing possibilities of disembodied co-present interactions via mobile images and text messaging. As a native mobile application, the very technical device of apps/networks like Snapchat reinforce the mirage of individuality, turning every individual and each residuum of the living subject into a producer of the reified spectacular self, projected in a narrative form in the stories promulgated through digital devices and social network.

#### 4.3 The Culture of the Newsfeed

On social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, a new form of written communication has developed in individual accounts: the tweet or status update. These are not only limited to being typically short if not necessarily short (as per Twitter's automatic restrictions). The status update is directed firstly to an invisible, diffuse audience. It is a remote audience that can potentially be affected as one's message participates among the rhapsody of updates and data in the audience's newsfeeds. These communications are part of a new style of spectacle that Debord could not have foreseen, since he was writing between the 1960s and 1980s, before the digital rose to become a central

organizing principle of social life. Yet the logic of the digital spectacle is consistent with the logic of Debord's original notion, i.e., the hegemony of media images and their mediating role in sociality, as well as the reconciliation of the very alienation they promote, through the dissolution of the distinction between spectacle and reality as the spectacle comes to saturate, define and even constitute reality. On social media, much content manifests in a stream, that is, an algorithmically guided exhibition of photos, videos and texts (Naaman, Boase and Lai 2010). The infinite scroll in the social media newsfeed facilitates a digital voyeurism that can drift through the inconceivably large volume of data and attention-seeking mechanisms (memes, images, sounds, etc.).

Group or mass emails already had the quality of impersonality, since they are expressions delivered out to several people at once, and hence the particular intimacy of one-to-one communication is sacrificed for the form of 'expression to audience.' Yet in the status update, this is taken even further. We are not intending to uphold only one-on-one or embodied co-present communication as a normative goal. There are limitations to these, and communication in different arrangements and through different media are not *ipso facto* inferior. Performance is an important part of social life, for instance lecturing before a class, giving speeches and performing stand-up comedy are not to be stereotyped as morally suspect or deprived. There is plenty about them to appreciate. The issue is that in-person, one-on-one communication has irreplaceable and important qualities that are specifically *not* there in the forums we are describing, and that their *conspicuous absence* indicates social pathology. It is not that everything should be one-on-one or in-person, it is just that one-on-one and in-person forms of communication would preferably not fade out of day-to-day life.

Group/mass emails are generated for specific purposes; there is no illusion that they are a 'normal' form of communication. They are also delivered to very specific and limited audiences, such as a few friends, family members or co-workers, or perhaps to a mailing list. There are some forms of mass email that are particularly impersonal and probably trump the status update in this sense, as they can be automatically generated for thousands of people (a.k.a. 'spam'). Yet again, these are generally seen as onerous exceptions to 'normal' communications. By contrast, tweets and status updates are routine by design. They are presented casually, almost as a running side narrative to accompany everyday life as they report on it, sent out to every person the user is connected to at once on their social media account, which for many users numbers in the hundreds or thousands. 'Lists' on Facebook can be used to choose sections to post to for different purposes, but the basic structure remains. Lists are not typically used to post status updates to a few family members, for instance. Group private messages are used for that. Even with lists, the style of expression and interaction is the same in kind, even if arguably variable in degree. Some status updates and comments can be lengthy, or link to lengthier blog posts, etc., but most are memes or short quips, or pointed, quickly delivered opinions.

On Twitter this is even more the case, as Facebook status updates can be long, but Tweets and their replies are necessarily short. Some people try to get around the limitations of Twitter by creating Tweet threads where they reply to themselves. Yet this is the exception rather than the standard.

Although less extreme as Facebook and Twitter, similar dynamics can be found on Instagram and Pinterest. The latter enables users to share photos and hobbies, promoting the spectacular self and the design of what a good life should be. Instagram is used to share photos and short videos with captions and comments that are directed as mostly outward facing (Schroeder 2016), that is, the content is public (although the user needs to register to comment) and is directed to an invisible audience. Like Twitter, Instagram is an asymmetric network: users do not need to follow the others back. It reinforces a sense of hierarchy in the production of the spectacular self and its metrics: profiles and users with many followers, especially the ones with much more followers than the number of the profiles followed by the profile, may be signs of relevance and popularity. The strong presence of selfies and self-portraits with friends and family among photos posted by individual users (Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati 2014) are cultural symbols of how a good life should be exhibited or how an imagined individuality can be affirmed. With the plethora of images, the spectacular self is prone to a pervasive visibility (Lupton 2015, 172–173): the representations of bodies as means for self-exhibition of physical contours are not a monopoly of websites devoted to sports, pornography or sexual fetishes, but also part of the most popular social networks streams containing all shapes and sizes of bodies.

The presence of ‘influencers’ in video-led platforms plays an important role in this asymmetry. The good influencer, with an audience of many followers, puts moral pressure on other users via the interaction between the influencer’s spectacular self and the reactions of the audience. Digital influencers diffuse contents to the generalized other at the same time as they enhance a kind of self-performance committed to build values and brands dedicated to specific segments of society. For Mead (1934), the generalized other is integral to the social process by which individuals interact and fractions of society exercise pressure over individual actions. In this sense, individual selves must be engaged in ‘cooperative processes’ in which the double correlation (the self as both subject and object of socialization) is produced in so far as individuals direct their behaviour accordingly. As subject, self-consciousness operates under the need for subjective freedom; as object, in the society of the selfie self-consciousness turns into a need to improve on one’s neoliberal impression management, which illustrates the reification and standardization of any attempt at promoting a singular individuality under the domination of digital capitalism. With the interactive tools of social media, these dynamics of correlation can produce a mirage of unmediated contact between users, although the interaction remains inextricable from mediation by the asymmetrical exhibitions of users’ spectacular selves.

In relation to the former traditional media of the culture industry, new social media reinforce the need for an ideology of authenticity. Against the distant contact between users and the mechanical qualities of their mediated gestures, 'authenticity' is sought out as a remedy for alienation via the promise of freedom of subjective expression against the dehumanizing experience of the sociotechnical world. Theodor Adorno (2003, 416–417) offers a useful analysis of this dynamic: if the search for authenticity attempts at an expression of true inwardness against outer artificialism and the 'frozen emanations' of social interactions, offering the 'pretense of the deep contact with the emotions (*Angerührtsein*)', it is as artificial (*standardisiert*) as the world that it negates. For him, this authenticity is a reified charge against reification (*Verdinglichung*) (Adorno 2003, 419–420). As Marwick points out, simulated 'back stage' access has become part of the typical style of celebrity and micro-celebrity online behaviour, the performance of 'authenticity' being an essential element of successful personal branding (Marwick and Boyd 2011b; Marwick 2013a).

The broad pretension of authenticity in the era of the digital spectacle is that true expressiveness will remedy the widespread sense of reification and lost intimacy. Yet in attempts to actualize this program over social media, even authentic intentions towards authenticity are coopted by the nature of the medium. Self-consciousness turns into self-deception (*Selbstbetrug*) and authenticity becomes ideology to the extent that it subverts itself. The gesture towards authenticity struggles against the growing powerlessness of the subject and the loss (*Verlust*) of its substance in a reified world subsumed under the instrumental imperatives of neoliberal impression management, but when social media is used to enact the struggle, the gesture must first acquiesce to what it portends to resist. In capitalist socialization, any reconciliation between the inner and outer worlds stumbles when against the impoverishment of the subject in light of the broader economic and social imperatives (Adorno 2003, 460–461). In other words, following Adorno's insights in connection to Mead's theory, with the generalized other the subject becomes an object (*Ding*) and a mass product (*Massenartikel*) within the spectacle.

#### 4.4 Invisible Audience

The shift from face-to-face communication to status updates – be they tweets, memes, Instagram photos, etc. – entails a loss of the kinds of information and intimacy particular to the feedback loops of embodied co-presence, and an increase in the projection of self in images, or in other words in spectacular surfaces. Returning to Mead (1934), the generalized other frames and influences every interaction, varying its assessments and dictates depending on context; and it does this from an invisible, omniscient place. The generalized other is projected, to some degree, onto every person one encounters, with some selection and modification depending on the definition of the situation and the

particularities of the individual other(s) present. As the generalized other frames the self and the individual other, so the individual other and the self's encounter with it may feedback into modifications, however small, in the generalized other. The generalized other is experienced through the particular other; it is mediated by concrete specificities. The context of interaction – the setting, for example – shapes what part of the generalized other's repertoire comes to weigh in on the interaction. Thus, the feedback loop between particular and general is constant and thorough, just as for Kant, concepts and sense-impressions co-determine one another as a condition of consciousness.

The status update radically separates the particular from the general, and substantially privileges the general. The general is posited prior to the particular, as the 'definition of the situation' – that is, the posting of the update for newsfeeds – never changes and there is no embodied human co-presence with particular faces and bodies that might mediate and inform the generalized other. Compared to face-to-face interaction, in the status update the other flesh-and-blood person is further away, actually invisible, and only implied with some degree of probability. In other words, the user can imagine somebody, in particular, if they want, but will the imagined other see the user's post? *Maybe*. Yet, the relationship to the generalized other is more direct, less mediated by the chaos of particular persons in embodied co-presence and all the signals that filter, refract and reflect back upon the voice of the generalized other. The generalized other was always invisible, but in face-to-face communication this invisibility was coupled with the visibility of other flesh-and-blood individuals. In the status update, there is no eye contact, no body language, no particularly, no co-presence, embodied or disembodied. The individual expresses first to the immediate generalized other, second to whatever particular individuals happen to invisibly view the expression in their own places and times. In losing the feedback loops of co-present interactions, the status update is a one-way communication rather than a moment in a flowing exchange. It is an expression delivered to an invisible audience, an attempt to be witnessed by representatives of the generalized other, a gamble in hopes of the payoff of likes and replies. The experience is characterized by the *expression* of the message sender, as there is no receiver other than the invisible audience, more or less haunted by an 'imagined audience' (Marwick and Boyd 2011a), which may be informed vaguely through a broad sense of who is on one's friends list, and/or of the users whose posts scroll by on one's newsfeed. In the action of expression, the message is not sent to any particular receiver – it is simply sent *out*.

This is not to say that the status update remains perpetually an isolated, unidirectional communication. In some cases, the invisible audience only responds with silence, yet even this is a response – a signal of disinterest or a product of the reified communication dependent on the hierarchies and selections induced by algorithms of social media (according to individual preferences, profiles with which individuals are most likely to interact, etc.). In this case,

there is a peculiar position of the generalized other in the mediating, alienating and hegemonizing stylings of the Debordian spectacle that manifest on digital platforms: the specific audience is unknown, especially in social networks like Twitter and Facebook, but the *potential* audience *may* be known according to hashtags and the algorithmic selection of shared interests between the producer and the many invisible audience members (Bernstein et al. 2013). Yet in many cases, and in fact in the expected or at least attempted scenario, some number of persons likes or comments, at some point, perhaps within a few seconds, minutes or hours. An exchange of comments may ensue, each one mirroring to a large extent the character of the status update. In the case of the tweet, every comment is also its own tweet. Thus, a process of social feedback is facilitated, just in comparison to face-to-face interaction, carrying – as mentioned above – a significant loss of information and delivered within a format directed towards the invisible audience as much as – if not more so – than to individual persons in the exchange. Every comment arises out of the invisible audience since this is always a fundamental experiential context of the newsfeed. At times something rapid enough to fabricate a flow of communication is enacted, but in general the situation is that each like or comment is delivered as an *isolated expression*, rather than a moment in embodied co-present dialogue. At any moment, comments could cease, as there is no ‘hello’ ritual, no ‘goodbye’ ritual, and no implicit consensus around communication norms. Every silence between comments could just as easily be the end of the ‘encounter’, and the generalized anonymity of the invisible audience resumes its omniscient character.

The invisible audience is omniscient in the newsfeed, and it is more directly present than in face-to-face communication that is haunted by the genres of the generalized other. Despite its pervasive presence, and despite the lack of synchronous social feedback where the generalized other is renegotiated as it comes to bear on every situation, the invisible audience of the newsfeed is actually *more* malleable than the generalized other of face-to-face interaction. In day-to-day life, if someone is not alone, they will invariably be in social settings that lie somewhere on a continuum between what we will call *closed* and *open settings*.

On the closed end of the spectrum are settings where through pact or contract, one can reasonably expect to encounter the same persons there upon repeated visits, which are integrated in life’s routine rhythms. These settings include the household, the factory, main office buildings, schoolhouses, and so on. In such places, interactional patterns develop into predictable, sustained relationships, and the individual has their place/identity within a set of social relations that can evolve over time, but generally speaking only changes slowly. These settings are more prone than open settings to involve what Goffman (1963a, 199) refers to as ‘tight’ social gatherings, as well as ‘focused interaction’, meaning ‘the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention’ (Goffman

1963a, 24). The individual can exercise some agency and influence the relations in such spaces, but cannot typically exert control per se over the social environment except by choosing not to be present, and/or to break the pact or contract, such as in the case of family separation, leaving unexpectedly from home, school or work, taking a different job, dropping out of high school, etc.

On the open end of the spectrum are settings where people participate without explicit pacts or contracts to return at any particular time. These include free public spaces like roads, sidewalks and parks, and are prone to contain what Goffman (1963a, 198) refers to as 'loose' social gatherings. There are certain ways these areas might be expected to be used, but the style is typically more informal than in tight social gatherings in closed settings. Social expectations are less binding here, and who will be there at any given time, and what their relationships will be, is fundamentally unpredictable. Especially in urban settings, this openness translates into general anonymity, and so to some extent, interactions become predictable because they are typically short, pragmatic and ritualized. There is little information exchanged or negotiated about the identities of self and other, beyond visual cues like clothing and whatever body language a person typically adopts in their public persona. The scenes tend towards 'unfocused interactions' (Goffman 1963a, 24), meaning 'the kind of communication that occurs when one gleans information about another person present by glancing at him, if only momentarily, as he passes in and out of one's view'. Between the two ends, but closer to the open end are public or private spaces where participation is tantamount to provision or consumption, such as at the movie theatres, restaurants, convenience stores and sports stadiums. In these situations, embodied co-presence is episodic and relatively unpredictable, but roles are a little more circumscribed, and people will typically be bifurcated into sellers and buyers, or performers and spectators, etc., with plenty of clarity about the respective roles of either side. In these open settings, if someone participates as a consumer or spectator, it is relatively easy to opt out, and maybe never come back. Still, a person cannot decide who will be there with them. One can choose a convenience store, and even to some extent choose the clerk to interact with; but one cannot choose who will patron this store, nor who will work at the store. People can find a place in the setting or avoid the setting. They cannot dictate the setting.

The newsfeed is considerably different from closed and open physical social settings. It is something of a nested indeterminate sociality within a broadly determined context. In other words, when a user posts a status update, they cannot control or predict with any certainty who might like, comment on or share their post. So far, this is like an open setting. Yet like a closed setting, the invisible audience of the newsfeed is largely limited by one's own friends list, which is primarily stable, or at least predictable and knowable. Unless a conscious alternation is made, the invisible audience is made of the same collection of persons, who the user has vetted to constitute their generalized other.

In the larger context here, participants are fixed, but in the immediate context of the action of the status update, there is typically no coherent 'situation' or 'social occasion' (Goffman 1963a, 18) to guide interaction norms other than the experience of expressing out towards the invisible audience. The user cannot help but fill the glaring absence with an imagined audience. In so doing, the user partially avoids the indeterminacy and inhumanness of the experience; and yet this imaginary audience is always that – an imaginary presence that can only haunt the immediate and irrevocable experience of absence.

It is easy to select in and out human elements that users wish to be in their invisible audience – sending friend requests to opt someone in, blocking to opt someone out. By definition, it is possible to use any criteria to determine who will constitute one's audience. In corporate social media, like Workplace, this universe is more limited, since the spectacular self is constructed in a strictly controlled virtual space composed only by employees. In other platforms, like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the list tends to be broader, since people can use it for co-workers, colleagues, friends, family, or some combination. While some users limit their lists in these specific ways, the most common way is something of a haphazard combination from these various categories, with some friends of friends, friends of friends of friends, and more or less random people included. It is not all chaos though. The typical invisible audience is culled in order to reflect back the responses the user wants to receive from others. In Mead's description of the generalized other, the individual is subject to the audience and the reactions of the audience shape the individual's expressions. In culture of the newsfeed this dynamic is preserved but it is synthesized with another: the individual user's audience is subject to the user, and the reactions of the audience are filtered according to the user's tastes and comfort. In the former case, the generalized other shapes the individual. In the latter case, the individual user also shapes the invisible audience.

The entanglements between the invisible audience and the generalized other is tangible in live streaming – a spectacular format that encompasses the main features of the society of the selfie. The role of live streaming has increased in digital platforms like YouTube and Twitch in the wake of the quarantines during the COVID-19 pandemic (Laubier 2021). This format of self-broadcasting deals with two important dimensions. On the one hand, the democratization of who can provide television-like content (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). On the other hand, a new kind of value generation grounded in new consumption needs that appear in the spectacular surfaces according to the particular activity of each streamer, reinforcing a sense of proximity between the streamer and the generalized audience as well as the figure of the streamer as a 'partner' who earns a share of the ad revenue (Hamilton et al. 2014). It reinforces the emphasis of the individual as a producer and entrepreneur of himself, above all, with the projection of his own spectacular self and abilities in a supposedly direct, authentic contact that is grounded in a lived, on the ground experience.

The spectacular self is thus formed as the invisible audience is formed, and one has considerable discretion in both cases. This ‘everyone else’ that seems to represent the opinions of ‘the world’ is largely the user’s own concoction. In this way users can construct a protected world where they are seen the way they want others to see them, where others agree with the user’s ideas, and where the ‘looking-glass’ aspect of the ‘looking-glass self’ is always already what the user wants it to be. This is not a fantasy world per se, but it is a unique world contoured to one’s own imagination, desires and comforts; and as it poses as universal, it is actually very particular, providing the comfortable illusion that ‘everyone else’ (or everyone who counts, everyone ‘real’) thinks and responds more or less how one wants them to. This is the *echo chamber effect*.

#### 4.5 Echo Chamber Effects

The term ‘echo chamber’, seminally dealt with in the works of Cass Sunstein (2009, 2018), is commonly used to refer to the worlds of social and ideological similarity that people form, nowadays generally on social media, through excluding voices that present opinions that diverge too much from their own. The echo chamber is a social space of discursive homophily, created intentionally by a person or persons working in concert, selecting voices to listen to that tout agreeable ideas to one’s own. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) describe a conservative echo chamber guided by Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, etc., where not only are dissenting opinions excluded, but they are also categorically discounted and framed in polarizing terms, as a force of opposition to those in the chamber who are framed in a positive light. Nguyen (2020, 146) defines an ‘echo chamber’ as ‘an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members’.

The terrain of the term overlaps with the related terms ‘epistemic bubble’ and ‘filter bubble’, which it is often conflated with in popular discourse. Nguyen (2020, 143) defines an ‘epistemic bubble’ as ‘a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission’. By contrast to an echo chamber, which is as much a social structure as a mechanism of discursive and normative constraint, an epistemic bubble refers to a horizon of knowledge that has unknown gaps but does not necessarily result from a conscious inclusion/exclusion process. While the echo chamber is robust to outside views, and is even actively policed by persons within it, the epistemic bubble can be more easily popped, simply by exposing the inhabitant of the bubble to previously omitted viewpoints. ‘Filter bubble’ refers to the results of algorithmic selection processes on social media, whereby the user is exposed to images and messages that the user has already indicated assent to (Pariser 2011). An epistemic bubble is likely to contain a filter bubble, but its construction is not restricted to social media and its algorithms; it can be integrally connected to broad ‘social sorting’ (Bishop 2009) processes. The chamber

and bubbles overlap in the sense that they all point to a retreat – either deliberate or accidental – away from difference and dissonance in the culture of the newsfeed. The key difference between the epistemic bubble and the echo chamber is in the intentionality and dogmatism of the latter.

We should not overestimate the influence and ontological status of ‘echo chambers’. Recent empirical research (Dubois and Blank 2017; Dutton et al. 2017; Shore et al. 2018; Sindermann et al. 2020) indicates that many users get information from many sources, that is, the majority of individuals are not mechanically dependent on only one channel. Yet we should not ignore the tendencies that the term ‘echo chamber’ is typically invoked to describe. If the view of the social media terrain as a collection of hardwired echo chambers is reductively pessimistic, the view of this terrain as full of reasonable dialogue, reflexivity and individuation of ideas falling into the myth of pluralism and reasonable behaviour is naively optimistic. Numerous studies have revealed echo chamber effects in both Twitter and Facebook (Guo et al. 2020; Usher et al. 2018; Jacobson et al. 2016; Del Vicario et al. 2016; Cossard et al. 2020). Far from a utopian deliberative arena based on a reasonable forum, social media are mostly composed by contents users who select and agree. In this sense, much more than an algorithmically constructed bubble, the echo chamber effect deals with the way sociality and thought are constructed in social media.

Rather than viewing an ‘echo chamber’ as a ‘thing’, and wrestling with the question of whether it exists or not, it is more accurate and useful to look at the ‘echo chamber effect’ (Di Fonzo 2011). Viewed as enclaving tendencies rather than delimited rooms, echo chamber effects can be understood in a more diffuse sense, where they can be more or less prevalent in different virtual contexts, and among different subpopulations (Sindermann et al. 2020). Here, TikTok is a good example, since it operates through short videos and machine learning, employing constant interaction between the users and the system to generate an extreme personalization of contents (Brennan 2020). The echo chamber effect here is amplified increasingly with increased use of the platform since individual preferences are available faster due to the feedback system. Efforts like those of Chkhartishvili and Kozitsin (2018), who have developed a metric for measuring the echo chamber effect, may be more helpful than attempting to delineate a uniform notion of exactly how powerful and encompassing ‘they’ are.

To speak of ‘echo chamber effects’ it is not necessary to posit ontologically separate groups or enclaves, with bounded membership, absolutely homogeneous expression of beliefs and complete immersion of participants. Instead, one might imagine a rhizomatic dimension of echo chamber effects running throughout the general social (media) terrain, punctuated with condensations of greater or lesser density and intensity in different places. In this image, consider echo chamber effects as always coexisting and interacting with dimensions of other tendencies, such as open dialogue, reflexivity, diversity of viewpoints, and so on. Our primary purpose in this book is to analyse the ways that social media culture may play a part in the social pathologies that manifest

in the crisis of liberal democracy, and as this is our main purpose, we will focus here on echo chamber effects rather than other, contrary tendencies.

Returning to the individual user, who projects a generalized other onto an invisible audience, an area of great power for the echo chamber effect is in bolstering the individual's normative solipsism. The user can craft their audience and newsfeed so that others will evaluate the user based upon criteria that the user is comfortable with, and the user can craft their own image for their spectatorship, in order to live up to these evaluative criteria as much as possible. One cannot entirely blind or hypnotize other users. There is a bare minimum one cannot erase, where one is always subject to the threat that one might not measure up. In the newsfeed, the user can craft their spectacular self according to what they want to think of themselves. The user can craft the invisible audience so that the latter also will think well of the user to the extent that the user conveys the image aspired to. And yet there are limits to this malleability – if the user were entirely in control, the need for impression management would be less. The capacity to select one's audience does not go so far as to eliminate social anxieties and insecurities related to body image, for example. Research has shown that social media use can exacerbate such anxieties and negative perceptions among young women (Fardouly 2015), since the typical tendency is to compare one's organic self, 'flaws' and all, with the carefully filtered spectacular selves other users project.

#### 4.6 Splitting Public Sphere

Echo chamber effects include defensive mechanisms which help insulate the user from the potential to take seriously divergent views. One such mechanism is the reinforcement of trust in the in-group (those who think like the user), and of distrust in the out-group (those who think differently from the user). Nguyen (2020, 147) also discusses what he calls disagreement-reinforcement mechanisms: 'members can be brought to hold a set of beliefs such that the existence and expression of contrary beliefs reinforces the original set of beliefs and the discrediting story', for example in Endre Begby's (2017) notion of 'evidential pre-emption' – if outsiders' responses are predicted and cast as erroneous before they are encountered, insiders may be prone to discrediting the others' responses immediately when encountered on the basis of the accuracy of the prediction rather than due to careful consideration. The exposition to the generalized other and the manifold stimuli of the surfaces and declarations coming from groups and profiles of users who cluster because they already agree, reinforce a partisan sense of position before any debate starts. It is easier to inflate an individual position and act as if it could count on an amount of (sometimes irrational) arguments, personal beliefs and data. In other words, the echo chamber effect is not a technological determinism, it is not connected to the total administration of technology over human conducts;

instead, it is about the way relatedness deals with the proliferation and filters of arenas for individual self-expression that characterize the clustered individual experiences of self, other, politics, morality and life itself under the Debordian spectacle in the digital age. The echo chamber effect is thus not totalitarian, but it does narrow horizons and generate mirages.

The narrowing began, however, long before Web 2.0. In a chapter called 'The Closing of the Universe of Discourse', of his famous book from 1964 called *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse described mechanisms by which language had come to portray a simplified view of reality that seemed to leave no space for questioning or dissent. It is not so much that dissent is decried, as that dissent appears irrational if not entirely nonsensical and impossible from within the dominant discourse. Among the mechanisms he described are, for instance, the common use of acronyms that mask complexity; the over-use of hyphenated language, etc. especially in joining together aspects of technology, politics and military; a language of 'concreteness' that tends to conflate 'the thing and its function'; and particularly relevant to the world of social media memes, *images are substituted for concepts*.<sup>1</sup> The pervasive effect of images implies a peculiar form of engagement and even rationality. If the concept designates an abstract representation grounded in a process of reflection (Marcuse 1991, 108), the predominance of one-dimensional thought deprives this rationality of any critical potential, since reflection may be damaged due to its confinement to operational terms. In the 1980s, Neil Postman (1985/2006) offered a similar diagnosis in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman located the narrowing in relation to the inflated position of television in society. He suggested the logic of entertainment was infecting other areas of life (e.g., religion, education, etc.), and critical reflection was phasing out as people were instead inundated with images. Politics was reduced to entertainment, and people's capacity to think about and discuss politics shrunk in concert. Now in the age of social media, psychological research on internet users indicates they develop skills at multi-tasking and visual-spatial understanding at the expense of their capacity for critical and creative insight (Carr 2020; Greenfield 2009).

Marcuse's concern with the ubiquity of images overlaps considerably with Flusser's concern with the ubiquity of surfaces, but they should not be reduced to one another. Instead, as with Debord, we find in Marcuse a useful pairing with Flusser to supply a broader theory of the society of the selfie. Marcuse's concern was largely of the domination of positivist 'technological rationality' and the closing off of other dimensions of interpretation, awareness and contextualization. For Flusser, the narrowing is not explicitly complicit with technological rationality. Its primary dynamic is in the erosion of depth, meaning, movement and relation beyond the image or surface in its form of appearance. In this sense, while Marcuse's theory of one-dimensionality is still useful, Flusser's notion is more flexible to denote the potential for the narrowing to occur for different persons or collections of persons in different ways. If 'narrowing' implies a centre of the narrowing as a kind of telos, then – contrary to

Marcuse – we suggest that the narrowing occurs in relation to multiple centres or teloses. Normative conclusions are not all the same, they remain multiple, and in fact their multiplicity is in some sense amplified by the narrowing. What is similar across communities of belief is the moral and discursive insulation of each from the others involved in the common narrowing process.

With social media, the narrowing takes a novel turn. With television, the spectator is passive, and in its first few decades, the selection of shows and channels was constrained. The trend was towards people passively soaking in the same images. With social media, the spectator is also a participant, and the patterns of each individual's participation shapes the personalized collection of images they encounter. The algorithms that facilitate this tendency thus feed into the narrowing but with the internet, the user shapes the horizon at the same time that the horizon shapes the user. The echo chamber's narrowing mechanism is towards solipsistic mirage that allows one not to feel challenged on the level of one's values. Everyone's horizon of normative deliberation is narrowed here, to the point where motion is increasingly unnecessary, to the point of growing 'one-dimensionality'. The echo chamber effect, especially under the aegis of algorithms based on what one likes or follows/unfollows, is part of a personalization of communication standards described by Marcuse (1991, 94–96) as the *effect of familiarity*. For him, spectacular language is based on the authoritarian identification between person and function. The superimposed, standardized selections of social media and the relationship with the generalized other, in Marcusean terms, turn the interactions dependent on functions and images that are presented and fit 'especially for you', that is, it 'promotes the self-identification of the individuals with the functions they and the others perform'. This expression of one-dimensional thought deprives critique and repels the recognition of the factors behind the facts; the abridgement of the concept in simultaneous images, according to preferences and hierarchies in social media, implies the loop of self-validating thoughts immune against contradiction (Marcuse 1991, 100).

For Marcuse, one-dimensional discourse was part of a larger process encompassing politics, psychology and culture in advanced industrial society – all areas converging in one-dimensional directions, towards 'total administration'. Rather than being administered by 'the capitalist class' in any conscious way, the one-dimensional reality serves the perpetuation of bureaucratic capitalism but has no nameable source in any particular person or organization. Marcuse's work came before the postmodern era, and while much of his analysis still resonates today, the situation is different in the twenty-first century. For example, it is still possible to argue that popular media shapes public opinion (McCombs and Valenzuela 2020), as Marcuse indicated, but today there is a wealth of independent media available online, that is clearly not co-opted and directed by the preferred discourses of a small society of big business elites and establishment politicians. Users have many diverse perspectives at their

fingertips, and with blogs and YouTube, anyone can become an independent source of political commentary. In this sense, claiming that all independent media is somehow enlisted in the preservation of bureaucratic capitalism is clearly reductive. Yet in some sense the tendency towards one-dimensionality is as strong as ever, via memes, hashtags, slogans and language that carries hidden presuppositions and leaves little to no space for reflection or dissent. Considering the echo chamber effect, individuals construct their own idiosyncratic horizons; but when individual horizons are similar, they operate centripetally, while when they are different, they operate centrifugally. A simple analogy: the tendency is something like a reverse magnetism, where similar 'charges' gravitate together, and opposing 'charges' pull further apart.

Yet there is an added dynamic, that centripetal horizons are in discursive intercourse and join together to participate in what we might call 'homophilic assemblages' characterized by one-dimensional communication and presupposed consensus. In the mid-twentieth century, Marcuse denoted a 'closing universe of discourse'. Let us put Marcuse's notion into dialogue with Debord's theories. The Marcusean 'universe of discourse' is, at minimum, a collection of dominant frames and narratives. The Debordian 'spectacle' is the intermingled mass of media images that constitutes the dominant frames and narratives through which we experience and understand the world. To give a Marcusean slant to Debordian theory then, we might say that the spectacle is not only a hegemonizing force. It is also a force of narrowing. Experience and understanding are at once mediated by the spectacle and atrophied due to the limited range of conceptualization permitted by the mediating spectacle. Marcuse's work on one-dimensionality and Debord's work on spectacle shared much in common. Both works reflected on the same broad social developments, and both were inspirational to left-wing activists in the 1960s. Both also predate the rise of the digital and social media, and so could not have foreseen the new significance of social dynamics particularly marked in digital platforms.

In the era of digital media, the diffuse circulation of data promotes two simultaneous motions that constitute a different-but-related scenario from the one described above: (a) fusing together individual horizons into homophilic assemblages, and (b) pulling apart and isolating these homophilic assemblages to render them functionally incommensurate. In the society of the selfie, it is maybe more accurate to denote a *splitting public sphere*. We mean 'splitting' here both in the sense of the physical analogy of branching, ramifying, etc., and in the psychoanalytic sense of black-and-white thinking regarding self and other. In object relations theory, 'splitting' is a defence mechanism whereby to the splitter, a person is either all good or all bad (Fairbairn 1994). In this sense, when we speak of 'splitting', we mean a simultaneous process of fragmenting and narrowing.

When one ventures into a context away from their accustomed homophilic assemblages, one carries their personalized horizon with them, which is based

on the affirming and reaffirming experience of encountering similar opinions to one's own as a typical state of affairs. In situations where people express divergent views on a thread of comments to a post, productive dialogue should not be anticipated. The unlimited reactions and responses expressed become a rhapsody of views that are not able to reflect about others' opinions other than clear derision or agreement. It is an exhibition of largely incommensurate positions. Siva Vaidhyanathan (2018, 8) says 'the very structure of a Facebook post and the threads of comments that run beneath it resist full and calm consideration. Posts and comments are designed to respond to just the comment directly above'. While it is possible to tag multiple people within one's comment, the basic structure is that each comment only refers to one post or other comment. 'They are nested to inhibit any member of a discussion from considering the full range of responses. Participants are encouraged to respond rashly, so they often respond rudely'.

In this splitting public sphere, rather than closing into a docile, consenting, homogenous population, there are an array of solipsistic social and political fragments with heated differences, talking past one another. As people become used to their homophilic assemblages and personalized echo chamber effects, they tend to become more intolerant of voices who diverge (Stroud and Muddiman 2013) from their horizons of normality. Engaging in civil debate less, people publicly *express* their opinions more instead. To express as one wants to, without seeing one's audience, increasingly becomes the rule, and thus the expectation and perhaps even the preference. The conviction that the freedom of individual expression trumps the responsibility to be considerate of one's audience, allow extreme and angry public venting to become normalized and even defended as a moral imperative to permit and to practice, e.g., the popularity of the slogan 'fuck your feelings' among Trump supporters around the time of the United States 2016 presidential election (Hong 2020). Voiced disagreement communicated towards those one disagrees with does not disappear, of course. Rather, it becomes less rational, more heated and more derogatory. The angry monologue declaring a group of others monolithically to be depraved, idiotic, duped, evil or biologically inferior, becomes increasingly common. After continuous frequent exposure to the 'flaming' reactions of others online, individuals become more likely to exhibit the same verbally aggressive tendencies (Hmeilowski et al. 2014). Friendships are lost and family members are disowned because disagreement cannot be managed and need not be tolerated (Smith et al. 2019). And the experience of the intolerance of the other side towards one's own, can only feed into an inflated sense that *they* – the monolith on the other side – are irrational, hateful, etc. (Yudkin et al. 2019), and so must not be tolerated. In a back-and-forth cycle, the spreading assumption heads towards a self-fulfilling prophecy between diverging groups who more and more become opposing and intolerant groups (Ahler 2014).

The splitting and fomenting work of the authoritarian public figure and propagandist – or 'agitator' (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949; Sipling 2021) – is

accomplished from the ground up in this case. This is what makes cultural sabotage through online trolling, etc., so effective. It is like poking a hungry, angry dog. Send out an extreme, divisive meme, and people will willingly champion it or attack it viciously, in effect legitimizing it to those who would champion it (Seymour 2019, 2020). In such a state people are highly susceptible to authoritarian rhetoric and propaganda. Social media per se is not responsible for authoritarianism. The reified relations of the society of the selfie, instead, play an important role in the spread of contemporary forms of authoritarianism. Agitation and black-and-white thinking are particularly prone to the mobilization of popular resentment against the elites and the perceived inequalities and injustices of material life.

In Chapter 6, we will explicate this at greater length. For now, recent events in Brazil can provide one empirical illustration of this hyper-politicization of digital media. Since the far-right government was elected in 2018, the president Jair Bolsonaro decided to open a personal account on Facebook to give a live broadcast about his political views every Thursday night. Those broadcasts have been transmitted regularly and they are marked by the performance of authenticity. The president tries to convince the audience about his independence in relation to the political elites and the artificial establishment of mass media, using simple language and allegedly expressing his true feelings and emotions with his invisible audience. These live broadcasts construct a popular digital milieu for far-right militants to express their views as being a space for unmediated contact between the leader and the people. The comments are open to all users and the conflict of homophilic assemblages becomes tangible: the spectacular appearance of individuals is guided by opinions that are already closed and are only exposed either to confront the opponent or to reinforce a solipsist logic that confirms narrow subjective beliefs prior to any rational debate. In this sense, the plethora of meanings and echo chamber effects collide in a rhapsody of stigmas and moral offenses.

Yet the digital political strategy of the far-right is not confined to the spectacular exhibition of the government via the construction of the image of the president as a humble man. In light of the presence of right-wing extremists in social media, the Supreme Court began an investigation against the ‘cabinet of hate’, a group connected to the president and his family that is responsible for promoting hate and political attacks via profiles and fan pages on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Facebook and Instagram, moreover, decided to remove 73 accounts of the ‘cabinet of hate’, associated with the spread of hate speech and political attacks against the establishment (democratic institutions, mainstream opposition, journalists, etc.). The same cabinet is also investigated by the Supreme Court and the Federal Police – and was the target of an operation for the search and apprehension of alleged criminal material – due to the mass spread of ‘fake news’, attacks and threats since 2018 via WhatsApp and social media, comprising a complex network of technical and financial support that counts on businessmen, digital influencers, far-right politicians and far-right militants.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Instead of being guided by reasonable consensus, the public sphere is much more fragmented in the society of the selfie (Vaidhyathan 2018). At the same time as spectacular culture has been grounded in the unification under market pressures, it also delivers 'tribalization'. It implies a rhapsody of assemblages (much of them transitory and volatile) of groups, orchestrated hate attacks, hacker activities and single-issue campaigns that populate social media, online forums, blogs and stream channels (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997). These are cultural and political signs of the fluid and fuzzy boundaries of a de-centred public life (Johnson 2013), in which the hegemony of mass media coexist with plural micro-groups and individual producers of spectacular content.

Since the 1990s, some postmodern theories and liberal theories have celebrated the cultural force of micro-publics, based on the progress of multicultural society and new forms for self-expression and difference paved by a conjunction of liberal democracy and the global market (Brunner 1995). The new forms of cultural consumption were understood as a self-realization and the participation in the democratic promises embedded in digital media (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2007; Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013). It would be the end of grand narratives with the supposed implosion of the big questions of modernity and their unified public narratives grounded in nation, progress, reason, class struggle, race, etc. Urban tribes were the apex of multicultural society and the many cultural references for individuals devoted to banality and media consumption (Maffesoli 1990, 94–96). When it comes to digital communication, it is argued that it constituted the subject in ways other than that of traditional modern institutions, affecting the ways identities are structured: the postmodern subject would be unstable, multiple, diffuse and not attached to grand narratives (Poster 1995).

If subjective transformations grasp important changes in the life-forms of contemporary capitalism, the postmodern pluralism and the celebration of micro-publics seem to stumble when up against its effects in light of the disaffection with liberal democracy expressed in extremism, and far-right and fascist filter bubbles that bases identity politics on ethnicity, nation, moral order, romantic past and stigma on the difference. The contemporary force of ultra-nationalist groups, which diffuses aversion to racial minorities, counts on the discourse of purity centred in an exclusive notion of polity comprised by ethnic unity (Valluvan 2019). In other words, the appeal of far-right and even conservative politics tries to re-centre public life around key elements of the grand narratives of modernity. Instead of a resurgence of the old order amidst the new, these micro-publics that counter the democratic liberal societies have been present in the internet since the 1990s – they are a byproduct of the society of the selfie, just as multicultural promises are. In contexts of crisis and strong modernization moves, those groups have gained visibility and have been normalized in the society of the selfie with hate groups and projects for attacks in

Italy (Frate 2021), mass messages systems with neo-Nazi content in Germany (Jordans and Rising 2021), threats to leftist politicians in Brazil (Rupp 2021), videos with swastikas in live transmissions in Portugal (Henriques 2021), etc.

These political strategies count on echo chamber effects and black-and-white thinking made visible in the splitting public sphere, but also on the catching effect of their messages disseminated out indefinitely through the invisible audience beyond friends lists, via hashtags, memes, gifs, montages, fake news and sensationalism. Propagandistic images proliferate via multiple platforms, as rational debate is reduced and moral complexity is harder to come by and easier to avoid. Spectacular selves, seeking to affirm and impose themselves (with retweets, sharing, avatars, strong opinions used to ‘slay’ and impact, etc.), are productive units of contents connected to the new forms of propaganda and polarization. The susceptibility of digital media to authoritarian rhetoric is a new frontier of social and political conflict as well as a cultural sign of alienation, which goes hand in hand with the search for authenticity in the reified terrain of the society of the selfie.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *One-Dimensional Man* was published just three years before *The Society of the Spectacle*, and in these works Marcuse and Debord share a kinship in their analyses of consumer society and the closing down of consciousness, and in their Hegelian-Marxist roots.