The metamorphosis of autonomy in the digital sphere: Implications for the eco-emancipatory project

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Abstract

Environmental politics are in crisis. As the window for mitigating lasting ecological damage closes, eco-emancipatory efforts become increasingly marginalised. This article argues that an investigation through the lens of autonomy can shed new light on the crisis of the eco-emancipatory project (EEP) in today's late-modern, digitally mediated and repoliticised societies. Moving beyond narratives of autonomy's demise in the digital age, the article explores how autonomy has been reconfigured in the digital sphere into what can be termed *hyper-autonomy* – self-legislation rooted in trivialised authenticity (Taylor) while lacking solidarity and compromise. It concludes that hyper-autonomy reinforces authoritarian positions, aligning more with the exclusionary logic of the far right than with eco-critical calls for collective self-limitation. While this investigation deepens the perception of the EEP as anachronistic, it also offers a platform to rethink the future of autonomy in environmental politics, navigating between adaptation and resistance.

Keywords

Autonomy, digital sphere, environmental politics, social media, trivialised authenticity

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Environmental politics in crisis

Established environmental politics are in crisis. As the impacts of the climate crisis – droughts, floods and rising heat-related deaths – become ever more apparent, Western democracies appear to be retreating from policies aimed at securing a transformation to sustainability. Rather, they seem to be actively defending their *sustained unsustainability* (e.g. Blühdorn, 2016), protecting the prosperity of the few at the expense of the many (Brand & Wissen, 2021). The window of opportunity to mitigate lasting ecological damage is rapidly closing and the legacy of fossil modernity (Folkers, 2021) is proving irreversible. As a result, the normative framework of sustainability – which aims to ensure consistent and sufficient opportunities for development and action for present and future generations (e.g. Neckel, 2018) – is discussed as outdated (Adloff, 2024; Blühdorn, 2024; Folkers, 2022). Instead, emphasis is shifting towards a resilient, that is, adaptive future (cf. Sorg and Staab in this Special Issue). In essence, the very notion of an open future, central to the concept of sustainability, is becoming ever more 'clogged' by the lingering presence of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the proliferation of pesticides and plastics, nuclear waste, and the depletion of marine ecosystems (cf. Folkers, 2022, p. 247; cf. Zierott et al. in this Special Issue). Moreover, environmental politics rooted in the emancipatory thought of *ecologism* (Dobson, 1990; Eckersley, 1992)), which 'holds that a sustainable and fulfilling existence presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world, and in our mode of social and political life' (Dobson, 1990, p. 2) – hereafter referred to as *eco-emancipatory project* (EEP), have been increasingly marginalised (Eversberg et al., 2024). Its recent imaginary of a socio-ecological transformation – grounded in a 'radical semantics' (Brand, 2014) that challenges ecological modernisation and advocates a good life for all within planetary boundaries (e.g. Brand et al., 2021) – faces mounting opposition, calling its legitimacy and influence into question.

Focusing on the EEP in environmental politics, which is the subject of debate in this Special Issue, this article argues that examining it through the lens of autonomy in late-modern, digitally mediated and politicised societies can shed new light on its crisis. Autonomy, understood as both individual and collective self-determination in opposition to the domination of nature (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2009 [1944]), has been central to emancipatory eco-political thought that envisions radical alternatives to capitalist society-nature relations (Eckersley, 1992; cf. Blühdorn in this Special Issue). Recently, however, autonomy has been declared dead in digitally mediated societies. Digitalisation – understood not merely as the conversion of analogue data into digital formats but also as the recording of reality through data, often referred to as big data or datafication (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013), followed by its algorithmic processing through artificial intelligence (AI) – is perceived as a threat to individual and collective self-determination and, by extension, to democracy (Thiel, 2018). As Susser et al. (2019) assert as to digital manipulation through big data, '[b]y threatening our autonomy it threatens democracy as well. For autonomy is writ small what democracy is writ large – the capacity to self-govern' (p. 11). The algorithmic construction of a datafied reality in the digital sphere in favour of private economic interests (van Dijck, 2013; Zuboff, 2019), allows for the anticipation and shaping of behaviour, effectively

manipulating the self-determined citizen (Susser et al., 2019; Zuboff, 2019), including the electorate (Persily, 2017). The transformed structure of the digital public sphere is unbounded – blurring the distinction between public and private sphere. This structure obstructs the formation of political opinion and collective will aimed at the common good (Habermas, 2022). Instead, the argument goes, digital platforms contribute to the brutalisation of public debate (Howard, 2020), the erosion of social relationships (Rendueles, 2015) and reinforce personal self-interest (for an overview of the role of the autonomous subject in social theory on digitalisation, cf. Block and Dickel, 2020 pp. 116–120). In contrast to interpretations that view the digital sphere as *undermining* autonomy, Blühdorn conceptualises the digital revolution – particularly the rapid advancement of AI – as an emancipatory *liberation* from self-legislation, giving rise to a *post-subjective condition* (Blühdorn, 2020, p. 393), in which the Kantian autonomous subject is replaced by the autonomy of AI. This shift moves towards adaptation (cf. Sorg and Staab in this Special Issue) and new forms of leadership. The digital revolution, Blühdorn (2024, p. 164) suggests, thus offers a *relief for the citizenry* from the demands of maturity and democracy, which have become *untenable* (Blühdorn, 2024) burdens to sustain fossil-based models of (material) prosperity (Kalke et al., 2024). It thus brings to completion what Blühdorn (2013) has referred to as *second-order emancipation* of the late-modern subject – the liberation from Western democratic commitments and norms in favour of flexible opportunities for self-realisation within Western consumer societies.

These diagnoses are highly plausible, as they highlight significant challenges faced by contemporary Western democracies. However, I challenge the underlying assumption of a post-autonomous condition in contemporary digitally mediated Western societies – whether understood as the *undermining of* autonomy or as *liberation from* it. My aim is to move beyond this binary framing of autonomy as either intact or declared dead, and instead to develop a more nuanced perspective. Emphasising both the continuity and variability of autonomy in modern societies, I argue that autonomy has been *reconfigured* in today's digitally mediated societies. Yet, digitalisation not only shapes but is also shaped by democratic societies, which themselves are digitally mediated, late-modern and repoliticised. Given this mutually constitutive relationship between democratic societies and digitalisation, as highlighted by proponents of a political theory of digitalisation (e.g. Berg & Hofmann, 2021; Hofmann, 2019), the digital sphere itself constitutes a late-modern and repoliticised space. In essence, as autonomy appears to have undergone a metamorphosis within today's late-modern, digitally mediated and repoliticised societies, I contend that social media – the 'most dominant manifestation' of the digital public sphere (Staab & Thiel, 2022, p. 133) – provides a crucial analytical context for examining this metamorphosis. Not least because any strict distinction between online and offline spheres has proven unproductive (Susser et al., 2019; Thiel, 2018).

Against this backdrop, this article offers a critical analysis and immanent critique of what it means to be autonomous in contemporary Western societies by examining social media platforms. The article addresses the following questions: How are notions of autonomy being reconfigured in the digital sphere, and what are the consequences for the EEP and established environmental politics?

To answer these questions, I proceed in four steps. I will begin by outlining the ideal of autonomy central to the EEP, setting the normative horizon and regulative ideal for this debate. Next, to conceptualise its potential metamorphosis, I present a more nuanced view of autonomy, structured along two axes. The first distinguishes between two modern ideals – self-determination and self-realisation – while the second separates these *regulative ideals* from contemporary *socio-historical norms* of autonomy, conceived of as capacity for action and critique constituted in productive but non-determining societal conditions (Foucault 1982) (section Autonomy in the EEP and beyond). In the third section, I outline the transformation of autonomy within late-modern and digital conditions of action in post-political times. These conditions have fostered a commodified norm of self-realisation, which many argue has become the dominant conception of autonomy in neoliberal capitalism. For neoliberal self-realisation, the value of authenticity has been *trivialised* (Taylor, 1991), reducing it to an instrumental resource serving personal self-fulfilment while being detached from solidarity, commitment, and compromise. In the fourth section, the politicisation of the digital sphere is shown to foster a norm of self-determination rooted in this trivialised value of authenticity – specifically, the personalised inner identity and truth. The paper concludes by characterising this norm of self-determination as hyper-autonomy, marked by the *hyper-politicisation* (Jäger, 2023) of late-modern *hyperculture* (Reckwitz, 2020) within social media. Hyper-autonomy reinforces authoritarian and uncompromising stances, aligning, rather than with eco-critical calls for collective deliberation and self-limitation, more closely with the exclusionary logic of the far right. The analysis of hyper-autonomy initially strengthens the perception of the EEP as anachronistic. However, it also opens avenues for reconsidering autonomy in environmental politics, navigating between adaptation and reorganisation.

Autonomy in the EEP and beyond

The *EEP* is a concept in need of explanation (cf. Blühdorn in this Special Issue). Blühdorn (e.g. 2000; 2013) has coined the term in his ongoing work. Rather than describing a consistent emancipatory project in environmental politics, it outlines an ideal (cf. Blühdorn, 2024, p. 19–24) of addressing capitalist societal–nature relationships in accordance with Enlightenment values 'such as freedom, equality, dignity, self-determination, reason and universal human rights' (Blühdorn, 2024, p. 21). Against the backdrop of divergent imaginaries to dealing with environmental issues including modernisation and control (Adloff, 2024), the EEP thus draws on the inextricable nexus of emancipatory values of Western modernity and responses to the ecological damage of capitalism. Blühdorn's historical point of reference for the EEP is the new social movements of the 1970s and early 1980s. Among other things, these movements addressed the ecological crisis with their right and duty to co- and self-determination in shaping collective and societal relations to nature. For Blühdorn (2024), autonomy finds its place in this eco-emancipatory nexus as 'democratic self-determination and the collective responsibility of mature citizens' (p. 22). It thus refers to the Enlightenment and Kantian regulative ideal as self-determination of the mature citizen. For Kant, the subject is autonomous when it enters the process of Enlightenment, i.e. when it dares to use its own mind: Dare to be wise! (*Sapere aude!*) (Kant, 2006). It was Kant's

demand for the subjects to critically question authorities (in his case: religious authorities) by following one's own self-legislation. However, self-legislation only counts as autonomous in Kantian terms if the resulting actions follow the universal law of his categorical imperative: 'Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' (Kant, 2008 [1785]). Put differently, to avoid descending into pure arbitrariness, human autonomy must thus be paired with the capacity for reason, which inherently includes responsibility (Kant, 2015 [1788]). According to Blühdorn (2021), this Kantian notion of autonomy includes 'two constitutive dimensions' (p. 4): the agenda of *liberation* from 'the domination, exploitation and oppression by the owners of capital' (p. 11), that is, the disembedding of rule transgression by critically questioning authorities, and the agenda of *limitation*, that is, the restrictive setting of rules by adhering to the claim of universality.

In recent terms, the EEP has been pursued by eco-critical attempts for a *profound socio-ecological transformation*. Against the backdrop of the ongoing transgression of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009), the concept of societal boundaries within ecological limits has risen to prominence to achieve such a transformation (Brand et al., 2021; Fuchs et al., 2021). How to define and implement societal boundaries, it is suggested, should be subject of democratic debate in inclusive processes of deliberation. In this context, autonomy is conceived of as *collectively defined self-limitation* (Brand et al., 2021) that implies 'the liberation from the [...] logic of unfettered expansion and acceleration', as well as 'the possibility of collectively and democratically establishing rules that ensure social freedom and the conditions for a collective good life' (p. 266).

However, the contemporary crisis of environmental politics, as previously discussed, demonstrates that the regulative ideal of autonomy as critical self-determination is, what Meyer-Drawe (1990) calls a *necessary illusion* within the realm of critical social sciences (see also Graefe, 2019, pp. 71–72). It is *necessary* because, in the tradition of critical thought, the critical subject must never cease to strive for it, must never give up upon it, and it is an *illusion* because this ideal can never be fully achieved. Against this backdrop, it is crucial for critical scholars to engage in immanent critique, examining the obstacles to its realisation. To this end, understanding how notions of autonomy change is essential, as I will elaborate further.

Importantly, self-determination has never been the sole regulative ideal of autonomy in modern thought. Since the 18th century, the Enlightenment conception of autonomy as self-determination has coexisted with and often stood in tension with, another notion of autonomy rooted in Romanticism: the ideal of self-realisation (Simmel, 2007 [1918]). In contrast to the Enlightenment value of universality among individuals, Romantic self-realisation emphasises the uniqueness and authenticity of each person, i.e. 'the original [and authentic] way of being human' (Taylor, 1991, p. 28), which must be discovered and realised in opposition to social alienation and external conformity. The ideal of self-realisation thus suggests that authenticity should be inwardly generated rather than socially determined (Taylor, 1991). However, authenticity remains inherently relational, shaped by interactions and dependent on external recognition (cf. Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021, pp. 175–176).

In brief, self-determination is concerned with moral collectivism and reason, whereas self-realisation centres on the pursuit of the good life and individual authenticity (for a

differentiation of both types of autonomy, see e.g. Graefe, 2019, pp. 76–81). Against this backdrop, it has often been argued that both modern ideals of autonomy are difficult to reconcile (Blühdorn, 2024, p. 281; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). However, while there is indeed an anti-modern, anti-moral strand within Romanticism (Taylor, 1991, pp. 65–66), culminating in the figure of the dandy (Henning, 2013), Romantic self-realisation also incorporates morality. As Taylor (1991, p. 41) has stressed, the moral value of authenticity is constrained by 'demands that emanate beyond the self', including socio-ecological boundaries, the needs of others, or civic duties (cf. p. 40). The Romantic ideal of authenticity, which prioritises inner feeling and the 'sentiment de l'existence' as described by Rousseau in his *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, thus presupposes a commitment to intersubjective justice and solidarity (Taylor, 1991). In this way, the moral value of authenticity coexists with the Enlightenment emphasis on universality, allowing for a conception of the good life that celebrates individual diversity while upholding collective moral obligations.

These *regulative ideals* of autonomy (what ought to be) can be reshaped, reconfigured and appropriated as *social-historical norms* of autonomy (what is) (Haderer, 2021). Societal norms refer to what it means to be autonomous, that is, capable of acting in the productive and constitutive conditions for agency in contemporary societies (e.g. Graefe, 2019, pp. 69–72). Put differently, autonomy as a societal norm is a capacity for action – constituted in the productive but non-determining field of modern power relations, in short, governmentality. As Foucault (2009 [1977/78], p. 111) defines it, governmentality is 'the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge'. This historicised understanding of autonomy thus goes back to Foucault (1982), who rejected Kant's understanding of the 'universal and unhistorical subject' (p. 785) and replaced it with a conception of the subject as self-constituting through self-practices (Foucault, 1988). However, the late Foucault (2010) considered himself a Kantian. Self-practices can encompass both compliance with governing power and actions of critique, counter-conduct and resistance – what Foucault (1996) describes as *the art of not being governed so much*. Thus, Foucault did not outright reject the Kantian notion of the critical subject, but rather critiqued its oppressive claim to being unhistorical and universal. Kant's (2006 [1784]) idea of entering the process of Enlightenment by daring to be wise (*Sapere aude!*) echoes in Foucault's concept of *the art of not being governed so much*. However, for Foucault, the capacity for critique is always tied to the specific historical, social and cultural context. Foucault thus offers a continuation – albeit a radically historicised one – of the Kantian critical project (Allen, 2008). He provides a framework for an immanent critique of *socio-historical norms* of autonomy in Western societies, grounded in the normative horizons of that project.

The late-modern and the digital turn of autonomy

In contemporary social theory, there is broad consensus that the prevailing norm of autonomy in late-modern Western societies is deeply rooted in the Romantic ideal of

self-realisation outlined above – an aspiration that played a central role in the new social movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, this ideal has been appropriated and reshaped by the forces of neoliberalism and its governing logics (Blühdorn, 2013; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Bröckling, 2016; Ehrenberg, 2012; Graefe, 2019; Honneth, 2002).

Beck (1983, 1992) and Giddens (1991) have examined how, in late-modern and post-industrial societies, economic prosperity, rising living standards and expanded educational opportunities since the 1950s have facilitated a shift away from traditional identities, familial dependencies and class-based milieus. This transformation has given rise to a process of individualisation, in which individuals must construct and continually revise their personal narratives amid weakening traditions and an expanding array of lifestyle choices. As Giddens (1991) has described, identity formation in this context is an ongoing process of self-discovery as individuals grapple with fundamental existential questions: 'What to do? How to act? Who to be?' (p. 70).

Against this backdrop, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have depicted how the new social movements – most notably the French student movement – sought to dismantle entrenched structures of authority and hierarchy. While many of the social movements also pursued collective forms of self-determination (cf. Blühdorn in this Special Issue), Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) highlight that the French student uprisings were particularly committed to liberating individuals from societal constraints. Their demands centred on authenticity and personal responsibility – ultimately advocating for greater autonomy through *self-realisation* in both individualised lifestyles and workplace structures (cf. p. 170). This critique aligned with what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have described as the previously marginal *artistic critique* rooted in Romantic thought. It rejects capitalist standardisation, commodification and conformity, criticising the subjugation of the authentic self to labour and the erosion of beauty and intrinsic value in life. In a later phase of the protests, these demands for greater self-realisation became intertwined with calls for economic security and social justice in the *social critique* of the working-class revolt – aligning with the critique of inequality and exploitation rooted in Marxist thought. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) observe, '[t]he two critiques were formulated primarily in terms of a demand for security (as regards the social critique) and a demand for autonomy (as regards the artistic critique)' (p. 171). With the advent of the neoliberal turn (Harvey, 2005), traditional hierarchies, authoritarian superiors and economic security measures were gradually replaced by mechanisms of self-control, individual responsibility, and flexibility. In a profound political shift, 'autonomy was, as it were, exchanged for security' (p. 190).

Under neoliberal conditions of acting, which introduced the economic principles of competition and activation into all areas of life (Foucault, 1979 [2010]), autonomy as self-realisation has undergone a significant transformation. No longer an emancipatory goal or a disruptive challenge to capitalist conformity, it has instead become a disciplinary requirement, a social promise and a deeply ingrained subjective desire. As Honneth (2002) has observed, what was once a demand for freedom from restrictive norms has been repurposed into the normative expectation of the self-responsible, flexible and self-optimising *entrepreneurial self* (Bröckling, 2016). This shift has paradoxically granted individuals more autonomy in navigating their careers and personal lives while

simultaneously constraining their agency beyond market-driven self-fulfilment (Ehrenberg, 2012). The result was a *post-political* (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1997) era, in which 'people had retreated into privacy, where politics was relegated to the back burner while technocrats were in charge' (Jäger, 2022, p. 1).

This 'transformation of capitalism', Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p. 165ff.) have argued, has thus co-opted and *neutralised* the artistic critique of the new social movements, and with it, the Romantic ideal of self-realisation and its moral value of authenticity. Under neoliberalism, authenticity itself has become instrumentalised. Identity, creativity and personal skills have become economic resources to be leveraged for competitive advantage (Bröckling, 2016). In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor (1991) has criticised this shift in the meaning of authenticity as a process of *trivialisation*. What was once inextricably tied to moral responsibility and solidarity (cf. pp. 40, 43) has been reduced to a mere resource for 'a purely personal understanding of self-realisation' (p. 43). Social relationships, once rooted in mutual recognition and community engagement, have been leveraged for personal gain. The notion of *trivialised authenticity*, then, does not suggest that authenticity has been replaced by inauthenticity. Rather, its meaning has undergone a fundamental transformation: no longer a moral end in itself, authenticity has been recast as an instrument of self-interest. Stripped of its original ethical substance, it endures as a hollow remnant of Romantic individualism, reshaped to enable advancement within the neoliberal framework of individual responsibility and competition. In this context, the trivialised notion of authenticity has become the 'enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self' (p. 41) – demands that, as discussed above, the moral value of authenticity inherently presupposes (cf. pp. 40–41). In contemporary Western societies, any invocation of authenticity inevitably bears the imprint of this trivialisation.

More recently, the late-modern turn and its productive conditions for neoliberal self-realisation have become intertwined with conditions in the digital sphere (Reckwitz, 2020; Staab & Thiel, 2022) since the datafication of social interactions. Datafication refers to the transformation of everyday life in digital data, allowing for its algorithmic processing through AI (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). On social media platforms, datafication has fundamentally reshaped online communication. As van Dijck (2014) has noted, datafication encodes social interactions, such as 'liking' or 'friending', into algorithmic processes, redefining them as marketable relationships. Based on behavioural data, algorithms curate connections according to the neoliberal principles of activation and competition. Previously, social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter supported peer-to-peer, networked, and participatory interactions. However, with the introduction of algorithmic steering, this participatory 'connectedness' has been transformed into 'connectivity through coding technologies' (van Dijck, 2013, p. 16). Van Dijck (2013) defines *connectivity* as 'a quantifiable value, also referred to as the *popularity principle*: the more contacts you accumulate and engage with, the more valuable you become, as more people perceive you as popular and, consequently, more inclined to connect with you' (p. 13, original emphasis). In the pursuit of objectivity, certainty, and security (Rouvroy & Stiegler, 2016), algorithms embody a specific vision of meritocracy, driven by quantitative metrics of coded interactions – such as citations, views, likes, shares, comments and followers. As Vitali-Rosati (2018, p. 55) has stressed, the algorithm embodies a meritocratic value system grounded in two key

ideas: first, 'that the most interesting content is the most cited'; and second, that a machine can calculate this without being influenced by any external factors. And he concludes, 'we no longer trust something due to its authority; it gains authority because it is considered reliable, and it is deemed reliable because others depend on it' (p. 55).

In this context, private profiles with lower popularity – measured by interaction rates – set up for communication with friends and acquaintances, have become less visible. In contrast, profiles of content creators with high interaction rates are increasingly prominent. Algorithmic steering amplifies competition for social connections, including likes, comments and follower counts, which in turn enhances algorithmically determined visibility. As a result, content creators on social media are compelled to 'compete with others for attention and valorisation' (Reckwitz, 2020, p. 178). Additionally, algorithms drive content creators' activity. In her analysis of Facebook's News Feed algorithm, Bucher (2012) has introduced the concept of an *algorithmic regime of visibility*, where inactivity leads to invisibility, and active engagement is rewarded with greater exposure.

In essence, the datafication of social interaction and its algorithmic processing on social media platforms have given rise to governing conditions that shape the *participatory* (Bucher, 2012) or *interactive* and *competitive* (Gane, 2012) neoliberal subject. This power regime in datafied social media platforms, 'founded on the automated collection, aggregation, and analysis of big data to model, anticipate and pre-emptively affect possible behaviours' (Rouvroy, 2013, p. 10), which Rouvroy and Berns (2010) have termed *algorithmic governmentality*, is thus closely intertwined and complicit with neoliberal governmentality. Gane (2012), drawing on Foucault's model of neoliberal governmentality, identifies various forms of (neo)liberal governing, two of which are particularly relevant to social media: *governmentality through interactivity* and *governmentality through surveillance to promote competition*. As he argues, the 'freedoms of [new] media' play a central role in shaping 'emergent neoliberal subjectivities' (p. 631). In this governing context, social media users actively engage with platforms for 'voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure' (Han, 2015, p. 8), crafting distinctive online profiles for valorisation within the influencer market (Reckwitz, 2020). Within the complicit dynamics of algorithmic and neoliberal governmentality, individuals are moulded into competitive, interactive, and transparent participants in what Reckwitz (2020) has described as *global hyperculture* – where nearly anything, as long as it holds appeal, can be integrated into markets of valorisation for the promise of neoliberal self-realisation. To attract attention and achieve valorisation on social media, content creators strive to appear as relatable as possible. In doing so, authenticity is strategically employed to their profiles (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021). Those who succeed in presenting themselves as authentic and relatable often reveal vulnerabilities, adopt a humble and approachable demeanour, and share intimate or personal content, thereby fostering an emotional connection with their audience (Miguel, 2018). The stronger an observer's personal connection to a post or profile, the more likely they are to engage saving, liking, sharing or commenting – thereby boosting its algorithmic reach. This dynamic creates an *algorithmic imperative of transparency* (Han, 2015, p. 13), where authenticity is once again reduced to a trivialised resource, serving a purely personal notion of self-fulfilment (Taylor, 1991).

On datafied social media platforms, trivialised authenticity serves as the connective interface for asymmetrical parasocial relationships between content creators and their

followers, who function as the validating *general peer* – an anonymous collective audience materialising through measurable engagement metrics (cf. Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2021, pp. 48–49). For content creators to receive positive social validation feedback loops from their observers, the latter must project an affective (Papacharissi, 2015) connection to the creator's perceived authenticity by feeling addressed in their own authenticity. This personal engagement is, in turn, datafied and reinforced by the algorithm. As a result, algorithmically steered personalised content reinforces the trivialisation and desolidarisation of authenticity for *both* content creators and their observers.

Politicisation of the digital sphere

As outlined above, since the appropriation of critique by neoliberal capitalism, society has entered a *post-political* era, in which individuals have withdrawn into private life, disengaging from collective political action (Jäger, 2022, 2023). However, the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, followed by the global economic crisis and its aftermath – identified as the multiple crisis of neoliberal capitalism (Bader et al., 2011) – marked a turning point of repoliticisation (Della Porta, 2017; Jäger, 2023). New forms of politics emerged, though it did not take the traditional collective forms of the 20th century. Rather, as Jäger (2022) has noted, politics now permeates 'the football pitch, the most popular Netflix shows, and the ways people describe themselves on their social media pages' (p. 2).

In this context, social media platforms have played a key role for new forms of political engagement. While traditional collective organisations, such as unions and political parties, have seen declining memberships in late-modern societies, social media platforms have been appropriated to mobilise large-scale digital action networks, such as the Aganaktismenoi in Greece, the Indignados in Spain, and the Occupy movement. Unlike traditional collective action grounded in shared ideologies and political agenda, social media facilitate *personalised* public engagement for the late-modern, fluid, flexible and singularised subject to engage in a *disunified multitude:* 'a collection of individuals coming together for shared causes, but otherwise not possessing the cohesive solidarity of the people' (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 158). Such collections, however, reveal a 'continued distancing from a shared understanding of a common good' (p. 158). Against this backdrop, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have characterised the organisational dynamic of digitally enabled networks as logic of *connective action.* They provide action frames that are easy to *relate* with and which can be *personally* appropriated and expressed via tweets, images or videos. Social media users are thus addressed with a way of finding their own *unique* and *authentic* place in the story (Robinson, 2010). The late modern subject, having previously retreated into privacy, began to engage politically from what Papacharissi (2010) has described as the 'locus of a digitally equipped private sphere' (p. 21). Sitting in their private sphere, Papacharissi (2010, p. 20) has argued, late-modern social media users become politically engaged while being 'less political […] but more autonomously defined' (p. 162).

Although Papacharissi does not expand on the implied notion of more autonomy for social media users, she asserts that 'it is only in the private sphere that one can be one's true, authentic self' (p. 133), distanced from 'the interpretations of being that may be

imposed by the public' (p. 134). Thus, it is the neoliberal authentic self that is politically activated. Against this backdrop, Papacharissi (2010, 2015) highlights the blurring of Enlightenment dualisms such as 'public and private,' 'personal and political,' 'individuation and collectivism,' and 'rationality and affect' in the *hybrid digital sphere* (2015, p. 25). This sphere functions as a 'networked yet privé sociality' constructed within a private social space (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 21). Drawing on Arendt's (1957, 1958) notion of the social, Papacharissi (2010, p. 49) positions the social sphere in a trichotomy alongside the public and private spheres. The sociality embodies elements of both the public and the private, 'without being subsumed by either' (p. 49; see also Wolfe, 1997). Arendt (1958) has described the social as a sphere where individuals no longer engage in genuine political action but instead operate as economic producers, consumers, or urban inhabitants. However, Arendt (1957) has also highlighted that interactions in the social sphere allow to view the world from different perspectives, tolerate differences and resolve conflicts to promote solidarity and tolerance (cf. Straßenberger, 2022, pp. 87–88). According to Papacharissi (2010, p. 50), in late-modern democracies, the social sphere gains importance as it 'merges individual and collective autonomy into a unified realm of activity that is socially driven, yet defined by fluid and continually renegotiated boundaries between the public and private'.

As for the norm of autonomy constituted in the repoliticised hybrid digital sphere, this refers to a notion of political self-determination that is a hybrid too. It embodies the self-legislation of an authentic self. As emphasised by Taylor (1991) and Arendt (1957), the moral significance of authenticity within the social sphere can indeed cultivate convivial solidarity, a sense of commitment and tolerance. However, as previously argued, within the complicit nexus of neoliberal and algorithmic governmentality on contemporary social media platforms, this authenticity remains trivialised. In times of repoliticisation, self-legislation on social media platforms is shaped by social connections through trivialised authenticity. This allows individuals to pursue their authentic identity and personal truth, aligning with what Taylor (1991, p. 43) describes as 'a purely personal understanding of self-fulfilment,' without the need for compromise, commitment or solidarity beyond self-interest. This socio-historical norm of autonomy in late-modern, digitally mediated and repoliticised societies may be characterised as *trivialised self-determination.*

Trivialised self-determination may have limited democratic impact. As Jäger (2023) observes, although contemporary Western societies are highly politicised, this often fails to produce significant political outcomes. New forms of political engagement in the digital sphere have been criticised for their superficial and fluid nature, leading to disunified multitudes lacking a cohesive political agenda (e.g. Howard, 2009). With the ongoing politicisation of social media, progressive political influencers employ neoliberal-algorithmic communication strategies of influencer marketing to affectively connect with their audiences. While they display authenticity to enhance relatability with their followers, their content is centred on Enlightenment values of equality, justice and social inclusion, which require solidarity and, particularly in the context of planetary boundaries, a willingness to compromise. However, these principles are at odds with the value of trivialised authenticity. As a result, progressive mobilisation efforts often remain at the level of content dissemination and 'the collaging of progressive

identities' (Jäger, 2022, p. 5), rather than fostering collective forms of engagement. This tension highlights the challenge of reconciling the individualistic culture of authenticity with the collective aims of progressive politics since the neoliberal appropriation of societal critique (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Fraser, 2017).

However, far-right (for a definition of the far right, cf. Pirro, 2023) digital networks appear to be more effective. Specifically, far-right actors on social media have adeptly appropriated social media platforms to organise a political and epistemic collective (Nawrocki, 2024) within post-organisational (Mullhall, 2018) alternative influence networks (Lewis, 2018). By 'stressing their relatability, their authenticity, and their accountability' (Lewis, 2018, p. 16), far-right political influencers and populist leaders (Ostiguy, 2017) employ neoliberal-algorithmic influencer marketing as explored above. Like progressive political influencers, they display authenticity to affectively appeal to their observer's identity and connect with a wider audience. However, on the content dimension they also appeal to the trivialised inner truth of their followers. Far-right actors use counter-knowledge as a mobilisation strategy, challenging epistemic authorities through counter-expertise (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Positioning themselves against the 'cultural elites' of liberal media (Lewis, 2018, p. 32) and so-called mainstream fake news (Maly, 2020), they draw on 'personal trust' within alternative media and social media communities (Lewis, 2018, p. 17). This counter-knowledge frames truth as a matter of audience interpretation, encapsulated in Lütjen's (2022) summary: 'You Decide'. We just report the facts – and you choose what to do with it' (p. 9). This, he concludes, resonates with an audience that sees itself as independent thinkers that rejects elite guidance and intermediaries such as political parties, mainstream media, and experts and rather follow nothing but the inner truth of their authentic self.

In this way, far-right digital actors legitimise the trivialised authenticity of each individual within the political collective. The content of far-right networks acts as a unifying force for a fluid collection of individuals, each driven by their own sense of identity and truth, who coalesce around a shared rejection of the liberal mainstream (Kreiss, 2018). Far-right digital networks differ from the formal structures of hierarchical political organisations, as they operate without a clearly defined ideology or centralised leadership (Fielitz & Marcks, 2019), making them inherently ambivalent and fluid. Despite this absence of traditional collective organisation, these networks effectively construct a shared identity and political subject by appealing to the notion of trivialised authenticity at both the performative and content levels. This reciprocal reinforcement of self-centred positions is sustained through the intersection of neoliberal and algorithmic governmentality. In this context, trivialised authenticity encourages individuals to prioritise their inner 'authentic' self in the uncompromising pursuit of self-interest, while algorithmic meritocracy fosters scepticism towards traditional epistemic authorities. Instead, authority is conferred upon the algorithmic majority within a broader peer network, which collectively validates personalised perspectives through curated news feeds, thereby reinforcing the perception of uncompromised authenticity.

To summarise, the socio-historical norm of trivialised self-determination, as reconfigured on social media platforms within the nexus of neoliberal and algorithmic governing power, obstructs the formation of an eco-emancipatory collective that would necessitate compromises, commitment and solidarity regarding self-limitation within planetary

boundaries. These values have been marginalised within the neoliberal culture of trivialised authenticity and the algorithmic meritocracy of content. In contrast, trivialised self-determination supports the organisation of far-right collectives that advocate for 'further liberation, autonomy, and self-realisation for a privileged minority at the expense of others' (Blühdorn, 2021, p. 4) – a proposition that has become increasingly relevant in the context of the ongoing polycrisis (cf. Seyd in this Special Issue). The contemporary polycrisis – encompassing the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis and inflation resulting from the Ukraine war, and low economic growth coinciding with the climate crisis – subjects late modern citizens to increasing insecurities and restrictive pressures, both materially and epistemically (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022; cf. Selk in this Special Issue). It is these distressing experiences and insecurities that fuel the formation of a far-right post-organisational collective from a disunified multitude of individuals who collectively authorise and legitimise their trivialised authentic stance for self-interest.

Hyper-autonomy and environmental politics

The aim of this paper was twofold. First, it sought to examine the current crisis in established environmental politics and the EEP through the lens of autonomy. Second, given the prevalent depiction of a post-autonomous condition in the digital age, the paper sought to move *beyond* the dominant narratives of the *undermining of* autonomy or *relief from* it in digitally mediated societies. To this end, it offered a critical analysis of how autonomy is being reconfigured in the digital sphere – highlighting its continuity and variability even amid its trivialisation and distortion.

I have argued that, within the framework of neoliberal and algorithmic governmentality, the trivialised value of authenticity operates as a connective interface for asymmetrical parasocial relationships between content creators and their followers. These relationships, rooted in personal relatability with users' perceived authenticity, are datafied and perpetuated through algorithmic reinforcement. In politicised times, these relatable communication strategies have been appropriated for political mobilisation. As a result, in late-modern, digitally mediated and repoliticised societies, a socio-historical norm of self-determination of a trivialised authentic self has emerged. It is driven by identity, inner truth and a personal conception of self-fulfilment, yet remains detached from the moral imperatives of solidarity, commitment and compromise. Thus, trivialised self-determination gives rise to the arbitrariness of negative freedom – precisely the condition Kant aimed to prevent through his categorical imperative (Blühdorn, 2013). Drawing on Foucault, this does not imply that autonomy can be declared dead; rather, it represents a socio-historicised transformation of the Kantian critical project – 'a perversion of the idea of enlightenment' (Lütjen, 2022, p. 14) – and *the art of not being governed so much* (Foucault, 1996), within the complicit nexus of neoliberal and algorithmic governmentality.

Trivialised self-determination may be best conceptualised as *hyper-autonomy*. This term draws on two concepts: first, Reckwitz's (2020) notion of the global *hyperculture* (p. 8) of late modernity, where everything – as long as it is affective for others 'by being considered attractive and authentic' – 'can be regarded as culture and can become elements of the highly mobile markets of valorization, which entice the

participation of subjects with the promise of self-actualization' (p. 9). As this hyperculture has become politicised, it also refers, second, to Jäger's (2023) notion of *hyperpoliticisation*, where individuals take quick and affective political stances without engaging in the traditional, organised political activities of the twentieth century. As Jäger (2022, p. 2) puts it: 'Today, *everything is politics.* And yet, despite people being intensely politicised […], very few are involved in the kind of organised conflict of interests that we might once have described as politics in the classical twentieth-century sense'. Against this backdrop of the 'incapacity to think through collective dimensions to struggle' in favour of 'the collaging of identities', Jäger (2022) describes hyperpolitics as a 're-entry of politics in society' (p. 5) *without political consequences* (Jäger, 2023) – with the notable exception of the far right, as elaborated above.

For the EEP, the logic of hyper-autonomy further entrenches the marginalisation of its values and, in times of polycrisis, enables the far right to secure a future for the few at the expense of others (cf. Zierott et al. in this Special Issue). Eversberg et al. (2024) observe a decline in public support for profound socio-ecological transformation, with backing falling from one-third of the population in 2018 to one-quarter in 2022. This shift is accompanied by the emergence of 'alliances between conservative and defensive-reactive forces' (p. 26), which bolster resistance to environmentally focused policies perceived as detrimental to individual livelihoods and economic stability. As a result, environmental politics are shifting towards strategies of adaptation and resilience (Graefe, 2019; Staab, 2022; cf. Sorg and Staab in this Special Issue). While resilience remains central to crisis management, emphasising adaptation to inevitable disruptions, it has been criticised for its depoliticised approach, which fails to address underlying structural causes (Bröckling, 2017; Graefe, 2019). Against this backdrop, there is reason to consider that hyper-autonomous societies may ultimately undermine themselves politically, transitioning into a post-autonomous, autocratic-authoritarian order (Blühdorn, 2021) and/or a technocratic modernity (cf. Sorg and Staab in this Special Issue) in an effort to uphold Western privileges.

However, much like the declarations of autonomy's demise, I caution against hasty predictions, advocating instead for a more nuanced perspective. As Folkers (2022) highlights, resilience is not merely a matter of adaptation but entails cyclical transformation. Drawing on Gunderson and Holling's (2002) panarchy theory, resilient socio-ecological systems evolve through two key phases: an initial forward loop of growth and *stabilisation*, followed by a backward loop in which major disturbances prompt internal *reorganisation*. From the standpoint of autonomy, too, resilience extends beyond mere adaptation. As Graefe (2019) demonstrates, it is intrinsically tied to self-organisation – the capacity for independent functionality or self-reliance – which has historically served as an emancipatory force. This is evident in anti-colonial struggles, anarchist strands of ecologism (e.g. Bookchin, 1980), the Kinderladen movement of the 1970s, and commons-based approaches (Graefe, 2019). Yet, as Folkers (2022) observes, dominant resilience discourses often neglect this transformative potential, focusing instead on insulating systems from change rather than enabling their reorganisation. Thus, within environmental politics, the normative framework of resilience can facilitate adaptation to ecological crises, often reinforcing established lifestyles through exclusion and digital control. However, resilience also has the potential to promote political

self-organisation, co-determination and resistance (Adloff, 2024; Folkers, 2022) – dimensions of autonomy that serve as pathways for marginalised but still persisting proponents of a profound socio-ecological transformation.

Against this backdrop, I conclude that the EEP is not a vanished anachronism (yet), but rather should be understood as increasingly marginalised, as it has always been to some extent (Brand, 2021; Hausknost, 2017). As long as autonomy as self-determination cannot be declared dead, there remains potential for the revitalisation of the EEP and its vision of profound socio-ecological transformation in times of resilience. However, reviving the EEP would necessitate a redefinition of self-determination and self-realisation beyond the trivialised notion of authenticity, aligning instead with the modern moral values of Enlightenment and Romantic thought. In digitally mediated societies, this would also require restructuring the digital sphere beyond centralised social media platforms – both of which presently offer little reason for optimism.

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