Dysfunctional liberal democracy: Bridging crisis through politics of hype

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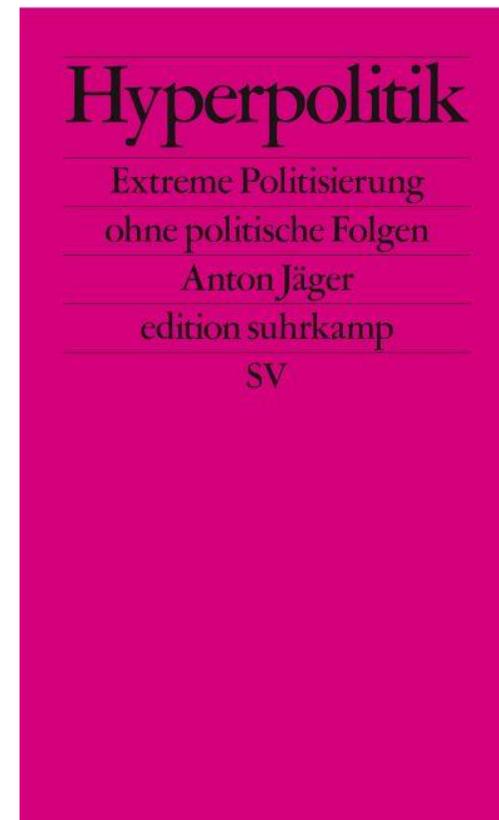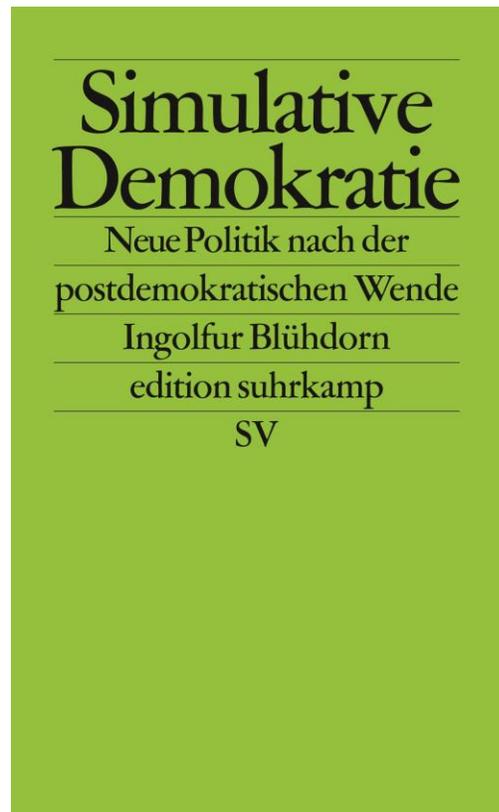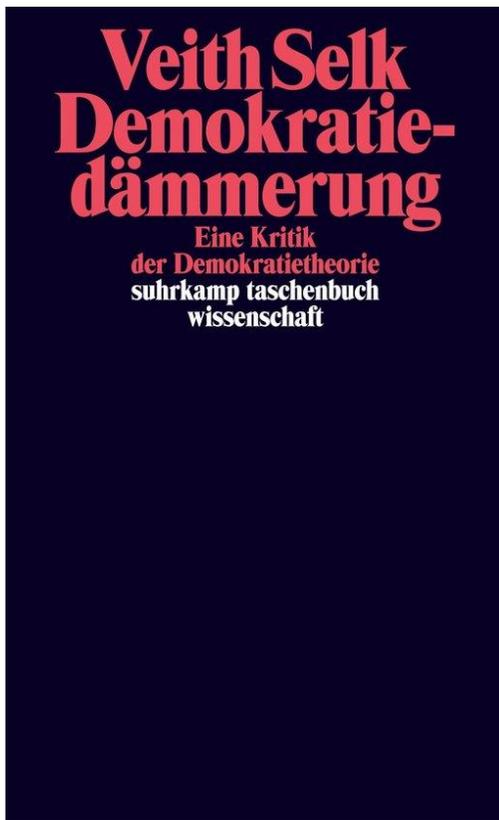
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Aim of this presentation

I. Elaborate how we are not living in post-democratic times, but in a democratic-simulation (focus on the Western world and its privileged strata and self-understanding).

II. Marry debates in political theory with STS and hype studies.

III. Introduce contemporary German thought on democracy, alienation and crisis.

Veith Selk
Demokratie-dämmerung
Eine Kritik
der Demokratietheorie
suhrkamp taschenbuch
wissenschaft

Simulative
Demokratie
Neue Politik nach der
postdemokratischen Wende
Ingolfur Blühdorn
edition suhrkamp
SV

Hyperpolitik
Extreme Politisierung
ohne politische Folgen
Anton Jäger
edition suhrkamp
SV

Central imperatives of liberal representative democracy

Parameters on the input side

➢ *Democratic equality:* is not based on exclusive knowledge, inheritance or power, but on public consent and free access to the competition for this consent under conditions of political equality: **Everyone who votes can run for political mandate!**

➢ *Democratic representation*: Everyone who is affected by a democratic election should also be able to be represented in political suffrage: **Control the power that has power over you!**

➢ *Democratic legibility*: the number of variables needed to understand politics or a relevant political issue must be so small that they can also be grasped by the demos. **Political practices (and their institutions) must be legible in order to be appropriated!**

Central imperatives of liberal representative democracy

Parameters on the output side

➢ *Problem-solving capacities*. **Deliver!**

➢ *Elite control & pacification of inequalitie*s. Access to wealth: **Oligarchy corrupts the system!**

➢ *Systemic reproduction*: economic, social and environmental resilience: **Preserve the system you depend on!**

Part I

The Implausibility of Liberal Democracy

Selk (2023) on processes of democratic degeneration

➢ "The categories of bourgeois society and liberal democracy, such as citizenship, popular sovereignty, freedom and equality, solidarity, meritocracy, equality of opportunity, etc., **can no longer be applied to our empirical reality."**

➢ Established ideas and theories are usually not refuted by a fact or a counterexample, but by a sum of historical experiences that undermine their credibility. **Representative democracy is affected by such a process of de-plausibilization.**

➢ In democratic theory there is a **lack of orientation** with regard to applying descriptive and analytical categories to reality…

Devolution: Differentiation & Individuation

➢ Process of emancipation from family, state and religion led to an rise of excessive individualism, acceleration, differentiation and societal complexity. **Precarious freedom in a risk society (Beck, 1986).**

➢ The ability to steer, control and implement politics in a globalized, mediatized and crisis-ridden world **overburdens democratic institutions.**

➢ **Policies become increasingly reactive and additive**, sub-systems become independent, interrelationships are disregarded.

➢ **The impression of a general policy failure** is therefore spreading among citizens. This applies to important areas such as social justice, environmental and climate protection, migration, education and economic and social policy.

15.03.2025   First name Last name - Presentation title

Modernity overcoming liberal democracy

➢ Differentiation and individualisation

➢ Politization of all life spheres

➢ The end of welfare capitalism and its pacification force

The result: overburdened democratic institutions, reactive and additive politics, sub-systems with different logics and **The impression of a general policy failure** is therefore spreading among citizens.

This applies to important areas such as social justice, environmental and climate protection, migration, education and economic and social policy.

The continuous individuation and politization processes which are constitutive to and normatively demanded by the modernist project of liberal democracy is producing its own crisis.

Part II

# Introducing the Remedy: Simulative Democracy

Post-Democratic paradox

➢ **Blühdorn (2013):** "the subjects liberated themselves from the traditional normative constraints and ruthlessly indulge in their self-realization, which is primarily oriented towards consumption and market success."

➢ "Stay loyal to your political ideals"; "more democratic participation", "listen to the science" is not an option anymore.

➢ **For the demos such drastic interventions in their project of self-realization and autonomy are too demanding, too stressful and simply overburdening.**

➢ Psychologically: the experience of complexity, constant availability, acceleration, competition are very exhausting.

Blühdorn on Simulative Democracy

➢ The idea of democracy appears unreal, disconnected from experience, and its normative appeal fades. **We experience dysfunctional political subjectivity and institutional failure.**

➢ Simulative democracy responds to this new constellation of problems. A political form of an "**overall social procedure of democratic self-illusion.**"

➢ In Simulative Democracy**, the post-democratic paradox can continue to exist without major cognitive dissonance**, legitimacy- and ongoing functional problems.

Fairytale "The Emperor's New Clothes" (1837)

privileged demos

liberal Democracy

crises
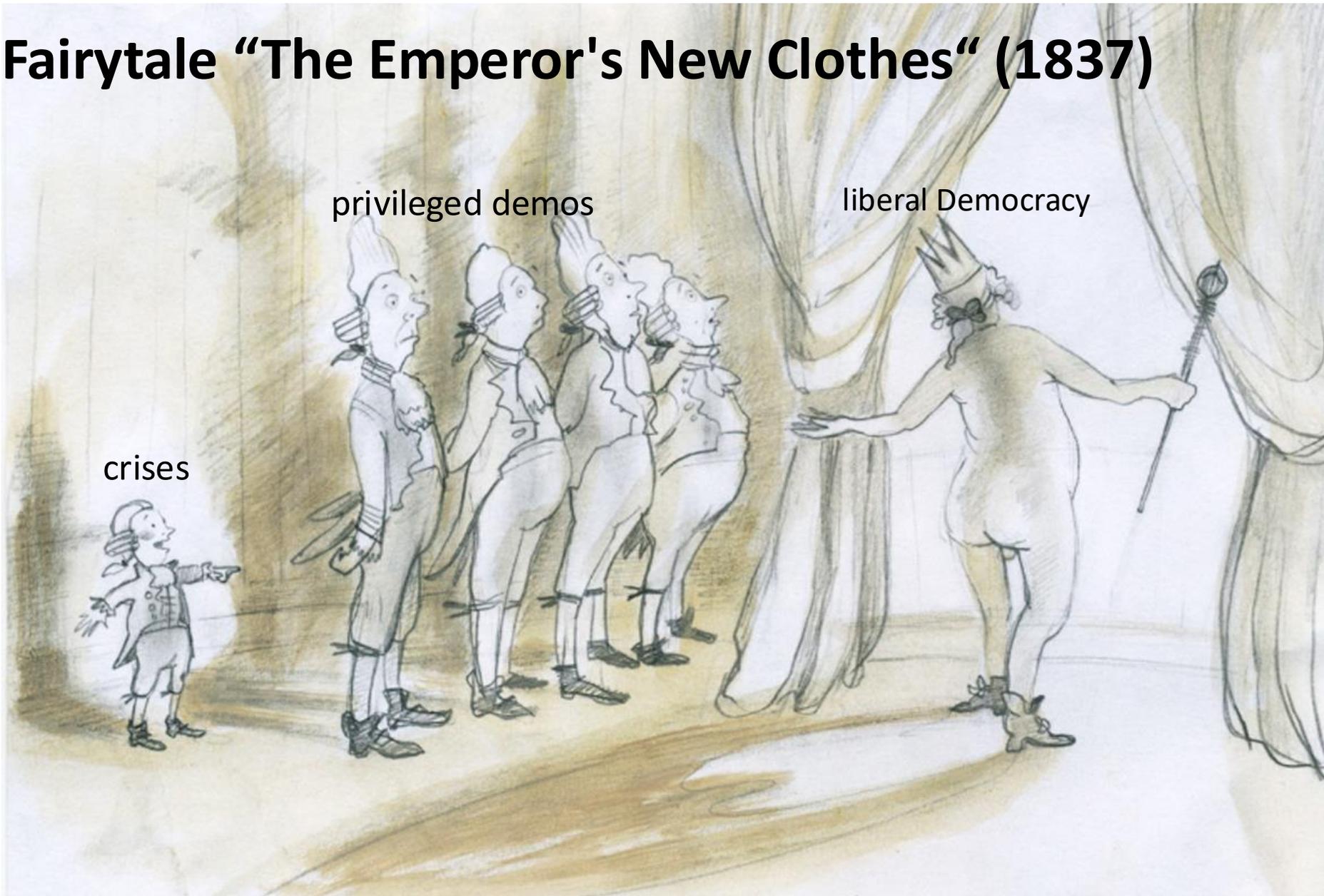
Tale is based on a 1335 story from the *Libro de los ejemplos,* a medieval Spanish collection of fifty-one cautionary tales.

itas Institut für Technikfolgenabschätzung und Systemanalyse

Anglo-American pendent: Mark Fisher's capitalist Realism

➢ Realism understood as "***mediatic supersaturation"*** that "fails any longer to outrage or even interest."

➢ "today's society must appear post-ideological: the prevailing ideology is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; they do not take ideological propositions seriously."

Still, the system needs to perform the symbolic order:
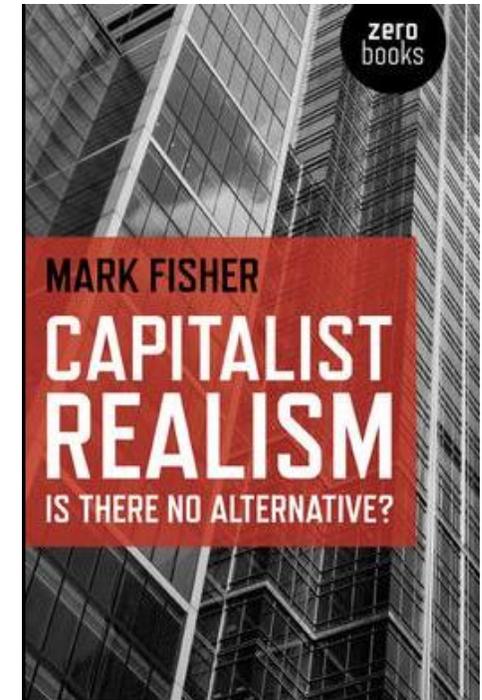
Hype!

Part III

Perform Democratic Simulation through Hype

How to make democratic simulation tangible, performative and effective?

➢ How to establish a symbolic democratic order without any real societal and structural change?

➢ How to sustain a condition of "strange symbiotic relationship between power and resistance" that leads to the "paradoxical result" that "both sides are satisfied" (Blühdorn)?

➢ Voting does not change anything (post-democracy) but if we take votes seriously then the majority does not want that anything changes (**we talk about Trump later**)

➢ What can the system offer to the demos so they stay pacified?

The system needs to, albeit implausible, perform the symbolic order:
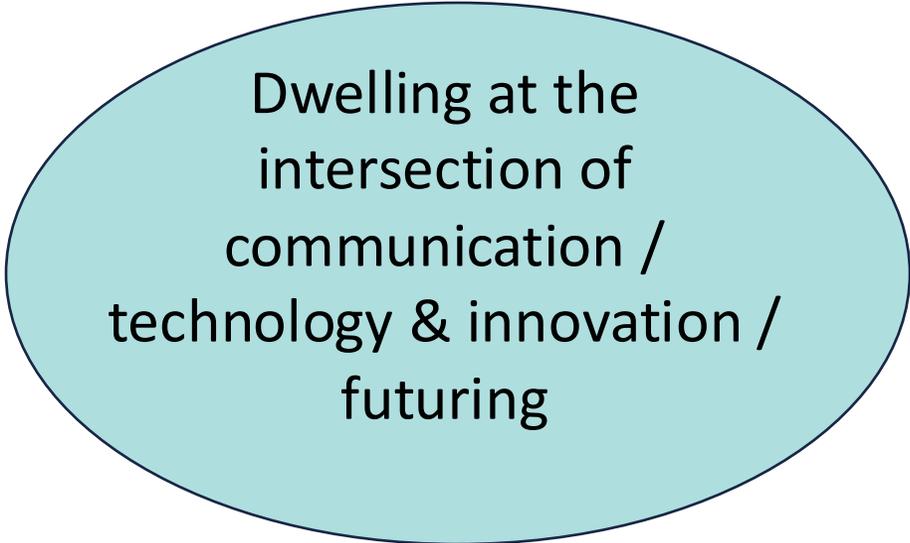
Hype!

Public Enemy - Don't Believe The Hype (Official Music Video)

Where to situate hype?

Anticipation (Alvial-Palavicino, 2015)

Sociology of expectations (Borup et al. 2006)

Dwelling at the intersection of communication / technology & innovation / futuring

Forecasting (Martino, 2003)

Hype?!

Vision Assessment (Grin & Grunwald, 2000; Frey et al., 2022)

Sociotechnical Imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015)

You cannot hype alone…

➢hypes are a societal dynamic triggered and driven by strategic agents (hypers) - but depend on overall society (media frenzy, followership, financial investors, political opportunists…)

Definition: *Hype is a social dynamic produced through an emotional staging and circulation of a distinct and laudable - but actually opportunistically exaggerated and implausible - future.*

It is all about the show: Stage performance & emotions

> ➢ Hypes differ from visions, scenarios or imaginaries…

> ➢ Epistemic critiques in form of evidence, rationality or implausibility do not meet the phenomenon.

Rather similar to 'bullshit'…?

*The bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that he necessarily gets them wrong. In Eric Ambler's novel Dirty Story, a character named Arthur Abdel Simpson recalls advice that he received as a child from his father: (….) "**Never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through."***
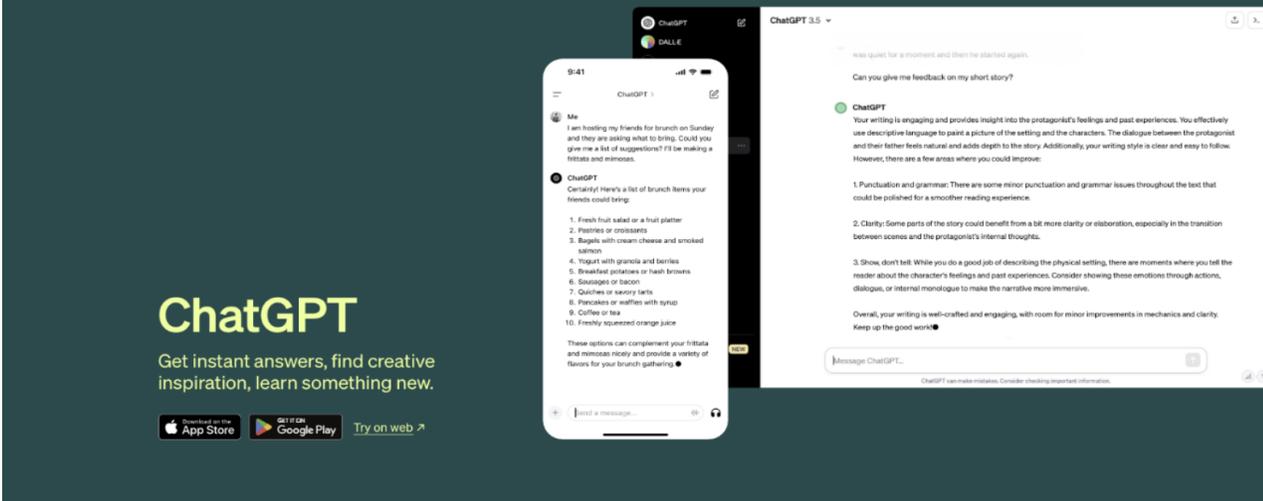
Henry Frankfurt, 2005, On Bullshit.

Example:
The simulative and pacifying force of tech hype

➢ AI Tech progress as a remedy to democratic, ecological & economic crisis.

➢ Open AI and its claims of singularity:
Tech fix solutionism: *"Ask me anything"*

➢ the politics of hype points to the emotional celebration of technology as an efficient and sustainable future, without really politically changing anything - except for the stock value of some privileged financial strata.

The Dramaturgy of the Chatbot Hype

Temporality		Rhetoric Motif	Emotional Effect, Stage Management
I. Presenting chatbots as knowledge models		Chat design as play-and-answer game	Curiosity, playful other, invitation for try-out.
		"Ask me anything"	Omniscient but opaque agent causing excitement, fascination, insecurity.
II. Panicking and hailing chat-bot performance		Hallucinations, humor, wittiness	Projection of creativity & improvisation, anthropomorphization, ELIZA effect
		Manipulative and uncanny	Bewilderment, simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the dark and the eerie.
III. Entertaining the battle of BigTech as a spectacle		Battle and competition between giants	Passive contemplation and awe of spectacle, escapism, creating audience of followership / enemyship.
		Dualisms of extremes	Sketching opposing poles, obscuring complexity and interdependencies. Evoking a performative momentum to leverage potentials or mitigate risks.
IV. Crossing the lines of the acceptable		Doomsday Apocalypse & call for moratorium	Worries and panic of eventual sudden loss of control / runaway dynamic / collapse. Religious offerings of redemption or doom, need for prophets to read / shape / (de)mystify the future.
V. Materialization? Lock-ins? Policy?		'Kairos' momentum of action	Closing window of opportunity calling for immediate attention and reaction. Looming threat creates pressure to "act now, think later". Creating authority and legitimacy for leadership and intervention.

EMOTIONAL HYPE TRAJECTORY

Summary

➢ The premises of liberal democracy are implausible and overcome.

➢ Current social order is reproduced by a symbolic celebration of something that is past: simulating an implausible future through hype.

➢ For now democratic order will continue in some dysfunctional way, as a hybrid between expertocratic, authoritarian, grassroot, constitutional, nationalist tension.

➢ That we cannot imagine how the liberal democratic situation will be in ten years time shows that we may be at the end of a paradigm.

15.03.2025

Thank you for your attention!

➢ Coming up:

Hype Studies Conference:

(DON'T) BELIEVE THE HYPE?!

10th-12th of Sept. in Barcelona