

Byung-Chul Han: Digital Technologies, Social Exhaustion, and the Decline of Democracy

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Byung-Chul Han's pivotal works display a provocative examination of digital technologies, capitalism and its commodification of life, achievement society and its pathologies. This article examines these issues in relation to the end of the disciplinary and immunological paradigm and the shift toward a neuronal model at the base of the present-day human subject and its social and political consequences. The relationship between new technologies and self-exploitation, pornographication of the ego and the disappearance of the Other is explored in conjunction with the overload of information and entropy, and an agonizing democracy.

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Byung-Chul Han: Digital Technologies, Social Exhaustion, and the Decline of Democracy

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Abstract:

Byung-Chul Han's pivotal works display a provocative examination of digital technologies, capitalism and its commodification of life, achievement society and its pathologies. This article examines these issues in relation to the end of the disciplinary and immunological paradigm and the shift toward a neuronal model at the base of the present-day human subject and its social and political consequences. The relationship between new technologies and self-exploitation, pornographication of the ego and the disappearance of the Other is explored in conjunction with the overload of information and entropy, and an agonizing democracy.

Keywords: Byung-Chul Han, digital technologies, capitalism, achievement society, exhaustion, narcissism, depression, immunological paradigm, democracy and "infocracy," sovereignty, human agency, information age, epistemological crisis and post-facticity, eros and the Other, dialectics.

Introduction: New Technologies and the End of the Disciplinary-Immunological Paradigm

Byung-Chul Han, German philosopher, cultural and media theorist, of South-Korean origin, has unabatedly produced an impressive number of short, incisive, and provocative books that delve into key issues of contemporary society and its technological, political and cultural shifts. His publications date back to the 1990s, picking up steam from the first decade of the 2000s. English translations of his early works were relatively slow to appear, being much timelier in these last years as the interest in his theoretical perspectives has grown considerably.

Among Han's first books to receive significant international attention, *The Burnout Society* (2015) and *The Agony of Eros* (2017) stand out in particular. In these, but essentially in all his works, he develops a philosophical orientation that weaves together new technologies and their behavioural and social impact, economic conditions and value systems dominated by late capitalism and its neoliberal agenda, commodification of life and mimetic desire, desacralization of the world and mortification of eros.ⁱ

To start with, Han claims we have reached the end of the disciplinary society, with its controls and interdictions, as proposed by Michel Foucault. The new subject is not constituted by the paradigm of obedience and constructed within the repressive institutions of the State, but by a model of "achievement" and performance that

expresses a deceptive sense of liberation of the psyche from all forms of restriction and coercion. He writes:

The walls of disciplinary institutions, which separate the normal from the abnormal, have come to seem archaic. Foucault's analysis of power cannot account for the psychic and topological changes that occurred as disciplinary society transformed into achievement society. Nor does the commonly employed concept of "control society" do justice to this change. It still contains too much negativity (B, p.8).

Whereas disciplinary society was investigated in the light of models related to criminality, madness, and negativity, the current "achievement society" is dominated by a positive drive animated by high motivation and fast-changing projects and ventures. This optimistic view, however, hides the fact that we struggle to measure up to it and experience a deep sense of inadequacy and exhaustion. The inevitable result is depression. Every society generates its own illnesses. The past century, associated with the disciplinary society, was an immunological epoch, in as much as it was dominated by a model centered around the figure of an external enemy whose violence, like that of viruses and bacteria, needed to be fought. The illness of the present age affects the neuronal system, with the consequence that violence has turned from external to internal. "The new human type," Han writes, "standing exposed to excessive positivity without any defense, lacks all sovereignty. The depressive human being is an *animal laborans* that exploits itself—and it does so voluntarily, without external constraints" (B, p. 10).

The shift from an immunological to a neuronal paradigm is central in Han's theoretical framework. It serves as the guiding principle for his analyses of new technologies and digitalization, social media, information age, and their impact on the present-day democratic political systems, the core topic of his latest volume, *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy* (2022).

Before probing into key claims of this volume, it is fitting to explore how Han distances himself from the philosophical orientation of thinkers, such as Roberto Esposito, who has contributed notably to extend Foucault's positions to societies' current transformations. Esposito has received much praise for his investigation into the genesis and developments of fundamental political beliefs: democracy, freedom, and community. In a volume such as *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* (2013), immunization is viewed as the recurrent logic that lies behind the aspirations of a community. The Other is perceived as a threat, a virus from which protection is necessary. The immunity towards the external is constitutive of all social bodies, he argues, from the juridical systems of nation-states to the organizations that regulate cultural, religious, or territorial manifestations. Democracy as well, a conception that resides at the core of Western civilization, cannot escape the logic of immunization. He contends that individual power drives result in a process of immunization of every

citizen that inevitably involves the entire community. And if globalization is considered as a collapse of the outside, he underscores that the condition of the fortress (a defense from the other) is transformed into that of the desert, a world divested of an inside (pp. 43-46).ⁱⁱ

For Han, this is an obsolete paradigm, inadequate to understand the bearing structures of present-day societies. The immunological human subject and community have come to an end. He writes:

Roberto Esposito makes a false assumption the basis of his theory of *immunitas* [...] The immunological paradigm proves incompatible with the process of globalization. Otherness provoking an immune reaction would work against the dissolution of boundaries. The immunologically organized world possesses a particular topology. It is marked by borders, transitions, thresholds, fences, ditches, and walls that prevent a universal change and exchange. The general promiscuity that has gripped all spheres of life and the absence of immunologically effective Otherness define [*bedingen*] each other (B, p. 2, p. 3).

Close to Esposito's position is Donatella Di Cesare. In a book written during the 2019 pandemic, *Immunodemocracy: Capitalist Asphyxia*, she contends that biopolitics has turned into immunopolitics. In her view, the COVID-19 virus has demonstrated the dominant and pervasive principle of immunity, of protection of one's borders from external threats, based on the "fear of contagion, the fear of the other, the terror at what lies outside of it" (2021: 38). This outlook indicates how the concepts of democracy, sovereignty, and community pertain to a political orientation that goes beyond the stringent emergency measures adopted for the pandemic. It shows sovereign power with decrees that suspend freedoms and control the lives of others (ibid 33). She writes: "Seen through the prism of the virus, democracy in Western countries has turned out to be a system of immunity that has already been operating for some time" (ibid p. 38). Liberal democracies are steeped in an "immunitarian" logic and consequently the "contemporary political order captures and banishes, includes and excludes" (ibid p. 40). Di Cesare conceives our democratic system within the logic of a territorial model centered on a duality: inside-outside, us-others, local-foreign, citizen-intruder, safe-unsafe. The result is a "phobocracy" (ibid p. 56) not to be identified with the pandemic alone. The phobia resides at the core of present-day democratic systems. The structure of immunization entails an anaesthetization, a form of defense mechanism, to face the pains and the afflictions of others (ibid p.44).ⁱⁱⁱ

Han attempts to dismantle this political postulation. His claim is that the new economic order, centered around globalization, is founded on the model of Sameness and not on that of Difference and of the menace from the Other. In his view, migrants and refugees (B, p. 3) are perceived much more as an economic burden than a threat. It can be objected that as a source of cheap labour they may be tolerated, but not totally released from the perception of menace to the identity of the receiving community. In this respect, Han's assessment of this particular feature of globalization may be somewhat reassuring and optimistic. The economic forces behind it do not abolish the cultural threat of the Other and, arguably, they may not be sufficient to redefine the complexities

of the human subject and of the social superstructures. Without underestimating the levelling effects of the globalizing agenda on subjectivity, in its expressions of values, desires, and belief systems, the model of Sameness is not yet as absolute as it may seem. National identities are going through processes of hybridization that conjugate the local with the global, but signs of fear and threat of the Other have not disappeared—right-wing policies of affluent societies on immigration are a clear indication.

Nevertheless, Han's critique of the immunological model is absolutely justified on the basis of the effects exerted by new technologies on the individual and on the collective psyche. The ways in which they have impacted communication, the brain, and its synaptic connections, are indisputable. The alterations brought about by digital technologies have been painstakingly scrutinized by the neurological sciences, psychiatry and other medical specializations. Results of notable research leave no doubt: new technologies are rewiring the brain in an unprecedented and perhaps in a much more extensive manner compared to those of past epochs, given the pervasive and relentless exposure to them. It is reasonable to argue that there exists a direct link between the reconfiguration of neurons generated by new technologies and the changes in social relations, culture, and worldviews.^{iv}

Han does not spare a substantial critique of Jean Baudrillard's influential theories as well. In his case too, digital violence falls within the confines of an immunological model. He writes:

Baudrillard pictures the totalitarianism of the same from an immunological standpoint [...] Immunological defense always takes aim at the Other or a foreign in the strong sense. The Same does not lead to the formation of antibodies. In a system dominated by the Same, it is meaningless to strengthen defense mechanisms. (B, pp.4-5)

He targets Baudrillard's *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (1993) in which the collapse of borders related to specific disciplines, gender identities, reality and fiction, real and virtual (produced by media and digital technologies) have evaporated. In Western cultures, this condition created the sense of an organism under attack. Written in 1990 (original edition), the book references the AIDS epidemic as the perfect metaphor of a viral attack. For Han, issues of power and violence can no longer be approached through a philosophy of immunology in as much as the viral menace does not pertain to a society driven by an excess of production and achievement. The immune system does not have to defend the body from any pathogen.

A similar critique is addressed to Giorgio Agamben's position on power, violence, and

bare life. Han distinguishes between self-exploitation and allo-exploitation and argues that contrary to Agamben's stance (reference is made particularly to *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), the new subject is not subjugated by any external force. The argument revolves around Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle's distinction between the term bios (a specific mode of life) and zoe (animal life, a living organism). For the Greek philosopher, humans are distinguished as sensible beings who possess reason and the ability of thought. An essential distinction is made by defining a human being a "zoon politikon," a member of a community, of the polis. Agamben's view of modernity as the dispossession of these human inherent traits (Auschwitz as the most emblematic example) by political power, for Han is not applicable to current times. In his view, Agamben's conception of bare life, an existence reduced to its biological component, a zoomorphic dimension, devoid of political status and recognition, expendable, sacrificeable, has no relevance within the present achievement society. The degradation of life within this new society stems from entirely different conditions. The subject that emerges is guided by a desire of health and the preservation of "vital functions" The new *homines sacri* of the achievement society are for Han "too alive to die, and too dead to live" (B, p. 51). He remarks: "From a standpoint at the middle of the society of achievement, Agamben describes a society of sovereignty. Therein lies the anachronism of his thinking" (B, p. 48).^v

Late Capitalism, Digital Technologies, and the Achievement Society

The divergences with both Baudrillard and Agamben are considerable. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that all these positions are grounded in the conviction that there is no independent body or psyche that is disconnected from a social, political, and technological space. The subject is not an enclosed entity. It establishes a continuous symbiotic relationship with externality. There is no autonomous subject from the technological environment.

The culture portrayed in *The Burnout Society*, fueled by the model of "achievement," and performance, and by the accelerated rhythms of digital technologies,^{vi} engenders a multitude of disorders that are not limited to depression and exhaustion, but include conditions such as chronic stress, ADHD, BD (B, p. 7) and other inflammatory diseases. Han never loses sight of the ways in which both technology and the political-economic system are at the source of maladies and illnesses. In *The Agony of Eros*, taking distance from Walter Benjamin's notion of capitalism as a form of religion, he notes that "Every religion operates with both debt (guilt) and relief (pardon)" (A, p. 11). On the contrary, capitalism offers no gateway to reparation. In his words, "capitalism *only works with debt and default*. It offers no possibility for atonement, which would free the debtor from liability. The impossibility of mitigation and atonement also accounts for the achievement subject's depression (A. p. 11). The structural components of society generate individual and collective pathologies.

In Han's view, the new society is dominated by an "*animal laborans*" that exploits itself without the need of external constraints, a last man in Nietzschean terms, an invalid, a victim of an excess of activity and of the promise of excitement. The labouring animal, however, is no longer the one described by Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*,

1958) that with the advancement of modernity replaces *homo faber* and surrenders one's uniqueness and individuality to a massified and indistinctive expression of life based on the common behaviour of the species. For Han, Arendt's category of "action," pertaining to the public, collective sphere of life, as the highest realization of *vita activa*, is inapplicable to the present-day social and technological transformations. He writes:

Arendt's descriptions of the modern *animal laborans* do not correspond to what we can observe in today's achievement society. The late-modern *animal laborans* does not give up its individuality or ego in order to merge, through the work it performs, with the anonymous life process of the species. Rather, contemporary labor society, as a society of achievement and business, fosters individuality [...] The late-modern *animal laborans* is equipped with an ego just short of bursting. And it is anything but passive (B, pp.17-18).

Here he identifies an unmistakable psychological trait of the digital age: the obsessive ostentation of the ego. It's hard not to be in agreement. The evidence is overwhelming: the pervasive compulsion of posting images of oneself, displaying for others personal events and activities on Facebook, and tweeting incessantly about one's reaction to not so significant daily occurrences. These are just a few examples of the narcissistic exposure of the ego. Indeed, social media represents the space in which to uncover one's intimacy. The pornographication of the body has been replaced by the pornographication of the ego. This disorder is linked to depression itself. Han states:

"Depression [...] follows from overexcited, overdriven, excessive self-reference that has assumed destructive traits. The exhausted, depressive achievement-subject grinds itself down (B, p. 42)."

Crisis of Eros, Narcissism, and the Disappearance of the Other

Han elaborates on the link between narcissism and "achievement" in *The Agony of Eros*. In today's society, desire is channeled exclusively towards one's ego ("Libido is primarily invested in one's own subjectivity," A, p. 2) and, as a result, the disappearance of Eros, the encounter with the Other, has become its dominant trait. Tapping into Emmanuel Levinas' principle of alterity, he writes that Eros "presumes the asymmetry and exteriority of the Other" (A, p. 1). Eros is based on the recognition of a difference and of its "atopic" (without a place) state of being. For such a society, the Other becomes an undesirable antinomy in as much as it "cannot be encompassed by the regime of the ego" (A, p. 1) or be easily devoured as any commodity. "The negativity of the atopic Other," Han claims, "refuses consumption" (A, p. 2). What can be consumed is sexuality as an expression of a commodified body. The reification and sexualization of the Other are the means for securing one's libidinal excitement and narcissistic urgencies. He writes: "love is being positivized into sexuality, and, by the same token, subjected to a commandment to perform. Sex means achievement and performance."

And sexiness represents capital to be increased. The body—with its display value—has become a commodity” (A, p.12).

Digital technologies are closely linked to the disappearance of the Other. They provide the means for abolishing distance, what Martin Buber, quoted by Han, called “primal distantiation” (A, p.12), a necessary component for avoiding the objectification of the Other.

Communication made possible by new technologies is grounded on the notion of closeness which produces the impossibility of keeping firm the otherness of the Other. For Han, one of the functions of “social media [is] to create proximity,” a positively charged act of “crowding” that abolishes love’s necessary components of tensions and wounds. He observes: “Today, love is being positivized into a formula for enjoyment. Above all, love is supposed to generate pleasant feelings. It no longer represents plot, narration, or drama—only inconsequential emotion and arousal. It is free from the negativity of injury, assault, or crashing.” (A, p.13)

Here too, Han shows great ability in establishing a homological correspondence between an emotional condition and the current economic realities. Late capitalism abolishes otherness to guarantee consumption. Eros as an “asymmetrical relationship to the Other” cannot be absorbed and swallowed up. In his words, “Otherness admits no bookkeeping. It does not appear in the balance of debt and credit” (A, 16). Love of the digital age deactivates all possible transgressive and transcendental drives and thus bears no weight or consequences on the “I”. Painless and passionless, it is “domesticated,” knows no “excess” or “madness” (A, p. 17, p. 18).

Late capitalism reduces life to its biological dimension. Subjected to desacralized and deritualized processes, life is reduced to “bare life,” the absolute antithesis to the Aristotelian notion of “good life.” It can only display an obscene vision of the world (A, p. 29, pp. 32-33).

For Han, a society driven by the hysteria of “achievement” and by the neurotic obsession of hyperactivity has lost its possibility of contemplation, a spiritual relationship with the world through the calm and slow gaze on things and on others. The ways of seeing have been gravely altered. He reminds the reader of Nietzsche’s counsel in the *Twilight of the Gods* that to develop a profound culture it is essential “«getting your eyes used to calm, to patience, to letting things come to you»—that is, making yourself capable of deep and contemplative attention, casting a long and slow gaze” (B, p. 21).

The lack of pauses pertains to the machine, including the computer. He writes: “Machines cannot pause. Despite its enormous capacity for calculation, the computer is stupid insofar as it lacks the ability to delay” (B, p. 22). Hyperactivity is a symptom of spiritual exhaustion.

The absence of negativity, inseparable from the achievement paradigm, transforms us into “autistic performance-machines” (B, p. 23). The disappearance of the negative exposes the human subject to drives and stimuli without any differentiation, reflection, or

resistance. Han adopts a Hegelian dialectical orientation based on the conviction that the negative, the antitheses and contradictions, are essential to animate the manifold expressions of life and culture towards higher forms. Han writes: “The society of positivity, from which negativity has disappeared, is a society of bare life, which is dominated exclusively by the concern «to make sure of survival»” (A, p. 25). Referencing Hegel’s *The Science of Logic* and *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Han maintains that a life without negativity is that of a “slave,” a “bare life”, concerned only in survival (the allusion to the Hegelian antithesis of master-slave is apparent). The positive alone is “lifeless,” without any vitality. To deliver his point, Han quotes Hegel: “Something is alive [...] only to the extent that it contains contradiction within itself: indeed, [its] force is this, to hold and endure contradiction within.” (A, p. 26). The reading of eros takes on a political course that will flow into *Infocracy*, a radical contradiction of received notions of democracy.

The concept of negativity is reflected also in the treatment of the relationship with the Other, drawing on the theories of eroticism expressed by Georges Bataille. Han references *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, in which Bataille theorizes the necessity of self-denial, the disappearance of one’s identity necessary in the erotic relationship: “Eroticism [...] is assenting to life up to the point of death (A, p. 24). Han’s account of eros envisions the Other as the contradiction of the self, the negative pole of the ego, contrary to the present-day dominant goals of just pleasant relationships, comforting and without resistance. The valorization of self-denial in the rapport with the Other acquires a political implication as well, in as much as today’s narcissistic culture, heavily supported by the new media, is incompatible with essential requirements for democracy and community. Negativity is the intensification of life both for eros and for politics. An agonizing eros coincides with an agonizing democracy. Han’s transgressive theoretical stand merges the two dimensions to break through the dismal cultural and political landscape of our times.

The exhaustion and fatigue of the achievement society is supplanted by Peter Handke’s notion of a “fundamental tiredness” that resides in a “serene not doing” (B, p. 32), in a Shabbat “a day of not-to.” In this case tiredness turns into an “immanent religion” (B, p. 34). Instead, time is spent scrolling up and down and swiping side to side digital screens in quick motions that inevitably reveal to the eye fast-moving and blurry images. The eye is getting trained to see visual reproductions of things rather than their unmediated existence. The visual enchantment of the direct exposure to the world is being lost, as well as the auditory one, given that headphones and microphones are the daily mediators for the ear.

Internet and digital media produce a barrage of addictive images and obsessive searches of information that not only provoke separation and isolation, making the encounter with the Other more problematic, but are a leading cause of the atrophy of fantasy. Han highlights that the root cause is to be found in the “high information density” of the communication media, particularly at the visual level (A, p. 38). These technological side effects complete the picture of the desertification of the human landscape, its withering relations with the Other and with externality, together with the

loss of the reality of things themselves. The “crisis of fantasy” is directly linked to “the agony of eros” (A, p. 41, Eros). It is a manifestation of the decline of creative energies, but also of the stifling effects on thought itself, in as much as “Without eros, thinking loses all vitality and turmoil, and becomes repetitive and reactive” (A, 53). Philosophy, one of its key expressions, we are reminded, is “the translation of eros into logos” (A, p. 52).

Information, entropy, and loss of fantasy

In some respect, *The Agony of Eros* is comparable to Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1962), revised within the context of present-day digital realities. For Marcuse the mortification of eros has its source in alienated labour and in the infiltration of instrumental reason into all aspects of life. He too emphasized that the weakening of eros unbinds destructive drives that sacrifice fantasy, aesthetic creativity, and the pleasure principle, necessary for the nourishing of the social imaginary and utopian thought. “Eros creates culture in his struggle against the death instinct” as it “strives to preserve being on an ever larger and richer scale,” Marcuse wrote. Eros’ objective is to guard “life instincts” from “the threat of non-fulfillment, extinction.” (1962: 98). In Marcuse too, the role of fantasy is to connect the deepest desires of the unconscious with the “highest products of consciousness” represented by art (ibid p. 128). Fantasy is the medium through which freedom delivers its messages. The parallels with Han’s notions of the “achievement society” are unmistakable. For Marcuse, fantasy, art, and creativity, as adversaries of the pleasure principle, speak “the eternal protest against the organization of life by the logic of domination, the critique of the performance principle”. (ibid p. 130). Han’s position is marked by the insight that the “performance principle” is self-imposed and it turns into a condition of self-exploitation that leads to the exhaustion syndrome. This unprecedented state of being, brought on by different technological and cultural realities, is the equivalent of what Marcuse for the industrial age denounced as the “organization of human existence into an instrument of labor” and as the impediment to the realization of human potentialities (ibid p. 140).

It can be objected that digital technologies favour a democratization of aesthetic creativity and that, especially at the visual level, with their infinite possibilities of combinations, permutations, and distortions of images, offer tools, unthinkable just a few decades ago, that can enhance the imaginative processes associated with design, graphic and visual arts. The problem is that historical avant-gardes and new avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s experimented widely with that realm of creativity without the use of the digital tools now readily available to any artist. Undoubtedly, the issue is broader, and it involves the exhaustion of aesthetic forms in our late modernity that precedes digitalization, but unquestionably digital tools have not opened unexplored artistic pathways. As well, it can be argued that statements on the affliction of philosophical thought are an indiscriminate generalization that does not hold if specific and significant contributions to the field, made during this period of massive digitalization, are considered. The brief answer is that Han’s observation must be taken as an evaluation of a dominant social condition. Indeed, if we consider the crisis of studies in philosophy, and of the humanities in general, in our institutions of higher learning, his positions become incontrovertible.

For Han, the lack of the “negativity of thresholds” or “threshold-experiences” (A, p. 41) is at the core of a crisis that involves literature and theory as well. The present culture is ruled by an overload of information and an accumulation of data, ironically defined as “Google science,” that is “additive or detective”, devoid of “narrative tension,” “mere information” emptied of hermeneutical objectives, of ways to interpret the complexities of the world. This condition puts an “end to theory of the emphatic sort” (A, p. 49). The claim here is that the exposure to an indiscriminate mass of information blocks the power of elucidation of the world through the application of vigorous theoretical grids. By leveraging on principles elaborated by the information theory, Han argues that the overload of information corresponds to a higher degree of entropy: “Massive information massively heightens the entropy of the world; it raises the level of noise” (A, p. 50). Undoubtedly, he identifies a central feature of the new media age: we are crushed under the weight of information. Verbal signs are reduced to signifiers severed from signifieds capable of constructing a structured and critical narrative of the world.

Digital Capitalism, Psychopolitical Degeneration, and Neuronal Transformations

What are the repercussions of digitalization, exhaustion, crisis of eros, and disappearance of meaningful experiences of intersubjectivity, on our democracies? These are primarily the central questions raised by Han’s latest publication, *Infocracy*. This, as all Han’s volumes, is short, dense, and provocative. It establishes a line of continuity with the volumes already discussed, expanding on a merciless critique of the psychopolitical degeneration brought about by digital capitalism. Here too Han distinguishes between the surveillance regime tied to industrial capitalism, ruled by the power over the body and the exploitation of its energies’ output and the “information regime,” built on the exploitation of data as the source of political and psychological control (I, p.1). The first shaped humans into “*labouring cattle*,” the latter into “*consumer cattle that provide data*” (I, p. 2, p. 1).

Again, the premise is that Foucault’s biopolitics, centered around corporeal obedience shaped by disciplinary measures of work, is inapplicable to the information age. This is grounded on the notion of an autonomous, volitive human subject, “*free, authentic, and creative*” (I, p.2). The surveillance put in place by digital technology is secured by the gathering of data that is offered with a “feeling of freedom,” (I, p. 5) a phenomenon without equivalent in human history. Whereas disciplinary power revolved around practices of social control and repressive measures, condensed in Foucault’s symbol of the panopticon or in Orwell’s Big Brother, digital surveillance, according to Han, is rooted in the circulation of unhampered communication and information. All digital devices become a source of personal data and the more intense the communication the more effective surveillance becomes. We live in a “digital prison” not governed by the isolation of inmates but by their interconnectedness. It is a “transparent” (I, p. 5) jail in which the compulsion to produce information turns into subjugation. The free flow of information, and its attendant sense of community that it creates, represents the veiled core of digital capitalism and its neoliberal agenda. Han writes: “The information regime renders people totally transparent, but domination itself is never transparent. There is no transparent form of domination. Transparency is merely the front of a process that is

itself invisible” (I, p. 6). All digital devices are informants.

William Faulkner’s words, written during the years of McCarthyism, that one could see from the “outside in through the walls” of homes, putting an end to the notion of privacy, have become more pressing and disturbing. “Destroy privacy and you destroy individuality” (1955: 37), he wrote. The abilities for invasion are now more powerful and efficient. Indeed, there are no more walls. Faulkner could have never imagined that the “wall” surrounding our brain would be infiltrated by the program of an AI that can read our thoughts. The latest experiment has been described as “a non-invasive decoder that reconstructs continuous language from cortical semantic representations recorded using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) [...] this decoder generates intelligible word sequences that recover the meaning of perceived speech imagined speech and even silent videos” (Jerry Tang, Amanda LeBel et al., 2023, p. 858). This technology is at a nascent stage and its widespread application can be envisioned for the future, perhaps not too distant. For now, the digital regime finds our domestic entrances wide open. The gathering of personal data, age, gender, location, consumer preferences, are rapidly being integrated with biometric data (facial and voice recognition, iris scan and other individual physical traits) that AI’s capability transforms into a complete identity of the user.

Han looks at the capabilities of the smartphone and the smart home (smart beds and smart vacuum cleaners) in mapping our private spaces. The efficiency of the algorithm to chart and shape behaviours is equated to the practices of totalitarian regimes, with the difference that “dataism” is “*totalitarianism without ideology*,” in as much as it does not foresee a different reality and has no cult of a leader, it is based on a multitude of influencers (I, pp. 8-9). He makes reference to an article by Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt (1975) in which electronic media is considered in relation to the loss of identity and a “mass man” reduced to a “nobody” (I, p.10). For Han, the notion of anonymity, the absence of specific traits of the individual, typified within mass society, is no longer fitting for the new media whose target is to chart specific profiles that in the past was reserved only for criminals. “Digital media brings the age of mass man to a close,” Han writes (I, p.10).

The specificity of individual profiles seems to contradict, at least on the surface, the notion of “mass man.” Yet, the spread of digital technologies has widened even more the levelling effects on individuals and cultures of the new “global village.” Moved by financial profits that surpass those of any other economic sector, digital devices extrapolate data to reconstruct individual identities for the sole purpose of their marketability. The specific profile is not rooted in the evaluation of values and views. Its only concern is predictability of choice and behavioural patterns. In other words, digital media has created a sameness of desires and needs that pertains not only to affluent societies but to the imagination of economic marginalized social classes in poor and underdeveloped parts of the world. Digital capitalism possesses more powerful levelling and massifying tools than electronic media. Its colonization of the psyche with the same desires is unprecedented. The differentiation between individual choices is represented by the selection of different product brands. Han’s analysis is accurate in identifying the technique of digital media in relation to the construction of individual profiles, but the

claim of the end of “mass man” is rather tough to substantiate. The ability of new technologies to tap into what Han defines as the “*digital unconscious*,” with the purpose to shape “pre-reflexive” behaviour (I, p. 10), is based on statistical data, general narratives and patterns that are applicable to entire groups and social classes.

Digital technologies replace the sacred and the oracular. Google and AI are omniscient divinities to entrust one’s decisions. Computer engineers, programmers, and software developers are the high priests of the new religion. “Social media is a church: *like is ‘amen’; sharing is communion; consumption is salvation*,” Han writes. The actions of influencers have the “*character of a liturgy*,” and the products they consume and want to share “a kind of digital Eucharist” (I, p.8).

These are technological, cultural, and neural transformations of anthropological scale. The consequences on democracy are, according to Han, so deep that they have turned it into an “infocracy,” characterized by a chaotic amassment of information without order or perspective. To tackle the issue, Han begins by referencing works by Jürgen Habermas, Neil Postman, and Aldous Huxley. The degeneration of democracy into “infocracy” is traced to the changes brought on by electronic media. The decline of the book culture bred fragmentation and deficiency of coherence in thought and ideas (I, p. 13); television, in particular, renders recipients passive and represents a “decay of the democratic public sphere,” as maintained by Habermas (I, p. 13); the inherent structure of this media is guided by the amusement principle (Postman) that turns everything into “staged events”, a “*theatrocracy*” (I, pp. 14-15) that obscures the boundaries between reality and fiction; radio too is dominated by discontinuity and by the domination of the music industry that promotes “visceral” responses (I, p. 15). Our *Brave New World* is narcotized by the amusement principle, “lives are dominated by the compulsion to be happy” (I, p. 16).

It is worth noting that Han does not comment on McLuhan’s ground-breaking analyses of the electronic media. The destabilization of lineal and sequential thought, syntactic organization, with its internal logic and coherence, the impoverishment of analytical aptitudes and weakening of conceptual competence, and general cognitive processes, together with the mutations of the senses, and the transformations of cultural infrastructures, social organization and interaction, are at the core of McLuhan’s teachings on the effects of electronic technology. With his seminal volume *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), he established a close link between the culture of the alphabet and Western power, its effect on civilization and on nature itself. McLuhan’s insightful homologies between the alphabet, electronic media and the rewiring of mental processes, social and cultural organization, paved the way for the analyses of the transformations of socio-political structures and technology.

It must be underlined, however, that the book’s objective is to provide an analysis of democracy within the current digital context. Han rightly underscores that Habermas’

position also needs to be considerably revised as the effects of mass media have been replaced by the radical new reality of the digitalized society. The menace to the political public sphere is no longer represented by a passive reception or by the entertainment syndrome, but by the fragmentation and viral spread of information characterized by a “*rhizomatic structure*,” (I, p.17) deprived of a centre, that cannot but create a dispersal of sociopolitical issues and an absorption into the private sphere.

The accelerated and overwhelming spread of information affects reception, no longer governed by “*temporal stability*” but by the urge of an endless consumption that in Han’s view is at the root of “time-intensive” practices, necessary to nourish “*knowledge, experience and insight*”. Digital communication is guided by “exciting” and “short-lived” information that cannot promote rationality, an insightful and comprehensive vision of reality (I, pp. 18-19). Whereas biopolitics of a disciplinary regime was based on demographic tools, the political condition of the present is dominated by “psychographic” information aimed at targeting specific voters with personalized ads. Politics has adopted marketing strategies that, as any other form of advertisement, have the capabilities of targeting even a voter’s unconscious reception of a message or is fed with fake news and so-called “*dark ads*.” Digital technologies are the infrastructures of “infocracy.” They have put in motion a serious erosion of the democratic processes and the demolition of a real platform for shared public debates that involve an entire community. Han here destroys the hopes and the naïve excitement expressed, a couple of decades ago, by supporters of the new technologies that greeted them as tools to spread democratic practices particularly in regions of the world struggling for freedom. At the time, there was no extensive foresight of their marketability objectives at the service of global capitalism or of their complexities.

For Han, the smartphone as a medium of “*mobile parliament*” and as a forum for “real-time” debate represents a total failure. Communication governed by an algorithm does not produce politicized, democratic citizens but “commodities,” “zombies” that, subjugated by the personalized strategies of the internet, the tendency towards the private, and the attendant formation of “self-referential info bubbles,” are incapable of listening to the other, an essential element for democracy and communicative action (I, p. 26, p. 28). In this respect Han finds incomplete the position of Eli Pariser who explains the decline of democracy only in relation to the internet that “shrinks and limits our life-world and our experiential horizon” (I, p. 29). He argues that globalization has destroyed our shared life-world represented by the homogeneity of previous societies within a specific culture. On the one hand we are dominated by the levelling effects of globalization and, on the other, by the phenomenon of fragmentation and tribalization. The formation of “digital tribes,” with their identitarian politics, closes the possibilities of dialogue and engenders a crisis of factuality and communicative rationality, a menace to a real understanding of the world and thus to democracy itself. In the realm of “tribal biotopes” (I, 31), conspiracy theories flourish, and information as knowledge disappears.

The awareness of this condition is extremely limited for the population at large. Han’s book radically deconstructs the superficial understanding of these powerful media. They have turned the electorate into “*voting cattle*” (p. 20) to be herded for the success of unscrupulous politicians, turned into “infowarriors” that employ information as a

“weapon.” Information, frequently piloted by visualization, turns the possibility of democratic debates into “meme wars.” Democracy fades in “an impenetrable jungle of information” in which truth can no longer find its way (I, p.23).

A voluminous book that aligns with Han’s positions (impossible to highlight differences here) is *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshana Zuboff (2018). It provides staggering figures related to the economic power of the leading digital players and an extensive and discerning analysis of their key technological devices for data extraction. She too warns that predictive modeling, made possible by the accumulation of data, allows new technologies to forecast the future and to filter information in an individualized mode. In her view, the potential to influence democratic processes, political elections, and voters’ perceptions of social realities, is alarming. For both authors, individual sovereignty and human agency are vanishing.

Han argues against the dataists’ version of algorithmic information as the solution for a total and all-encompassing social knowledge or for a society with no political parties and ideologies, strictly based on big data. Societies would be administered by a managerial system in which democracy becomes obsolete, turning into a “*digital post-democracy*.” This would mark the complete advent of “infocracy.” Dataists see society as an organism regulated by a data-driven organization that does not cause any distortion of the general will and ensures performance and planning. Individual autonomy, free will and, most of all conflicts of social classes, have no place in a society seen as an apiary. The dataists’ position brings the death of the subject and human agency announced by Foucault into its final political consequences (I, pp. 34-43). The fiery enthusiasm of the late 1980s and 1990s for digital technologies is extinguished. Gianni Vattimo’s *The Transparent Society* (1992), originally published in Italian in 1989, finds no place in Han’s assessment of the current democratic realities. Vattimo believed that communication society made possible by the new media would dissolve centralized postures in favour of a multitude of versions of the world that, on the one hand, were to mark the end of Western hegemonic culture and, on the other, the emergence of local minorities (formed on gender, ethnic, religious, or aesthetic grounds) that were able to express at last the birth of a new subject, the realization of a being fully human. That book was followed by *A Farewell to Truth* (2011, original Italian edition 2009) in which he identified the postmodern pluralism with the fluidity of a society that would reach an advanced stage of democratization able to put an end to epistemological dominance, violence, and power. The dream of heterotopia has turned into a dysfunctional and dystopic society. The electronic democracy of the new media, cyberspace as a political utopia has turned into the space for wealth accumulation in the hands of the few and expansion of global markets. The interconnectedness of the web has created more consumers than engaged citizens, less humus for democracy to grow and more political manipulation, unreliability of information and disorientation.

The Asphyxiating Democracy

What is left of these visions in Han's book is a social wasteland where democracy is asphyxiating. In many respects, it confirms Daniel Bell's thesis of the end of ideologies announced in the early 1960s. Their death was the result of the decline of utopian thought and of the exhaustion of political ideas (Bell 1962). Today, the technologies of late capitalism represent the last nail in the coffin. But it is necessary to underline that a pervasive ideology in fact does exist. It is the ideology of late capitalism. If we set aside the analysis of digital media and democracy, its devastation on the health of our planet is indisputable. The devastation on our minds is not dissimilar, it is just harder to see. Both realms are affected by the same ideological paradigm.

The information age, a chaotic agglomerate of fake news, conspiracy theories, and unverified claims (the Trump's phenomenon embodies a blatant example analyzed by Han), has created an epistemological crisis that has relinquished any trust in truth and any belief in the existence of facts that constitute our reality. This loss is responsible for the emergence of a "*society of mistrust*" (I, p. 52) and a new expression of nihilism that generates a sense of hyperreality and the lack of a "*shared world*," (I, p. 44) necessary for any possible communal human action. For Han, we are beyond Nietzschean nihilism. In his view, although Nietzsche demolished the notion of absolute and transhistorical truth, he still recognized its function for the "purpose of facilitating human common life" (I, p.45). A tribalized information devoid of factuality, information without orientation, an accumulation of information without a process of exclusion is incompatible with the possibility of a narrative or a rational consensus, as advocated by Habermas' ethics of communication.

Democracy cannot survive in this technological and social reality. Han credits Foucault for sensing the outcome of this risk in one of his last lectures at the Collège de France. Democracy necessitates "isegoria" and "parrēsia," as the Greek historian Polybius maintained. The first regards freedom of expression. The second is the requirement to speak the truth for the well-being of the community. And truth can only be embodied in logical arguments supported by reason. Power conflicts and political games cannot be disjointed from parrēsia. This is the opposite of today's pervasive conviction that anyone can say whatever without any relevance to facts or truth. It is a question of "likes" and "dislikes." The disintegration of communication and the absence of a solid and cohesive counterculture to the dominant belief systems is exactly what sustains the logic of late capitalism. Although written in a different political and technological landscape, Marcuse's words still resonate with vigour: "In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference" (1964: 61).

Han reminds the reader that truth is a heroic act that requires courage. In the last pages, he reserves a radical critique of today's philosophy, a discipline for which truth has fallen into oblivion ("Today's philosophy lacks any relation to the truth," I, 57). As in Plato's allegory of the cave, today we are "captives in a *digital cave*." He aptly recalls Hannah Arendt's claim that truth is supported by temporal duration. It provides "stability of being," the opposite of the ephemeral dimension of the information paradigm (I, 58).^{vii}

To speak the truth under a totalitarian regime was a revolutionary act. Today in our post-truth, post-facticity world, the struggle for truth is annihilated by the entropic arbitrariness of words and thoughts.

The digital turn represents the new face of late modernity. The crisis of the grand narratives of the postindustrial societies and the political exhaustion identified by Jean-François Lyotard, or Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation, hyperreality, and the attendant fracture between signs and referents, have intensified and taken on new modalities. In some respects, the unreality they have produced recalls Guy Debord's pioneering analysis of the "société du spectacle." Unquestionably, new technologies have generated unparalleled and distinctive social and psychopolitical ways of being, but a meaningful link between the critical perspectives of those authors and Han's critique of current conditions exists at some level. Debord, for instance, defines the "spectacle" as "social relation among people, mediated by images," based on an economic system that degrades life and generates a "*circular production of isolation*." And in relation to the technological condition of his times, he writes:

The technology is based on isolation, and the technical process isolates in turn. From the automobile to television, all the goods selected by the spectacular system are also its weapons for the constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of «lonely crowds»" (1983: unpagged, sects. 4 and 28).

Han's unwavering stands recall those of a cultural and media theorist, Günther Anders, who established an inseparable link of electronic media and capitalism with the superfluousness of political democracies and the "obsolescence" of humankind as we know it. As early as the 1950s, Anders saw the dangers of obsessive consumption urged by media technologies of the time and capitalist practices. For Anders the obsolescence of things, produced in what he defines as the third industrial age, coincide with the decline of human attributes. The relentless communication for consumption relayed by advertisements, particularly by television and radio, represented a message of destruction of the objects we already possessed. For Anders, as for Han, capitalism abolishes duration, everything must 'perish' quickly (1992: 324).^{viii} In *The Scent of Time*, Han's central thesis is the loss of duration, alongside the obsession with a *vita activa* that has eclipsed any need for the contemplative side of life. He writes: "what we face is an absence of any experience of duration" (S, 33), and time is lived "divested of all deep structure or sense" (ibid p. 18). He contrasts the process of a computer, which is governed by a temporality that knows no hesitation, and Being, in the Heideggerian exception. The computer with its "functional efficiency" is based on calculation for which a "delay is a "disturbance" and thus has no "access to lingering." For Heidegger, Han argues, Being is not a "*procedere*" as a ceaseless change, but rather a movement that "oscillates [...] within the Same" (S, 70). Han seems to suggest that Being has a centre and thus a sense of temporality (duration) that cannot belong to the realm of a machine. That dimension of temporality is being lost in our current age and human time seems to reproduce that of the computer.

Anders, too, sees the issue of duration at the core of capitalism and of its industrial 'ontology.' The notion of things as trash to be quickly disposed of bounces back on humanity itself. It too becomes 'disposable' (1992: 35). Anders prophetically anticipates the addiction and the monopoly of time engendered by media and its advertisements, a condition that has increased exponentially with digitalization. He saw time spent on electronic media as a form of employment without remuneration, a parallel with today's digital users transformed into a source of profitable data. The Sameness of values and views generated by technological domination creates a conformity that for Anders is a form of a 'collective monologue' (ibid p. 258). The new subjects of history are not humans but technology. There are no walls that separate inner and outer spaces. Psychic life coincides with powerful external factors (ibid p. 135). Furthermore, a condition that Anders describes as 'schizotopy' arises as the impossibility of keeping apart the sphere of the private and that of the public (ibid p. 74-78). Even though for Han, digitalization produces a form of narcissistic individualism, it too has its root causes in technology and is not spared of a Sameness that falls upon society as a whole. For Anders, technological development puts an end to democratic political structure and forms a "technological oligarchy" that implements a monocratic rule that suppresses freedom (ibid pp. 138-141). Technological domination represents for Anders a more severe condition than the conventional Marxist view of social dominance, exploitation, alienation, and ownership of the means of production.^{ix} In many respects, Han, as well, by highlighting technological dominance, revises Marxist theoretical grids for the age of digitalization.

Anders believes that recording technologies (voice and video recorders) can easily be tampered with, and communication be falsified—an extraordinary anticipation of today's digital manipulation of images and of written messages, a critique that Han fully shares by evidencing fake news, dark ads, conspiracy theories and alike (I, pp. 20-24). Anders, however, maintains that reproduction technologies produce a new form of reification, in as much as they destroy what is unique and 'fluid.' With this concept, Anders seems to connect with Walter Benjamin's notion of the artwork's loss of aura in the "age of mechanical reproduction" (1969: 217-251). Anders transfers the notion of aura (the end of the uniqueness of the original artwork) to human life. The reproduction of unique sounds and images of daily events reify their temporality and singularity. Their reproduction is transformed into a fiction of ourselves (1992: 48). Han too insists on the unreality of our self and the reification of the Other.

Han set for himself an ambitious project and succeeded in delivering an insightful and powerful critique of the digital society. The awareness he generates is jam-packed with warning signals that can unlock possibilities for alternative modes of life. The objection that can be raised is that, if, most likely, digital capitalism is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, how can such an awareness be transformed into a different praxis of life? There are no easy solutions. But it can certainly be observed that social and political changes are sparked by a consciousness that acquires the force of dismantling acquired ways of being.

The views on democracy and on our current society expressed by a radical and thought-provoking philosopher, Alain Badiou, for whose work Han has shown interest, may shed further light on these issues.^x In *The Pornographic Age* (2020), Badiou

examines Jean Genet's play *The Balcony* (1966, original edition 1956) in which emblematic figures of power and violence, a Judge, a General and a Bishop, are joined by that of a Chief of Police who appears as a giant phallus. Badiou provides an interpretation of this image together with the space in which the play takes place, a brothel of high-class prostitutes. Outside of this space, in the city, a revolution is raging. For Badiou it's a telling metaphor that points to the fact that if a revolt were to occur today, it would be outside of the "Western brothel" (2020: 5). In his view, typically today, a critique of capitalism is founded on reformist ideas, on championing a more caring and gentle capitalism that respects the environment and supports "more democracy." And he states:

Nothing will emerge from these chimeras. The only dangerous and radical critique is the political critique of democracy. Because the emblem of the present age, its fetish, its phallus, is democracy. So long as we do not know how to construct a large-scale creative critique of State democracy, we will remain stagnate, in the financial brothel of images (2020:17).

Democracy today is a word that "merely covers our passive desire for comfort, the satisfaction with our intellectual misery, captured in the term «middle class»" (ibid). We live in an age in which the traditional revolutionary ethos has dissolved, and a new truth is not yet fully perceptible. It shows only some wandering fragments of itself. And Badiou concludes: "Let us prepare [...] those poems and those images which are not the satisfaction of our enslaved desires. Let us prepare the poetic nudity of the present" (ibid p. 20). Han has done exactly this. He has disclosed the fetish image of our democracy, its emptiness, the illusion that it represents the sovereignty of the people. He has shown the political pornography of our times. By dismantling comforting versions of technology, social well-being, economic progress, and democracy, Han urges us to reexamine our outlooks, open up our mental space and think the unthought.

ⁱ Quotations from Han's books will be indicated in parentheses as follows: (B) for *The Burnout Society*; (A) for *The Agony of Eros*, and (I) for *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy*. A couple of references will be made to *The Scent of Time* (2017), indicated by (S).

ⁱⁱ The volume contains an introduction to Esposito's notions of biopolitics and community by V. Lemm. For a review of the volume, see J. Picchione (2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ It must be noted that Di Cesare shares with Han a critical version of capitalism. She writes of the "malign velocity of capitalism," its "compulsive, asphyxial vortex," its "ruthlessness" and the ecological disasters produced by its technologies (2021, p. 24, p. 95). She maintains that the pandemic has demonstrated the "vulnerability" of our territorial political outlook and the necessity to conceive of new ways of inhabiting the planet and to construct a world community based not on "possessing" but on "being and existing" (ibid p. 29).

^{iv} The research of the neurosciences on the impact of new technologies on the brain is extensive. It reveals a general consensus of their serious side effects. One of the first volumes

to provide an overview of neurological studies and the changes of the brain that affect behaviour, cognitive and emotional functions, is *iBrain: surviving the technological alteration of the modern mind* by G. Small, G. Vorgan (2008). It evidences the “weakening of the brain’s neural circuitry” in establishing “human contact” and social interactions” (2008: 2). It identifies the issue of new technologies and the way they affect communication and “political and social change” (ibid). Most importantly, it claims that neuronal firing and brain cellular connections are so much altered by extensive exposure to digital technologies that we pay only partial attention to what we do. ADD and ADHD syndromes are discussed (ibid 64-67). Indeed, the book anticipates the notion of “burnout” linked to digitalization. It states that after long exposure to digital devices, people tested were “feeling spaced out, fatigued, irritable, and distracted, as if [...] in a «digital fog».” Regions of the brain (the hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex), that control mood and thought processes were significantly altered. Such a condition triggers symptoms of “mental stress” that is defined as “techno brain burnout” and it is so “threatening to become an epidemic” (ibid 19).

For the relationship between digital media, multitasking, and the decline in information processing, see E. Ophir, Clifford Nass, A. D. Wagner (2009).

For the effects of new technologies on reading practices and their impact on comprehension and retention see M. Wolfe (2007). She discusses the essential function of “delay neurons” that “slow neuronal transmission for milliseconds,” an infinitesimal lapse of time that allows “sequence and order in our apprehension of reality” (2007: 214). This essential process is seriously compromised by the accelerated pace of digital devices. For their impact on writing and analytical skills in the context of higher education, see J. Picchione (2016). One chapter of the pamphlet deals with new media and their effects on democracy (2016: 37-42). For a more recent publication, see Y. Zhao, M. P. Paulus, M. N. Potenza (2023). This major study establishes a link between extensive exposure to media devices and problems of depression and anxiety in children. It also identified similarities between screen media activity and alcohol consumption in adults. The research involved over 5000 children and was conducted by the Yale Department of Psychiatry and the Columbia School of Nursing.

^v Han’s critique of Baudrillard takes into account the positions held in *The Agony of Power* (2010). In this case as well, Han contests the immunological model that is based on the notion of an enemy, of violence to which the subject is exposed (2015: 5).

^{vi} The issue of an increased speed of time needs clarification. Han does not negate the accelerated movement of digital technologies. For him, however, it is only a symptom of a much broader question. Today’s life is characterized by a “temporal dispersal,” a time that is “whizzing without a direction,” (S, p. vi) that shows the “inability to end and to conclude (ibid p. 2). Time is lived through a process of atomization, devoid of any force of attraction, a gravitational pull to give it a course. The sense of “discontinuity” of time derives from the absence of a narrative that would frame its passage (ibid pp. 18-19). The “de-narrativization” of life entails that “events [...] are not steered on to narrative paths” (ibid p. 33). We go through it aimlessly. It is this that gives the impression of acceleration, as time “loses its scent” (ibid p. 18).

^{vii} The acceleration of life’s rhythms under late capitalism and its technological organization is the subject of a book by Pascal Chabot (2021). The distress it causes is severe and disturbing. Chronosophy is seen as the philosophical guide for having a meaningful and wise experience of time. In his view, we are experiencing a hypertime, a particular “chronotype” imposed by the capitalist structure and its attendant instruments of social organization. He summarizes his position in a recent article in which he writes : “Dans l’hypertemps contemporain, l’heure est partout [...] Son incessante répétition par des instruments et médias, la plupart digitaux, produit un quadrillage très serré des journées [...] Omniprésence du temps, vision quantitative,

injonction, compte à rebours et immédiateté sont les caractéristiques de l'hypertemps contemporain. Celui-ci n'est pas le temps lui-même. Il est une transformation du temps, une projection sur le temps d'habitudes mentales et de mode d'action propre au technocapitalisme." (2022 : 66-69). Chabot is also the author of *The Global Burnout* (2018) in which the capitalist and technological organization of life are part of a broader critique of values and belief systems of the present-age dominated by weariness, exhaustion, and a feeling of deficiency, loss of confidence and helplessness. It is a form of "spiritual fatigue" that the monastic culture of the Middle Ages defined as *acedia* ("Burnout is the *acedia* of our times" (2018:16). He writes: "Burnout is a disease of a civilization" caused by "increasingly powerful production regimes [...] increasingly invasive instruments of control, and ever-mounting pressure [...] technological expansion [...] driven by an economic logic that seeks, above all, to maximize profits" (ibid p. 2, p. 3). The managerial, technological culture aims to "subjugate, control, coerce, reward informers and undermine feelings of solidarity." (ibid p.4). The result is "Fatigue, anxiety, unmanageable stress, depersonalization, feelings of incompetence" (ibid). The impact of technological society on culture has engendered an "exhaustion of humanism" (ibid p. 41) on a misguided notion of progress. The humanistic stance must renew its objectives and direct culture towards a model able to "relegate the logic of economics and technology to a secondary role" (ibid p. 6). Han and Chabot share a common diagnosis as to the effects of present-age social and mental conditions. However, the young Belgian philosopher sees a subjugated subject, overpowered by techno-capitalism and thrown into a state of psychological malaise and disorders. Han's achievement-subject coincides only in part with this position.

^{viii} Anders' *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen 2* (1980) is not available in English. In its place, reference is made to a translation into Italian (1992).

^{ix} For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Jason Dawsey, 2019.

^x Badiou's work is not referenced in *Infocracy*, but it plays a significant role in *The Agony of Eros*. In fact, Badiou wrote a foreword, entitled "The Reinvention of Love" that appears in the English translation of that volume. He defines Han's analysis of love "brilliant" and "profound" (2022: ix, p. x). Han references Badiou's *In Praise of Love* (2012) that likely stirred him to develop a version of love as a political experience and as a possible path towards a radical rethinking of politics itself. He writes: "political action occurs in a sphere that intersects with eros on manifold levels. Political action is mutual desire for another way of living—a more just world aligned with eros on every register. Eros represents a source of energy for political revolt and engagement" (2017: 44).

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