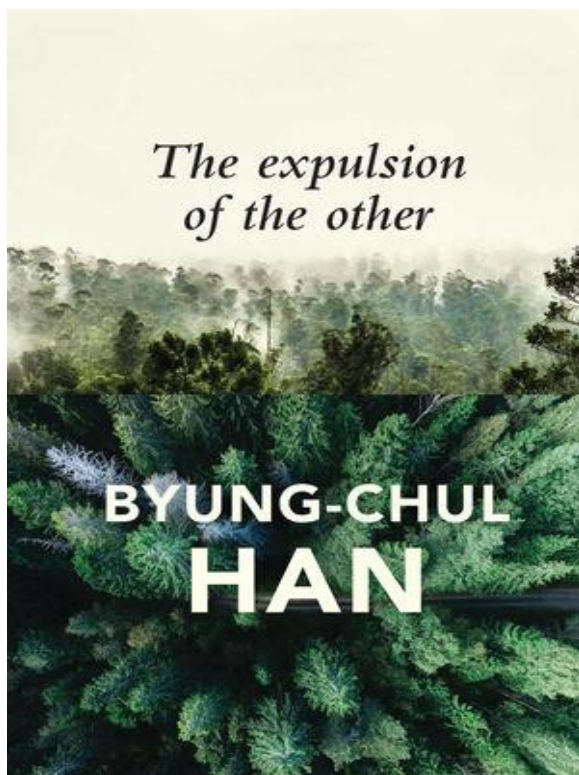# THE EMPTINESS OF THE ONE-DIMENSIONAL SELF: BYUNG-CHUL HAN'S *EXPULSION OF THE OTHER*

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Han, B. (2018). *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*. (W. Hoban, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press. 100 pages. ISBN: 978-1-509-52305-4.

It takes an especially wide and deep understanding of our zeitgeist, and the philosophical reflections on it, to bring together such disparate contemporary phenomena as immigration, terrorism, surveillance and the digital consumer society and fuse them into a coherent and succinct meditation on our social condition. The German philosopher Byung-Chul Han has been engaged in just such a series of meditations over the last few years. The Expulsion of the Other (2018) is the newest of these engagements and brings together Han's previous reflections on contemporary society: a society he sees as defined by a profound fatigue (Han, 2015a), an abundance of

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meaningless 'positivity', an obsessive – even pornographic – transparency (Han, 2015b), narcissism, consumption and the reduction of the material stuff of reality to the ephemera of digital capitalism (Han, 2017).In the present work, Han continues his concern with the direction of social progress by shifting focus to the question of Otherness, specifically to the result of the lack of the presence of the Other, and the deliberate erasure of alterity that marks our contemporary lives. The book progresses through an examination of different aspects of this disappearance of the Other, the relationship of this disappearance to the mediated self of digital capitalism, and the immense socio-historical consequences such a disappearance involves. The elimination of all negativity is a hallmark of contemporary society. Everything is smoothed out. Communication, too, is smoothed out into an exchange of pleasantries; negative feelings such as sorrow are denied any language, any expression. Every form of injury by others is avoided, yet it rises again as self-harm. Here, too, we find a confirmation of the general logic that the expulsion of the Other results in a process of self-destruction (2018, p. 24). Han understands this disappearance of alterity in society as a deliberate and conscious expulsion of any sign of the Other. He begins by relating this expulsion to the "terror of the Same" (2018, p. 3) or the reduction of all selves to a quantifiable, interchangeable commodity. This is a terror prompted by capitalism's digital incarnation and its need for incessant positivity. This obsession with the positive which Han also links to the obsession with appearances of health and happiness, is an imperative of digital capitalism's drive for "efficiency and productivity" (2018, p. 4) at all costs. Here, Han echoes Jean Baudrillard's exposition of 'terrorism' as the inevitable response to the violence that capitalism causes to the Self, through its excision of Otherness and the promotion of a universal Sameness. Han's understanding however attempts to move beyond Baudrillard's idea of proliferating global violence as a form of cancer: "The violence of the global as the violence of positivity is post-immunological. Baudrillard overlooks this paradigm shift, which is constitutive of the digital, neoliberal order" (2018, p. 14). Han relates this expulsion of the Other to the literal expulsion of migrants, of refugees, of unwanted minorities who would threaten the proliferation of this universal sameness. He sees the centralized surveillance regimes represented by the old Panopticon now replaced by an exclusionary "banopticon" (2018, p. 12), that operates through the violent enforcements of closed borders and the prevention of the Other from entering the territory of the Self.

Drawing from Kant's idea of perpetual peace that depends on a universal hospitality: "No one, Kant argues 'has more of a right to be at a given place on earth than

anyone else'" (2018, p.17), Han presents the European Union's inhospitable response to its newest refugees as betraying its pretensions to reason and freedom.

Hospitality is the highest expression of a universal reason that has come into its own. Reason does not exercise any homogenizing power. Its friendliness enables it to acknowledge the Other in their otherness and welcome them. Friendliness means freedom (2018, p. 17).

Much of this slim volume, which has a rewarding density belying its size, draws on and painstakingly examines Heidegger's concept of Dasein to distinguish between the universal Sameness of the Self organised by neoliberal capital and the immanent "self-Being" (2018, p. 29) or the "Selfsame" (2018, p.2) that is guided by an inner orientation to its own potentiality. Han's idea of the authentic human self is similar to his understanding of social diversity: both superficial creations of sameness that turn the self into a commodity (the authentic self) and in turn generate a mirror image of assimilable differences – or the "same Other" (2018, p. 21) – that we call diversity. Both these commoditised entities, Han says are products of the numbing positivity that capitalism generates, and are the opposite of the enlivening negativity that is the hallmark of a true Other and of the Selfsame 'Dasein'.

An essential element of this positivity is the featurelessness of our interactions in the digital and virtual world. Han uses Peter Handke's notion of 'counterbody' to bemoan the loss of any friction, resistance and materiality in the world that would have been evidence of humanity and the presence of the other. Instead he argues we are increasingly accustomed to a series of disembodied encounters that rob us of the gaze and voice of the other.

Han brings together Lacan, Sartre, Blanchot and Hitchcock's Rear Window, among other eclectic texts to underline the significance of the gaze as a sign of the true Other. Even the dominance of the Panopticon is for Han a sign of the humanity of central surveillance, compared to the digital panopticon that has no need of the gaze, for we have taken on its functions and have turned our gaze upon ourselves. The Voice too, for Han is a fundamental aspect of the presence of the Other, in the Barthesian terms of the voice as a sensual signifier as well as carrying the sense of the signified. The digital voice that lacks both the corporeality and the potential ambiguity of the signifier is a further sign of the smoothening that accompanies the expulsion of the Other. Similarly Han argues, the hypercommunication of our age destroys the silences and foreignness of language that are an integral sign of the Other. In the absence of the Other, true communication is thus no longer possible.

Han ends with the final aspect of the Other's disappearance: the absence of listening as a part of our discourse. This is the result of the lack of any 'object' of our communication:

Digital communication, on the other hand, fosters an expansive, de-personalized communication that has no need of a personal no need of a gaze or a voice…. Without the presence of the Other, communication degenerates into an accelerated exchange of information. It creates no relationship, only connection. It is a communication with no neighbour, without any neighbourly closeness (2018, p. 74).

Han presents social media as emblematic of this kind of one-sided narcissistic faux communication: "In the community of the 'like', one encounters only oneself or like-minded persons. Thus no discourse is possible." (2018, p. 75). On an optimistic note, he sees the re-emergence of a community of listeners as the only way to reclaim not just the human element of discourse but also the humanity of time, out of the neoliberal temporality that privileges "efficiency and performance". For Han this recuperation is inseparable from our reconnection with the expelled Other:

The society to come, by contrast, could be termed a society of listeners and hearkeners. What is needed today is a temporal revolution that ushers in a completely different time; we must rediscover the time of the Other… Unlike the time of the self, which isolates and separates us, the time of the Other creates a community. It is therefore a good time (2018, p.78).

Despite the density of Han's ideas and the eclectic range of his references and inspirations, The Expulsion of the Other is an eminently readable book. Wieland Hoban's excellent translation should take the credit for retaining the essential, concise rhythm of Han's prose, but readers familiar with Han's other recent works would recognise the accessibility that is one of the philosopher's hallmarks.

That familiarity would in some cases make the present work seem repetitive. In the service of his main arguments, Han draws upon many of the same ideas and references that animate his other work: The Transparency Society, The Burnout Society, In the Swarm and Psychopolitics among his other works have all addressed pieces of the same puzzle that Han is examining in the present work. However, The Expulsion of the Other, through its engagement with communication, language and the digitally-mediated self adds a new dimension to Han's examination of our collective condition under neoliberal capitalism. While it brings forth new aspects of this relationship between digital media and politics, for a new reader the book also acts as both a fascinating introduction to the work of this original thinker, as well as a succinct

summary of his ideas. Brief yet profound, The Expulsion of the Other is an evocative meditation on the fate of the human self in the age of digital capitalism. At a time when a new fascism across the world is rising hand in hand with the increasing digital commoditisation of our lives, the book provides a timely self-reflection and a reminder of the possibilities of a different future.

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