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Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism & New Technologies of Power

By Byung-Chul Han

Verso, 2017, pbk £9.99 (ISBN 9781784785772), pp. 96.

by James F. Kelly

The role of data analysis firms like Cambridge Analytica in the election of Donald Trump and Brexit has galvanised interest in how Big Data is radically transforming the way we live and work. Corporations have enlisted the tools of war - mass surveillance, data mining, and psychological steering - in an attempt to predict and manipulate human behaviour for profit and market domination. A new social contract is being written; one which takes aim at human freedom. Just ask Val Harian, Google's Chief Economist, who says that Google's AI should "know what you want and tell you before you ask the question."

Byung-Chul Han's *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* constitutes a timely intervention into the crisis of freedom facilitated by neoliberalism's embrace of the data revolution. While everything from the waning influence of expert knowledge to the dissolution of trust in time-honoured political institutions has been assigned to the emergence of Big Data, its precise nature remains elusive to observers. Shoshana Zuboff's highly anticipated *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) considers Big Data as a purely social object, while Srnicek's *Platform Capitalism* (2017) extracts data from its cultural forms and likens it to a raw material like oil. Perhaps Han's most immediate contribution to navigating the digital future unfolding before us is his abandonment of such a dichotomy and his ability to approach data as a totality. Rather than parsing the technical from the social, Han instead chooses to locate the rise of Big Data within the historical trajectory of neoliberalism.

Although Han relies heavily on the autonomist concept of immaterial labour to develop a theoretical framework for Big Data, his interrogation of the digital economy evokes the language of the Frankfurt school, and his diagnosis of society is likewise framed as a crisis of agency. For Han, what makes Big Data such an efficient instrument of domination is its ability to reduce the social world to measurable phenomena, rendering the human psyche predictable and amenable. 'It is possible', Han claims, 'that Big Data can even read desires we do not know we harbour' (63). Algorithmically analysed in real-time, the individual becomes a mere spectator in an endless cycle of affective stimulation and commodification. Yet, under this new mutation of capitalism, individuals experience their own subjugation as liberation.

This illusory freedom is brought about by the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial, immaterial mode of production, under which neoliberalism has learnt to exploit rather than oppress freedom. 'Confession obtained by force has been replaced by voluntary disclosure. Smartphones have been substituted for torture chambers ... Big Brother now wears a friendly face' (38-39). The old disciplinary society governed by sanctions and zones of enclosure (Foucault's schools, prisons, and hospitals) has been eclipsed by a digital control society, where the chains of our unfreedom are forged in comments, likes, and retweets: 'Neoliberalism is the capitalism of Like' (15).

According to Han, capitalist power has shed its negativity and traded violence and prohibition for seduction. Smart power 'works through pleasing and fulfilling. Instead of making people compliant, it seeks to make them dependent' (14). Tech companies certainly

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want you to feel free when using their software, argues Han, but the digital confession booths of platforms like Instagram and Twitter are designed to extract the innermost desires, opinions, and preferences of their users.

Controversially, Han suggests that the psychopolitical power of Big Data has nullified the contradiction of class struggle, arguing that Marx's 'distinction between proletariat and bourgeoisie no longer holds' (6), as under Big Data '[t]here is no working class being exploited by those who own the means of production' (5). The data mined to steer the subconscious, unarticulated needs of consumers via platforms is disclosed voluntarily, and therefore allo-exploitation has been eclipsed by auto-exploitation: 'people are now master and slave in one. Even class struggle has transformed into an inner struggle against oneself' (5). Han's ability to analyse the architecture of our new digital economy on its own terms is impressive, but if capitalism no longer has a ruling class who own the means of production, and if exploitation and domination have been internalized, it is unclear who is left to steer this new economic project. Following the global wave of resistance against tech platforms like Uber Eats and Deliveroo, it is difficult to locate the critical potential in abandoning the notion of class. If anything, such an estimation seems to bolster the egalitarian image Silicon Valley's leading lights wish to project of themselves. Moreover, while Han maintains that value production should be considered wholly immaterial, he never attempts to rest this against the materiality of the mediums through which data is captured and stored (the internet, after all, accounts for nearly 10 percent of global energy consumption).

According to Han, Big Data 'has taken the stage with the fervor of a second Enlightenment' (57), and it is from within the Enlightenment project itself that he uncovers the foundations of our contemporary crisis. In offering a mathematical formula for the general will, Han presents Rousseau as the prophet of digital totalitarianism, whose religious fervour for quantification and statistical analysis encouraged neoliberalism's experiment with Big Data. Han maintains that Rousseau's notion of democracy excludes discourse and communication, the exercise of which 'distorts statistical objectivity' (74) - only numbers should speak. For Han, Rousseau's estimation of a rational political community 'avoids approaching the question morally ... [T]he purpose of a political association is simply the protection and welfare of its members. The surest sign of success is the increase of population' (74).

Han renders Rousseau's contribution to the Enlightenment and critical theory unrecognisable. For Rousseau, the general will can never actually be determined mathematically, it only emerges once every individual is able to think as a citizen, that is, to think in terms of the other. The awareness of their expanded self-consciousness is only possible through the type of moral education he dedicates *Emile* (1979) to. Han's misreading is disappointing as he might have found an ally in Rousseau. After all, Rousseau likewise diagnosed a crisis of agency and maintained that liberal property-based social orders facilitate a mode of consciousness in which individuals become active participants in their own subjugation.

That said, perhaps Han's relegation of thinkers like Rousseau and Marx to the dustbin of critical theory is less a flight into straw man philosophy and more a symptom of his resignation about the status of reason in late modern societies. Specifically, his conviction that the current mutation of neoliberalism is hollowing out the human capacity for critique. For Han, Big Data's ability to produce 'knowledge for the sake of domination' (12) bends all that was once exogenous to capital toward the narrow horizon of the profit motive. Even Rousseau, a philosopher of freedom, will hold a place in the arsenal of our new digital despots.

Nonetheless, Han's concept of auto-exploitation raises important questions about neoliberalism's ability to colonise modes of self-expression and individuality. We live in

an age where market-based solutions to the climate catastrophe like zero waste lifestyles and ethical diets are readily on offer. It is in this context that Han invites his readers to adopt a stance of critical self-examination, one that may unearth the ways in which we as individuals reproduce the substance of capital.

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