

Europe and the Digital Enlightenment: Between Autonomy and Algorithmic Power

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Abstract

This study asks whether Europe is truly living up to its Enlightenment heritage in the digital age, or whether it is drifting away from Kant's ideal of autonomy and moving closer to Foucault's world of invisible algorithmic control. The text compares Kant's and Foucault's views on the Enlightenment and explores how digital technologies-like AI and algorithms-influence personal freedom and social norms. The key question is: Are we thinking for ourselves online, or do algorithms make our choices for us? Western Europe tries to protect autonomy with laws like GDPR or DSA, but can freedom actually be guaranteed by rules from outside? Beyond this philosophical contrast, the study finds that Europe's digital landscape reveals a growing simulation of autonomy: individuals believe they act freely, yet their actions are increasingly structured by algorithmic systems. Western Europe institutionalizes critical reason, while Eastern Europe exhibits fragmented digital autonomy shaped by distrust and weak institutions. The research concludes that Europe's Enlightenment legacy can survive only if autonomy is redefined as technological understanding and critical reflection, rather than formal compliance.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Autonomy, Algorithmic power, The dichotomy of the Digital East and West

Introduction

For centuries, Europe has regarded itself as the continent of the Enlightenment. Inspired by thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, a modern self-conception emerged, grounded in freedom, autonomy, rationality, and the rule of law. Yet the technological and geopolitical transformations of the twenty-first century are fundamentally challenging this image. Artificial intelligence, algorithmic reality, virtual identities, and continuous surveillance all pose unprecedented questions to the legacy Kant described as “emergence from self-incurred immaturity.” Are we truly advancing along the path of autonomy, or are we regressing into a new form of immaturity, now wrapped in digital packaging? While the West continues to identify itself as the heir to the Enlightenment, it may be drifting toward Foucault’s darker vision, in which power no longer represses but instead permeates language, behaviour, and norms. Regulation, while protective, also defines the legitimate boundaries of digital behaviour and the parameters of acceptable knowledge, illustrating the rise of an automated administrative logic of governance (Calo & Citron, 2022). This dilemma is especially apparent when examined through the East–West dichotomy. The West claims a tradition of critical rationality, even as technological control increasingly infiltrates daily life. In contrast, the East often appears to experience digital freedom without the safeguards of critical reflection or robust institutions. Digital modernity, therefore, generates divergent forms of power and subjectivity within Europe itself.

Methodologically, the study adopts a deductive–analytical approach, linking classical philosophical reasoning with contemporary digital realities. The “deductive” component means that the research is theory-driven, grounded in the conceptual frameworks of Kant and Foucault, yet projected onto real social and technological contexts such as social media platforms, digital regulation, and the practices of algorithmic governance. The purpose of this method is not to test hypotheses, but to reveal how philosophical principles illuminate the social and political structures of the digital age. The term “analytical” refers to the study’s focus on conceptual analysis—it deconstructs and examines the interrelations among the categories of freedom, autonomy, and power within the context of digital modernity. This approach draws upon the tradition of classical analytic philosophy, emphasizing clarity of reasoning, conceptual precision, and internal logical coherence.

The research develops a conceptual matrix that juxtaposes Kant’s notion of autonomy with Foucault’s model of power, demonstrating how the Enlightenment tension between freedom and control reappears within the *platform society* (cf. van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Although primarily theoretical in nature, the framework is explicitly designed for empirical application. In my related research (Málik, 2025), this approach has been

applied to concrete cases such as the algorithmic architectures of social media-illustrating how platform curation shapes public discourse and user autonomy-as well as to the institutional dynamics of digital regulation, and to everyday practices like content moderation and recommender systems. These examples demonstrate that the framework is not only interpretive but also operational: it enables critical analysis of how digital infrastructures govern perception and behavior, thereby bridging philosophical critique and empirical inquiry.

Narratives of the Enlightenment: Kant vs. Foucault

In his brief yet influential 1784 essay “What is Enlightenment?”, Immanuel Kant writes: “*Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another.*” (Kant, 1784/1996, p. 11). This statement has become a foundational tenet of modern European thought. For Kant, immaturity is not an age-related condition but a moral and intellectual dependency: the unwillingness to use reason freely. Enlightenment, therefore, is not merely the accumulation of knowledge but an act of courage; i.e., the capacity for individuals to think, judge, and act autonomously, free from the coercive forces of external authorities such as church, state, or tradition. It is crucial to note, however, that for Kant freedom does not simply mean the absence of coercion, but the self-legislation of reason: autonomy as maturity, the ability to give oneself law through critical reflection, even against one’s own desires or inherited customs. This notion has served as the theoretical foundation for modern liberalism, human rights, and individual freedom. Many regard this Kantian ideal of autonomy as the essence of European civilization. The Enlightenment project did not end in the eighteenth century; its objective remains the same: the liberation of individuals from ignorance, prejudice, and voluntary intellectual subjugation. Kant also recognized that this process is gradual rather than instantaneous. The transition from immaturity is a collective, social endeavour, requiring a culture of independent thinking, robust education, and transparent institutions that nurture individual judgment.

Today, in the digital age, this question re-emerges: Do we think autonomously, or have we entered a subtler form of immaturity? If AI provides the answers and algorithms determine what information we receive, do we still think for ourselves, or is thought occurring elsewhere, on our behalf? For Kant, critique was not a destructive act but a constructive one: reason’s highest function. It was not about disagreeing just to disagree, but about seeking the truth by using one’s own reason. This is why he tightly linked autonomy to moral law: only those who act from inner conviction, rather than external compulsion, can be truly ethical. The foundational values of the European Union-human dignity, freedom, and the rule of law-are all rooted in this

Kantian tradition. The pressing question is whether contemporary technology truly fosters this kind of autonomy or merely simulates it. With the rise of digital technologies, the twenty-first century has inaugurated a new era in which power operates less through repression and more through algorithmic profiling and optimization (Zuboff, 2019).

While Kant viewed the Enlightenment as a liberating process heralding the triumph of reason, Michel Foucault offered a more ambivalent perspective. In 1984, precisely two centuries after Kant's seminal essay, Foucault published his version, bearing the same title but diverging sharply in tone and conclusion. For Foucault, the Enlightenment was not solely the realization of autonomy but also the inception of a new mode of power (Foucault, 1984). What Kant embraced as modernity, Foucault saw as a project of redesigning and governing human beings. Reason, science, and institutionalization, he argued, became not only instruments of liberation but also of discipline. Power, in Foucault's view, is not centralized, owned, or merely repressive; it permeates social structures. It becomes embedded in medicine, psychiatry, education, law, media, and, crucially, digital technologies. This power operates less through command and more through normalization, shaping notions of what is "rational," "acceptable," or "normal," and thus constructs the subject accordingly.

Within such a framework, critique is not a purely intellectual activity but a form of resistance. Foucault argues that true critique involves recognizing and questioning the discursive systems that define what is considered true, good, or legitimate. Hence, the Enlightenment legacy is dual: it fosters critical thinking while simultaneously generating new constraints that frame it. Foucault does not idealize autonomy. He maintains that even "independent" thinking is embedded in power structures: what we think and how we think are influenced by language, institutions, scientific paradigms, and dominant discourses. Autonomy, therefore, is not a final state but a continual struggle.

In modern societies, power no longer asserts itself through coercion but through data, diagnoses, recommendations, and algorithms. This makes it all the more insidious: it appears rational, even benevolent. One of Foucault's sharpest insights is that modern power has become more intelligent, and thus more difficult to resist (Foucault, 1977). He sees the Enlightenment not only as the dawn of critical thought but also as the rise of normative apparatuses. Knowledge, for Foucault, is never neutral; it is inextricably linked with power. Genuine critique, then, is not about verifying facts but uncovering the mechanisms of power behind those facts. In the digital age, this insight is acutely relevant. Platforms, data collection, profiling, and AI-driven personalization infiltrate everyday life while concealing their power. Today, Foucault would likely be more concerned with platform economies and

algorithmic norms than with traditional forms of authority. For Kant, by contrast, the problem is not limited to state power but extends to any heteronomous authority, i.e., any guidance or norm that does not arise from the individual's autonomous use of reason.

Virtual Worlds: Autonomy or New Immaturity?

In the age of the Internet, AI, and the metaverse, humanity appears to face boundless opportunities. Identities, knowledge, communities, and experiences can be chosen freely, anytime, anywhere. In light of Kant's legacy, this could be seen as the culmination of the Enlightenment: individuals at last living, learning, and thinking autonomously. But does this promise hold? Such expectations stem from the widespread belief that digital technologies democratize access to information, amplify individual voices, and reduce dependence on traditional authorities such as the state, the church, or established media. The internet is often imagined as an "equalizer," where knowledge is universally available and where individuals can construct and express their identities without external mediation. In this sense, digital modernity appears to fulfil the Enlightenment ideal of emancipation: it promises direct, unfiltered access to knowledge and a plurality of perspectives that could foster independent judgment. However, whether this potential translates into genuine maturity and autonomy remains a matter of critical debate.

The expectation that the Internet could foster maturity and autonomy has deep intellectual and cultural roots. Historically, every major communication revolution—from the printing press to the spread of mass literacy—has been associated with the promise of greater individual enlightenment and emancipation. In this tradition, the digital revolution appeared as a new stage: a medium that, by lowering barriers of access to information, would empower individuals to think for themselves. The early utopian discourses around cyberspace portrayed it as a radically decentralized and participatory sphere, where hierarchical structures of knowledge and authority would be eroded. The Internet was thus expected not merely to provide new channels of communication but to function as a catalyst of critical autonomy, enabling individuals to bypass established authorities and form judgments based on an unprecedented plurality of perspectives. Whether such expectations have been fulfilled remains an open and contested question.

For Kant, autonomy is the capacity to use reason independently, without relying on others to determine truth or make decisions. Digital technologies appear to support this, yet the emphasis lies on appearance. These technologies are not neutral instruments; algorithms do not merely serve, they pre-select. An AI system structures in advance what we see, read, and are recommended. Social platforms monetize our attention and steer it according

to business imperatives. From a Kantian standpoint, this signals a new immaturity, not due to ignorance, but because decisions are no longer reasoned by the self. If individuals do not understand how the systems they navigate function, they do not act autonomously: they simulate autonomy. This is high-tech immaturity: we feel free while selecting from pre-curated possibilities (Floridi, 2021). In today's context, Kant's question might be: In a digital world, do we think for ourselves, or are our thoughts preprogrammed?

Foucault's conception of power as structuring rather than commanding aptly describes digital systems. These platforms do not prohibit; they prioritize. They steer not through force but through prediction, attention, and customization. Users receive not what they desire, but what they are expected to desire. This is the logic of predictive algorithms: they model and shape behaviour without conscious awareness. It aligns seamlessly with Foucault's theory of discursive power. The "reality" encountered online is not self-evident but constructed. The criteria for "valuable" or "intelligent" content are shaped by algorithmic logic. This leads to a regime of "invisible regulation," where the freedom to choose is formal rather than substantive: options are pre-filtered. Foucault's critical question here is not simply whether information is true, but why certain information is highlighted while others are suppressed. This is the power dynamic of virtual worlds: the unseen curation of decisions.

Digital modernity, particularly the proliferation of data-driven systems and algorithmic decision-making, grants new relevance to Foucault's theoretical framework. Today, behavioural norms are shaped not by the panopticon but by the data panopticon and platform architectures. Algorithms do not merely observe; they pre-emptively model the subject's behaviour, generating recommendations, opportunities, and even sanctions accordingly (Zuboff, 2019). Normalization thus operates not only on physical and social levels, but also at cognitive and perceptual levels: we articulate what the algorithm privileges, perceive what the feed displays, and respond in ways deemed "optimal" by the logic of user interaction. It is precisely in this context that Foucault's critique becomes pertinent: to identify and map the discursive and technological systems that, inconspicuously yet effectively, redefine the subject's scope of action.

A disquieting question emerges from the perspectives of both philosophers. In a system where human behaviour is incessantly monitored, profiled, and shaped, is there still room for genuine autonomy or resistance? For Kant, the autonomous individual poses questions; for Foucault, the resistant individual challenges the system's structural boundaries. Today, both modes of agency are under threat, not due to overt oppression, but because the system's design itself deflects attention from questioning. Information overload, perpetual emotional stimulation, and the polarized logic of platforms all contribute to the erosion of reflective thought. The autonomous thinker is

replaced by a reactive, impulsive user shaped by algorithmic profiling. The “critical citizen” gives way to the “responsive datapoint” as the new normative subject. Virtual worlds thus present not only opportunities but also profound risks. In the words of Kant and Foucault, we must once again ask whether the freedom we experience is genuine or merely an illusion produced by the internal logic of the system. This ambivalence between digital emancipation and new forms of dependency becomes particularly visible in Western Europe, where Enlightenment ideals have been translated into legal frameworks.

Western Europe: The “Kantian” Showcase and the “Foucauldian” Reality

Western Europe’s official self-conception positions it as the intellectual heir of the Enlightenment. The rule of law, critical public discourse, civic autonomy, and the protection of civil liberties are deeply rooted in the political culture of Western democracies. With the advent of digital technologies, this intellectual heritage encountered a new domain: the pressing question today is whether the tradition of autonomy and critique can remain viable amid the rise of AI and algorithmic governance.

Formally, the necessary frameworks are in place. The European Union’s regulatory architecture has become the institutional translation of Kant’s moral philosophy. The EU’s stringent data protection regulation (GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation, adopted in 2016) and the comprehensive framework of the DSA – Digital Services Act (entered into force in 2022) are not merely technical instruments but legal embodiments of the Enlightenment idea that the individual must never be treated merely as a means, but always as an end in themselves. Both frameworks seek to secure informational self-determination, the digital analogue of Kantian autonomy. GDPR defines the individual as the rightful owner of personal data, whose consent is the moral and legal precondition of any processing. The DSA, by contrast, extends this principle from privacy to the architecture of public discourse itself, demanding transparency, accountability, and human oversight in algorithmic systems. In this sense, Europe attempts to legislate autonomy - to transform a moral ideal into an enforceable right.

Yet this raises a paradox: can autonomy be legislated? Can freedom be mandated? In reality, the state cannot legislate autonomy itself, but it can enforce the conditions of possibility for becoming mature, through education, transparency, and rights protections. For Kant, autonomy is fundamentally internal: it arises from the exercise of reason, not from external imposition. If autonomy is externally enforced, it risks turning into well-structured compliance rather than genuine self-legislation.

Foucault, by contrast, warned that modern power is not what it appears to be, but rather what appears benign. The digital environment in Western

societies exemplifies this: users feel free, yet every action is monitored, assessed, and subtly guided by algorithmic systems. Here, power does not prohibit, it personalizes. It does not command, it recommends. Social media platforms, search engines, and AI-based decision-support systems are infrastructures that shape cognition itself. What one sees-or does not see-what one reads and in what sequence-these are not incidental, but questions of structural power. The public sphere is no longer a “free marketplace” but a regulated and dynamically modulated environment. In Foucauldian terms, this is discursive control: the subjects, frames, and vocabulary of thought are pre-structured. Individuals may believe they think freely, but this “freedom” is already conditioned. This is power at its most refined: there is no need for coercion, only optimization.

Western democracies frequently emphasize the importance of critical thinking, yet offer limited systemic support for its cultivation. Educational systems often fail to foster this capacity; the media landscape is polarized; the credibility of scientific institutions is waning; and social platforms prioritize reaction over reflection. While the Western individual perceives themselves as autonomous, they are increasingly embedded in an invisible system that predefines their “free” choices. For Kant, freedom is grounded in critical reasoning. For Foucault, the most insidious form of power is that which structures even this freedom. Thus, Western digital culture embodies a paradox: it maintains the semblance of liberty while progressively shaping experience itself. This is not the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, but the optimized subtlety of the twenty-first. The question is no longer whether resistance is possible, but whether we can still recognize what must be resisted.

Eastern Europe: Fragmented Autonomy and the Absence of Trust

The historical legacy of the Enlightenment is far from homogeneous within Europe itself. The dominant Western European interpretations (the enlightened ideals of individual freedom, direct democracy, and the rule of law) took root very differently in Eastern Europe, where modernization was often not organic but imported, directed from above by the state. Thus, the idea of Enlightenment is not a universal template, but a geopolitical construction, whose meaning and adoption have been shaped by distinct historical experiences and institutional reflexes (Giddens, 1990). While Western Europe institutionalized the values of the Enlightenment-embedding them in law, education, and legal norms-Eastern Europe followed a different path for historical and political reasons. Here, the idea of Enlightenment often failed to become a stable, reflexive value system at the heart of public life. Instead, it remained a theoretical ideal, while daily practice was governed by distrust of authority, self-censorship, or open scepticism.

In Kant's vision, the autonomous person thinks, decides, and judges independently. Yet this presupposes a social milieu that fosters such autonomy: educational systems, democratic culture, and transparent institutions. In Eastern Europe, these conditions are often lacking or weakened. Education frequently fails to cultivate critical thinking, emphasizing conformity and memorization instead. In public life, rather than reflexive debate, political polarization and distrust tend to prevail. For Kant, this constitutes the maintenance of "immaturity." Yet today, it is not the authorities of the past but the confusion of the present that sustains it. The digital realm, which at first glance seems to promise freedom, is for many a route of escape: at last, one can have their own identity, opinions, and thoughts "freely." But in reality, this rarely has a solid intellectual foundation; more often, it is instinctive, reactive, and uncontrolled. For Kant, this is not autonomy, but a new, fragmented form of immaturity.

Western algorithmic control is soft and structured; in Eastern Europe, power is more direct and fragmented. Instead of discursive power, repressive power often prevails: surveillance, censorship, propaganda, and political manipulation. Distrust of institutions is widespread; the "official truth" is suspect. Thus, critical thinking is not a stable institution, but rather a sporadic form of resistance. For Foucault, this would not be an autonomous position, but an uncertain, often self-destructive counterculture. The digital realm becomes the battleground for this struggle: not because everything is free, but precisely because rules have yet to be established. In this context, the virtual world reveals two faces. On one hand, it is liberating: anyone can voice an opinion, critical perspectives and alternative narratives can emerge. On the other hand, it is chaotic: boundaries blur between true and false, fact and fiction, expertise and conspiracy theory. For Foucault, this is not genuine critique, but the disintegration of discourse, where not the pluralism of truth prevails, but fragmentation, in which "everything is equally valid," and thus nothing matters at all.

In many places in Eastern Europe, there is no strong, democratic oversight over digital platforms. State regulation is either absent or politically motivated. As a result, platforms operate without transparency or social reflection. Western-style regulation (e.g., GDPR, AI ethics codes) is often merely copied in form, but hollow in substance. In Foucault's terms, what operates here is not soft power, but both invisible and raw power at once. The digital realm can serve as a site of resistance, but just as easily as a terrain of manipulation, disinformation, and polarization. The system is not normative but chaotic, and therefore unstable. Eastern Europe has often failed to deeply embed the ideals of the Enlightenment into its institutions and, consequently, has not developed a stable critical culture in the digital space either. Freedom is often more informal than it is grounded in law or society. For Kant, this does

not constitute genuine autonomy; for Foucault, it is not structured resistance, but a fragmented struggle for discourse.

The Matrix of Europe: The Divergence of Ideals and Reality

The previous chapters have shown that Kant's vision of autonomy and Foucault's critical stance toward power offer two fundamentally different yet complementary perspectives for interpreting modern Europe. We can now project this duality onto the continent's two major regions: Western and Eastern Europe. This conceptual model can be illustrated as a four-cell matrix, with Kant and Foucault on the horizontal axis, and West and East on the vertical (see Figure 1). The matrix reveals that European reality does not faithfully reflect its professed ideals; rather, the regions are in a kind of displacement, not only from one another but from their own theoretical foundations.

Figure 1: The Kant–Foucault and East–West Matrix

	Kant (Autonomy)	Foucault (Critique of Power)
Western Europe	Institutionalized autonomy; rule of law and data protection rhetoric; apparent critical culture	Discursive control; algorithmic regulation; optimized behaviour; voluntary compliance
Eastern Europe	Autonomy as a scarcity; deficits in education and trust; “immaturity” in modern dress	Raw power; polarized discourse; unregulated digital space; disinformation and paranoia

Notes: The author's own elaboration

From a Foucauldian perspective, this displacement produces a striking similarity: both East and West are equally structured by diffuse networks of discursive power, which normalize and guide conduct regardless of institutional differences. From a Kantian perspective, however, the distinction is more pronounced. Western Europe has historically built stronger institutions—such as education, rule of law, and civic trust—that provide the conditions of possibility for autonomy (Giddens, 1990; Krastev & Holmes, 2019). These institutional safeguards do not guarantee maturity, but they enable it to emerge. The growing prevalence of algorithmic governance, however, threatens to erode precisely these safeguards. In this sense, the algorithmic structuring of society risks narrowing the difference between East and West, demanding closer attention to how autonomy is sustained in both contexts (Zuboff, 2019; Yeung, 2017).

In Western rhetoric, Kant remains the guiding thread: freedom, self-determination, and critical thinking. Western societies strive to create digital ethical frameworks that align with Enlightenment ideals: autonomy, transparency, and data rights. Yet even these institutions often falter under technological pressure, especially when facing global platform monopolies (Big Tech) (Floridi, 2021). Reality increasingly follows Foucault's logic:

algorithmic control, behavioural optimization, discourse structured by platforms. Decision-making appears personal, but is filtered. The culture of debate formally exists, but public spaces (such as social platforms) operate according to algorithmic business models. This means that while the citizen feels they are thinking, they are in fact following a form of optimized behaviour. It is the formalization of the Kantian ideal and the fulfilment of Foucauldian reality. The contradiction between the rhetoric of autonomy and the hidden control of discursive structures is one of the deepest dilemmas of Western societies.

Eastern Europe, by contrast, struggles not with overregulation but with a lack of stable and transparent regulation. Here, the digital sphere is “free,” but control is unstructured, haphazard, or outright authoritarian. Distrust toward the state, knowledge, and even critique itself is profound. Foucault would not see hidden power here but a collapsed discourse. Critique is not the rethinking of norms but often a disoriented reaction, or even a conspiracy-driven alternative reality. From the Kantian side, this is the absence of autonomy: people do not use their own reason but follow the narratives of others, often driven by instinct or fear. Thus, the Enlightenment has not been fulfilled but has stalled-temporarily or perhaps for the long term.

The distortion of the matrix shows that Europe as a whole has shifted away from its own ideals. The West, including the US, while claiming to be Kantian, is becoming increasingly Foucauldian. The East, while demanding freedom, often struggles amid unstructured, unreliable, or manipulated systems. In both regions, there is a simulation of autonomy: we act as if we are critical, yet we do not always understand or control what structures our thinking.

Toward a Digital East? – The Challenge to Europe’s Self-Image

The Enlightenment project was originally born in Western Europe and radiated outward-more or less successfully-to the rest of the continent. Concepts such as autonomy, critical reason, freedom, secularization, and human dignity were all part of this intellectual heritage. The European Union built its institutions and political identity upon these foundations. As we have seen, however, these ideals have often become hollow, purely formal, or even distorted in practice. Increasingly, an uncomfortable question arises: Is it possible that, while Western Europe is the nominal heir to the Enlightenment, it is politically and technologically drifting toward a more “Eastern” type of society?

What does it mean to move “toward the East”? This is not a matter of geography. The “East” here is not merely the post-Soviet space or the EU’s periphery. Rather, the “East” functions as a metaphor: a society of mistrust, institutional weakness, loyalty over autonomy, covert or overt technological

control, and the fragmentation of discourse with a marginalization of reflection. When we ask “Toward the East?”, we are asking whether the Enlightenment project is reversing, and if so, what might take its place. Today, the “East” not only evokes the past, but also signals a possible face of the digital future. These are societies where technology invisibly governs life, individual choices unfold along pre-programmed patterns, truth becomes relative, and popularity-not substance-determines what matters; where power operates not through force but through algorithmic optimization; and critique is less institutionalized than impulsive, often extreme. In this sense, the East is not Eastern Europe, but a new civilizational condition, in which freedom is appearance, reflection is marginalized, and power diffuses across language, technology, and behavioural norms.

Kant might ask: “Where is the autonomous person, if they are unaware that the algorithm is deciding for them?” Foucault would add: “Power today does not repress, but pacifies-and thus silences.” This makes the question urgent: Will there be a new Enlightenment for the twenty-first century, capable of redefining autonomy, critique, and freedom within the frameworks of digital reality? Or, will Europe wander into a future where no one even remembers what “*Sapere aude*” meant? I believe that Europe cannot return to Kant’s eighteenth-century world, but even less can it afford to drift uncritically into a technologically dominated society. Autonomy today does not mean rejecting authority, but understanding the system itself. Critique is not destruction, but the capacity for conscious rethinking. The “East” can also serve as a warning: a reminder of what happens when the Enlightenment project is distorted or abandoned. The question is not East or West, but whether Europe can face, in an authentic way, what it has neglected or lost.

Conclusion – The New Trial of Enlightenment: Europe at the Threshold of Reflection

The Enlightenment project is not a thing of the past. It is not a closed philosophical era, nor a set of doctrines confined to books, but a mode of thinking that must either remain alive or gradually fade away. Europe’s future depends on whether this practice can survive in new forms amid the technological, social, and political challenges of the twenty-first century. The analysis along the Kant–Foucault axis has shown that both autonomy (as an ideal) and critique of power (as a necessity) are endangered, albeit in different ways, in the West and the East.

The digital space, initially appearing to extend freedom, has often become a site of control and simulated choice. Algorithms do not merely serve, they shape-invisibly, yet effectively. Meanwhile, the West maintains Kantian rhetoric, but operates according to Foucauldian reality. The East struggles with the absence of reflection, while its informal freedoms are

distorted by unstructured, often toxic digital cultures. The entire continent is heading toward a new kind of immaturity: it is not forbidden thought, but optimized behaviour that determines how we live—a condition that mirrors what Morozov (2021) calls “freedom as a service,” the transformation of autonomy into algorithmically mediated dependence. The real question, then, is not whether a return to the Enlightenment is possible, but whether we are capable of reimagining its spirit. Can Kant’s autonomy function in an era when people do not understand the systems in which they live? This question echoes Arendt’s concern in *The Human Condition* (1958/1998): modern individuals inhabit systems of their own making that they no longer fully understand. The erosion of comprehension thus raises the problem of whether autonomy, as Kant conceived it, can still be sustained. Is there a place for Foucault’s critique in a society where power is no longer “top-down,” but operates through databases, profiling, and user behaviour patterns?

I believe the answer starts here: only if critical thinking ceases to be just curriculum, and becomes public, political, and technological reflection. It is not enough to teach Kant or read Foucault; we must live the mode of thinking they represent. Europe would still become the continent of the Enlightenment again, but not on the geological map of the eighteenth century; instead, it will happen across digital networks, in the moral decisions of AI development, the structures of the data economy, and in the questions of who determines what counts as “knowledge,” and why.

In summary, the findings suggest that Europe’s autonomy in the digital age is increasingly simulated rather than substantial: freedom is formally protected but substantively guided by algorithmic systems. The East–West divide is no longer geographical but structural—both regions experience a convergence toward optimized behaviour and diminished critical reflection. The study therefore proposes that a renewed Enlightenment must emerge, one that unites philosophical critique with digital literacy, ensuring that individuals understand, rather than merely inhabit, the technological systems shaping their lives (Helbing, 2019). The real question, therefore, is not whether “Europe is moving East,” but whether it recognizes that it has strayed from its own path. If so, there is still time to correct the course. If not, Europe may become little more than a fond memory of its own ideals, while new, invisible powers shape the future.

Appendix – The Empirical Context of Digital Autonomy: Structural Tensions and Regional Divergence in Europe

While this study is primarily theoretical, juxtaposing Kant’s concept of autonomy with Foucault’s theory of discursive power, the broader philosophical claims demand empirical contextualization. This appendix provides such a context, drawing upon two contemporary and authoritative

sources: the *Freedom on the Net 2024* report and the *Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022*. The objective is not to conduct a statistical or causal analysis, nor to treat these datasets as direct evidence for interpreting Enlightenment philosophy. Rather, the aim is to sketch the broader socio-technological contours within which the theoretical argument unfolds.

These reports reveal patterns that resonate-though not deterministically-with the core concepts of this study: autonomy, algorithmic power, and digital maturity. The data function as snapshots of a deeper historical process of transformation, in which technologies such as generative AI serve more as accelerators than root causes. Autonomy in the digital age is not shaped by technology alone but by the institutional, educational, and normative ecosystems in which these technologies operate. Thus, the appendix serves as an empirical supplement: not to illustrate, but to situate and enrich the theoretical framework.

Global Erosion of Trust and Freedom

The *Freedom on the Net 2024* report documents a sobering global trend: internet freedom has declined for the 14th consecutive year. In 27 of the 72 countries surveyed, the conditions for online human rights have deteriorated. One of the most striking developments is the state-sponsored manipulation of online content, particularly during electoral periods, which undermines the reliability of information ecosystems and fosters a climate of mistrust. Such practices illustrate the Foucauldian insight that power now functions less through censorship than through modulation, steering perception rather than outright blocking it.

Meanwhile, *DESI 2022* data show that while 87% of EU citizens use the internet regularly, only 54% possess at least basic digital skills. This discrepancy between access and capability exacerbates the vulnerability of users to manipulation, intensifying the trust deficit that characterizes the digital age. The illusion of digital autonomy often masks a deeper dependency, where users are formally connected yet epistemically fragile.

East–West Contrasts and Structural Asymmetries

Europe is far from homogeneous. According to *Freedom on the Net 2024*, countries like Iceland and the Netherlands are classified as “Free,” whereas Russia and Belarus rank among the most repressive. Hungary is labeled “Partly Free,” highlighting intra-EU divergences in digital freedom and civil liberties. The *DESI 2022* further reveals striking differences: in countries like Finland and the Netherlands, nearly 80% of the population has basic digital skills; in Romania and Bulgaria, this figure drops to around 30–40%.

These contrasts are not merely geographical but structural. “East” and “West” here refer to institutional robustness, civic culture, and regulatory efficacy. In Eastern Europe, rural–urban gaps and weak educational infrastructures deepen asymmetries in digital inclusion and literacy. These factors not only shape access to technology but also determine the forms and limits of digital autonomy. As this paper has argued, Kantian maturity requires both personal capacity and supportive institutions. In many parts of Eastern Europe, both are lacking.

Technological Innovation and Its Discontents

Generative AI, deepfake technologies, and algorithmic avatars have entered not only cultural but political arenas. The *Freedom on the Net 2024* reports instances of AI-generated content influencing electoral outcomes and public opinion, raising questions about the integrity of democratic processes. At the same time, *DESI 2022* notes that only 8% of European businesses had implemented AI solutions by 2021. This disconnect between the perceived political power of AI and its limited institutional adoption illustrates a critical paradox: the anxiety about technological manipulation outpaces the reality of its widespread application. Thus, technology becomes a projection surface for deeper societal anxieties about control, visibility, and agency.

Institutional Responses and the Role of Civil Society

Encouragingly, institutional countermeasures are emerging. The EU’s *Digital Decade 2030* agenda sets concrete goals: ensuring that 80% of citizens have basic digital skills, expanding ICT employment, and pushing for AI adoption across businesses. Civil society initiatives-like Taiwan’s Cofacts platform or the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)-illustrate the bottom-up efforts to combat disinformation and build civic resilience. Regulatory instruments such as the *Digital Services Act* and the revised *Code of Practice on Disinformation* aim to make digital environments more transparent and accountable. These strategies reflect an understanding that digital governance cannot be purely technological; it must also be normative, participatory, and reflexive.

Concluding Reflection

The data confirm the central thesis of this study: that digital autonomy is increasingly simulated rather than substantial. Europe is caught between the rhetoric of Enlightenment and the reality of algorithmic governance. The *Freedom on the Net* and *DESI* reports together show that:

- The crisis of trust is not episodic but structurally embedded;
- The East–West divide reflects not nature but institutional asymmetries and historical legacies;

- AI technologies are already politically potent, even where they are not yet economically widespread;
- The governance of digital spaces demands both top-down regulation and bottom-up civic engagement.

Thus, autonomy in the digital age is not a given, but a contested and contingent achievement. As this appendix emphasizes, philosophical reflection must be grounded in empirical awareness. If we are to preserve and reinvent the Enlightenment in our time, we must engage not only with abstract principles but with the material, political, and technological conditions that shape them.

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