

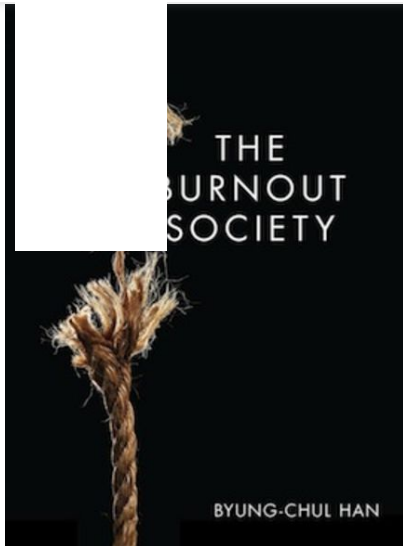
Media and Transparency: An Introduction to Byung-Chul Han in English

By Adrian Nathan West



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BYUNG-CHUL HAN is as good a candidate as any for philosopher of the moment. Though it has been 20 years since his first book appeared — a remarkable monograph on the notion of *Stimmung*, or mood, in Heidegger — it was not until 2009 that his works began to show up in translation.



in those that followed, and a definitive turn toward the political, and specifically toward historical models of coercion, only took place with the appearance of 2005's *Was ist Macht* (*What is Power*). In 2010, he published his breakout volume, *Die Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*,

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translated into English as *The Burnout Society*, and began to attract attention outside Germany, his country of adoption. Since then, his writings have appeared in more than a dozen languages, and over the past two years, the United States and the United Kingdom have begun to catch up: Stanford and MIT have now released two books each, and three more will be published in the upcoming months.

Undoubtedly, Han's unusual background has contributed to his mystique. Born in Seoul in 1959, he studied metallurgy after leaving high school, and nearly killed himself in a chemical explosion at his family home. At 26, he left for Germany without knowing the language. He had been admitted to the University of Clausthal-Zellerfeld, where his parents believed he would continue his technical studies; he soon left for Munich, majoring in German literature and theology before moving on to Freiburg, where he would take a doctorate in philosophy in 1994. Compared with other chic thinkers from Jean-Luc Nancy to Slavoj Žižek, his work is surprisingly accessible, with little proclivity for the dialectical *fourberie* that has led many empirically minded readers to dismiss critical theory outright. This may be an effect of Han's writing in a second language; certainly his sentences contain few of the elaborate subordinate clauses German philosophy, rightly or wrongly, is famous for, and if

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is work, his forthcoming is something in a new

calculated waffling.

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Primary concern as a philosopher is to illuminate the experience of subjectivity in the transition from post-industrial to digital society. *In the Swarm* is an ideal introduction to his thought, recapitulating many ideas present from the earlier *The Burnout Society* and *The Agony of Eros* while opening the way for the overt critique of contemporary systems of control in 2014's *Psychopolitics*, forthcoming from Verso. From the first, it shows Han at his best and worst: the writing is clear, but also hieratical, with a humorless gravity at odds with its examination of such concepts as "the shitstorm"; he is penetrating on the insidiousness of digital activism, which replaces non-conformism with a toothless, but psychologically beguiling simulacrum, but at times, he comes across as naïve about the technologies he is critiquing, and has a penchant for ominous but ham-handed propositions like: "The algorithms employed by Facebook, the stock market, and the secret service are basically the same."

In the Swarm opens with a lament for the "pathos of distance," which forms the foundation for respect. Han opposes the German *Rücksicht*, which means consideration but also looking backward, to the Latin *spectare*, which is vulgar and voyeuristic, gawking without deference. The concession of the other's privacy is the foundation of civil society. Citing Barthes to the effect that "*private life* is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object," Han argues that private life is crumbling with the virtualization of the self. From here, he moves on to the "shitstorm," which, as an "authentic phenomenon of digital communication," differs from such quaint forms of protest as barking on the street corner or writing a letter to an editor or congressman. The individual acts of virtual outrage composing the shitstorm — the carping message board

are not a promise to engagement, but instead an offer of “immediate affective discharge” in an instant that “favors symmetrical communication.” This essence, that online condemnation responds less to the logic criteria of suasion than to the base pleasure of dealing a cheap shot — in many cases, under cover of anonymity — with no concern for whether the target is a stranger, a celebrity author, or the president of the United States.

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Outrage, in Han’s view, draws attention efficiently but lacks the stability and constancy required for successful intervention in the public sphere. Masses marshaled to the purpose of public shaming lack a commitment to a course of shared action. Outrage is an end in itself, and its targets are inevitably granular, so that the power relations that structure individual grievances at their core persist through the shitstorm unaltered.

While digital subjects may perceive themselves as inhabiting a novel democratic medium, with spurious connections to the rich, famous, and powerful, they are also under constant observation and susceptible to being set upon by the swarm at any time (readers interested in examples should consult Jon Ronson’s amusing and unsettling *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*). Hence “[t]he imperative of transparency produces a strong compulsion to conform.” Anyone who has a social media account is likely to agree: an off-color joke or the embrace of unwelcome political views can mean shunning, ridicule, even the loss of work, and while anonymous trolls go on pillorying their targets and at times even threatening their lives, many of the rest of us are engaged in the constant if veiled one-upsmanship known by the unflattering but not inaccurate term “virtue signaling.” On my own Twitter, I have recently seen an impassioned diatribe against the racism of the term “native speaker,” the suggestion that those uncomfortable with the idea of

for Trump. Whatever might be said about the
 aspects underlying such statements, they seem wanting
 in respect characteristic of truly pluralistic societies —
 that embrace radically different views and seek to
 resolve conflict through dialogue, rather than those in
 which accepted ideals of diversity and openness are imposed
 as though by decree.

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In the chapter “From Subject to Project,” Han introduces
 “the achievement subject,” a central figure in 2010’s *The
 Burnout Society*. After invoking, probably wistfully for anyone
 who has ever labored on the land, the subjectivity of the
 Heideggerian farmer, who “submits himself to the *nomos of
 the Earth*,” whatever that might mean, he states:

Today, Heidegger’s existential ontology needs to be
 rewritten, for man believes himself no longer to be a
 subject in a state of submission, but rather a self-
 projecting, even self-optimizing subject. Undoubtedly,
 the evolution from subject to project was underway
 before the inauguration of the digital medium.
 Nonetheless, the formula holds: the forms of being or
 life at a given time push, in critical phases, for forms of
 expression that only attain their fulfillment in a new
 medium. The forms that life assumes depend on
 prevailing media.

The achievement subject is no longer liable to external
 control, but exploits himself under the burden of a freedom
 that brings with it the imperative to positive yield.
 Identifying himself as a project, he no longer differentiates
 work from leisure, and his relentless engagement in the
 process of self-production gives rise to a number of
 maladies, from depression to nervous collapse.

into murky waters. To begin with, its link to sections of the self is never entirely clear. Even if the notion of an online “presence” is one part of the self-identity-construction, it is hard to see tweeting or blogging as particularly exhausting; for many, they prove a respite from long hours spent in front of a keyboard. His assertion that “depression is a narcissistic malady” characteristic of subjects drained by the self-directed pursuit of success has scant basis in the medical literature or the testimony of depression sufferers. Finally, it is worth asking to what extent the achievement subject is truly characteristic of modernity. Han paints a picture of a world where everyone is plugged in nonstop, eternally tapping and pinching touchscreens; where Skype endangers face-to-face communication and self-promotion is the dominant mode of production. While this is all suggestive in a *Black Mirror* sort of way, it falls short as a description of lived reality. Globally, only one in four adults works full time, and agriculture remains the largest employment field by far. Less than half the world has an internet connection, and the majority of job growth since the Great Recession has been precarious and in low-skill areas. Experts in automation point to white-collar work as the next victim of the automation revolution, and the World Economic Forum has described legal, administrative, and financial services as likely to suffer serious disruptions in coming years. The decline in traditional employment has certainly led to a push for flexibility, retraining, “developing competencies,” and otherwise taking on an inability to prepare for shifts in the market as a personal shortcoming rather than a symptom of capital’s voracity, but the extent to which workers have bought into the image of themselves as “entrepreneurs of the self” remains debatable. In any case, the threat of automation and other forms of streamlining point less toward a future of achievement subjects running themselves ragged in a hamster wheel than one in which, to

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alization of techno-capitalist regimes of control is the theme of the soon-to-be-published *Topology of Violence*, thoughtfully translated by Amanda DeMarco. Here again, Han shows an often grating aversion to real-world examples: his privileging of the self-directed aggression of the achievement subject as the eminent expression of contemporary violence passes over, among other things, the use of murder and torture, and their representation on social media, as instruments of intimidation by criminal enterprises and quasi-state actors in places like Guatemala and Syria, not to mention the estimated 45 million people working in slavery from India to Cambodia to Mauritania. Still, there is something profound, and not unrelated to the West's incapacity to confront these cruder instances of brutality, in Han's analysis of the "violence of positivity." This is an affliction of excess — excess wealth, excess information, excess self-absorption — that erodes not only humanistic values, but the contemplative distance that upholds them. Han's critique dovetails with recent assertions of Wolfgang Streeck, who writes, in *How Will Capitalism End?*:

Life under social entropy elevates being optimistic to the status of a public virtue and civic responsibility. In fact, one can say that even more than capitalism in its heyday, the entropic society of disintegrated, de-structured and under-governed post-capitalism depends on its ability to hitch itself onto the natural desire of people not to feel desperate, while defining pessimism as a socially harmful personal deficiency.

Han draws on Carl Schmitt to develop a concept of the "immunological other," an other whose irreducible difference, while provoking reactions of suspicion and even

difference through the democratization of taste, globalization, which is a process, or rather an *excess* of disinhibition and the dissolution of boundaries.”

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This rings reactionary, but the charge of reaction, I fear, is losing force. The feverish analyses of stagnant wages, deindustrialization, and “deaths of despair” among the white working class in the wake of the Trump and Brexit vote, while valid taken on their own, served in part to ease the dismay of liberals unwilling to examine what is patently clear: that in both instances, voters’ predominant concerns were identitarian. Putting aside Cambridge Analytica, Russian collusion, and filter bubbles, it is a fact that a vast part of the population in many countries in the Western world is unhappy with globalization *as such*. Perplexingly, the generic response from the left has been a recapitulation of neoliberal palaver about GDP growth and cost benefits and dismissal of fears about cultural integrity as “fascism.” If anything, this has led to further resentment and polarization.

Han examines “the erosion of the other” in another recently translated title, *The Agony of Eros*. Of all his works now available in English, this is without a doubt the most exasperating. While the theme is opportune, perhaps even urgent, Han’s message gets lost amid etymological divagations and gnomic phrases like, “Nearness is negative insofar as remoteness is inscribed within it.” His assertion

of freedom, which he never seriously attempts, throughout the book, he cites his totem thinkers as being so tantamount to evidence. There are parts frankly baffling, as when he contends that the obscenity of pornography “is not an excess of sex, but the fact that it has no sex at all.”

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In essence, Han is arguing for the interdependence of Logos and Eros. Without Logos, Eros is reduced to the brutality of bare life; without Eros, Logos deteriorates into “data-driven calculation.” The aloofness of Logos “constitutes the transcendental condition for any alterity existing at all.” Bare life, for Han, is the opposite of vitality, which requires the affective investment of contemplative concern. Here he follows Heidegger, who spoke of Eros as a congenial god illuminating “untrodden paths.” Pornography, states Han, has depleted the store of fantasy, which relies for its effects on the unknown; and the search for a mate who fulfills the criteria pornography sets forth is no longer properly erotic, but instead just another cost-benefit calculation.

Despite his shortcomings, Han has hit on something of great import for subjectivity in his critique of the equivalence of human and computational reason. At the end of *The Agony of Eros*, he asserts, “There is no data-driven thinking.” Data is assimilable to thought, but only as a form of submission. Thinking requires lentitude, bewilderment, distance. Han quotes Chris Anderson of *Wired* on the obsolescence of theoretical models in the era of big data:

Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves.

power in the past two decades has inaugurated of analysis in fields ranging from psychology to e literary criticism to sabermetrics, but the a of theory overlooks the centrality of heuristics to the experience of thought, and thus to the experience of humanity. “Big data has no concept and no spirit,” Han says, with the implication that these two are mutually dependent. When the act of engaged thought, however erratic, however flawed, is cast aside by resort to data, experience loses vital relevance, and is reduced to the tedium of channel-surfing. Here, the line between subjectivity and subjection grows dim. In defense of the spirit — of wisdom over knowledge — Han proposes the model of the idiot as defined by Botho Strauß: one who rejects transparency and openness, who opts for discretion over “sharing,” for aimless rumination over data-centered calculation. Strauß writes, lamenting the values of the ’70s, which paved the way for the internet and the consequent decline of the pensive frame of mind: “We knew only curiosity, the stretching out of our feelers, immunity to recollection, and the eternal push onward.” His rancor, which Han shares, is cantankerous and untimely; that does not make it erroneous in the least.

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Note: Translations of Han’s work have been modified for the purposes of this essay.

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Adrian Nathan West is the author of The Aesthetics of Degradation as well as translator of numerous works of contemporary European literature, including Pere Gimferrer’s Fortuny and Marianne Fritz’s The Weight of Things.

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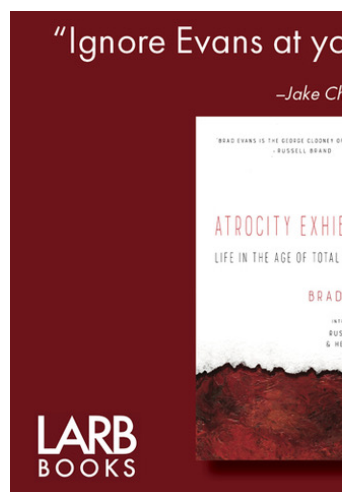
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