National-Populism, Post-Truth, and the Logic of Postmodernism: A Multidisciplinary Insight into the Crisis of Liberal Democracy

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Abstract

2024 is said to be a decisive year for liberal democracy in the world. The national-populist phenomenon that has been on the rise in recent years occasions renewed and sustained academic debate on the existential challenges faced by liberal democracy. It is a paradigmatic assumption of the liberal mainstream that the rise of national-populist leaders and their constituency pose a fundamental threat to democratic survival. But are national-populism and the Western model of liberal democracy divorced in any essential way? If, as the liberals maintain, national-populism rests and thrives upon the post-truth condition of societal fragmentation and individual psycho-cognitive isolation characterizing contemporary society, we must investigate whether this condition is something foreign to liberal democracy and therefore removable as such. By mobilizing a multidisciplinary corpus, this article shows that postmodernism, defined as the cultural superstructure of consumerist capitalism, is what underpins and perpetuates the interrelated phenomena of infinitely increasing social fragmentation and individual isolation. In the most advanced contemporary stage, called "late postmodernity," the subjects of Western consumerist capitalist societies are purely driven by a hedonist-narcissistic pleasure principle that defuses all potential for the radical contestation of the existing hegemonic power structure of the liberal-democratic state. The post-truth condition, of which national-populism is an outgrowth, poses no essential threat to liberal democracy as long as both are sustained and promoted, at the structural level, by the hegemonic mode of production.

Keywords: liberal democracy, National-Populism, philosophy, communication studies, sociology

Introduction

Politicians in Western national establishments and the global media purport that year 2024 is going to be a "stress test" for global democracy. *The Economist* claims that "2024 is a giant test of nerves for

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democracy" (The Economist, 2024a), while *NBC* declares that "This year, more than any in recent memory, global democracy rests on the edge of a knife: Never before will so many people around the world have the opportunity to vote, but rarely have democracy's core tenets been so fundamentally threatened." (NBC, 2024). Media voices of this sort echo concerns expressed by a multitude of like-minded political figures as well as academics located in the United States and western Europe belonging. The Western political and intellectual mainstream is mostly concerned with the prospect that, of the 76 elections that are expected to be held this year throughout the world, more than half of them will not be based on "free and fair" democratic practices. Of particular concern is the rise of so-called national-populist leaders who, as is purported, would exacerbate domestic societal divisions and polarization, thereby undermining the very social pact which is vital for democratic regime survival. At the international level, national-populist leaders are suspected by the liberal mainstream of being prone to unrestrained and unpredictable foreign policies that run against, and would ultimately jeopardize, the multilateral norms and institutions underpinning the liberal international order (Nye and Keohane 1977; Keohane 2005).

The solid and undisputed victory of Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia – a country of over 200 million population, being the most populous state in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the largest Muslim country in the world, crucially located in a strategic position separating the Indian and the Pacific Oceans – has promptly been depicted by a concert of Western-dominated global media, such as *The Economist* (2024b) and *Voice of America* (2024), as a controversial and problematic outcome disclosing uncertain futures for democracy in the Southeast Asian nation. The Western media not only lay stress on the Indonesian President's populist credentials derived from his polarizing presidential campaign while resurrecting allegations of past undemocratic practices dating back to the 1990s but are also preaching the fear that Indonesia's civilian democratic life is now being threatened by Prabowo's ties with the armed forces. What has been generally overlooked so far by the Western recounting of the current developments in the Southeast Asian giant democracy is, as usual, the grassroot perspectives of the Indonesian voters who democratically expressed their preference regarding the future of their nation. From a theoretical perspective, the Western narrative in this case again rehearses the well-known practice of uncritically and indiscriminately applies Western concepts and concerns onto largely different empirical cases and contexts (Said 1978).

Analytical fallacies will not, in any way, prevent the Western observers from reiterating the refrain of global democracy being in danger, crisis, or at a turning point. In non-Western geo-cultural milieus (such as in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and elsewhere), the national-populist danger takes the shape, according to the Western liberal narrative, of strong and popular leaders with nationalist credentials and prone to Oriental forms of despotism. However, when national-populist figures emerge in some Western countries, these are curiously "orientalized" as stranger elements alien to the Western liberal tradition. This is the case, for example, of the political rise of Donald Trump who, together with his constituency, portrayed as an element foreign to American liberal democracy and as such a threat to the liberal-democratic survival of the nation. As the 2024 presidential elections in the United States, featuring the lingering ghost of Trump's re-nomination, are obviously expected to be the most impactful at the global level and therefore motivate the rekindling of the academic and media debate on the relationship between national-populism and liberal democracy.

The present political and intellectual climate of the perceived danger to democracy posed by the national-populist tendencies witnessed in democratic societies compels more fundamental theoretical questions that tackle the condition and development of liberal democracies. It is the mainstream assumption that national-populism stands in ontological contrast to liberal democracy, with the former assumedly posing an existential threat to the former. In this article, I try to challenge this assumption by arguing that, on the contrary, the socio-political condition that allow the emergence of national-populism is not only rooted in the liberal-democratic system itself but is also consistent with and intrinsic to the logic of development of liberalism and capitalism.

The argument is structured as follows. The debate on (national-)populism was spawned in recent years by the rise to prominence – which was unexpected and shocking to most – of such political phenomena as Trump and Brexit in 2016 (Pappas 2019). The consensus amongst the Western liberal mainstream tried to explain and make sense of the national-populist moment of Western democracies by attributing it to a condition of society and political communication called "post-truth." The post-truth era, so the liberal argument goes, engenders the societal division and polarization that constitute the breeding ground for the national-populist phenomenon. To overcome the condition and consequences of post-truth, mainstream scholars have suggested a number of approaches, the most advanced of which appears to be resting on the idea of the social construction of meaning aimed at safeguarding the social pact in liberal-democratic societies. However, recent acquisitions in the social sciences and the humanities articulate the notion that the extreme fragmentation of society and political engagement is but the result necessitated by the material and ideational structures underpinning the very existence and development of postmodern capitalist societies (Lipovetsky 2018; Nealon 2012; Roult et al 2022). The individual emancipatory logic and consumerist hedonism predicated by postmodernism, understood as the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson 1991), has evolved to such an extreme stage at which the social-psychological isolation of individuals in contemporary society and the fragmentation of communities and political grievances not only prove innocuous to the survival of the capitalist liberal-democratic state but also perpetuate its hegemony. It is concluded therefore that post-truth and the atomization of society at the basis of the national-populist phenomenon stand in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the hegemonic liberal-democratic state.

What is National-Populism

Nationalism is the ideology of the nation-state; it stresses national identity as the chief defining element of a collectivity while downplaying all other forms of allegiance (such as transnational or subnational identities). Populism, in the contemporary understanding, is defined as an ideology that favors the "people" as an exclusive source of political legitimacy and authority as opposed to the "elite," based on an Us-versus-Them mentality. Although "the people" according to populists does not necessarily correspond to the nation, the factual record shows that "nations and nationalisms are at the hearth of the populist phenomenon" (Henderson and Jones 2021: 207-8). Therefore, nationalism and populism can be regarded as two sides of the same coin – a coin called *national-populism*, which is the ideology that "prioritize[s] the culture and interests of the nation, and promise[s] to give voice to a people who feel that they have been neglected, even held in contempt, by distant and often corrupt elites" (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: ix).

National-populism, as exemplified by movements and leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, is characterized by an appeal to a homogeneous national identity and a strong emphasis on the interests of the "common people" or the "nation." National-populist leaders often employ rhetoric that pits the interests of the so-called "ordinary citizens" against those of elites, immigrants, and perceived outsiders. They capitalize on a sense of national pride and nostalgia for a perceived golden age while promising to restore national sovereignty and protect traditional cultural values (Bergmann 2020). National-populist movements tend to be anti-establishment, advocating for policies that challenge the status quo and promote a more assertive, often confrontational, approach to governance (Pasquino 2008; Pappas 2019)

The interest of political scientists in the national-populist phenomenon has grown rampant in recent years, especially since the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, both occurred in 2016, as well as the remarkable success of several anti-elitist and anti-globalization movements and parties in Europe (e.g., Viktor Orban in Hungary, the National Front/Rally in France, the League in Italy, AfD in Germany, among others). These cases of national-populism all point to the legitimacy crisis of established supranational authorities such as the European Union (EU) in the case of the Eurosceptic national-populists and of international institutions (e.g., the World Health Organization) and arrangements (e.g, trade and security agreements) in the American case. Populism in the United States is generally identified with the figure of Donald Trump, whose polarizing political style and temperament predominantly appeal to the American white majority. His ability to mobilize the enraged masses was epitomized by the attack on Capitol Hill of January 6, 2021. Alongside this populist element, his rhetoric and agenda are nationalist inasmuch they obsessively stress the primacy of the American people ("America First") vis-à-vis external threats including immigrants, North Korea ("rocket man"), or China ("China virus"), as well as generic enemies like the mainstream media ("you are fake news!"). In light of this, we can fairly define Donald Trump as a national-populist leader and his supporters as national-populists.

National-populism in America can hardly be said to be over with the removal of Donald Trump from the White House. As a matter of fact, the causes of national-populism in the USA are indeed far more deep-rooted than the specific case of Donald Trump's rise and fall would suggest. Samuel Huntington (2004: 309–16) argues that the national-populist phenomenon of White nativism in America – preceding and outliving the Trump moment – is a popular reaction against those transnational elites and liberal establishment which in recent decades have been promoting subnational non-white groups and identities in the US.

The Trumpian national-populist peril, as well as its European counterparts, spurred the endless proliferation of political and sociological literature seeking to understand and address the condition undergirding the phenomenal rise of national-populism and their implications for the survival of liberal democracies. While it is not possible to provide a complete review of such a huge literature, the common thread and underlying argument of the liberal discourse on populism was condensed in Jonah Goldberg in the book *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy* (2018). Identity politics is a catchphrase and phenomenon characteristic of the United States which revolves around the idea that political mobilization and activism should be based on the shared experiences and identities of marginalized groups, such as

women, racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others. While identity politics has been instrumental in raising awareness about systemic injustices and advocating for social change, critics argue that it can also contribute to the fragmentation of societies by emphasizing differences rather than commonalities. The intellectuals concerned by the rise of national-populism stress the fact that identity politics and societal fragmentation has been co-opted by nationalist and populist movements, who construct exclusionary narratives that define the nation in terms of a particular ethnic or cultural identity, marginalizing those who do not fit into this narrow definition. National-populist leaders often exploit existing social divisions and grievances to mobilize support, tapping into feelings of resentment and insecurity among segments of the population (Urbinati 2022). They frame political issues in terms of identity, portraying themselves as champions of the "true" national identity against perceived threats from outsiders or minorities. By prioritizing narrow group interests over the common good, these phenomena undermine the supposed foundational principles of Western liberal democracy, eroding trust in democratic institutions and fostering a climate of polarization and distrust.

Post-Truth: Approaches and State of the Art

The stress placed by the liberal intellectuals on such emotional elements such as the feelings of resentment, rage, and insecurity, as well as the struggle over the idea of "truth" (as concerns, for instance, the question of national identity), assumedly at the heart of the national-populist phenomenon, are all encapsulated in the notion of "post-truth" (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017; Waisbord 2018; Block 2019; de la Torre 2019; Collins et al 2020). In discussing post-truth, many Western scholars refer to the Oxford Dictionary definition of post-truth as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." In the context of the present debate, post-truth accordingly refers to a political and cultural environment where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. In a post-truth era, individuals are more likely to accept information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and values, regardless of its veracity, while dismissing or ignoring evidence that contradicts their worldview. Reality does not matter in the era of post-truth. This phenomenon is often facilitated by the spread of misinformation and disinformation through various channels, including social media, partisan news outlets, and political propaganda (Oates 2021). The post-truth challenge to reason and a shared discourse on factual truth threatened to undermine the political norms of liberal-democratic existence (Lee 2022).

Since Oxford Dictionary elected post-truth as the word of the year in 2016, a huge mess of literature in sociology, communication and political studies addressing it proliferated ever since. The Western conventional wisdom associates post-truth with such political phenomena as Brexit, the rise of Donald Trump, populism in Europe and a plethora of social phenomena under the umbrella of conspiracy theories (denying global warming, human evolution, the novel coronavirus and so on). It is important to note that those who talk and write about post-truth are those who are worried about (and want to eradicate) it and proclaim themselves as the defenders of Western liberal democracy against the threats of authoritarianism, including Donald Trump and the European populists, and malignant foreign interferences, such as Russian disinformation (Cosentino 2020).

In formulating their prescriptions for dealing with the problem of post-truth, the Western liberal scholarship generally falls into two categories based on their diagnoses and remedies. The first one includes early post-truth theorist Lee MacIntyre (2018) who considers that post-truth originates out of such cognitive biases as motivated reasoning and belief perseverance (outgrowth of cognitive dissonance) which impair the people's perception and assessment of facts and reality, as long as the harmful consequences of ignoring reality are not perceived. However, the deniers of reality will retract their post-truth convictions as soon as reality takes its toll on those who ignored it.[1] Following this diagnosis of the post-truth phenomenon, facts will ultimately prevail over those who disregard them. Accordingly, the solution to post-truth would be simply, to consistently and efficiently informing the audiences of the facts of reality, that is to say, "[e]ven before the water rises, we should try to figure out some way to 'hit people between the eyes' with facts" (MacIntyre 2018: 161). Scholars in this "realist" camp advocate the "important role that governments and public organizations could play in helping to raise public awareness about the harm that post-truth is doing to our society, in order to promote more self-refection on the situation" (Sim 2019: 166). The applications of information technologies in such "positivist" government interventions are explored in the work edited by Visvizi and Lytras (2019).

A more intellectually sophisticated perspective is offered by those scholars who downplay the importance of the communication and demonstration of truth in favor of a relational understanding of the post-truth phenomenon and the possible solution to it. Farkas and Schou express their reservations regarding the commissioning of "experts who 'know better,' punishment for difference, censorship packed in algorithmic decision-making and the fortification of that which is claimed to be under siege [truth]" (2020: 149). In its stead, they invoke the issue of "equality, universality, recognition and care" and call for "deeper, more inclusive and open democratic institutions" as spaces for the clash and reconciliation of alternative voices to take place (Farkas and 2020: 150). As an alternative to realism, Maddalena and Gili propose "rich, relational realism" that relies on "indirect knowledge, necessarily based on faith—namely, on trust in another person or people who we judge to be reliable" in such relational realities as "[a] family, an association, a nation" where trust and human relationships are allowed to grow (2020: 100-1). They advocate the prioritization of the "intermediary layer of groups, communities, associations, and local media, where people can meet and recognize one another, and which serve as a filter for the influences of large institutions" (Maddalena and Gili 2020: 99). Ultimately, it is envisioned that "Truth will always be a correspondence to reality, but since reality is more complex than purely sense-related data, truth would come 'in the long run', if inquiry were sustained long enough" (Maddalena and Gili 2020: 102). For the purpose of analysis, we may call this latter approach a "constructivist" approach, by virtue of its emphasis on the social construction of a shared truth pursued in the long run through human relations and trust, carving out space for emotional connections among the people alongside sheer rationality and objectivity in the demonstration of facts.

It seems that no systematic advancement has been offered beyond what I termed here the realist and constructivist perspectives on post-truth. While the realist perspective uncritically presumes the

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[1] MacIntyre (2018) gives the example of the Republican mayor of a city in Florida, US who had been a denying the existence of global warming but then realized gravity of the problem, and acted accordingly, once the rising seawater level started threatening the survival of hit city

omnipotence of reality, facts, and information thereon effectively communicated, the constructivist position adopts a more critical stance and privileges the construction of shared meanings, understanding, and trust through relationships. What the realist and constructivist perspectives have in common, however, is the assumption that "reality" plays a role in the process of forming opinions in the public sphere. On the one hand, the realist perspective assumes reality as an overwhelming entity whose facts must be discovered by man through knowledge and reason, while failure to do so is attributed to insufficient information or reasoning. On the other hand, the constructivist perspective believes reality to be socially constructed among like-minded people who respect and sympathize with each other in relationships of mutual recognition. Still, in both cases, there is a "reality principle" informing these perspectives. Whether it is about discovering it or constructing it, reality remains the crux of the post-truth problematique and the interventions prescribed for post-truth governance.

A number of arguments have been recently advanced that seem to move toward the recognition of the irrelevance of the reality principle in the public sphere. The dynamics of social media are discovered to engender "the fragmentation of the audience into a plurality of self-referential segments, politically polarized 'bubbles', devoid, at least potentially, of a common communicative sphere" (Palano 2019, p. 36). Following a techno-informational materialist pattern of reasoning, the development of social media, coupled with the postmodern mutation of the media into mere entertainment ready for audience consumption (Habermas 1989), have thereby determined a structural transformation of the public sphere as a result of which the people's willingness or possibility at all to converge toward a shared reality can no longer be taken for granted (Hyvönen 2022). Not only like-minded communities, but each and every individual Self is now insulated and put at the center stage of their personal, singular, individually (a-socially) constructed worlds of (social) media and representation. This transformation is so extreme that the very idea of society – which is the foundational condition for the possibility of socially constructing reality, truth, meaning, and social action – has been effectively eroded.

There is no such thing as society (also) means the absolute centrality of the self, the sovereign right of all individuals to express themselves and construct inevitably subjective meanings. [...] . The world and others therefore become the stage upon which to express and impose the self and a store of tools with which to potentially express and impose oneself. [...] Not only does truth appear threatening, since by definition it places limits on the single person's free will, but more deeply, it is made inaccessible by taking the subjectiveness of building meanings to the extreme. [...] The public sphere cannot be a space of conflict, confrontation and changing opinions due to all people speaking their own language and rejecting all attempts at translation as inauthentic. (Alagna 2019, pp. 124-125)

At the end of the day, this condition of the public sphere leaves no possibility for any social construction of a shared truth, let alone the chance that reality may pose a constraint on post-truth beliefs. That is because any attempt at socially constructing a shared truth in cooperation with others by appealing to some idea of reality is seen by the individual Self as a violation of one's own agency and volitional satisfaction (Kalpokas 2019).

The psycho-cognitive isolation of individuals in contemporary society seems therefore the ultimate and most fundamental obstacle for the public sphere to move toward the ideal-type of a critical-rational discourse, argumentation, and agreement on truth. The mainstream liberal narrative intrinsically attributes the national-populist phenomenon, assumedly threatening liberal democracy, to the post-

truth condition determined by societal fragmentation and the psycho-cognitive isolation of the individual. Following the liberal logic, societal fragmentation and post-truth stands in ontological contrast to liberal democracy, with the former posing an existential threat to the latter. What must be investigated, however, is the question of whether the opposite is true: Is societal fragmentation and individual isolation, culminating in the post-truth condition, an external danger to liberal democracy or rather a necessary outcome of it? To address this question, the idea of postmodern society will be elaborated, in the next section, as a stage of capitalist liberal democracies that compels infinitely growing fragmentation for the sake of preserving the hegemonic power of the liberal democratic state.

Postmodernism: Emancipatory Logic and Hegemony

Postmodernism is a multifaceted philosophical and cultural movement that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century and has been discussed by scholars as the basis for the post-truth phenomenon (Salgado 2019). Its original and pathbreaking idea is the challenge to the certainties and grand narratives of modernity while embracing the fragmented, diverse, and contingent nature of contemporary existence. Postmodernists declaredly break with the tradition of modernity signified by the tendencies of the European Enlightenment that prescribed mankind to apply reason to dominate the natural environment and improve his own material condition in the world. Modernity therefore implies faith in scientific rationality (instrumental reason), objective and absolute Truth, linear historical progress, and confidence in technological development. Rejecting the idea of a universal truth or a singular narrative that can comprehensively explain reality, postmodernism celebrates plurality, hybridity, and the blurring of boundaries across various domains, including art, literature, philosophy, and society. It emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge, highlighting the role of language in constructing reality through language games (Wittgenstein), the ubiquity of power dynamics (Foucault), and role of cultural context in shaping individual and collective understandings of truth.

Jean-Francois Lyotard's seminal book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) is conventionally regarded as a key text and manifesto of postmodernist thought. Lyotard popularly introduces the concept of the "incredulity towards metanarratives," meaning that in contemporary postmodern society people are increasingly skeptical of totalizing explanations or grand theories that claim to provide universal truths on the world. Instead, he highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the multiplicity of perspectives. Postmodernism denies the possibility of an overarching, unified, and objective narrative of reality and truth, and instead embraces a fragmented, diverse, and pluralistic view of reality. In other words, it signifies an epoch of skepticism toward universal explanations of historical progress and acknowledges the coexistence and juxtaposition of a plurality of realities and worldviews socially constructed by like-minded groups of people through language games. One of the key aspects of Lyotard's analysis is his focus on the role of knowledge and information in contemporary society, arguing that technological advancements, particularly in communication and information technology, have led to the acceleration of knowledge production and dissemination.

The groundbreaking move undertaken by Lyotard's postmodernism is the attack on Jurgen Habermas' modernist linguistic ethics of critical-rational discourse. Habermas notoriously postulated the ideal-typical communication situation defined by perfect reason and argumentative speech aimed at reaching a shared consensus on truth and the foundation of reality (Habermas). Lyotard argues that this

consensus undermines and defies social justice because it prevents alternative discourse, speech, and thoughts from proliferating. The idea of universal truth and foundational reality, as well as the rational discourse propounded by Western modernity, is therefore totalitarian and oppressive. Postmodernism is therefore hailed as the disclosure toward human justice and emancipation from the oppression of all-encompassing, totalitarian grand narratives. Contra the modernist instrumental rationality, postmodernism constitutes the philosophical substratum of the proliferation of a plurality of truths, discourses, and language games; it stands for the celebration of diversity and holds the maximization of difference as an ethical goal in itself.

Quintessential to the postmodernist sensibility is the emancipatory vision stemming from the social constructivist revelation that reality and its truths are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). As social structures are viewed as resulting from and enabled by linguistic constructs (Derrida 1967), the linguistic deconstruction thereof is viewed to wield the potential to emancipate the subaltern and marginalized subjects – in terms of race, gender, class, etc. – from existing power structures. Postmodernism is therefore charged with an ethical, emancipatory mandate and carries the vision of a more democratic and inclusive society (Vattimo, 1985). The emancipatory logic of postmodernism encompasses a critical interrogation of power structures and dominant discourses, aiming to dismantle oppressive systems and liberate marginalized voices (Foucault 1975). Inspired by the Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony introduced in the first half of the twentieth century during Italian fascism (Gramsci 1971) and rooted in skepticism toward metanarratives and a recognition of the multiplicity of truths, postmodernism offers a framework for challenging hegemonic ideologies and advocating for social justice.

Postmodernism legitimizes the discourses of difference – of ways of seeing the world alternative to unifying metanarratives. The emancipatory logic of postmodernism has contributed to the proliferation of sub- and countercultures, as well as radical instances of resistance and empowerment. Postmodernism's emphasis on the plurality of perspectives, the deconstruction of grand narratives, and the celebration of diversity has provided fertile ground for marginalized groups to assert their identities and challenge dominant norms. Postmodernism's skepticism toward authoritative knowledge and its emphasis on the fluidity of meaning have opened up spaces for radical instances of resistance and activism. Activist movements, such as feminist, anti-racist, and LGBTQ+ movements, have drawn upon postmodern critiques of power and truth to challenge systemic injustices and advocate for social change (Butler 1990). By deconstructing oppressive ideologies and exposing the constructed nature of social norms, these movements have sought to empower marginalized communities and create more inclusive and equitable societies. In the realm of culture, postmodernism has encouraged the recognition and valorization of subcultural practices that exist outside mainstream frameworks.

While postmodernist difference and emancipation are regarded as ethical goals valuable and worth striving for per se, the deconstruction of reality and truth and the consequent multiplication and proliferation of alternative discourses and radical movements produces, as a matter of fact, the paradoxical outcome of perpetuating the existing hegemonic status quo at the structural level. Not only does postmodernist radicality falls short of generating systemic change, but paradoxically ends up reinforcing the structural power inherited by the modern era. This idea is articulated by postmodernist literary critic Fredric Jameson in the seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late*

Capitalism (1991). Jameson's thesis on postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism highlights a paradoxical outcome of the emancipatory logic of postmodernism. While postmodernism initially emerged as a critique of modernist grand narratives and a celebration of plurality, diversity, and the deconstruction of traditional hierarchies, Jameson argues that in the context of late capitalism, these tendencies have been co-opted and commodified. He believes that late capitalism, following state capitalism and monopoly capitalism (imperialism), is synonymous with an information society in which all spheres of existence are commodified and technology is highly developed, and with postmodern economy taking shape since the 1970s characterized by trends such as the collapse of high and low culture, the rise of consumerism, the emergence of the global finance. In such a society, the individuals' perceptions of time and space undergo new changes, and historical depth and the direct experience of reality disappears.

Jameson defines postmodernism as situation in which culture pervades every real fact. Every natural data is read within a cultural code and leads to a culturalized way of existing. Everything is analyzed through a discourse and a cultural interpretation of the world. The postmodernist epochal turning point brings culture to the centerstage and brings about a situation in which the world is constructed in a fictitious way and humans have no direct and authentic experience of it. In the patterns of consumption in capitalist societies, the use value of goods has been completely replaced by their purely cultural value, also called "simulacrum": "the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced" (Jameson 1991, p. 18). In such a postmodernist consumer culture, we no longer consume things but the very fact of consuming and the meaning attached to it. With the infinite proliferation of meanings, significations, and simulacra, presenting a sanitized, hyperreal version of reality that perpetuates the status quo, falling short of any systemic contestation of the underlying contradictions and inequalities of capitalist society. Rather than offering genuine alternatives or critiques of the capitalist system, postmodern culture becomes complicit in its reproduction, serving to reinforce the dominance of exchange value and the logic of the simulacrum. Postmodern concepts such as multi-ethnicity, decentered narratives and global networks, and lack of depth are therefore revealed as the main cultural characteristics of this late-stage capitalist society. In other words, the fragmentation, subjective discoursal decentering, and plurality characteristic of postmodern culture are not liberating but rather symptomatic of the logic of late capitalism.[2] This paradoxical outcome highlights the tension between the emancipatory aspirations of postmodernism and its integration into the capitalist system.

The Hedonist-Narcissistic Subject in 'Late Postmodernity'

The role and success of postmodernism in furthering more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable models of society seems at least dubious and in need of interrogation. In the introductory essay of his book entitled *Post-Postmodernism*, Jeffrey Nealon marks a substantial political economic continuity between the decade of the 1980s and the present situation in the American historical experience;

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[2] In Jameson's analysis, the proliferation of consumer choices, the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, and the dominance of image and spectacle all serve to perpetuate the status quo and reinforce capitalist hegemony. Rather than challenging oppressive systems, postmodernism, according to Jameson, becomes complicit in their reproduction.

accordingly, he anticipates the shortcomings of applying the usual, postmodernist methods of critique as it comes to the current stage of intensified and globalized capitalism (Nealon 2012). Writing in the 1980s, Frederic Jameson notoriously noticed how "the cultural, economic, and social upheavals" of the 1960s, together with the explosion of artistic and youth revolutions of all kinds promising radical change and liberation for all the oppressed, eventually and unheroically faded out as soon as around the mid-1970s and dialectically ended up in the conservative neoliberal restoration and cultural containment that signified "the '80s" (Jameson 1984).

While the 1990s witnessed the intensification of the neoliberal policies undertaken by the Western governments in the preceding decade, a turning point was marked, on Nealon's account, by the events of September 2001. Better said, the response to such events in the United States produced the further and definitive entrenchment of the neoliberal hegemony of an all-powerful (and somewhat oxymoronic) "nation-state without welfare" now in charge of territorial security and free-market capitalism all at once. This development is what ultimately justifies the continuity and escalation of the fundamental economic-political tendencies of the 1980s in the present era. Not oblivious of the inglorious end of the radical bonanza of the 1960s accounted by Jameson and his argument that "the political and artistic strategies of resistance born in the 1960s aren't likely to be effective in the very different social and political climate of the 1980s", (Nealon 2012, p. 13) Nealon's historical diagnosis warns that "[r]egarding the present state of theory in the humanities and the possibilities for mobilizing response to the logic of privatization, [...] it's becoming increasingly unhelpful to replay the drama that posits a repressive, normative 'stasis or essentialism' that can be outflanked only by some form of more or less liberating, socially constructed 'fluid openness'" (Nealon 2012, pp. 20-21).

Nealon makes a fundamental point when he suggests that the (postmodern) insistence on liberation and "the hybridity and fluidness of X or Y" is indeed the "mantra of transnational capital", a thesis supported by bringing up the example of the United States in the context of the war on terrorism: "[i]n order to be patriotic in this war, we in the US have not at all been asked to repress or downsize our desires: no collective, public efforts like wholesale rationing or conserving to enhance the war effort. Rather, in a 180-degree turnabout from the usual austere rhetoric of wartime, Uncle Sam now wants us to liberate our individual desires in the face of the axis of evil (defined primarily as anti-desire, anti-individual, fundamentalist repression)" (Nealon 2012, pp. 20-21). The logic of postmodernism is thusly said to have been co-opted by the hegemonic capitalist state and specifically serves it, in Nealon's observation, as the driving force for coercive foreign policy. In the current time of "post-postmodernism," which for Nealon amounts to the postmodern era usually associated with the '80s but devoid of Jameson's optimism that capitalism would have reached a "late" stage of its development, we have to assume that the cultural rebellion narratives of the '60s, which often revolved around the liberation of an individual's or group's desire in the face of various social repressions, can now officially be pronounced dead. Under an economic logic that is in fact dedicate to the unleashing of multifarious individual desires [...], a repressive notion of 'normalization' is not the primary danger lurking within contemporary capitalism. [...] There are myriad social and political dangers latent in the neoliberal truisms of finance capital, but the rigid normalization of cultural options isn't paramount among them (Nealon 2012, p. 21).

A similar line of argument is developed by French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky in his characterization of contemporary Western consumer, post-Fordist capitalist societies. Lipovetsky signifies the contemporary era in terms of "hypermodernity" being the continuation of postmodernity with displays of more extreme features of the modern capitalist hegemony. "Lipovetsky observes and interprets hypermodernity to be like an individualist transition and revolution with the self-centered human at its heart – who is now unregulated and even narcissistic – but where the sacrificial codes have been shattered for the benefit of a further, amplified shockingly consumerist attitude. [...] Among other things, the quest for experiences, various pleasures, and novelties in which leisure is omnipresent, constitutes the foundations of our current Western society" (Roult et al 2022, p. 170). Lipovetsky situates our society in a "period of emptiness" (*ère du vide*) wherein, at a further stage of development of the postmodern logic of hedonic individualism, "the prevailing value is the individual and the individual's right to self-actualization and to be free: personal motivations, desires, hedonistic values, rejection of authoritarianism – these all emphasize this new narcissism, which is a form of total *individualism*" (Roult et al 2022, p. 171).

The human subjects in the hypermodern age are characterized as "neo-narcissistic" because their existential center of gravity is the individual Self and recognize no other fundamental reason for social action and engagement other than the private bodily (hedonic) or psychological (narcissistic) self-pleasure. In the social realm, the hypermodern subject certainly happens to pledge themselves to social engagements and cultural affiliations typical of the postmodern time, but they do so not as an embodied and enduring commitment but only as long as such endeavors fulfil their quest of individual self-pleasure. As it has been clarified, the assertion of total individualism should not be equated "with the demise of the collective dimension. On the contrary, the relationship to the community is still in evidence; it has simply become individualized. One of the examples he [Lipovetsky] uses to support his line of reasoning is the case of volunteer work, and in the process raises its more circumstantial, if not frivolous, implications" (Roult et al 2022, p. 179). Radical pursuits and ideals are arbitrarily chosen *à la carte* and easily abandoned out of caprice in the hypermodern age, mostly driven by a pleasure principle rather than being embodied in the socially engaged subject. Consequently, as it happens, they turn out to be disembodied, short-lived and mostly inconsequential pursuits when it comes to the radical transformation of society.

In his 2018 interview with Elsa Godart, Lipovetsky identifies three causes of hypermodernity: (1) The full-fledged development of consumer capitalism; (2) the hegemony of the individualistic ideology in capitalist political orders; and (3) the popularization of sub- and countercultures emerged in the West since the late 1960s (Lipovetsky 2018). Though not explicitly framed in terms of (neo-)Marxian critique of capitalism, we may develop a historical-materialist consideration of Lipovetsky's hypermodern society in terms of structure and superstructure. Hypermodernity, which is informed and sustained by the liberal political ideology and an individualist value system, works as the cultural superstructure of the capitalist economic structure. Just like the postmodern superstructure fragmented the civil societal discontent into ever-more marginal and irrelevant contestations thereby defusing any potential for a proletarian class struggle vis-à-vis the capitalist elite, the abject mental isolation of the individuals in the hypermodernity stage simply renders the class struggle unthinkable and, therefore, more-than-ever impossible. This is why hypermodernity is necessary for capitalism to ensure its own preservation and

hegemony. At the same time, the current stage of consumer capitalism is the necessary ground for hypermodernity to flourish.

In this framework, we observe how the two-fold tendencies of postmodernism (discoural deconstruction and the consequent infinite proliferation and empowerment of alternative and marginalized voices) do not necessarily happen to bring about any substantial contestation of the hegemonic capitalist regime. On the contrary, the proliferation and consequent pulverization of radical instances, the postmodernist deconstruction of everything, and the fetishization if not (hypermodern) commodification of whatever is marginalized and radical, by force of the combined (post)modern – all-too (post)modern – logics of emancipation and individualization, have effectively been incorporated into the hegemonic superstructure at the present stage of postmodernity. Call it post-postmodernism or hypermodernity – or we may say, more synthetically, "late postmodernity" – it is at this specific historical-political conjuncture that we capture the significance and urgency of the critical self-reckoning of postmodernism. Whereas it may not be tenable to optimistically diagnose a late stage of capitalism and its ills presumedly foreshadowing a new future, the present self-critical reflection of postmodernism – to be conducted on postmodernism's own terms – signals a new (perhaps late) stage of postmodernity. In this stage, old and new postmodernist intellectuals are more clearly recognizing the shortcomings of postmodernism and its alliance – unholy as much as unintended – with capitalist hegemony.

Conclusion

To be sure, the complete psycho-cognitive isolation of the individual is but the outgrowth necessitated by the very intrinsic logic of postmodernism. The activity of subjectivism and the radical pluralization and relativization of all language, discourse, and truth leads to solipsism and makes communication impossible altogether. With no shared meaning and understanding of truth and reality possible, the result is a stage of society where every individual is tremendously disjointed from the external reality and driven in its social and seemingly politically engaged behaviors by nothing but an individualistic hedonist-narcissistic pleasure principle. At a stage of consumerist society where the material concerns for survival have been virtually removed, what does drive, say, the groups of European youths to spend one afternoon waving Ukrainian flags to show support for Ukraine during the Russian "Special Military Operation"? What does drive a Mexican lawyer to wear an ethnic *keffiyeh* to show support for the Palestinian cause? What does drive an Italian 26-year-old student to debate the figure of Ibrahim Traoré or the Russian republic of Ingushetia while sitting idly in a coffee shop? Arguably, from the critical postmodernist perspective, all these world political issues have no clearly perceptible relation with the immediate existential material concerns of such subjects. With no material, real-world concerns in sight, what is left is nothing but the solipsistic pleasure principle of hedonism and narcissism, that is to say, their enjoyment of the knowledge and the belief of having a say in such political issues, the feeling of importance and relevance in an otherwise indifferent and incommensurable world. Knowledge, political opinion, and all social behavior have effectively been turned into consumption goods for bored individuals. Everything remains in the individual psychological sphere and can never eventuate in radical contestation and threat to the existing systemic structures of power.

It appears from this analysis that, in conclusion, in the late-postmodern stage of Western liberal democracies the commodification of all spheres of human existence have been effectively commodified to the point that even any form of civic and radical engagement and intellectual pursuit are now little more than a mere gesture of consumerist self-pleasure aimed at satisfying the narcissism and hedonism of idle and unconcerned individuals. This condition was not only made possible by the hegemonic position of postmodernism as a philosophy and dominant cultural trend, but is also favored, advanced, and required by the capitalist system of power. In the current phase of the supposed national-populist and post-truth threat to liberal democracy, we must carefully inquire whether the societal fragmentation and psycho-cognitive individual isolation of individuals that supposedly lie at their heart are development alien to the Western brand of liberal democracy or are rather inherent to it. This article suggests that national-populism, together with the infinity of other political movements and cultures that can be witnessed in the late postmodern era, are not foreign elements that invade and threaten liberal democracy but are rather the necessitated and predictable outcome of unfettered liberalism – the ideology of individual freedom vis-à-vis the constraints of society and the collectivity – promoted and required by the capitalist system of power in its consumerist (post-Fordist) stage. Oriental(ized) national-populist despots and the post-truth dominance of emotions over reason pose no existential danger to the liberal-democratic state as long as both are allied to, and are underpinned by, the hegemonic capitalist order.

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