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Article:

**Apparatuses of (De-)politicization: Contemporary
Socio-Political Movements and the Neoliberal
Transformation of Politics**

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PhD Proposal:

**The Ghost behind the Colonial Curtain: European
Secularism as an Instrument of White Supremacy**

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Thomas Keulemans, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other words – including electronic media- have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

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Article

**Apparatuses of (De-)politicization:
Contemporary Socio-Political Movements
and the Neoliberal Transformation of
Politics**

Abstract

In this article, I take issue with proposals that advocate overcoming the crisis of political representation by democratizing structures of representation as to include the people in processes of decision-making. These accounts, I argue, neglect taking into account the de-politicizing neoliberal transformations of liberal democratic government and its subjects. I argue that horizontalizing representation can be a means of re-politicization – as part of a more fundamental project of re-politicizing society and life – but must not be taken as a sufficient goal in itself. Rather, I argue that our primary focus should be on re-politicizing spaces to facilitate the generation of political thought and action and thus allow for the re-politicization of subjects capable of bearing the responsibility of inclusive forms of representation.

“The true content of Occupy Wall Street was not the demand ... for better wages, decent housing, or a more generous social security, but *disgust with the life we’re forced to live*. Disgust with a life in which we’re all *alone*, alone facing the necessity for each one to make a living, house oneself, feed oneself, realize one’s potential, and attend to one’s health, *by oneself*. ... The life in common that was attempted in Zuccotti Park, in tents, in the cold, in the rain, surrounded by police in the dreariest of Manhattan’s squares was definitely not a full rollout of the *vita nova* – it was just the point where the sadness of metropolitan existence began to be flagrant. At last it was possible to grasp our shared condition *together*, our equal reduction to the status of entrepreneurs of the self.”

- **The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 49.**

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I. Introduction

Many recent debates within Western¹ political philosophy have in some way positioned themselves around the tension between hegemonic politics and exodus politics. Hegemonic politics understands the socio-political realm as a field of forces in which the hegemonic force is most widely accepted through disseminated discourses and practices but can nevertheless be challenged by counter-hegemonic blocs (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2005; 2013; 2018). A counter-hegemony must be articulated around a common demand that combines multiple wishes and is thus capable of furthering equality and justice by means of its vertical representation in democratic institutions. Exodus politics, on the other hand, assumes a relative autonomy and advocates the organization of horizontal, more directly democratic alternatives that reject traditional forms of political representation (Hardt and Negri 2000; 2004; 2009; 2012; 2017). This tension's contemporary relevance must be considered in light of the protests taking place since the 1990s, culminating in 2011 with a global wave of uprisings – starting with the Arab Spring, spreading to Europe, the US and other parts of the world. These uprisings – among which I consider Occupy, the Indignados but also the later Gilets Jaunes as the contemporary, Western expressions whose practices I have used for analysis² – popularized, by publicly re-appropriating and reconfiguring political structures like leadership, representation and decision-making, debates on socio-political alternatives. As such, these movements have been considered the grassroots responses to the crisis of political representation (Holloway 2018; 2019; Lorey 2012; 2014; 2019; Tormey 2012).

This crisis of representation signifies the increasing distance between the represented and their representatives effected by a number of transformations that discourage the engaged participation of the *demos* in political processes – the *demos* here signifying the people as democracy's constituent power. These transformations include the growing influence of financial interests within the political realm and the increasingly technocratic character of decision- and policy-making. Consequently, this crisis fuels both politicization as well as de-politicization: it politicizes subjects due to their experience of being un(der)represented, the result of which is that people have started taking the streets to express their distrust toward the current democratic institutions and experiment with (radical) alternatives (Tormey 2012, 134). Simultaneously, it de-politicizes subjects by complicating their participation, thus discouraging them to be an actively political citizen that is willing to engage and participate in processes

¹ The term 'Western' here designates west European and northern American.

² Despite the fact that most 2011-movements have characterized as 'movements of the squares' I limit my analysis in this article to Western movements as to avoid unjust generalizations and universalizations.

focused on socio-political change. This de-politicization works in two ways: on the one hand, citizen's participation is complicated by the growing power of financial and corporate interest and the technocratization of politics, while, on the other hand, it involves the debilitation of the political imaginary to envision alternatives to the current political configuration.

Inevitably, then, one of the most vivid discussions within the hegemonic-exodus tension revolves around the current state and future of political representation, which Hannah Pitkin, as one of the first, defined as a relation between representative and represented in which the former acts in the interests of the latter while being responsive and accountable to the latter's wishes, objections and requests (Pitkin 1967, 209-210). However, today's movements seem to respond to the representative's *lack of responsiveness* toward the represented, thereby contesting this definition's legitimacy and exposing how it only refers to an idealized conception of representation. As a response, contemporary Western movements have, by horizontally organizing their democratic practices, attempted to reconfigure the apparatus of representation (Kioupkiolis 2014, 150, 165). Agamben defines the apparatus as the network established between a heterogeneity of elements containing a strategic function due to which it is always situated within power relations (Agamben 2009, 2-3, 11). The apparatus thus designates that in and through which governance is practiced and thus always implies processes of subjectification, by means of which it strategically aims to produce the subjects it requires to function. It is in this light that contemporary Western movements must be interpreted: rather than trying to overcome the representational apparatus, they attempt to appropriate and reconfigure it to overcome the current crisis.

However, because of the central position of the *assembly*, in which all are welcome to express their voice equally to reach a general consensus, recent Western movements have been accused of rejecting representation altogether, refusing to deploy *any* form of representation (Decreus et al. 2014, 136; Decreus 2012a, 34-35). This alleged rejection has been praised as well as fiercely critiqued – for example by Mouffe, who claimed that a movement that refuses to engage with existing representative institutions will be bound to be ineffective and forgotten (Mouffe 2013, 126-127; 2018, 20-21; Decreus et al., 2014, 40). Thus, for Mouffe, the 2011-movements have never posed a serious threat to the Western powers that be nor did they lead to socio-political change due to their self-proclaimed autonomy from existing institutions. Others, however, like Hardt and Negri, have praised these 'new social movements' for their inventiveness and non-conformity to the guidelines of the political system. Rather than criticizing their lack of effecting constitutional change, they celebrate their re-politicizing effects as well as their horizontality, openness and inclusivity resulting from their embracement of diversity and singularity (Hardt and Negri 2012; 2017). They consider these multitudinous

uprisings as passionate experiments that have expanded political conditions, limits and possibilities and as such have generated hope and inspiration for the generations to come.

Rather than choosing sides or endorsing the strict binary – between verticality and horizontality, political representation and irrepresentability, engagement with or withdrawal from institutions – many scholars have sought to alleviate the tension (Kioupkiolis 2010; 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; Decreus 2012a; Decreus et al. 2012b; 2014; Lorey 2012; 2014; 2019; Holloway 2018; 2019; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2014). In doing so, Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Thomas Decreus both advocate opening up representational structures to ensure the possibility of the people’s radical participation, which must be seen as a radicalization of their current indirect political participation through voting that would lead to more direct power of decision-making. Without idealizing the multitude’s self-governing capacities, as Hardt and Negri do, they counter Mouffe’s ‘elitist and exclusive’ conception of political representation, in which the *demos* is considered to be ‘constitutively lacking’ and incapable of governing or representing itself (Kioupkiolis 2017a, 12). They argue that, to counter the representational crisis, we must focus on horizontalizing (Kioupkiolis) and democratizing (Decreus) representation.

In this article I take issue with these projects. In the following part, I present Kioupkiolis’ and Decreus’ positions and, consequently, criticize their narrow analysis of the forces constitutive of the representational crisis. Although I support them in challenging Mouffe’s ‘elitist’ position, I will argue that their proposals neglect taking into account the neoliberal transformations of Western states and their (political) subjects. As such, I argue, horizontalizing representation will lead to a more inclusive representative apparatus, without, however, compensating for the lack of cultivated political spaces and subjects to bear this responsibility. In the subsequent part, I elaborate on the transformative effects of neoliberalism, which is here understood as the dominant ideology fueling a set of politico-economic practices focused on creating and maintaining the ideal market conditions that are believed to be required for the maximum amount of individual well-being and freedom (Brown 2015b; Harvey 2005, 2; Thorsen and Lie, 2007). This paradigm dominates decision- and policy-making, state action and social life by granting the market primacy (over the government) in efficiently regulating society, subjecting all domains of life to market logics and emphasizing entrepreneurship and competition as the ultimate moral values (Brown 2015b; Harvey 2005, 2; Thorsen and Lie, 2007). Consequently, neoliberalism’s effect is twofold: first of all, it transforms liberal democratic government, and secondly, it de-politicizes citizens.

The former effect is part of the marketization of politics, government and its governance, which, in turn, leads to three important transformations. First of all, the growing influence of

financial interests in the political realm has allowed for competition between the *demos*' and corporate interests. Rather than gatekeeping the *demos*' interests, government has been transformed into the gatekeeper of ideal market conditions and the creator of new markets (Barona 2007; Brown 2015a; Thorsen and Lie 2007). Secondly, the transformation of political parties and the demise of partisan politics has led to political arena characterized by a politics of unrelenting compromise. Consequently, rather than being loyal to their ideological foundations and voters base, political parties now aim for positions of power, by being less ideological, more adaptive and conforming to market logics (Mair 2013). Thirdly, the increasingly important role of experts in decision- and policy-making has initiated a 'technocratization' of the political realm: representatives take more frequent recourse to allegedly neutral 'experts' for advice on specialist matters, thereby excluding the people (Decreus 2012a, 40; Barona 2007).

The latter effect describes the marketization of the subject effected by the dissemination of neoliberal norms, values and habits that encourage self-entrepreneurship and competition. By naturalizing these values, subjects are individualized and stymied in processes of collectivization and socialization that are constitutive of politics and community. As such, by internalizing this rationality and acting accordingly, citizens are de-politicized as their individualization and marketization conflicts, I argue, with the cultivation of a politicized life. Since the proposed democratization of representation neglects taking into account this fundamental de-politicization of society, it might lead to more horizontal representation and an amount of re-politicized subjects without, however, compensating for the lack of politicized spaces and without countering the ongoing de-politicizing effects of neoliberal governance. As such, it can be part of a greater project of re-politicization but not the final goal. Therefore, I argue that the re-politicization of society and life, through the creation of apparatuses that counter the de-politicizing effects of neoliberal governance by facilitating and generating political thought, debate and action and encouraging people to enact alternatives, must be our primary goal.

II. Post-Hegemony and the Crisis of Representation

Post-hegemonic accounts (Kioupkiolis 2010, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Decreus 2012a; Decreus et al. 2012b, 2014; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013; Stavrakakis 2014) have, for long, criticized calls for overcoming representation by showing how such calls reduce all forms of representation to traditional, political representation, which signifies a vertical relation between representative and represented. Such a reduction neglects taking into account the processes by

which a movement (re)presents itself to itself through symbolic and discursive representations, necessary to define its identity – such as Occupy claiming to embody and represent the 99%, thereby opposing themselves to the rich 1%. As such, most post-hegemonic accounts agree on concluding that representation might be undesirable, as it can never reflect the diversity and multiplicity of a movement, but nevertheless unavoidable, as representations are necessary in finding one’s goals and identity. This has shifted the post-hegemonic focus from asking ‘how to overcome representation’ to ‘how to democratically construct and use structures of representation’ (Decreus 2012a, 33).

Responding to this question, Kioupkiolis and Decreus advocate opening up the apparatus of representation to make it accessible for anyone who wishes to participate and, in this way, counter the hegemonic assumption that the *demos* lacks the capacity to represent itself. It is through this lens that they consider the 2011-movements primarily as responding to the crisis of representation by inventing new forms of representation (Kioupkiolis) and, correspondingly, democratizing them by maximizing the spaces for self-reflection, contestation and opposition (Decreus) (Kioupkiolis 2017c, 18; 2017a, 30-31; Decreus 2012a, 39). However, they thereby seem to neglect to take into account the neoliberal transformations of the public and political realm that have led to a lack of politicized spaces, in which people can practice with alternatives, and the consequent lack of politicized subjects that know how to enact such alternatives. Therefore, I argue that we must not take horizontalizing representation as our current and main goal but, rather, as a means of re-politicization that will, ultimately, lead to enough people being capable of representing themselves and their communities and, thereby, counter the crisis.

Although explicitly rejecting structures of representation due to a history of misrepresentation, Kioupkiolis argues that movements like Occupy did make representative claims (Kioupkiolis 2017a, 30). While attempting to avoid traditional forms of representation, they still spoke in the name of ‘the 99%’ against ‘the 1%’, thereby claiming to be representative of 99 per cent of society (Kioupkiolis 2017a, 30; 2017c, 13). In addition, they used spokespersons to represent group decisions in assemblies, signifying at least to some extent the endorsement of representative structures. This means, Kioupkiolis argues, that certain modes of representation, “as ‘the making present’ of something which is ‘not present literally or in fact’”, are unavoidable as the *demos*’ full presence is infeasible (Kioupkiolis 2017a, 3, 29-30). However, he adds, these movements did modify traditional forms of representation so as to prevent definitive and lasting disparities in power between different actors (*ibid.*, 13, 22, 27, 29, 30, 32). Spokespersons, for instance, were not allowed to make decisions on behalf of the ones they represented but merely communicated their decisions ‘made below’ and

representative positions rotated frequently to prevent abuse of representative positions and power structures from becoming fixed (Kioupkiolis 2017c, 13). Consequently, by minimizing the representational gap and maximizing the space for contestation, representatives could be held more immediately accountable.

As such, Kioupkiolis concludes, these movements' 'post-hegemonic' label does not in any way imply the complete transgression of hegemonic forms of politics (Kioupkiolis 2014, 164; 2017c, 8, 17). Rather, he claims, we should understand the prefix 'post-' as signifying the attempts to radically reconfigure "the figures of leadership, representation, unification and concentration of forces which made up the core of hegemonic politics" (Kioupkiolis 2017c, 8). Thus, rather than completely transgressing traditional values of political organization, contemporary movements are redefining them in favor of more horizontal and inclusive forms of politics. In line with these attempts, Kioupkiolis advocates theorizing and practicing with hybrid forms of hegemonic and post-hegemonic representation (Kioupkiolis 2017a, 5, 6, 33). In doing so, Kioupkiolis (*ibid.*, 21-22) proposes focusing on commoning³ representation, which would entail maximally eliminating

any standing division between the rulers and the ruled, enabling anyone who so wishes to involve themselves in political deliberation, lawmaking, administration and law enforcement regarding collective affairs. Anyone can take legislative and policy-drafting initiatives in deliberative fora, anyone can take up posts in the apparatuses of administration and the courts. Collective self-governance becomes in principle an affair of common citizens, of *anyone*.

In this way, Kioupkiolis challenges Mouffe's claim that the *demos* is incapable of self-government or -representation as it is 'constitutively lacking' and thus requires guidance by elevated leaders to formulate their demands and ensure they change the existing institutions from within. In line with Hardt and Negri, Kioupkiolis does consider the *demos* capable of representing itself, as change can also be effected without engaging with institutions (*ibid.*, 12-13). Still, however, the question remains as to how representation is truly commonized?

³ The common, for Kioupkiolis, "refers to goods and resources that are collectively owned and/or collectively produced. Access to them is provided on equal terms (which may range from totally open access to universal exclusion from consumption, with many possibilities in-between), and the common good is collectively administered in egalitarian, participatory ways by the communities which produce or own them. (...) What is crucial for our understanding of 'common democracy' and 'common representation' is that the 'common' pertains to shared resources which are managed, produced and distributed through collective participation on equal terms which eschew the logic of both private and state-public property" (Kioupkiolis 2017a, 20-21).

Kioupkiolis suggests experimenting with instruments – like allotment, frequent rotation, limited tenure, increased accountability and alternating participants in working groups – that depersonalize representation as their functions are “assumed by anonymous, mobile and shifting crowds” (Kioupkiolis 2014, 165; 2017a, 22). This is precisely what contemporary Western movements did: by occupying public squares they created spaces for collective practice with horizontal and accessible forms of representation; by welcoming anyone to participate in assemblies, they transformed representation into an apparatus of participation, engagement and (re-)politicization, thus opposing opaque representative processes in liberal democracies. To complement this process, Kioupkiolis (2017a, 33) advocates penetrating state- and other institutions as their democratization will not come from top-down since those in power benefit from being in power and will not hand over their positions to the many.

Kioupkiolis forgets, however, to take into account the marketization and de-politicization of society. How do we common structures of representation in a de-politicized environment, that is, with a lack of politicized spaces and subjects? Kioupkiolis’ understanding of contemporary Western movements as experimenting with horizontal forms of representation is definitely not incorrect, but does, however, understate their (re-)politicizing power, which, I think, is essential. These movements have, in the first place, had to occupy – and thus re-politicize – public space to enable the experience of a political life for all. Such a re-politicization of de-politicized space, overlooked by Kioupkiolis, is a necessary condition for the cultivation of a political consciousness and life, in which people realize, believe in and act on their political power, and prepares people for bearing political responsibilities, like representation. Thus, an inclusive apparatus of representation will prove ineffective in overcoming the crisis of representation if it is not part of a bigger project of re-politicizing spaces to facilitate the cultivation of politicized subjects that are still subject to neoliberal de-politicization every day.

In a similar vein, Thomas Decreus (2012a, 2012b, 2014) advocates a democratization of representation without taking into account a fundamentally de-politicized political realm and subject. In doing this, Decreus (2012a, 33) too builds on Pitkin’s (1967) indispensable definition in which political representation signifies the vertical relation between represented and representative whereby the latter acts in the interests of the former while remaining responsive to the former’s objections. On the basis of this definition, Decreus, following Kioupkiolis, subverts the claim that these movements have transgressed representation as it results from the misconception by which all forms of representation are reduced to political representation. Just like Kioupkiolis, Decreus exposes the unavoidability of representative claims that speak on behalf of absent parts of society. Thus, he claims, we must complicate the

presumed detrimental relation between participation and representation, in which representation (as someone else (re)presenting your interests) is believed to prevent participation (as (re)presenting oneself in a political space) (Decreus 2012a, 33). Representative slogans and names like ‘the 99%’ do not prevent people from political participation but rather stimulate participation since almost anyone is invited. Thus, we need to categorize different forms of representation based on their different intensities and, as such, we should not focus on overcoming representation altogether but rather on democratically dealing with its inevitability (ibid., 33).

Countering Hardt and Negri’s belief in the multitude’s capability of direct democracy without representation, Decreus shows how calls for exodus deny the unavoidability of representation. This does, however, not mean that he agrees with Mouffe’s assertion that the political incapability of the *demos* necessitates traditional, political representation. Instead, Decreus identifies these differing beliefs in the people’s political (in)capability as the most essential difference constituting the debate and goes on to show how both alternatives are built on the assumption that the interests of the represented precede processes of representation (ibid., 35). He subverts this assumption by showing how the interests of the represented only come about *through* and *by means of* processes of representation, meaning there can be no collectivity without representation and thus no ‘beyond’ representation at all (ibid., 35). Movements need representation in order to (re)present themselves to themselves and, through this process, incessantly reflect on who they are. Therefore, in a way similar to Kioupkiolis, Decreus argues against traditional, political representation as well as overcoming representation in favor of reconfiguring traditional modes of representation into more directly democratic modes of representation – such as referenda⁴ – in which people have a more direct say in decision-making (ibid., 35-36).

Inspired by Lefort, Decreus argues that such a process starts by realizing that the process of representation always already contains a gap in which the representation never coincides with that which is represented (ibid., 36-37). For Lefort, this means that the extent to which a democracy is democratic is the extent to which this unavoidable gap between representation and represented can be questioned and contested. On the basis of this, Decreus identifies – and advocates – a transition from “participation to contestation as the distinctive character of a

⁴ In France, the Gilets Jaunes advocated the restoration of the Référendum d’Initiatives Citoyenne (RIC), which would grant the political power for every registered voter to propose a law; to propose the abrogation of any legislation; to petition for the destitution of any elected representative; and to call for an amendment to the constitution. All such initiatives should gather 700,000 signatures by registered voters in order for the national parliament to be obligated to discuss it and after amending it, to call out a national referendum one year after having received the petition (Mercier 2018).

democratic organization” in which the government’s task is to stimulate and facilitate conflict and contestation (ibid., 39, *Decreus’ translation*). A properly democratic regime would thus institutionalize the possibility for contestation, whereas an undemocratic government would violently oppress forms of contestation (ibid., 39). Considering the public assemblies of contemporary Western movements, Decreus concludes that they are democratic, not because they let everybody “have an equal share in power, but by creating a large space through which a maximum of internal contestation is possible” (ibid., 39, *Decreus’ translation*). Thus, Decreus advocates maximizing contestatory spaces to democratize the apparatus of representation.

Here it becomes clear that Decreus, too, neglects to sufficiently consider the neoliberal transformations of the political realm and subject. First of all, to what extent is it possible to create spaces of radical contestation – in which the political system can be fundamentally questioned and alternatives can be experimented with – when public assemblies are forcefully evicted in order to ‘restore the public order,’ thereby confining the occupants to the ballot box and petitions? And what does it mean for a de-politicized subject to have space for critical contestation when one has internalized the market’s logic without cultivating a life of political engagement and activity? If we only establish accessible representation without actively countering the de-politicizing effects of neoliberal governance, we will accept and facilitate the growing marketization of all domains of society and life and hand politics over to the market, thereby endorsing the primacy of economic over ideological, social and political incentives. Therefore, rather than merely advocating instruments of commoning and horizontalization, I argue on the basis of two arguments, that these means must be part of a bigger project of re-politicizing society and life.

First of all, only when considering neoliberalism’s inherently de-politicizing effects will we notice that we are still confronted with a de-politicized political realm, characterized by a consensus on neoliberal hegemony, and a de-politicized majority of people, incapable of contesting this hegemony. As such, opening up positions of representation might alleviate but not fundamentally confront the crisis, as a de-politicized *demos* does not possess the political imaginary to enact a political alternative and will merely replace those in representative positions without addressing the transformation of politics. To exemplify this, Parvu (2017) shows how Romanian protestors, in protesting against the leveling of three mountains for mining, opposed the project by adopting the same de-politicized neoliberal discourse as the state and the mining company. Parvu argues that “many protestors had internalized the notion that the decision ultimately boils down not to public debate and contestation, but to a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) based on expert opinion” (Parvu 2017, 780). In this way, they challenged the project on the basis of neoliberal arguments such as the project not providing

enough jobs, providing jobs for too short of a time, and the judgment that it would not generate enough money for the community (ibid., 780). This shows that opening up representative positions without simultaneously contesting a deeply penetrated neoliberal rationality will not necessarily entail a fundamental change in politics as its neoliberal basis will not be contested. This does, however, not mean that accessible representation could have re-politicizing effects through which citizens cultivate political engagement by learning how to formulate and defend their demands outside of the hegemonic neoliberal discourse.

Second of all, even when the people would represent themselves, a fundamentally de-politicized majority of the people will, when confronted with political choices, dilemmas and questions, request political guidance and leadership as they are unfamiliar with how to politically struggle for their collective interests. In dismissing Mouffe's claim, in which the *demos* is politically incapable, in favor of inclusive representation, Kioupiolis and Decreas assert that the *demos* is inherently qualified for political representation. However, although I do not consider the *demos*' to be essentially politically incapable, thereby definitively excluding them from political positions of power, I do agree with Mouffe that the majority of the *demos* is currently politically unqualified due to neoliberalism's de-politicizing effects. As such I expect de-politicized subjects in representative positions to quickly request old forms of vertical leadership rather than manifesting the idealized forms of direct democracy. Furthermore, in establishing a more direct democracy, we cannot rely on an already politicized minority to represent the rest, as it requires people that either know how to represent themselves or contest their misrepresentation. Therefore, without re-politicizing the political realm and, in this way, allow for the cultivation of politicized subjects, merely opening up representational structures will not be able to counter the fundamentally de-politicizing effects of neoliberal governance. In other words, I consider Kioupiolis' and Decreas' proposals effective only as part of a more fundamental project of re-politicizing society and life.

III. Neoliberalism: An Apparatus of De-politicization

Within political thought, one is almost obliged to theorize the connection between neoliberalism and politics as neoliberalism has had a substantial transformative impact on society and the political realm since its advent in the 1970s (Harvey 2005, 2, 9). The hegemony of neoliberalism is so penetrant in a myriad of ways that it "shapes what we understand to be the conditions of possibility of our actions" (Parvu 2017, 779). Parvu (ibid., 779) formulates it well, when he writes that:

One key element of the neoliberal political rationality is precisely its propensity to *de-politicize* large swathes of the contested issues, thereby narrowing the scope of politics. De-politicization here (...) refers to the fading away of alternative forms of reason and imagining politically, that now tend to converge onto non-contestable – hence object of consensus – and normalized assumptions. Neoliberalism as a political rationality, in a nutshell, reorganizes and contracts our political imaginary, our capacity to imagine and think about the possibilities and limits of politics (...) Previously recognized autonomous spheres (social, moral, political) have now collapsed into a single one defined by an all-encompassing economic judgment: *homo oeconomicus* and his particular form of rationality have displaced most alternative forms of conceiving the social space and acting in society. Thus, neoliberal de-politicization works mainly through a pervasive form of economization.

Consequently, the 2011 global wave of protests has been widely theorized as a contemporary response to the political realm's growing economization. In the following part, I explain how neoliberalism has two major negative effects on the political realm: first of all, it has transformed the Western, liberal democratic state into one regulated by and acting in the interests of the economy, whose growth becomes its primary goal, rather than those of the people. In this way, influence on decision- and policy-making is unevenly distributed as big corporations, through lobbyists, have direct influence on policy-change, whereas the people merely elect representatives. Second of all, neoliberalism normalizes individualism and incessant competition whereby it creates neoliberal subjects that internalize a market logic. Thus, rather than being stimulated to engage with socio-political issues and actively struggling for one's rights, people are stimulated to marketize themselves. Through this de-politicization of the political realm and its subject, thus narrowing the political conditions of possibility to contest neoliberal hegemony, neoliberalism creates the (ultimate) conditions and subjects for its reign.

The Neoliberal Transformation of Liberal Democracy

The penetration of neoliberal rationality in the political realm has led some to conclude that “the modern state has ceased to be a government of, by, and for the people, and has become a government that is overseen by and exists for the sake of the financial market” (Holloway 2018,

4). This neoliberal transformation of liberal democracy commenced when Western governments⁵, in the aftermath of economic crises, started changing their conception of what should be their main task. Where governments used to use their resources to provide for basic necessities – like healthcare, education and housing – they now started shifting their focus towards the creation and proliferation of markets (Harvey 2005, 2). This shift can be identified in the tendency of privatizing public goods – like public transport, hospitals, energy, education – and profits and the socialization of losses⁶ (Holloway 2018, 6; Harvey 2005, 3). Rather than providing a basic level of necessities, Western states want citizens to compete for the rights and resources to attain certain goods, based on the increasingly popular conviction that believes human well-being to be advanced in the most beneficial way “by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 2). In this way, the state apparatus – including government, representative institutions and the people’s representatives – believes that by creating the ideal conditions for the market it automatically regulates the satisfaction of the people’s interests.

In accordance with the state’s transformation, political parties and their politics, too, have changed. Partisan politics – in which political actors or parties would be uncompromising and ideologically fixed – has been replaced by a politics of unrelenting consensus as political parties that used to question democracy’s foundations and advocate radical transformations of society – such as the communist parties – have shifted their positions towards the middle (Mair 2013, 38-39). As a result, Mair argues, “more or less all west European parties have now entered the political mainstream,” since “in electoral politics, only the democratic alternative is now on offer” (ibid., 39). Traditional political parties built on challenging the mainstream have thus moved towards mainstream parties by embracing and adopting (parts of) the hegemonic neoliberal political rationality. This signifies a similar change in their goals: rather than sticking to their ideological basis, they have become more willing to compromise to reach for coalition and secure positions of power (Mair 2013, 1, 48-49; Parvu 2017, 777). In this political constellation – that Mouffe calls ‘post-political’ (Mouffe 2018, 19, 32; Mouffe 2005, 1, 7) – political parties have become increasingly less distinctive from each other as their consensus

⁵ Since it is beyond the scope of this article to consider every country’s expression of neoliberal governance in its singularity I have chosen to talk about “Western government” as an abstract, general concept. I think this is justified by the growing power of supranational institutions such as the IMF, the ECB and the European Union that have a significant influence on global governance.

⁶ The privatization of profit and the socialization of losses can be seen in the ways in which governments used tax money to save banks, in the crisis of 2008, and other big corporations, such as AirFrance-KLM and Lufthansa, who were granted billions of money by the Netherlands, France and Germany in the 2020 corona-crisis.

on neoliberal democracy allows them to coalesce with parties that used to present the main alternative (Mair 2013, 42-43, 48-49). As a consequence of this growing middle-segment in the political realm that uncontestedly endorses the neoliberal democratic framework, the *demos* considers most parties no longer representative of their concerns and thus takes recourse to more radical alternatives on the streets or the currently resurging anti-establishment parties (Tormey 2012, 134; Mouffe 2018b).

Another transformation that has increased the gap between representatives and represented is the growing appeal to ‘expertise’ in processes of policy- and decision-making. This leads to two phenomena: firstly, by more frequently relying on experts, representation implies a knowledge unavailable to ‘normal’ people and, secondly, the growing influence of ‘expert’ advisors allows for corporate interests to directly influence policy-making. Although it is assumed that representatives appeal to experts for ‘neutral’ advice on complex matters – a claim backed by the appeal to their ‘scientific objectivity’ – such technocratic governance proves itself to significantly benefit corporate interests (Barona 2007; Holloway 2018, 16; Parvu 2017, 777). For example, in the Netherlands, the government decided to abolish a dividend tax for multinationals on the basis of only one research done by the Erasmus University that refused to mention that the research was commissioned and financed by Shell and other multinationals benefiting from such policy-change (AD 2018; Bollen 2018). The government initially denied their plans and the existence of documents discussing the tax’s abolition, but was later exposed to be convinced by the research commissioned by multinationals, even though its methods were questioned (AD 2018). As such, it seems that representatives have become managers of conflicting interests – as corporations often demand financial privileges that decrease the budget for the socialization of society – without evoking the people’s protests, whose interests are subjugated to corporate interests, such as those of Shell. Conclusively, the ‘technocratization’ of democratic processes too leads to an increased distance between represented and their representatives and, accordingly, a growing distrust from the former towards the latter.

Neoliberal governance has thus led to a politics whose processes are increasingly inaccessible for the people and that is increasingly hostile towards democratic processes that do not stimulate the economy, by for example creating jobs or improving a country’s global market position. This growing importance of economic processes over democratic processes shows the shift of the locus of power from politics to the economy, that is, the neoliberal transformation of politics, in which the *market* has penetrated and thereby expelled the *polis* (Brown 2015, 72; Holloway 2018, 10; Thorsen and Lie 2007, 14-15).

The Neoliberal Subject

In order to be able to install its governance, the neoliberal state needs compliant subjects that endorse – preferably without coercion – the values upon which its governance is based. Neoliberal governance thus functions by instructing and managing a society’s population by disseminating neoliberal norms and habits that, when endorsed, are likely to lead to success and inclusion but, when rejected, potentially lead to exclusion (Holloway 2018, 8; Holloway 2019 7, 12). These norms value an individual who finds its worthiness in being a *self-entrepreneur* incessantly investing in oneself in order to be better than the competition on the market. Thus, Holloway argues, these norms normalize a conception of the human as *homo oeconomicus* in which the neoliberal subject is “the financialized and depoliticized subject,” that is, “a subject of (...) self-entrepreneurship, or even various, self-enterprising persona” (Holloway 2019, 12; Holloway 2018, 8-9). As a consequence, rather than stimulating commoning, collectivization and socio-political organization neoliberal rationality normalizes an individualization of society by stimulating people to invest in and marketize oneself – through processes of production and consumption – thereby presenting everyone else as one’s potential competitor (Holloway 2018, 9; Holloway 2019, 7). Neoliberal subjectification thus discourages the creation of social and political communities, initiatives and projects – processes that include people’s collectively organized efforts aimed at improving certain aspects of life – by normalizing individualism and the importance of production and consumption. Consequently, as it refuses to stimulate the creation of social and political communities, it debilitates the potentials for socio-political change. In other words, neoliberal rationality is built on values and habits that oppose, rather than stimulate, socio-political cooperation and organization among communities that could lead to local change and self-government and, thus, more direct forms of democracy.

Thus, we can understand how neoliberal rationality actively functions as a *rationality of de-politicization* as it discourages social and political cooperation and, instead, stimulates the individualist marketization of the self. This does not mean that change is not possible. However, by reducing politics to an individualist right to vote in elections and through consumerist choices, neoliberalism only allows for a very narrow and de-politicized conception of politics and thus blocks fundamental, systemic change. Due to the demise of partisan politics and a politics of unrelenting compromise, neoliberal democracy has been installed as an uncontestable system that functions best in satisfying all conflicting interests. This is the nature of neoliberalism’s de-politicization: as it installs its rationality as uncontestable, it becomes increasingly difficult for the political imaginary, if not cultivated well enough, to imagine and enact alternative socio-political configurations.

This makes the neoliberal subject more than just someone living in a neoliberal society: it is the subject that embodies the system's rationality and helps furthering its project. It is the subject that is subjected to processes of de-politicization everyday as it is increasingly excluded from processes of decision-making that are being assigned to 'experts' and who therefore has an increasingly hard time finding the proper political space for expressing one's worries, wishes and demands. In addition, it must manage to survive in an increasingly hostile environment that is unprecedentedly competitive and that requires constant innovation and investment in oneself. In other words, the neoliberal subject "is the 'warp and woof' that weaves neoliberal society." (Holloway 2018, 24).

IV. Conclusion

Conclusively, we can state that neoliberalism's detrimental effect on the democratic system is twofold: first of all, it has transformed the state apparatus from one that existed by and for the people into one whose actions are mainly regulated by the needs of the market, which is believed to maximize human well-being. Secondly, rather than stimulating social community and political organization, neoliberal governance stimulates people to marketize oneself individually, thus discouraging socio-political initiative (ibid., 9-10). More specifically, neoliberal governance has transformed the political realm in three ways: first of all, its rationality has penetrated the political realm and changed Western governments' main goal from providing for basic necessities to creating and maintaining ideal market conditions, thereby allowing for competition between corporate and people's interests. Secondly, political parties have left their partisan basis in favor of a politics of compromise to attain positions of power, thereby embracing the hegemony of neoliberal democracy and becoming less distinctive from other parties. Third, the growing influence of experts in policy- and decision-making creates an increasing gap between representatives and the people since such knowledge and the processes that accompany it are inaccessible for most people.

Conclusively, life under neoliberalism is a de-politicized life since processes of collectivization and socio-political organization are dissuaded and formerly political spaces are de-politicized and must now, often illegally, be created or re-politicized anew. In this way, the space for contestation is limited because of the lack of spaces facilitating the development and cultivation of a political consciousness that could be capable of enacting an alternative to neoliberal hegemony. In other words, neoliberal society leads away from and obstructs the experience of a political life. This de-politicization works in the interest of the powers that be

as the *demos* is encouraged to live an economized and de-politicized life and, as such, most of the people have not been trained to politically confront and contest hegemonic powers.

The referendum, which allows the *demos* to directly influence decision-making and can thus be considered as part of Kioupkiolis' instruments of horizontalizing representation and Decreus' means of increasing space for contestation, can perfectly illustrate this point. A de-politicized *demos*, despite being granted powers of decision-making, will not be immune to the spectacle of media campaigns and populist rhetoric as it has not in any way cultivated a political subjectivity that knows how to clearly position itself in political debate, for example by identifying the discrepancies between campaign slogans and real policies and decisions, and is thus prone to be persuaded by political appearances rather than political content. As such, the results of referenda, despite referenda being horizontal modes of representation, do not reflect the *demos*' plurality of voices as cultivated political subjects but, rather, reflect who has succeeded most in persuading a mainly de-politicized *demos* with political marketing campaigns.

We must admit that neoliberalism shapes, delimits and constitutes the current political rationality, which means that "it now shapes our foundational political presuppositions and therefore generates the limits that we deem intelligible, feasible, and appropriate as the scope of politics" (Parvu 2017, 779). If neoliberal democracy leads to the privatization of profit and socialization of losses and it values economic over democratic processes, we can only counter its hegemony by creating spaces that refuse its rationality and subjects capable of refusing and contesting it, without relying too much on a politicized minority to stand behind. Rather, we must take contemporary Western movements as inspiration: however, not, as Kioupkiolis and Decreus assert, because their main goal was to indefinitely horizontalize and democratize the representative apparatus, as their experiments didn't reach so far, but because they, first and foremost, re-politicized public spaces in order to make accessible the experience of a political life for all, including de-politicized subjects. In the same way that traditional political representation is de-politicizing as it becomes increasingly inaccessible for the people, the horizontalization and democratization of representation are merely means of re-politicizing people. For this reason, I think that Kioupkiolis and Decreus do not sufficiently take into account neoliberal de-politicization of spaces and subjects and therefore interpret contemporary Western movements without mentioning their re-politicizing power. I think that focusing on re-politicization should precede focusing on the horizontalization of representation as I reckon that re-politicized subjects – with or without horizontal structures of representation – will autonomously organize their representation whereas de-politicized subjects – even with horizontal representation – are politically untrained to bear this responsibility and will thus

request guidance and leadership. In other words, although I agree with Kioupkiolis and Decreus that the *demos* should possess more, if not all, power of decision-making and I support their proposals for horizontalization and democratization, I reckon most of the *demos* yet to be incapable of establishing a direct democracy because of their de-politicization. The currently economized and de-politicized part of the *demos* could, even if seated in representative positions, not form the antidote to the current crisis of representation, as it is important to understand, as Parvu (2017, 778) states, that

one must not (...) automatically infer that by simply moving *outside* the formal political system (and generating a ‘politics from below’, for instance), the dynamics of politicization among subpolitical actors would *inherently* be free of, or immune to, the wider trends generated by the post-political condition.

In other words, as well as the apparatus of representation, the de-politicized *demos* must be transformed in order to be capable of politically challenging the neoliberal hegemony and, in its wake, the crisis of representation. This could come about, like Kioupkiolis and Decreus assert, through the practice of horizontal representation. However, in order to be able to generate radically democratic alternatives, we need more permanent spaces that are autonomously organized and, therefore, less limited by neoliberal logic. When talking about such spaces, I think about squats, occupations but also legally bought spaces that are collectively owned by communities and therefore less affected by capitalist norms such as the need to pay rent, the norm of private property and a profit-based mindset. These politicized spaces allow for more radical contestation and the generation of more direct forms of democracy as they facilitate the cultivation of political forms of life, in which life and politics are symbiotically interwoven and in which people learn how to represent their communities.

Thus, to prepare for and render effective an inclusive and horizontal apparatus of representation, we need to start creating and spreading apparatuses of re-politicization that re-politicize spaces and subjects and allow for and facilitate the cultivation of politicized forms of life. In other words, we need to start bringing back politicized spaces that reject neoliberal rationality in order to be able to generate alternatives. With this in mind, I do think that Occupy, the Indignados, the Gilets Jaunes, and other contemporary eruptions of mass protest, are the apparatuses we are looking for: as they sharpen distinctions and politicize, albeit temporarily, public spaces they compel people to take political positions. Also, since they collectively experiment with more directly democratic forms of representation and politics as well as with common and collective forms of community and life, they counter neoliberal values and

subjectification and allow people to experience what it means to live a joyful political life. As such, these protests must be considered as the apparatuses that need to be radically multiplied, diversified, spread and disseminated as they subjectify people into politicized subjects capable of deciding and organizing collectively in the interest of the diverse many and the common. Furthermore, and in this sense, I agree with Kioupkiolis and Decreus, these apparatuses must counter neoliberal logics that individualize, privatize, and commodify common goods into exclusive commodities by building them on the basis of collective, shared, common governance and decision-making.

To conclude, the question of how to democratically deal with the unavoidability of representation cannot be answered if we do not first ask ourselves what a political life looks like. Because, how do we disseminate democratic modes of representation when the political realm is limited and controlled by neoliberal logic and the re-politicization of public spaces is often met with police repression – as we have seen at the occupations of Occupy, the Gilets Jaunes and the Indignados? I reckon that if we want to transform the representational apparatus into an inclusive and accessible apparatus in order to common politics and represent everyone's interests, we must first focus on the re-politicization of spaces in which de-politicized people can learn how to represent themselves. Contemporary Western movements formed such apparatuses of re-politicization and must thus be taken as inspiration for creating and multiplying similar but singular apparatuses of re-politicization and experimentation.

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PhD Proposal

**The Ghost behind the Colonial Curtain:
Western Secularism as an Instrument of
White Supremacy**

1. Main applicant

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2. Title of research proposal

The Ghost behind the Colonial Curtain: Western Secularism as an Instrument of White Supremacy

3. Summary

This project aims to research the connection between Western⁷ secularism, colonialism and whiteness – a racialized identity that helps in understanding social relations along color, cultural, geographical and socio-political lines. Western thinkers believe the West to have entered a “secular age” in which politics and religion are strictly separated, state sovereignty is no longer authorized by religion and the state apparatus is neutral toward different religions (Taylor 2007, 1). Critical accounts have, however, criticized these idealized accounts by exposing the non-secular values underpinning Western secular governance and its intimate links with neocolonialism (Fitzgerald 2007; Hart 2016; Maldonado-Torres 2008; Mignolo 2000; Pecora 2014; Randell-Moon 2013; Yountae 2017). However abundant the decolonial literature on the links between (neo)colonialism and Western secular governance, this research aims to further and deepen the specific connection between Western secularism and whiteness by researching how secularist discourse and action serve the wages of whiteness and a system of white supremacy. That is, I aim for a deeper understanding of the relation between Western secular governance, colonialism and white supremacy, as a socio-political system built on the assumption that the values that characterize predominantly white communities and nation-states are superior. I will thus research whether secularism is deployed as an instrument of (neo)colonialism and, if so, how this benefits whiteness. In this way, my aim in this project is to further and deepen the understanding of whiteness as a racial concept in order to help initiatives that aim at dismantling white supremacy.

Keywords: secular governance, (post-)secularism, decoloniality, whiteness, white supremacy, (neo)colonialism.

⁷ The notion ‘Western’ here designates the secularism of predominantly white nation-states in Western Europe or nation-states – such as the United States and Australia – that have originated directly from European colonialism.

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Curriculum Vitae

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2015-now	Organized a variety of political events such as demonstrations, lectures, gatherings, panels, actions and workshops.	The Netherlands

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English	More than sufficient in speaking, understanding, reading and writing
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6. Period of funding

4 years, 1.0 fte, September 2020 – August 2024.

7. Sub-discipline

33.90.00 Philosophy, other

8. Proposed Research

Since the second half of the 20th century an increasing number of scholars have engaged in debates on secularism. These scholars come from different academic disciplines – including philosophy, the social sciences, and religion studies – and combine their respective worldviews and cultural backgrounds to better understand secularism. However, a definition of secularism will not come easy as they all emphasize different dimensions of the secular (Chrulew 2015). However, we can see that Western accounts (for example, Habermas 2008; Taylor 2007) more often advocate secularization, whereas non-Western scholars more often emphasize the coloniality – by which they mean the way they seem to be imposing values on other countries or communities – of such accounts and, accordingly, offer anti-colonial critiques that challenge such attempts (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2015; Enayat 2017; Maldonado-Torres 2008; Mignolo 2000). Decolonial perspectives on secular projects – emerging from diasporic scholars from South America and focused on addressing the nexus between the long European history of crusade and colonialism and the South American situation (Bhambra 2014, 115) – seem to agree that secular discourse and action serve to cover up (neo)colonial practices. By claiming neutrality toward different religions – as one of the central tenets of the secular worldview – countries that have embraced secularism often portray themselves as progressive and, accordingly, see it as their task to globally impose presumably secular values on other countries, thereby giving it a colonial character (Moreton-Robinson 2004; Randell-Moon 2013, 2015).

Despite the variety of non-Western perspectives on the connection between secularism and (neo)colonialism, and, to some extent, white supremacy, there is not much research that considers this relationship through the lenses of whiteness. This project takes such a perspective as the vantage point and aims to look at the specific ways in which Western secularism functions as an instrument of whiteness and, thus, of white supremacy – here understood as a socio-political system built on the belief in the superiority of the beliefs, values, behaviors and worldviews that characterize predominantly white nation-states and communities in which one becomes more successful the more one conforms to these dominant values. Whiteness must,

however, not be understood as a monolithic and stable concept that exhaustively defines all white people. Rather it must be seen as “a lens through which particular aspects of social relationships can be apprehended,” which, in this case, is the social relationship that connects whiteness with secularism (Garner 2007, 1). Even though scholars like Eze (1997) and Wynter (2003) find a shared agreement in stating that, through European modernity and Enlightenment, the rational, European individual has been installed as the ‘universal man’, other research suggests that white people still construct themselves as raceless individuals, “unfettered by the kinds of collective identifications that they view other people as having” (Garner 2007, 4). As such, whiteness is often considered as the racially unmarked norm, rather than as a racial concept. As such, in predominantly white societies, deviance is measured by the distance it takes from the white norms of a given society (ibid., 6). Thus, Hartigan states, the analytical concept of “whiteness asserts the obvious and overlooked fact that whites are racially interested and motivated” (Hartigan 2005, 1). It is this motivation that I want to research: although secularism – just like whiteness – is presented as the rational, neutral and most logical configuration of modern-day society (Habermas 2008; Taylor 2007), its alleged neutrality can serve as a cloak for a hidden agenda that aims to maintain, perpetuate and expand a system based on white, European values – that is, values upon which European communities and nations are built and which are often intimately connected with Enlightenment and Christian values. As such, secularism might benefit, reinforce and impose a system of white supremacy.

Then, if we consider whiteness to be, as Garner (2007, 6) formulates, “the performance of culture and the enactment of power,” we must ask ourselves to what extent this power is enacted and by what means. Since it is beyond the scope of this project to find out by what variety of means whiteness is performed, I aim to research the specific relation between whiteness, secularism and colonialism. More specifically, I want to research the ways in which European (neo)colonialism – which I understand as the processes by which Europeans (have) attempt(ed) to impose their worldviews, economies, and politics on other peoples – has evolved from being religiously motivated toward being motivated by secular motives that, however, still aim at the imposition of values on others. The following questions are leading in this research: first of all, to what extent is secularism used to justify or deny the establishment and expansion of colonial power relations? Secondly, if so, how is secularism, in both discourse and action, deployed as an instrument for naturalizing, reinforcing and expanding systems of white supremacy in different parts of the world? Third, if secular (neo)colonialism serves to maintain a system of white supremacy, then to what extent must we consider it part of state governance? The lens through which all of these questions are posed, that is, the question that underlies all these questions, is: what is the interest and investment of whiteness in all of these processes?

By answering these questions, I hope to further the project of racializing whiteness as a socio-political, governmental, and cultural but, above all, as a racial concept by showing if and how it is invested in secular (state) governance.

In defining secularism, we must, according to Talal Asad (2003), conceptually distinguish between the secular, secularization and secular projects as they all require analysis as singular objects. Starting this project, however, I will only assume the distinction between secular discourse and action. On the basis of this distinction we can already emphasize some dimensions of secularism, such as the commonplace that considers secularism to signify the separation of state and church, by which politics is no longer primarily religiously motivated. Correspondingly, Randell-Moon (2013) mentions the non-establishment of a state religion, whereby the state is believed to remain “neutral” toward all religions. Connected to this is the juridical exclusion of some religion from the public realm, thereby turning religious practice into something that is increasingly limited to the private sphere. Furthermore, secularism describes the shift of sovereign power’s legitimacy: whereas the foundation of power used to be legitimized by religious power, political power has, since modernity, started to legitimize itself, for example through ‘the people’ as the basis of a democratic regime (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 361-362). Others, like Taylor (1999), categorize secularization as the decline of people’s belief in and commitment to religion and its institutions on the one hand, and the retreat of religion from the public realm on the other hand.

Considering these dimensions of secularism, we can state that the retreat of religion from the public and political realm is what allows for the state’s neutrality towards all religions without privileging or avoiding one in particular (Randell-Moon 2013, 353). However, such idealized accounts cannot account for the prohibition on burqa’s in public spaces in European countries, the violent negation of Indigenous sovereignty by colonial states or the fact that politicians have to take an oath on the bible in most “secular” countries. Thus, Asad (2006, 504-507) writes that the function of the separation of church and state is not the regulation of equality *between* religions but rather the regulation of the exceptions *to* the secularism of the state, thereby reinforcing state sovereignty and managing the often-irreligious population (ibid., 499). Here, we can see how postcolonial critique aims to expose (European) secular discourse as justifying state governance that, by presenting itself as “neutral” towards different religions, actually aims to reinforce its sovereignty. From this perspective, Moreton-Robinson too challenges the self-proclaimed neutrality of, in this case, Australian secular law, which, she argues, is invested in “the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty” that “operates to discriminate in favor of itself, ensuring it protects and maintains its interest by the continuing denial and exclusion” (2004, para. 7) of forces that challenge its reign.

From this perspective, it is understandable how secular discourse, by means of its recourse to notions as ‘neutrality’ and ‘rationality’, serves to hide and maintain the coloniality of secular governance. Maldonado-Torres (2008) goes further by arguing that secular discourse provided the ideal ground for the transition from what he coins the first to the second modernity, the former characterized by a religious colonialism and the second by a secular colonialism. According to him, secular discourse helped justifying colonialism because “the colonial others were conceived as primitives living in stages where only religion or tradition dominated their customs and ways of being” (ibid., 366). As such, secularism legitimized colonial governance by claiming it seeks to enlighten those ‘primitives’ still dominated by religion. Maldonado-Torres thus shows how secularism reproduces the same colonial discourses that characterized European Christian colonialism, thus maintaining colonial power structures while the power of religion decreased and, as such, concludes that “secularism has in many ways become the religion of the modern world” (ibid., 360).

In a similar vein, Mignolo (2000) argues that ideology is needed to legitimize the imposition of European values on colonized peoples. Where formerly these values were disseminated under the banner of religious missionary work, they started to be imposed through secular projects legitimized by secular discourse. It is with this logic that Maldonado-Torres (2008, 365-366) writes about the confrontation between Christian and secular colonialism as an “intra-imperial” event needed to respond to the growing disenchantment and rationalization of the world without losing the basis for colonialisms. As such, the discourse legitimizing colonialism changed, but the overall project of imposing values on other communities did not. Thus, secularization cannot be disconnected from what Chakrabarty (1996, 61) refers to as the “civilizing process that the European Enlightenment inaugurated in the eighteenth century as a world historical task.”

The question still remains as to how secularism specifically serves a system of white supremacy. This question has been, especially considered from a Western perspective, insufficiently theorized in the academic literature. Therefore, it is my goal to scrutinize this specific relationship from a white, Western perspective thus deepening the connection between critical secular studies and whiteness studies, whose specific aim is to expose “the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege” (Applebaum 2016, 1). Rather than understanding how secularist discourse and action legitimize and perpetuate colonial projects, I put the focus on how they serve and perpetuate values that characterize white nation-states and communities and thus aid in reinforcing systems of white supremacy. According to Asad (2003, 1-2) “what is distinctive about “secularism” is that it presupposes new concepts of “religion,” “ethics,” and “politics,” and new imperatives associated with

them.” My aim in this research project is to find out how the secular reconfiguration of these and other concepts benefits whiteness by naturalizing and imposing the values that characterize modern European society and its communities as universal.

Because of the different configurations of secularism and colonialism in different parts of the world, I will, in the first year of this research project, compare the decolonial⁸ (Dussel 2008; Maldonado-Torres 2008; Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2008; Yountae 2017), postcolonial (Asad 1993, 2003, 2006; Mahmood 2016; Enayat 2017; Bhabra 2014) and anti-colonial (Randell-Moon 2013, 2015; Moreton-Robinson 2004; Fitzgerald 2007; Hart 2016; Pecora 2014) perspectives on this relationship. For this, I will select the literature that, preferably, already addresses this relationship through the lens of whiteness and white supremacy. The goal of this comparison is to see whether or not it is possible to synthesize a critical yet somewhat unified conception of whiteness in relation to secularism and colonialism and, if not possible, differentiate between different modes of secularism, colonialism and whiteness.

In the second year I will perform a historical analysis of the justification for European colonialism with a specific focus on the ways in which the evolution from a religiously motivated to a secular colonialism was justified. As such, I aim to construct an understanding of the adaptivity of racism and the ways in which it functions to reinforce or prolong racialized power relations. More specifically I want to understand how this evolution of discourse – focused on justifying the same sorts of racial inequality based on different grounds – is part of a performative strategy aimed at disseminating values that characterize whiteness (that I have categorized in the first year) and that aids in reinforcing systems of white supremacy. As a result, I want to understand the ways in which racism and racialized discourse adapts to evolving circumstances and conditions of possibility, the ways in which whiteness is performed in order to justify this evolution of colonial power and start constructing an understanding of contemporary modes of (neo)colonial secularism.

In the third year, I start researching, more specifically, how contemporary modes of secularism can be considered as part of state governance. As a consequence, I want to answer the question whether or not European nation-states are complicit in, or even primarily responsible for, (neo)colonial modes of secularism and, if so, how their governance establishes

⁸ The decolonial tradition is the tradition mostly emanating from or focused on the South American situation and considers this situation in connection to the long history of European crusade and colonialism (from the fifteenth century onwards). It also criticizes the postcolonial tradition for not sufficiently taking into account the ways in which (neo)colonialism still functions as an instrument or performance of power. The postcolonial tradition mostly emanates from and is focused on the Middle-Eastern, South Asian and African situation and analyzes the developments in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Bhabra 2014, 115). Anti-colonial is what I have coined the authors that belong to neither tradition but that still aim at formulating a critical perspective on (neo)colonialism.

or maintains such colonial power relations through secular governance. In answering these questions, I plan to research specific instances of secular and racialized governance. Examples of such research might be: how the notions “neutrality” and “rationality” function within secular state governance as justifications for the establishment and expansion of colonial power relations; researching how allegedly secular governance aims to produce the “ideal” family, a conception that is, however, based on the dominant Christian conception of the family but, in this process, installs or aggravates racialized relations of inequality; or researching the ways in which secular discourse covers up and overwrites the racialized and violent foundations of sovereign authorities, such as Australian sovereignty that is built on the negation of Indigenous sovereignty. By researching such specific instances, in which state governance, fueled by secular values, in some way produces colonial or racialized power relations, I aim to answer the following questions: can this research show that secular governance leads to new modes of colonialism and racism that serve the wages of whiteness? And can this research show that the perpetuation and expansion of white supremacy must be considered part of secular state governance?

In the fourth year, I aim to finish my dissertation on the basis of the research done. I hope to be able to answer the following questions: to what extent is secularism used to justify the establishment and expansion of colonial power relations? How was secularism deployed in the evolution from religiously motivated to secular modes of colonialism? How is secularism, in both discourse and action, deployed as an instrument for naturalizing, reinforcing and expanding systems of white supremacy? During the course of this research project, I also aim to contribute multiple academic articles and multiple popularizing articles in order to explain the field of inquiry to a wider, non-academic audience. Furthermore, I will try to help organizing a course on issues like the evolution of religiously motivated and secular modes of colonialism; state governance, whiteness and colonialism; or on the ways in which racism adapts in order to justify new modes of systemic racial inequality.

9. Word count

2500 words

10. Methodological approach

This project will utilize an interdisciplinary approach, involving the disciplines of philosophy, the social sciences, critical whiteness and religious studies among others, in thoroughly analyzing the aforementioned power relations. The goal, however, is to bring the relevant

disciplines together in a philosophical study that questions the racialized power relations involved in secular discourse, action and governance.

Throughout this project, I will mainly make use of *conceptual*, *comparative* and *historical analyses*. With regard to conceptual analyses I will focus on the performativity and strategic deployment of certain concepts, such as secularism and whiteness, in order to see how these concepts are used over time in different locations and to show how they strategically function in attaining certain goals. In this way, I hope to gain a better understanding of the different spatio-temporal meanings and deployments of these concepts as well as to formulate working definitions that will clarify and demarcate the analytical framework of this research project. This means looking at how certain concepts are symbiotically intertwined, if and how they can be separated and looked at as singular concepts or how they must always be contextualized in specific environments and situations.

In the first year, I will mainly make use of *comparative* forms of analysis so as to bring into dialogue concepts and discourses from culturally and geographically different power constellations in order to be able to situate them within their shared context as well as in their singularity. These comparisons will be mainly *geographical* and *cultural*. Through these comparisons, I aim to construct working definitions of different concepts without, however, losing the conviction that concepts only make sense relative to other concepts and when situated within broader social structures and locations. The focus in this year will be mostly on the concepts ‘whiteness’ and ‘secularism’.

In the second year, *historical* analysis will play an important role as I aim to compare analyze the ways in which colonialism has evolved from being motivated by religious motives to being fueled by secular incentives. As such, I compare colonialisms within different historical contexts and will aim for a genealogy of its use and justifications. Such a comparison should help in understanding the adaptivity of racism and the ways in which it is deployed in order to maintain or establish certain racialized relations of power. I want to specifically understand and be able to show how a completely different discourse (secular as opposed to religious) can be adapted in order to be deployed to justify the same kind of projects (colonialism and white supremacy).

Throughout the span of this project, I will analyze everything through the lens of whiteness, by thinking of whiteness as a conceptual tool that illuminates the specific interests and strategic goals behind the discourses, actions and governance of certain actors, thereby always situating it within power relations. This will result in analyses that consider historical and socio-political issues and questions of power in light of the social, political, cultural and racial conceptions of whiteness. With this, I want to put these research questions and results

into a critical perspective of racialization in order to unveil hidden structures and interests of racism, colonialism and white supremacy that would otherwise remain invisible when not taking into account racialization. As part of this research, I will also constantly take into account my own situatedness in the world as a white, Dutch male. This situatedness makes this research interesting since, as a white person born in Western Europe, my access to whiteness can put things in perspective as I have grown up within whiteness' system of values, ideas, behaviors and discourses.

11. Societal relevance

Despite the fact that, “for generations, scholars of color (...) have maintained that whiteness lies at the center of the problem of racism” (Applebaum 2016, 1), the development of whiteness as a racial concept seems to be insufficient. Therefore, the most important aspect of the societal relevance of this research project is the elaboration of whiteness as a racial concept. This elaboration will aid in understanding the specific and singular ways in which racialized inequalities of power, from the perspective of whiteness, are established, maintained and defended. As such, the development of whiteness as a racial concept can help in spreading a broader awareness, mainly among white people, of processes of racialization and racism. It is essential, in fighting and dismantling racisms, that white people start seeing and acknowledging their own role in benefitting from and reinforcing racialized power relations. As such, this research can help in making theories of racism and racialization in combination with colonialism, secularism and the state, more accessible to a broader audience of mainly white people and communities. As such, this research can be used by anti-racist movements and collectives that want to understand the ways in which religiously motivated colonialism has evolved into secular forms of colonialism, how secularism is deployed to impose values that characterize white communities on other peoples, how all of this is supported by the state and the ways in which it benefits a system of white supremacy.

In attempting to develop whiteness as a racial concept, this research helps, for example, in countering forms of color-blind racism in which people claim not to be racist as they “see no color”. Rather than believing in such a neutral perception, which leads to racism as it will not see the structural injustices that are established on the basis of color or race, this research aims to elaborate on the ways in which whiteness still functions as a project of subordination and colonization with economic, political, geographic, cultural or other forms of gain. Another instance in which this research could prove itself to be a helpful resource in fighting racism is connected to the contemporary intensity of islamophobia. As a project that focuses on the relationship between whiteness as a racial concept, colonialism and the ways in which secular

discourse, action and governance justify ongoing forms of imposition – be it political systems, economic measures or social and cultural values – this research could help in understanding the foundations of contemporary islamophobia by showing how its conception in Europe conflicts with the hegemonic secular worldview. As such, this research could form a useful resource in the struggle against specific forms of racialization and racism, such as islamophobia, that seem to be fueled by conflicting worldviews and the tension between religious and secular worldviews. Generally, this research could provide anti-racist communities with theoretical resources in their struggles to dismantle and challenge configurations of white supremacy as the specific form of racism in which values that characterize white, European and often Christian communities, are considered inherently superior.

12. Work schedule

<p>Year 1</p>	<p>Step I: Mapping the literature: comparing de-, post-, and anti-colonial perspectives on secularism and colonialism, where possible with a specific focus on whiteness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering, reading and analyzing decolonial (Latin American), post-colonial (Middle-Eastern/African) and anti-colonial (Australian, American, European) perspectives on the relationship between colonialism and secularism, where possible with a specific focus on whiteness. Literature must in some way describe a relationship between secularism and colonialism, whiteness or other expressions of systemic racism. Take three months for each section. • Compare the different accounts from different parts of the world and see if we can bring together and synthesize a general conception of whiteness or construct different conceptions of whiteness and secularism. Take one to two months for constructing a comparison. • Goal: constructing a critical perspective on contemporary expressions of whiteness in relation to secularism. <p>Results: overview of de-, post- and anti-colonial perspectives on secularism and colonialism, whiteness or white supremacy; a critical perspective on whiteness in its different modes and expressions; a critical perspective on secularism in relation to colonialism and whiteness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing a popularizing article summarizing and forwarding the state of the art of critical and decolonial analyses of secular projects (<i>De Groene Amsterdammer, Trouw, De Correspondent</i>)
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<p>Year 2</p>	<p>Step II: Religion, Secularism and Colonialism: researching the shift from religiously motivated to secular colonialisms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical analysis of the justifications for European colonialism with a specific focus on the evolution of religiously motivated forms of colonialism to secular modes of colonialism. • Analyze the performativity of racialization and racism: how did discourses, action and governance change in order to justify the same sort of actions on the basis of different values? • Understanding the coloniality of contemporary secularism and understanding how it serves to proliferate, perpetuate and expand colonial relations in different parts of the world. <p>Results: an understanding of the evolution from religiously motivated to secular modes of colonialism; understanding the performative power of whiteness and secularism; understanding how discourses are changed in order to perpetuate the same kind of colonial actions on the basis of different values; understand how racism, racist discourse and racialization evolve over time; understand and constructing an overview of the current modes of secular colonialism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing an article on the evolution from religiously motivated colonialism toward secular colonialism (<i>Krisis, Radical Philosophy and other journals on issues of racism, whiteness or white supremacy, or on religious studies</i>). • Writing a popularizing article on the performativity of racialization and colonialism emphasizing the adaptivity of racism in order to reinforce and perpetuate systems of racial inequality (<i>De Groene Amsterdammer, Trouw, De Correspondent</i>). • Presenting article on a conference on philosophy of religion, social and political philosophy, gender, race or class, the secular age, colonialism, whiteness or white supremacy.
<p>Year 3</p>	<p>Step III: Secularism and Whiteness: how do contemporary expressions of colonial secularism serve the wages of whiteness?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze to what extent contemporary modes of (secular) colonialism are part of state governance. Can the reinforcement and expansion of whiteness and white supremacy be considered part of state governance? • Researching specific instances of secular and racialized governance. Ideas for such research could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Researching how the notions “neutrality” and “rationality” function within secular state governance as justifications for the establishment, perpetuation or expansion of colonial power relations.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Family biopolitics in secular Europe and the US. To what extent is family biopolitics, that is, a governance based on producing the “right” kind of family, racialized and based on the values that characterize white cultures? ○ Researching the ways in which secular discourse covers up and overwrites the racial and violent origins of sovereign authority. This research will thus focus on the question: how is secularism deployed as an instrument to deny and hide the colonial, racial and violent origins of certain nation-states, such as Australia? <p>Results: An answer on the following questions: can this research show that 1) secular governance leads to new modes of colonialism that serve the wages of whiteness? And 2) the perpetuation and expansion of white supremacy must be considered part of state governance?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing an article on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ State governance, secularism and contemporary (neo)colonialism that analyzes the extent to which state governance is responsible for serving the wages of whiteness; • Help constructing a course on the evolution of religiously motivated and secular modes of colonialism; on state governance, whiteness and colonialism; or on the ways in which racism adapts in order to justify new modes of systemic racial inequality.
Year 4	<p>Step IV: Concluding on the relationship between whiteness, secularism and (neo)colonialism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this conclusive part I will try to answer the following questions on the basis of the preceding research: to what extent is secularism used to justify the establishment and expansion of colonial power relations? If so, how does secular governance serve the interests of whiteness? Or, how is secularism, in both discourse and action, deployed as an instrument for naturalizing, reinforcing and expanding systems of white supremacy? • Write dissertation on the basis of research • Present the dissertation on a conference <p>Results: Dissertation finished.</p>

13. Summary for non-specialists

Nowadays, voices advocating the need for secularization are widespread, especially in Europe and countries that have originated from European colonialism. These accounts even go so far

as to claim that a secular politics is the most rational political configuration and thus fuels the critique on nation-states that, in some way, still hold on to religious foundations, motives and governance. However, decolonial perspectives have started to contest and challenge European and North American accounts of secularism by exposing how their discourses and projects serve as a cloak for the continuation of colonial projects. As such, scholars agree that even though it seems that secular discourse and action have replaced modern, imperial Christian discourse and governance, the colonial agenda of both seem to be still intact. Thus, it seems that the discourse that justifies colonial governance has changed from a religious to a secular discourse without, however, the underlying project being abandoned. As such, many decolonial scholars conclude that secular discourse and action serve to justify neocolonial Western governance by claiming to enlighten those still dominated by forms of religion.

However, the specific links between Western secular governance and whiteness – here understood as a socio-political construct that encompasses the values, behaviors, worldviews and ideas that characterize predominantly white, European and often Christian communities and nation-states – is less abundantly researched. It is for this reason that this research project aims to deepen and further the relationship between critical secular studies and whiteness studies in order to better understand to what extent the racial concept of whiteness is invested in secular discourses and forms of governance. Part of this research is to find out and understand if and how secular discourse, action and governance might benefit systems of white supremacy, which is understood as the socio-political system built on the belief that the values and beliefs upon which white, European and often Christian communities are built are inherently superior. In other words, it aims to construct a better understanding of the ways in which Western secular discourse and action are deployed as instruments to perpetuate, naturalize and expand a system of white supremacy. In this way, this research project aims to expose the hidden agendas as well as the racialized practices underpinning contemporary secular governance and (neo)colonialism. Understanding this relationship will shed new light on religious-political conflicts and tensions – such as those between the US and Iran, Israel and Palestine (and the Middle-East in general), and Europe and the Islam, to name a few – and allow us to better understand what is at stake in these agonistic relationships. Furthermore, this research can provide theoretical resources that can help anti-racist communities in better understanding contemporary expressions of whiteness and, in this way, help to fight and dismantle racialized and oppressive structures. Last but not least, this research aims to articulate the ways in which the interests of whiteness and white supremacy are included within the strategies and goals of state governance.

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