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Neoliberalism and the Hermeneutics of Despondency

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Title of review

Neoliberalism and the Hermeneutics of Despondency

Book reviewed

Psychopolitics: neoliberalism and new technologies of power, by Byung-Chul Han

(translated by Erik Butler), Verso, 2017, 87 pp. ISBN: 9781784785772, £6.99 (paperback).

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As you read this review essay, you are most likely (with journal hardcopies by now almost a thing of the past) sitting at a computer, or at least, gazing at a screen of one size or another, scrolling or thumbing over these words in search of: what? Insight, knowledge, entertainment? Are you working now? Is this labour, or leisure, or consumption, or something else? Will you ‘like’ this essay? Will you ‘share’ it? To what purpose? And to what extent are you aware of the myriad of the micro-processes, calculations, recordings, and transmissions that are simultaneously taking place right under your nose, so to speak, as your eyes saccade and stop across the screen? Or of the data, and value, that is being captured and created as you read and click? And, above all, how are you feeling? Tired, I bet. Yes. Exhausted.

This digital world is the world of psychopolitics, and these new technologies are better conceived as neoliberal technologies of power and domination. This is the argument of Korean-born Cultural Theorist Byung-Chul Han, a ‘star of German philosophy’, according to the publisher’s website. This book, *Psychopolitics* (2017), translated from the original German (published in 2014) by Erik Butler, is certainly of-the-moment, not only in its theme, and is both fascinating and frustrating in almost equal measure. In what follows I will briefly give an overview of the general structure and argument of the book, before offering some critical reflections, especially as they relate to emotions and power.

The first thing to note about the book itself is its form. It is short. At 87 pages in total, the work is not so much a ‘book’ as an extended essay, or a collection of essays with a common theme. It is published as part of the Verso Futures series, a collection of essay-length ‘interventions’ that ambitiously aims to address ‘the outer limit of political and social possibility’. This, in itself, is one source of Han’s appeal and popularity. In the ‘attention economy’ of digitally-mediated neoliberalism, attention (*your* very eyes and ears) is a key, and increasingly scarce and competed-for resource. Indeed, this book appears to be the

longest of Han's works in English, and there is a good deal of continuity in terms of both style and substance with earlier books, such as *The Burnout Society* (2015), and *The Transparency Society* (2015), which also diagnose the maladies of the current age. The focus here is geared more towards the intersections of Digital Society, power, and freedom under neoliberalism, especially as they work on the psyche, specifically.

Yet, this, for me at least, is also one source of frustration. There are thirteen 'chapters' squeezed into the essay, some of which are so short as to be almost inconsequential. Many of them read more like that other great feature of the digital age: blog posts. For those of us already even reasonably well-versed in social theory (a breed traditionally more likely to suffer from attention *surplus* disorder), some of the individual essays say very little, almost nothing, that isn't already well known. Chapter three, 'The Mole and the Snake', for example, is two pages long. It says that the animal of disciplinary society is the mole (suited to the confined and controlled closed systems), while the animal of neoliberal society is the snake (which likes openness and 'makes its own space' through movement) – the former is a labourer, the latter an entrepreneur. Practically all of this, however, including the animals, comes directly from Deleuze's 'Postscript on Control Societies' (1992), which was first published in 1990, and was itself a short and sketchy (though suggestive, and popular) updating of Foucault. Here, Han offers us the metaphorical transition, and really only adds that (again, pivoting on another direct quotation from the Deleuze text that I cannot, in fact, locate) the competition and motivation cited by Deleuze as features of the new societies of control, actually represent 'features of the psychopolitical technology of domination that constitutes the neoliberal regime' (Han, 2017, p.18). In short, the ideas here, based on an already somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of Foucault, belong to Deleuze, which Han tags as 'psychopolitics' at the end. The metaphor is evocative, but this is theoretically frustrating, especially if one knows the Deleuze essay. Such sources of frustration are not

uncommon in Han's approach to theory. Stylistically, the individual essays are both short and readable, and yet, full and dense with ideas – reading them itself provokes a sort-of exhaustion. Metaphors abound. Citation is minimal. The pages are awash with declarative sentences and aphoristic phrases, often close to slogans, more often teetering on the hyperbolic – healing is killing, freedom is bondage, and so on. It is written in a manner that is, it seems, at once, both wild and free (though not in the Deleuzian sense of the 'creation' of concepts), and highly controlled – a neoliberal book for a philosophy of neoliberalism. Perhaps this is part of the point.

Under neoliberalism as Han conceives it, freedom itself is a technology of control – a new, and more efficient, form of (self) subjectivation and (self) subjugation. This is the 'crisis of freedom' of chapter one. The general argument here is, again, quite familiar – (material) industrial capitalism has transmuted into (immaterial) neoliberal and financial capitalism, neoliberal subjects must become *projects*, entrepreneurs of themselves, which heralds the end of non-purposive relationships, the end of class, of collective action, of politics, and so on – this new freedom is itself birthing new, mutated forms of constraint, compulsion, and coercion. In this permissive society, the 'freedom of *Can* generates even more coercion than the disciplinarian *Should*, which issues commandments and prohibitions. *Should* has a limit. In contrast, *Can* has none. Thus, the compulsion entailed by *Can* is unlimited' (Han 2017, p. 2). In this sense, fundamentally (for Han) *psychic* pathologies like depression or burnout are pathologies of freedom and its neoliberal exploitation. This is an individual and individualizing form of freedom that is being exploited with the freeing of Capital, which produces a shift from 'allo-exploitation' to 'auto-exploitation'. This process affects all classes, he says, (a form of class-less self-exploitation 'unknown to Marx'), and to such an extent that 'no *political We* is even possible that could rise up and undertake collective action' (Han 2017, p.6). Structural problems are internalized as personal (individual) failures,

producing shame and depression (note that he uses the German construction of debt/guilt, die Schuld/die Schulden, which is almost a cliché at this stage, about half a dozen times) rather than revolution.

These are all mostly commonplaces of contemporary social and critical theory (e.g. Žižek has been banging on in a similar vein about the new permissive society – ‘you may!’ – and the postmodern superego since the 1990s), mixed with exaggeration and overstatement, and the political vision (to the extent that it was true in 2014) seems to have been challenged by history and the rise of populism. At least some of the class-less onlookers of his ‘spectator democracy’ – the passive erstwhile citizens, now consumers, that ‘react only *passively* to politics (Han 2017, p.10) – appear to have rolled up their sleeves, for good or ill. Where the book is somewhat more interesting is when it turns to the neoliberal *dispositif* of transparency operating in the new digital panopticon, and the specifically digital psychopolitics associated with the rise of Big Data and these new forms of surveillance and control. The new forms of knowledge being produced on a massive scale (even as most of you read these words) may be used as a new form of domination, both to facilitate ‘intervention in the psyche’ (p.12), and to predict human behaviour on a scale previously unimaginable (by all perhaps except Asimov and the ‘psychohistorians’ of his social science fiction). The recent exposure of Cambridge Analytica and their use of Facebook data is just the beginning, and this point is perhaps more resonant now than it was in 2014. However, the conclusion here, that Big Data and digital psychopolitics transforms the ‘negativity of freely made decisions’ into the ‘positivity of factual states’, and thereby transforms persons into things – that ‘Big Data has announced the end of the *person* who possesses free will’ (p.12) – rests on an impoverished view of humans beings, seemingly devoid or devoided of human agency.

This is no longer a hermeneutics of suspicion, nor even one of despair. This is a hermeneutics of *despondency*, to play an etymological game of my own, both metaphorically

and literally. On the one hand, Han's analysis of the times is 'hopeless', worse than despairing, but what psychopolitics ultimately argues is that, under neoliberalism, one must 'give up one's soul' (as in the Latin phrase *animam despondere*), expending oneself in the process. Han does recognise, like many others, the quasi-religious aspects of this world, the 'devotional objects of the Digital period', which 'materialize and stabilize domination', to which we submit to. The smartphone is a 'digital rosary' and a mobile confessional, while (clicking) 'Like is the digital Amen' (Han, 2017, p.12). Power works more effectively through these devices, not only via their surveillance mechanisms, but more so through the ways in which we surveil ourselves when we use them. We give ourselves, our souls, and our psyches, up to power.

Chapters two to five (pp.13-28) address the concept of power in a number of ways, but mainly to outline the shift from disciplinary power and biopolitics to the neoliberal form of 'Smart Power' (the shift from the mole to the snake mentioned earlier). This power is 'friendly', and seductive, operating through permissiveness and freedom. It says 'yes' rather than 'no', and thereby calls forth 'positive emotions'. There is a rolling (and repetitive) critique of Foucault at work in these chapters. While he may have recognized that the structures and technologies of disciplinary society were no longer fully relevant to the world of the late 1970s, in his lectures on neoliberalism he failed to recognize that *biopolitics* (the politics of the *body* in its productive capacity under capitalism) has been superseded by *psychopolitics* (the politics of the 'soul', the psyche, the mind, the emotions under *neoliberal* capitalism) as the dominant technology of power operating in the new regime. Here, this more subtle technology of power 'does not lay hold of individuals directly. Instead, it ensures that individuals act on themselves so that power relations are interiorized – and then interpreted as freedom. Self-optimization and submission, freedom and exploitation, fall into one' (Han, 2017, p.28). This is what Foucault 'missed'.

There are a number of problems with Han's argumentation here. Firstly, his presentation of disciplinary power itself is somewhat tendentious. He repeatedly describes it as being, repressive, 'commanded by negativity', 'inhibitive' rather than permissive, which appears to me at least to be a basic (or perhaps wilful) misreading of 'positive power', and much of Foucault's argument in *Discipline & punish* and elsewhere about the *productive* nature of disciplinary power. Relatedly, there is a stark dualism at work between the body and the psyche or mind. Disciplinary power, though occasionally reaching into the 'mental sphere', does not 'focus on the psyche' – the 'orthopaedic technology of disciplinary power is too crude to penetrate into the deeper levels of the soul... Bentham's Big Brother only observes from the outside. His panopticon is bound to the *optical medium*. It has no access to inner thoughts or needs' (Han 2017, p.21). By focusing on the more mechanistic and external aspects (like drilling etc), Han misses the key *constitutive* import of disciplinary power; that it *produces* subjects and 'reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself into their very actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes, and everyday lives' (Foucault 1980, p. 39). For Han, neoliberal capitalism is not really concerned 'with the biological, the somatic, the corporal... The body no longer represents a central force of production' (Han 2017, p.25). Such a sharp bifurcation between the psyche and the body occludes the fact that minds, emotions, are yet still *embodied*, unless the rapture of the Kurzweilian Singularity has already happened and I have not been invited. Moreover, there is no real mention of governmentality here, and the voluminous work on it and the psyche (Rau and Lemke are both dismissed as problematic and 'fraught' in a footnote, but no mention of Rose among others). A deeper reading of Foucault would also account for his resistance to 'the psyche' as a central target of power, such as his ambiguous relation to Freud, and the therapeutic ethos more generally.

Which brings us to Han's chapter on emotions or 'emotional capitalism'.

Psychopolitics is always more refined and subtle than disciplinary power over individuals or biopolitics of populations, and the self-optimization and limitless achievement it peddles operates under a regime of *positivity* (which is actually harmful and exhausting self-exploitation) – 'likes', smileys, and perhaps above all, positive *emotions*. And he is no doubt correct when he says that talk of affect, emotion, and feeling has 'grown inflationary' of late. But he immediately goes on to make a series of obtuse and unsubstantiated claims, suggesting that:

...hardly anyone bothers to ask where this sudden interest in emotions came from. Scientific emotion-researchers are clearly not reflecting much on their own activities. Thus, they have failed to remark that the emotional 'boom' stems from an economic process, above all. Worse still, utter conceptual confusion prevails. 'Emotion', 'feeling' and 'affect' seem interchangeable for many researchers (Han, 2017, p.41).

Firstly, practically everyone working on emotion across the humanities and social sciences (including history, literature, geography, anthropology, as well as sociology and psychology) addresses this, offering various and multifaceted accounts and explanations for the rise, not only of emotionalism, but also scientific and scholarly interest in it (something Han does not go on to do here). While it may be true that not everyone agrees that economic processes that the primary motor of this rise, I do not know of anyone who would suggest that they had nothing to do with it. And I agree with him that a good deal of conceptual confusion does remain in the study of affect and emotion, but a good part of the reason for this is because of the type of scholarly practice that Han himself commits over the next three pages, namely, redefining the terms affect, emotion, and feeling to suit his own ends. Indeed, when most of the rest of us do that we at least refer to other scholars to justify and explain our reasoning,

rather than piling up declarative sentences. As it happens, and like many other scholars, I would agree that there is a difference between affects, emotions, and feelings, and that emotion is 'performative' rather than constative. For Han, affect and emotion are (merely) expressions of subjectivity, whereas feeling is objective, it admits an account or a narrative (I have a feeling *that*, say). This treatment of affect does not appear to have been troubled by the 'affective turn', and emotion is reduced to something intentional, goal-orientated, and fundamentally expressive (on p. 42), but, as they are controlled by the limbic system (like 'drives'), they form the 'pre-reflexive, half-conscious, physico-instinctual level of action that escapes full awareness' (on p. 48). There is no support offered for these positions. They are just stated as (really quite obvious) facts. Feelings, in this view, have a different temporality to affects and emotions; they have duration, whereas emotion is fleeting. On this basis he claims that both anxiety and guilt are feelings, not emotions.

It must be exceptionally liberating to free oneself from the burden of scholarship or the need to place oneself within a body of existing literature, especially on a subject as complex and conceptually contested as emotion, and to rely (almost) exclusively on introspection to make up your own definitions of terms. However, such liberation should not also permit the misreading or misrepresentation of the *one* book on emotion that is cited, namely *Cold intimacies: the marking of emotional capitalism* by Eva Illouz (2007). This is itself a short book, directly based on her Adorno Lectures, given in Frankfurt in 2004, and written up more substantially as *Saving the modern soul: therapy, emotions, and the culture of self-help* (Illouz, 2008). Unfortunately, Han does not appear to have read the second book, and his curt critique of the first appears to be based on his reading of the first two pages alone. He chides her for not distinguishing between feelings and emotions (fine, but for many people this endless terminological hair-splitting has become a barrier to actually getting any work done), but more so for 'failing to account' for the fact that emotion *only* becomes a

source of value for capitalism under neoliberalism, and not before – all of the classical sociological theories of emotion she reviews in the opening pages ‘do nothing to explain the boom of emotion *today*’ (Han 2017, p.45). Well, quite. But this is precisely what Illouz’s book does, offering a historically credible institutional and cultural account of the rise of emotion as a category of value over the twentieth century. Her account explains how the emergence of a new ‘emotional style’, based on an emerging ‘therapeutic ethos’ (which perhaps began with Freud’s Clarke Lectures in the US in 1909), gradually spreads from the universities and institutions into the corporate world of 1920s America, and from there via advertising, Hollywood, media, and the state, into the homes and bodies of individuals and families. The process interpenetrates with capitalism and its transformation over the same period directly, especially as capitalism and the world of work becomes ‘less material’ (as he says) and becomes based increasingly on communication and (human) relationality:

‘Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing... a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange’ (Illouz 2017, p.5; 2008, p.60). Now, one can take issue with Illouz on a number of fronts here, but what Han offers is another tendentious and selective misreading, this time of Illouz’s conception of ‘emotional capitalism’ (which in-part does explain the rise of emotional capital, as a new resource, and salience of ‘emotional intelligence’ in the contemporary world), a phrase he wishes to appropriate for rhetorical effect. For him, a fundamentally binary thinker, emotionality *must* be the medium of neoliberalism for psychopolitics to make sense, because rationality was the medium of disciplinary society and biopolitics (p.45). He offers no explanation himself for its rise, beyond stating (again) that neoliberalism operates an

immaterial mode of production in which communication and interaction play a greater role (which is actually explained in historical detail by Illouz).

So, what is to be done? What politics of resistance might emerge in this age of ‘digital totalitarianism’, transparency, ‘dataism’, and conformism? Well, to become an idiot. The idiot, or fool, is a particular type of (especially philosophical) outsider – ‘unallied, un-networked, and uninformed’ (Han 2017, p.83). Such outsiders meet the clamour of the psychopolitical age with a politics of silence. Intelligence can only choose between options that are always already given by ‘the system’; it thus must follow the logic of the system. Idiotism abandons intelligence and thereby gains access to the ‘wholly other’. The idiot must undergo a process of ‘de-psychologization’ and ‘de-subjectivization’ to attain an art of living that is truly free; to become like Deleuze’s *homo tatum*, a man or person without qualities.

Yet, as the idiot enters into the sphere of pure immanence, they appear to do so alone. De-subjectivized, and in their silence, they do not appear to be able to bring others with them. There is no *political* programme here, indeed, nor could there be, as collective action is a thing of the past. The self-exploiting masses, having installed ‘neoliberalism 3.0’ as their psychopolitical operating system, must be left where they are, compulsively Tweeting, and Liking like the neo-liberal robots they are, getting increasingly exhausted and depressed. The idiot gives up and checks out, in silence.

Han, the despondent diagnostician of despondency, the idiot, escapes the neoliberal and digital Slough of Despond himself. He is like Pliable, abandoning Christian, when who we need is Help. Neoliberalism itself, a master category, stalks the landscape:

This miry Slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore is it called the Slough of Despond: for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and

discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place; and this is the reason of the badness of this ground (Bunyan, [1678] 2008, p.19).

In both style and substance, this book is a source of frustration. It is, at times, evocative, even elegant, at others it is glib and ephemeral. In a sense, it isn't written for me. I like analysis, scholarly debate, footnotes – a deep engagement with literature, and history, and evidence. This is a book, I think, for the 'cool kids', which is something I have not been for quite a while (if ever). It has the kind of bleak chic that would resonate well in a pared-down café in Paris or London, where beautiful young things dressed all in black look up from their smashed avocado on sourdough toast, gaze contemplatively into middle distance before sipping their flat white from a reclaimed jam jar, thinking: 'am I too dumb to be an idiot'? What it doesn't have is a working model of the human agent, or a mode of social explanation. Aspects of the argument are unassailable – new forms of power are having detrimental effects on the lives and bodies of human beings under contemporary capitalism, Big Data and other technological developments are a serious concern, and emotions and emotional life in general is increasingly central to the any analysis of power. But most of these aspects are available elsewhere, and treated with less exaggeration, and in more detail, with more rigour, and more hope.

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