



Digital Psychopolitics: Subjectivation in the Smart Age

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Abstract

Contemporary philosophy is largely influenced by scholars analyzing the shifting nature of power in the modern age. Philosopher and cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han offers a critical analysis of neoliberalism's impact through his idea of "psychopolitics," which posits a new form of domination. This article examines Han's concept of psychopolitics, arguing that it represents the primary form of power in today's neoliberal societies. It contends that power has transitioned from Foucault's disciplinary biopolitics, which used external force, to a more subtle form that influences the mind. Within psychopolitical systems, individuals willingly pursue self-optimization and performance, leading to the paradoxical outcome of self-imposed exploitation and widespread burnout. This paper analyzes how digital technologies, particularly big data and social media, enable control. These technologies establish a digital panopticon in which individuals contribute to their own monitoring through voluntary self-disclosure and online engagement. This study demonstrates that the pursuit of achievement, when coupled with constant digital monitoring, can erode individual freedom and critical thinking, leading to an identity crisis driven by the continuous demand for productivity.

Keywords: Psychopolitics, Biopolitics, Psychopower, Dataism, Transparency, Surveillance, Emotional Capitalism, Subjectivation.



Introduction

The development of neoliberalism has been closely linked to notable advancements in technology, a reorganization of power structures, and the splintering of political systems. In response, Han introduces the concept of “psychopolitics” to describe this emerging form of governance. He uses this term to refer to the contemporary regime’s methods of control, which are largely exercised through technology. To grasp psychopolitics, it is essential to first understand Foucault’s idea of “biopolitics.” Foucault contended that biopolitics which is the administration of life at a population level, became vital for capitalist societies. This is because capitalism, through its disciplinary mechanisms, socializes the body by emphasizing its productive potential. Consequently, biopolitics primarily concerns itself with the biological and physical dimensions of a population, essentially functioning as a politics of the body (Han, 2017b).

Han is particularly interested in the biases built into digital technologies, specifically the focus on being positive and being transparent. He argues that these two elements are the main drivers of what he calls neoliberal or digital psychopolitics. He remarks “Neoliberal psycho-politics attempts to elicit positive emotions and to exploit them. In the final analysis, it is freedom itself that is here being exploited. In this respect, neoliberal psycho-politics differs from the biopolitics of industrial modernity, which operates through disciplinary compulsion and command” (Han & Steuer, 2019, p.12). This is a new way of control that is different from and has come after the older system of “biopolitics,” which was common in industrial societies. Biopower controlled people through rules and force. In contrast, psychopolitics uses our own freedom against us. It cleverly makes us willingly subordinate ourselves to the system, turning freedom into a form of self-imposed control. According to Han, digital communication and technology are fundamental to how neoliberal psychopolitics maintains its power. He argues that the inherent biases towards positivity and transparency in these technologies provide a method for understanding how these new power structures and the systems they uphold operate. These characteristics enable digital media to divide and shape individuals through self-optimization, total surveillance, and the almost religious belief in data.

Han’s theory starts with the idea that there is a problem with our sense of self. This problem is about how technologies grab and shape our identities in ways that support the larger economic and social system. The main goal of capitalist societies is to link together the economy, technology, and social trends in a way that creates our very sense of self. In this view, the study of the economy becomes the same



as the study of how our identities are formed. For thinkers like Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, the only important questions that can help us move beyond current capitalist systems are political questions about how our identities are created (Knepper et al., 2024). Han builds upon the ideas of these thinkers by saying that media technologies play a key role in how we become who we are. He believes that media is central to the different ways and systems that shape our identities.

Psychopower

In Han's perspective, biopower and biopolitical control are inadequate heuristics for understanding the technology of power under neoliberalism, much less for diagnosing its various psychopathologies (Knepper et al., 2024). Han thinks Foucault's inability to discern domination beyond discipline is his major shortcoming. He states "Foucault evidently did not appreciate that biopolitics and population - which represent genuine categories of disciplinary society - are unsuited to describing the neoliberal regime. Consequently, he failed to do what the circumstances actually called for: to make the turn to psychopolitics" (Han, 2017b, p. 23).

Han (2017b) observes that "Biopolitics is incapable of enabling subtle interventions in the psyche. In contrast, digital psychopolitics manages to intervene in psychic processes in a prospective fashion" (p.23). He insists that Foucault did not see that the neoliberal regime utterly claims the technology of the self for its own purposes: "Biopolitics is the governmental technology of disciplinary power. However, this approach proves altogether unsuited to the neoliberal regime, which exploits the psyche above all" (Han, 2017b, p. 27). For Han, Foucault could not anticipate how neoliberal strategies of power would divest themselves from biopolitical disciplinary techniques. According to Han, neoliberalism functions by subtly influencing individual consciousness, a process central to subjectivation. This influence leads individuals to misinterpret external mechanisms of control as expressions of personal autonomy (Knepper et al., 2024). Han observes: "Now, a further paradigm shift is underway. The digital panopticon engineers not a disciplinary society along biopolitical lines but a transparency society along psychopolitical ones. Psychopower is taking the place of biopower. With the help of digital surveillance, psychopolitics is in the position to read and control thoughts" (Han, 2017a, p. 78).

According to Han, the historical prominence of biopolitics, which emphasizes control over biological life, is diminishing. In its place, digital psychopolitics is



emerging as the primary mode of governance, leveraging digital means to influence and regulate psychological states (Han, 2017a). For Han “Neoliberal psychopolitics is a technology of domination that stabilizes and perpetuates the prevailing system by means of psychological programming and steering” (Han, 2017b, p.79). This power involves direct influence on mental states, shaping thoughts, desires, and emotions, and may extend to accessing and manipulating pre-reflective unconscious processes. Liberal biopower, for example, traditionally adopted an ergonomic and physical approach to training individuals, focusing on the differential conditioning of bodies and their communicative capacities. This involved disciplining individuals to perform specific roles, such as those of workers in industrial sectors like the chemical or textile industries. In contrast, psychopolitics operates from an affective-cognitive perspective, directly influencing the subject’s mind. Rather than modulating physical gestures, abilities, and performance, as was characteristic of industrial labor, psychopolitics aims for the systematic techno-social engineering of human thoughts, needs, and desires. Consequently, it bypasses localized disciplinary institutions, such as the factory, and instead relies on digitally governed automated media, ranging from social media news feeds and autoplay functions to smart vehicles and the Internet of Things (Knepper et al., 2024). Han sees psychopolitics as capitalism intensifying its reach, permeating the very core of our being (2017b).

Han argues that psychopolitics uses smart power, which is very different from Foucault’s idea of disciplinary power. Foucault’s power often works through rules and force, telling people what they “shouldn’t” do. But Han’s smart power uses positive reinforcement and temptation, making people feel like they “can” do things, even as it subtly guides their behaviour. This makes it more dangerous because it gets people to control themselves by playing on their desires and their sense of freedom, instead of telling them what to do (Han, 2017b). It does not impose silence but constantly encourages subjects to share, communicate, participate, and express their desires and preferences. Han views: “This friendly power cosies up to the psyche aiming to please and fulfill desires, thereby making subjects dependent rather than merely compliant” (Han, 2017b, p. 14-15). In a contemporary context, Han believes that we have superseded a biopolitics into a more psychopolitics. Han develops several interconnected concepts to elaborate his theory of psychopolitics and its effects on contemporary subjectivity. Digital technologies are not merely instruments of the psychopolitical regime; they constitute its fundamental operational framework. Han’s analysis highlights how Big Data, pervasive surveillance, and social media platforms collectively form a “digital panopticon,” enabling extensive psychological monitoring.



Psychopolitics of Big data

Digital technology, particularly Big Data, is identified as a key enabler of psychopolitics. He views it not just as a repository of information but as an active agent in shaping subjectivity. Han points out: “If nothing else, Big Data has given rise to a highly efficient form of control...Digital surveillance proves so efficient because it is aperspectival. It does not suffer from the perspectival limitations characterizing analogue optical systems. Digital optics enables surveillance from any and every angle. It eliminates all blind spots. In contrast to analogue and perspectival optics, it can peer into the human soul itself” (Han, 2017b, p. 56). Big Data enables the construction of individual and collective psychograms, potentially revealing and exploiting the unconscious. Han asserts that Big Data provides knowledge of social communication, facilitating intervention at a pre-reflexive psychological level. This allows for subtle and pervasive control over individual thoughts and behaviours.

Han contends that Big Data signifies the obsolescence of free will. The digital panopticon thus functions as a mechanism for anticipating and subtly directing future actions. Both corporate and political entities can leverage these tools to predict and manipulate behavior for commercial or regulatory objectives (Han, 2017b).

Han critiques ‘Dataism’ as an ideology that fetishizes data collection. He comments that the knowledge generated by Big Data is far from neutral or objective. He raises critical epistemological questions about the nature of data-driven “truth” and its inherent political and economic biases. He cautions against the acceptance of Big Data as absolute truth, emphasizing that mere data collection and analysis cannot provide genuine self-knowledge (Han, 2017b). Self-knowledge comes from personal reflection and narrative, not just numbers. He sees the rise of Big Data as a step towards a “digital totalitarianism” that threatens individual autonomy.

Transparency&Participatory Surveillance

Han is critical of the contemporary emphasis on “transparency,” often promoted in the digital sphere. The contemporary emphasis on transparency, often lauded as a democratic virtue, functions as a powerful mechanism of psychopolitical control: “The society of transparency is not a society of trust, but a society of control” (Han, 2015, p. 47). The proliferation of digital media compels universal exposure, a phenomenon Han terms transparency. This pervasive transparency, often willingly adopted, diminishes privacy and individuality. Han posits that trust thrives in an environment of partial knowledge, where individuals engage and act despite uncertainty. Transparency, by eliminating this inherent “not-knowing,” eradicates



the necessity for trust, thereby undermining its very foundation. Consequently, transparency does not foster trust; rather, it dismantles it. The societal demand for transparency indicates a pre-existing deficit of trust, as a truly trusting society would not necessitate such pervasive visibility (Han, 2015, p.48).

Han contends the internet's promise as a realm of unlimited freedom has proven illusory. The current trend shows a shift from unbounded liberty and communication towards pervasive control and surveillance, with social media increasingly functioning as digital panopticons that monitor and exploit the social sphere. This digital panopticon involves networked inhabitants actively communicating and observing each other. They collaborate in its operations. The digital control society thrives by exploiting voluntary self-disclosure and self-exposure. Unlike traditional surveillance it relies on individuals' inner desire to share data rather than forceful extraction, making the digital panopticon highly effective (Han, 2017b).

Emotional Capitalism

Han identifies “emotional capitalism” as a component of psychopolitics, distinguishing it from traditional forms of capitalism that exploit physical labour. This contemporary system focuses on the commodification of emotions, feelings, and psychological states for economic profit. He argues that neoliberalism leverages emotions—defined as instantaneous, performative, and situational, in contrast to more enduring, narrative-based feelings—to stimulate consumption and productivity. Han remarks: “Neoliberal psychopolitics seizes on emotion to influence actions on this pre reflexive level. By way of emotion, it manages to cut and operate deep inside. As such, emotion affords a highly efficient medium for psychopolitically steering the integral person, the person as a whole” (Han, 2017b, p.48).

Techniques like gamification transform work and life into emotionally engaging activities, increasing investment and performance beyond rational calculation. Emotional capitalism increases productivity by integrating elements of play and games into the work environment, thereby diminishing the separation between professional and personal spheres. It transforms work itself into a game. When work offers rewards, people are more motivated, perform better, and produce more than in workplaces that only focus on tasks (Han, 2017b). As subjectivity becomes weakened and exposed through easily influenced emotions, it becomes a key target for psychopolitical control.



Shaping of the Digital Unconscious

Han posits that social media platforms are central to digital domination, serving as key instruments within his framework of psychopolitics. These platforms function as environments crucial for subjectivation, actively shaping individual desires, promoting adherence to social norms, and monitoring emotional responses. Social media platforms cultivate and direct individual desires through targeted content and personalized experiences. They incentivize conformity by fostering a reliance on metrics such as likes, followers, and comments as measures of self-worth. In his view: “Power operates more effectively when it delegates surveillance to discrete individuals. Like is the digital Amen. When we click Like, we are bowing down to the order of domination” (Han, 2017a). Han argues that digital communication is significantly harming community by destroying the public sphere and increasing human isolation. Digital interaction is driven by narcissism rather than neighborly love. He portrays digital technology as a “narcissistic ego machine” that hinders genuine connection (Han, 2017b).

Technology as subjectivation apparatus

The subjectivation apparatus in the context of psychopolitics refers to the ensemble of technologies, discourses, and institutions that shape individuals’ inner lives, desires, thoughts, and feelings in the service of power. It aids in understanding how power operates in contemporary society, particularly within the framework of neoliberalism and the digital age. Han views digital devices, particularly the ubiquitous smartphone, as powerful subjectivation- apparatuses: “Smartphones represent digital devotion - indeed, they are the devotional objects of the Digital, period. As a subjectivation-apparatus, the smartphone works like a rosary - which, because of its ready availability, represents a hand held device too. Both the smartphone and the rosary serve the purpose of self-monitoring and control. Power operates more effectively when it delegates surveillance to discrete individuals” (Han, 2017b, p.12). He views the smartphone as not just an effective surveillance apparatus but also as a mobile confessional. They are not neutral tools but actively shape the user’s psyche and behaviour. Han argues that psychopolitics leverages digital technology to create a system akin to a self-monitoring prison. This system subtly manipulates individuals’ desires and constructs psychological profiles, thereby transforming them into predictable consumers. Within neoliberalism, the exercise of power is subtle; it does not directly coerce individuals. Instead, it fosters a process of self-optimization and interiorization of power relations, which individuals then interpret as freedom. Consequently, concepts such as self-



optimization and submission, freedom and exploitation, become indistinguishable (Han, 2017b).

Violence of Positivity

Han asserts that the violence of positivity is as detrimental as the violence of negativity. He argues that neoliberal psychopolitics, facilitated by the consciousness industry, degrades the human psyche, which he characterizes as fundamentally distinct from a “machine of positivity.” The neoliberal subject is relentlessly driven by the imperative of self-optimization, manifesting as a perpetual compulsion for increased achievement. In this context, Han concludes that healing paradoxically signifies destruction (Han, 2017b). The operation of power within a neoliberal framework diverges from traditional models of prohibition or repression. Instead, it functions through enablement, promotion, and projection. Consumption is not constrained but actively maximized. This system does not cultivate scarcity; rather, it generates a surplus, often characterized by an overwhelming sense of positivity. Individuals are consistently encouraged to engage in both communication and consumption. Consequently, the principle of negativity is superseded by a pervasive principle of positivity. Needs are thus stimulated rather than repressed, and coercive forms of confession are replaced by voluntary disclosure (Han, 2017b).

The neoliberal emphasis on self-optimization primarily facilitates seamless integration and performance within existing systems. This framework advocates for the therapeutic eradication of inhibitions, weaknesses, and errors to enhance individual efficiency and productivity. Consequently, all aspects of human endeavour become quantifiable, measurable, and subject to market forces. The impetus for self-optimization does not stem from a pursuit of individual well-being but rather from systemic pressures rooted in the quantitative assessment of market success (Han, 2017b).

Psychopolitics has sparked considerable discussion and debate in contemporary philosophy and social theory. Although its timely insights are broadly recognized, the work has also drawn notable criticism. Scholars influenced by post-Foucauldian thought—such as those examining the micro-physics of power or Judith Butler’s concepts of performativity and resistance—often implicitly critique Han’s ideas. These scholars propose that Han may not fully account for the ways in which individuals can engage with established power dynamics. Similarly, researchers who prioritize the unpredictability of everyday social interactions, rather than broad theoretical narratives, also present a challenge to Han’s perspective.



Critics argue that Han presents an overly deterministic picture of individuals as being passively conditioned and controlled by neoliberal forces and digital technologies. In a way, it oversimplifies the notion of power dynamics in present-day society. By conceptualizing self-optimization as internalized exploitation, the analysis may neglect individual agency and the potential for resistance within these systems. Critics argue that Han neglects the vital role of material and economic inequalities, prioritizing psychological control. They contend that psychological manipulation cannot be understood apart from these material realities. These criticisms aim to improve and challenge Han's ideas for a better understanding of modern power dynamics.

Conclusion

Psychopolitics represents a subtle yet pervasive form of control, shifting from overt disciplinary structures to an internalized system of self-optimization and performance. Byung-Chul Han argues that power today controls individuals not through force, but by shaping their thoughts and feelings. This system pushes people to constantly achieve and promote themselves, making them feel free even as it leads to stress and a sense of being exploited. Technology does not just help psychopolitics. In fact, it actively creates the kind of individuals who are vulnerable to its influence. The endless demands from digital platforms for interaction, communication, sharing, and performance cultivate minds that seek external approval and are always busy. Thus, digital media is a key part of the psychopolitical system that quietly controls inner lives. This leads to a society where individuals constantly monitor themselves, try to improve themselves, and ultimately exploit themselves, all while believing they are free and connected. Psychopolitics shows that individuals are controlled not just by outside forces, but also by an inner drive to always improve and succeed. This drive turns the individual into both the exploiter and the exploited, creating a harmful form of self-oppression. Han suggests that the modern idea of freedom -where there is constant striving and a pressure to be positive - is actually a new way of being controlled. This "freedom," which promises that anything is possible, often leads to burnout and feelings of failure when individuals cannot keep up with the relentless pace.

Byung-Chul Han argues that modern society's emphasis on productivity and positivity, far from being liberating, functions as a subtle form of cultural control. He suggests that this pressure for constant achievement and self-optimization is so deeply internalized that individuals often perceive it as freedom. Han urges a critical



examination of whether this drive for self-improvement genuinely empowers us, or if it constitutes a more deceptive means of influencing our thoughts and thereby determining our lives. Essentially, Han prompts a reevaluation of the freedom purportedly offered by neoliberalism, revealing its concealed mechanisms of control. He urges us to reflect profoundly on the meaning of genuine freedom in a society that continually pushes for continuous performance and accomplishment.

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