

Article

## Byung-Chul Han's Theory of Negative Politics

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**Abstract:** It is a complex task to provide a systematic Hanian theory of politics, as Han is more concerned with diagnosing the positive, psychopolitical, and infocratic dominations of neoliberal capitalism. To fill this gap, I curate his scattered critical remarks on the contemporary political climate, in conjunction with his philosophical vocabulary, towards what I call negative politics. This intervention necessitates a disquisition of his critique of neoliberal capitalism, as well as his theory of violence. To concretize these objectives, I first highlight the distinct character of Han's theory of violence by engaging with some formulations of violence in the continental philosophical tradition. In the second part, I explain how neoliberal capitalist-authored violence provides an illusory freedom and adulterates contemporary political life. In the third, I explore his theory of infocracy within the context of global politics and crises. Given the dominance of algorithmically manipulated information in this new regime, the cult of positivity assumes more invincibility. Ultimately, I diagram and explain some revolutionary potentials embedded in his writings, which could rehabilitate contemporary politics and, more importantly, reconfigure atomized communities, thereby recovering the people's ability to contemplate, question the status quo, and think about the future.

**Keywords:** neoliberal capitalism, positivity, infocracy, negative politics

### Violence: From the Immunological to the Post-Immunological

Western politics, according to Giorgio Agamben, is defined by the ubiquitous politicization of bare life—"the life of the *homo sacer* ... who may be killed and yet not sacrificed."<sup>1</sup> From residing in a

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

marginal milieu, bare life permeates in the whole political realm, where the *homo sacer*'s inclusion assumes the form of an exception. This is made possible by the state's sovereign legitimacy to kill the *homo sacer* "without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice"<sup>2</sup> because it resides in a zone of indistinction. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* contend that the state's sovereign authority, expressed in the forms of state surveillance and lawful violence, "consists in capturing while simultaneously constituting a right to capture. It is an incorporated, structural violence distinct from every kind of direct violence."<sup>3</sup>

However, of course, the immanent and inescapable relation between the *homo sacer* and sovereign power is not the only locale for the immense proliferation or operation of political violence. Within the restrictive confines of the book *Homo Sacer*, the *homo sacer* is eternally doomed, in the same vein that the sovereign remains an omnipotent nerve-center of power beyond critique. At least, before concluding the "Homo Sacer" chapter in the aforesaid book, Agamben claims that what makes life in the present extremely bare and dangerous is its exposure "to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways. Our age is the one in which a holiday weekend produces more victims on Europe's highways than a war campaign."<sup>4</sup> This pronouncement should be analyzed at various levels. One possible pathway is the theorization of the *homo sacer* and sovereign power outside the logic of Eurocentrism and statist politics. A reconfiguration of their immanent relation and interpretations outside them offers a possible light outside the tunnel of sovereign violence. Interestingly, Agamben underlines in *Homo Sacer* the necessity to overcome this condition, albeit without a definitive blueprint: "And only if it is possible to think the relation between potentiality and actuality differently—and even to think beyond this relation—will be possible to think of constituting power wholly released from the sovereign ban. Until [this happens], a political theory freed from the aporia of sovereignty remains unthinkable."<sup>5</sup>

The previously mentioned opening also hints at new pathways to be explored in the other volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series.<sup>6</sup> Beyond Agamben, bare life is not only applicable to the people residing at the peripheries or under the state of exception. Instead, it is a condition that involves "all of us,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 448.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). In this last volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben theorizes a post-sovereign politics and proposes a non-sovereign politics and mode of living.

without exception, who are *homines sacri*.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it opens the doors to a novel formulation of violence, where the individual either does not perceive violence as emanating from the State apparatus by virtue of its capitalist totalization, or they do not blame sovereign power for the miseries they experience. Even before the famous “Postscript on Control Societies” in *Negotiations*,<sup>8</sup> the concept of a non-Statist/post-Statist domination was already mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Within the capitalist mode of production, they opine, “it is very difficult to say who is the thief and who the victim, or even where the violence resides.”<sup>9</sup> This mode of capture without capturing, which parallels Agamben’s description of the sovereign’s subjugation of bare life, still rests on negativity, unfortunately.

However, there is also another face of violence where the individual self-motivates to exert more effort, time, and energy to become better or achieve more freedom. Han calls this new adversary *psychopolitics*. One of the distinctive attributes of Han’s formulation of psychopolitics, particularly in relation to his diagnosis of neoliberal capitalism, is its post-immunological configuration. The post-immunological paradigm is defined by the destruction of borders, territories, and otherness, which previously characterized the immunological paradigm. Side by side with this event is the annihilation of the factors that constitute the dialectic of negativity. The death of negativity leads to the excessive proliferation of positivity—the principal culprit in the aggressive and accelerated cultivation of psychopolitical violence in the contemporary period.

If contemporary theorists were to conceptualize a political theory that remains statist, sovereign-laden, and negative in its approach to confronting psychopolitical violence, then it would simply exacerbate the problems plaguing the present. In this paper, I seek to formulate a theory of negative politics that confronts novel mutations of violence by collating and engaging with Han’s sporadic critical writings. Of course, this is not to assert that this is the only form of violence of paramount value today. Sovereign power or the state of exception remains systemically operative even in democracies or the most advanced societies. Its parasitic character overlaps with other regimes of power and violence, including those beyond statist and disciplinary domains, such as psychopolitical domination. In fact, Han mentions in *Topology of Violence* that the erosion of negativity today should not be understood as the disappearance of violence, since “along with the

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<sup>7</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 178-180.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 447.

violence of negativity, there is a violence of positivity, which is wielded without enmity or domination.”<sup>10</sup>

## Psychopolitical Violence and the Debasing of the Political

There are probably two ways to understand and analyze the detrimental implications of the neoliberal capitalist phenomenon. The first one is defined by deregulation, liberalization, and privatization. Through the catalyzing influence of globalization, these processes become fundamental channels for implementing socio-economic policies, including massive tax cuts, the erosion or elimination of healthcare and social welfare programs, the continuous and aggressive dismantling of union organizations, the impoverishment of public education, and more.<sup>11</sup> These complex events, animated by the phenomenon of globalization, make Deleuze’s analysis of the societies of control in *Negotiations* a timely contribution. Despite the protean theorization and opportune analysis of Deleuze’s control society, it remains grounded in negativity.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it remains impotent in explaining the psychic and topological changes emergent in the complex transition from control society and even the disciplinary society to the achievement society.<sup>13</sup>

The second way to comprehend the effects of neoliberal capitalism is through positivity (or excessive positivity). The dissolution of the fundamental pillars of the immunological paradigm gives birth to the achievement society or the society of performance. One of the important claims Han makes in *The Burnout Society* concerns his critique of Hannah Arendt’s notion of the *vita activa* in the context of the achievement society. According to the former, “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.”<sup>14</sup> But he emphasizes that life today is barer than Agamben’s bare life. Meaning to say, violence today is invisible, and its oppressive hand grips everyone, not

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<sup>10</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence*, trans. by Amanda Demarco (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), vii.

<sup>11</sup> Manfred Steger and Ravi Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 2018, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Deleuze claims that the control society offers a more intricate form of surveillance and control where power operates in a more free-floating yet assimilative form. See Raniel Reyes, “A Genealogy of the Contemporary Undead Life through Byung-Chul Han,” in *Philosophia: An International Journal of Philosophy*, 26:2 (June 2025), 237, <<https://doi.org/10.46992/pijp.26.2.a.5>>.

<sup>13</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

only those under the state of exception. Moreover, whereas the life of the *homo sacer* can be killed without any legal consequence, the life of the achievement subject cannot be killed. Neoliberal capitalism perceives death as a negativity or a hindrance to the flow of capital. Thus, if a person cannot be killed, then their "life equals that of the undead. They are too alive to die, and too dead to live."<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the ego of the achievement subject is "just short of bursting ... It is hyperactive and hyperneurotic."<sup>16</sup> In this vein, instead of experiencing freedom, the master and the slave become the exploiter and the exploited altogether.<sup>17</sup>

Han uses Psychopolitics to describe this late-modern phenomenon. In contrast to sovereign action and disciplinarity, it is a more contagious mutation of violence, grounded in positivity through the forms of freedom, internal pressures, and digital surveillance. In *Topology of Violence*, Han further opines:

Today, it is shifting from the visible to the invisible, from the frontal to the viral, from brute force to mediated force, from the real to the virtual, from the physical to the psychological, from the negative to the positive, withdrawing into the subcutaneous, subcommunicative, capillary, and neuronal space, creating the false impression that it has disappeared. It becomes completely invisible at the moment it merges with its opposite, that is, with freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Psychopolitical violence functions as a non-statist and molecular capture. Ingeniously, it engenders auto-exploiting individuals or workers in their own enterprise as they turn into masters and slaves altogether, and where "even class struggle has transformed into an inner struggle against oneself."<sup>19</sup> As such, Antonio Negri's theorization of the cooperative, the *multitude*, the successor of Karl Marx's proletariat, is already an unsuitable agency in the neoliberal capitalist mode of production. Instead, "conditions are defined by the *solitude* of an entrepreneur who is isolated and self-combatting and practices auto-exploitation voluntarily."<sup>20</sup> In addition, Han explains in *The Expulsion of the Other* that: "The absence of a repressive gaze creates—and this is a decisive difference from the surveillance strategy of the

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<sup>15</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Han, *Topology of Violence*, vii.

<sup>19</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. by Erik Butler (London: Verso Books, 2017), 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

disciplinary society—a deceptive sense of freedom.”<sup>21</sup> The absence of a repressive gaze morphs into a “disturbed structure of gratification” in *Topology of Violence*.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the lack of relation results in a lack of gratification and recognition from the other. Such a deficiency leads to the subject’s narcissistic relation to oneself. Problematically, the crisis of gratification compels him/her to achieve more without finality, thereby not achieving any goals, and losing “itself in dissipation.”<sup>23</sup> The endless pressure to achieve more without recognition and closure rebrands as freedom, i.e., emancipation from the panoptical grasp of an exterior authority. Consequently, work is converted into self-paced competitions, a site for disjointed relations, and a bastion of short-sighted visions.

Han remarks that the crisis of the contemporary period has already surmounted the normalization of the state of exception in society. Instead, “no state of exception is possible anymore because everything is absorbed by the immanence of the same.”<sup>24</sup> Like work, the positivization of politics initially delegitimizes the possibility of any form of sovereign action. For this reason, it becomes incapable of questioning and overcoming the current scheme of things and merely becomes complacent in maintaining the *status quo*. Since politics remains under the tutelage of capital, it will remain devoid of any transcendental horizon. The positivization of politics, likewise, dissolves all underlying meanings and significance of parties and ideologies. In this manner, what is produced is a ubiquitous state of political emptiness—a state filled with spectacle of media theatrics. Politicians also establish themselves in this depoliticized space of spectacle. It is not their *political acts* but rather their *personality* that is staged in the media.”<sup>25</sup>

In the current political climate, struggles occur no longer between classes or ideologies, but between individual selves. When self-referentiality transitions to an absolute competition, the achievement-subject falls prey to the “destructive compulsion to outdo itself,”<sup>26</sup> and no longer to defeat the other. This is made possible by what Han calls, the *ego-ideal*. In his words:

In the ... achievement society, the superego positivizes itself into the ego ideal. The superego is repressive. It mainly voices prohibitions. It dominates the ego ... The superego generates negative compulsions. In contrast, the ego ideal exerts positive

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<sup>21</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 49.

<sup>22</sup> Han, *Topology of Violence*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 35–36.

compulsions on the ego. The negativity of the superego constrains the ego. Basing the self on the ego ideal, on the other hand, is interpreted as an act of freedom. But in the face of the unattainable ego ideal, the self sees itself as deficient, a loser to be assailed with self-reproach. Auto-aggression develops out of the gap between the real ego and the ego ideal. The ego ... is at war with itself ... External violence is replaced by self-generated violence, which is more devastating because its victims imagine themselves to be free.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, the positivization of politics delegitimizes politics from its power to enact strategic action. Without any forms of secrecy and depth transforms, politics transforms into a mere transparent activity or a referendum. In a transparency-laden political field, Han argues,

Opinions are matters of no consequence ... Compulsive transparency stabilizes the existing system most effectively ... It does not harbor negativity that might radically question the political-economic system as it stands. It is blind to what lies outside the system.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, the more transparency reigns, the more capital moves rapidly, the more forms of negativity are discouraged, and the more society is overrun by spectacle. Transparent politics, furthermore, is participated not by engaged and committed individuals.<sup>29</sup> Instead, it is merely manned by consumer citizens uninterested in complex deliberations and critical reflections. As the logic of consumption prevails, citizens only air their voices to complain, in the same manner that they are detached from the intricate interconnectedness between past and present predicaments.

Moreover, the value of politicians is gauged based on their ingenious technique to please the sensibilities of the masses, and not on their capability to formulate long-term visions and enact comprehensive societal reforms. The more these politicians blindly embrace the status quo or represent the so-called voice of the people, the more they are appreciated, the more negativity in society is annihilated, and the more genuine communication is abolished.<sup>30</sup>

In a society governed by positivity and transparency, the role of the community is minimal. The simple reason is that only narcissistic and

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–37.

<sup>28</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 6–7.

<sup>29</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Han, *The Transparency Society*, 7.

apathetic individuals compose it. As such, collective action is disheartened in exchange for a personal pathway to making oneself a project. In *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, Han spends a chapter elaborating on the enormous crippling of the political:

There is no cooperative, networked multitude that could serve as a global protest movement and revolutionary body. Rather, the current form of production is based on the solitary, isolated, disconnected entrepreneur of the self ... Today, everyone is in competition with everyone else, even within a single enterprise. This universal competition may lead to an enormous increase in productivity, but it destroys solidarity and the sense of community. You cannot form a revolutionary mass out of depressive, disconnected individuals.<sup>31</sup>

In a world marred by narcissism, achievement, and competition, collective action or radical solidarity finds no place. Han also echoes his critique of Hard and Negri's multitude in *Topology of Violence*. In a society of indifference, the aforesaid revolutionary feat is unlikely because it is merely inhabited by "isolated and mutually antagonistic selves. Everyone involved in the capitalist process is simultaneously victim and perpetrator ... Hard and Negri miss this particular topology of the global."<sup>32</sup>

Of course, the death of the political and the impossibility of revolution are likewise problematized in other contemporary scholarship. At the same time, not all people across the globe are exclusive or direct victims of neoliberal capitalism's psychopolitics. In *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, Slavoj Žižek argues:

struggle and antagonisms are in no way reducible to the intra-personal 'struggle against oneself.' There are still millions of manual workers in Third World countries, there are big differences between different kinds of immaterial workers ... A gap separates the top manager who owns or runs a company from a precarious worker spending days at home alone with his/her personal

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<sup>31</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 18. See Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, 39 and Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*, ed. by Erik Empson and Stephen Shukaitis, trans. by Arianna Bove, Erik Empson, Michael Goddard, Giuseppina Mecchia, Antonella Schintu, and Steve Wright (London: Minor Compositionism, 2009), 34.

<sup>32</sup> Han, *Topology of Violence*, 119.

computer—they are definitely not both a master and a slave in the same sense.<sup>33</sup>

Although in an earlier work, Žižek's formulation of objective violence in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, bears a partial semblance to the invisibility and deterrence of resistance conditioned by psychopolitical violence. As opposed to subjective violence, objective violence "is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceived somethings as subjectively violent."<sup>34</sup> Thanks to the humanitarian initiatives of global philanthropists or left liberal communists, the people are prevented from going beyond subjective violence and from unshackling the root causes of exploitation. Instead, they are convinced and motivated to be focused on immediately acting, i.e., in eradicating global problems, such as "starvation in Africa, the plight of the Muslim women, religious fundamentalist violence."<sup>35</sup> through collective and creative means. Unfortunately, the strategic imperative of accelerated response to humanitarian crises prevents people from reflecting and identifying the real causes of these predicaments. Against these false prophets or deceptive principles, Žižek laments:

The exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on.<sup>36</sup>

In a parallel fashion, there are undeniably other regions or territories still subjugated by statist or disciplinary power, in conjunction with other socio-economic and political predicaments, such as gender inequality, massive poverty, the refugee crisis, the displacement of indigenous people, and equal access to education. In *The Enigma of Capital*, David Harvey is correct to comment on capitalism's "uneven geographical development [that] is as infinitely varied as it is volatile."<sup>37</sup>

Intriguingly, the victims in Žižek's subjective and objective violence do not only refer to Agamben's *homo sacri*, but also certain social groups, such

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<sup>33</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020), 21–22.

<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 148.

as women, the homeless, and the unemployed. For example, women are coerced to undergo “plastic surgery, cosmetic implants, and Botox injections” to remain productive in the sexual economy.<sup>38</sup> Han emphasizes, however, that despite providing a more inclusive theory of violence, Žižek misrecognizes the violence that occurs without domination affecting all of us. The positive self-motivation to become beauty, fitness, and performance zombies, involves all of us regardless of culture, race, status etc.<sup>39</sup>

At this juncture, there seems to be a problem with Han’s critique. In Third World countries, not all people possess the opportunity to become beauty or fitness enthusiasts, as they are often preoccupied with feeding their families and securing decent housing. While this third-world predicament bears a degree of legitimacy, one must realize that Han’s frame of reference is shaped by the socio-historical realities of advanced societies, namely, South Korea and Germany.<sup>40</sup> Albeit his perspective is arguably first-world, people in economically challenged countries persist to strive for high social status, such as owning an expensive smartphone and a luxurious house and lot, as well as possessing a flawless skin. These personal goals, understood as freedom, prompt them to hustle unlimitedly or self-optimize incessantly. This idealization may be much stronger in these places, given the enormous repressions that the people experience daily.

Given these nuances of violence, both invisible and statist, I argue that Han’s notion of psychopolitical domination is a new technologically mediated and neoliberal-authored mechanism that overlaps with other mechanisms of violence or subjugation. For this reason, instead of thinking which theory of violence is better, people should exhaust all their energies and resources in thinking about how to analyze and antagonize these protean and heterogeneous monsters. For Han, nevertheless, people must enact this philosophical gesture through the post-immunological paradigm, since it is within this paradigm that critique or negativity is impoverished.

## Digital Psychopolitics, Global Politics, and Consequences

Han comprehensively differentiates the disciplinary regime from what he terms the *Information Regime* or *Infocracy* in *Infocracy: Digitization and*

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<sup>38</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, 145.

<sup>39</sup> Han, *Topology of Violence*, 80-81. Žižek’s violence still adheres to the negativity model, according to Han.

<sup>40</sup> What is of interest for Han is how those caught in the comfier regions of late capitalism are driving themselves to produce and consume at ever greater speeds; these pressures are more psychological than physical, subtly convincing those who partially benefit from neoliberalism to perpetuate it against their own self-interest. See Jason A. Bartles, “Byung-Chul Han’s Negativity; or Restoring Beauty and Rage in Excessively Positive Times,” in *The New Centennial Review*, 21 (Winter 2021), 61.

*the Crisis of Democracy*. In this digital era, algorithms and artificially intelligent information reign supreme, no longer subject to the sovereign. Instead of closed spaces, the information regime employs hypercommunication and hyperconnection to produce subjects who believe that obedience is a precondition for freedom, authenticity, and creativity.<sup>41</sup> The body is no longer the target of this ploy, but the psyche, via perpetual psychopolitical surveillance. In the information regime, the body is demoted as the subject of the health and aesthetic industry, while the psyche becomes the new locus of domination.

The radical innovation characterizing the information regime does not mean the cessation of surveillance. In fact, it merely assumes a more molecular configuration. The dissolution of closed spaces leads to open networks of information influx and hypercommunication. In the first place, why would people think they are experiencing domination when they can utilize and navigate cyberspace without limitations? In Han's view, "people do not feel that they are under surveillance. They feel free. Paradoxically, it is the feeling of freedom that secures the rule of the regime ... *When freedom and surveillance coincide, domination becomes complete.*"<sup>42</sup>

In this new regime, additionally, the cellphone acts as one of the most potent panoptical devices.<sup>43</sup> The more people think that they cannot live without a cellphone and without being 24/7 hyperactive, the more their behaviors are predicted and controlled through algorithmic and AI-configured information. In an earlier work, *The Transparency Society*, Han already described how the cult of transparency forces everything inwards to convert it into information,<sup>44</sup> because more information and communication entail increased productivity and acceleration. In *Infocracy*, meanwhile, he provides more concrete and timely vocabulary to explicate this phenomenon.<sup>45</sup>

Paradoxically, the very system that proliferates transparency is the same system that promotes covert violence, because the "*engine room of transparency lies in the dark*. We surrender to the growing power of the algorithmic black box."<sup>46</sup> In the same way, it is hidden in the sense that it is

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<sup>41</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022), 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> In *Precarious Rhapsody*, Franco Berardi claims: "The cellular phone is left on by the great majority of info-workers even when they are not working. It has a major function in the organization of labor as self-enterprise that is formally autonomous but substantially dependent. The digital network is the sphere where the spatial and temporal globalization of labor is made possible." Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Han, *The Transparency Society*, viii.

<sup>45</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

immanent in the everyday life, i.e., “behind the friendliness of social media, the convenience of search engine...and the courteous civility of smart apps.”<sup>47</sup> Not only through smartphones, but also with the help of social media influencers, the power of the information regime, i.e., its psychopolitical domination among people, fortifies.

Aside from the illusion of freedom it offers, one may wonder why psychopolitical domination is indubitably powerful. Hyper-productive individuals often lack the time to pause, reflect, and question the status quo. Their lack of time for contemplation also results in a lack of time for any political activity. This deficiency serves as the essential ingredient in producing a digital swarm, i.e., people confined to their own bubbles, whose leaders are no less than social media influencers (and even those with tendencies toward theocratic rule). In the digital swarm, anonymous subjects are recognized through their profiles. The creation of individuals’ profiles allows them to be psychopolitically captured by the information regime. Furthermore, the age of transparency and information creatively motivates people to curate their identities and encounter others through profiles. Regarding the inextricable link between one’s identity and profile in the age of digital technology, Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul D’Ambrosio’s book, *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*, offers a lucid formulation and explication of the concept *proflicity*. As a novel vocabulary, *proflicity* means the crafting of profile-configured identities using photo-editing applications, wherein online users fashion content and engage with other users as an audience altogether.<sup>48</sup>

Given the ubiquity of psychopolitical domination, it is also noteworthy to comprehend the status of politics in the information regime. In the old book culture, as Habermas perceives it, public discussion is organized, politicians exhibit intellectual prowess, and citizens are actively engaged in politics.<sup>49</sup> In the electronic mass media culture, on the other hand, people have become passive subjects and politicians had maximized mediocracy to effectively substantiate their socio-economic platforms—the perfect formulas for the public sphere’s decay.<sup>50</sup>

In *Psychopolitics*, Han underscores that today, citizens have become not merely consumers of capitalist products and services, but also of politics. For instance, they view an election as a one-time event, wherein candidates

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991), 170, as cited in Han, *Infocracy*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 18. See Han, *Psychopolitics*, 10.

or parties are either likable or not. Being passive individuals, they fail to realize that they also have a role to play in politics. They likewise fail to establish a link between the candidate they voted for and the future of their society. Unfortunately, if they ever participate in anything political, they will simply use this opportunity to asymmetrically air their grievances, like a typical social media user. Han refers to this phenomenon as *spectator democracy*.<sup>51</sup> A more recent concretization of spectator democracy is the Philippine Senate's gesture in relation to the proposed house arrest of former president Rodrigo Duterte. On 1 October 2025, many of them requested the International Criminal Court (ICC) to put Duterte under house arrest because he is already old, sick, and weak. Nevertheless, such a theatrical gesture is merely a play of optics because it lacks any bearing on the ICC. Unfortunately, this posturing reduces the ICC case or the crime against humanity filed against Duterte, as a publicity war, at the expense of all the victims of the gruesome drug war.<sup>52</sup>

Information, the heart of infocracy, is irreconcilable with politics. It crushes time into disjointed presences. In a democratic deliberation, for instance, a longer time is needed for deep contemplation, complex rational discourse, and creative imagination, which bridges the present with the past and the future. Sadly, it is affective communication that triumphs in the information regime, where "it is not the better argument but the most exciting information that prevails."<sup>53</sup> No wonder fake news and disinformation dominate the present. As a new normativity, this alarming event contributes to the polarity of politics and the strengthening of information capitalism. Behind all these are the infallible bosses who control information and manipulate the political directions of societies. If Carl Schmitt were alive today, Han asserts, then perhaps he would say that the sovereign is no longer the one who decides on the state of exception, but the one who controls the information in cyberspace.<sup>54</sup>

The fake news and disinformation surge during the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections,<sup>55</sup> reminds me of the *Black Mirror* Netflix series "Waldo

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<sup>51</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Jairo Bolledo, "'Distorted Sense of Justice,' Rights Groups Slam Senate resolution on Duterte House Arrest," in *Rappler* (3 October 2025), <<https://www.rappler.com/philippines/rodrigo-duterte-house-arrest-senate-resolution-statements-rights-groups-lawmakers/>>; see also Joana Lei Casilao and Sundry Locus, "ICC denies Rodrigo Duterte's interim release appeal," in *GMA News Online* (28 November 2025), <<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/967781/icc-denies-rodrigo-duterte-interim-release-appeal/story/>>.

<sup>53</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Gunther, Erik Nisbet, Paul Beck, Trump may owe his 2016 victory to 'fake news,' new study suggests," in *The Conversation* (15 February 2018), <<https://theconversation.com/trump-may-owe-his-2016-victory-to-fake-news-new-study-suggests-91538>>. But the

Moment.” The story follows Jamie, a washed-up comedian, and the man behind Waldo—an animated bear who later transforms into an instant political celebrity through his taunting of traditional or establishment candidates. Waldo’s creative, emotive, and anti-conventional theatrics contributes to the relentless valorization of entertainment over rational discourse. Ironically, there were moments in the episode where the people appreciated the presence of Waldo than the real human candidate, despite the former offering nothing but anti-establishment rants. Indeed, contemporary society is eclipsed by numerous algorithm-manipulated Waldos, created to dominate and prevent people from questioning and thinking about the things that really matter.

The victory of current U.S. President Donald Trump is a paradoxical Waldo moment. Trump is one of the foremost beneficiaries of the information regime and a complex political anomaly. As a noted symbol of infocratic politics, his political camp is enormously defined and shaped by “viral information. Infocracy promotes success-oriented, instrumental forms of action and leads to the spread of opportunism.”<sup>56</sup> Han further argues that “in asserting whatever suits his purposes without compunction, Donald Trump is not a typical liar ... He is, rather, indifferent towards factual truth. Someone who is blind to fact and reality poses a greater threat to truth than does a liar.”<sup>57</sup> Brian Massumi in *The Personality of Power*, describes Trump as:

... an exception as a person, moved by no program, no ideal, no norm, only expediency, practiced chaotically on the fly sending out waves of disturbance that stir up the sediment of society.... Trump, the media figure, is a stirrer: a node of quasi-chaotic agitation spinning off vortices of disturbance just begging for an ascription to hang themselves onto, in order to give them a sense of solidity and well-foundedness. Trump: the preeminent accident of person.<sup>58</sup>

Like Waldo, Trump’s affective and anti-establishment theatrics contribute to the incessant privileging of spectacle over concrete, dedicated, and sophisticated discourse in the realm of politics. Not only Trump, but a vast number of politicians, political aspirants, and organizations globally utilize the techno-algorithmic services of *psychometrics*. It is a powerful

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erosion of truth, Han clarifies, started even before Trump’s politics of fake news. See Han, *Infocracy*, 46.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Brian Massumi, *Personality of Power: A Theory of Fascism for Anti-fascist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025), 19.

mechanism that hybridizes profiling and marketing by sending voters personalized advertisements, based on their psychograms, *via* social media. Like consumer behavior, voting behavior is subject to unconscious conditioning. Microtargeting, in the form of dark ads or fake news, is not operationalized for critical awareness but for the manipulation of voters' perception and the decomposition of society's discursive atmosphere.<sup>59</sup> Sadly, some people abhor engaging with actual people but find pleasure in inadvertently interacting with opinion-manufacturing bots to allow them to be psychopolitically dominated, thereby endangering democracy. Overall, the data-driven manipulation-laden infocracy undermines the democratic process, which necessitates slowness, community, and complexities. As Han laments,

Digital communication redirects information flows in a way that undermines the democratic process. Information is distributed without passing through public spaces ... The internet is therefore not a public sphere. Social media intensifies this *communication without community* ... Digital communities are not commodified forms of community. They are incapable of *acting politically*.<sup>60</sup>

Going back to Trump, his decisive non-consecutive victory,<sup>61</sup> despite being a convicted felon, should be understood not a mere mass clamor for a messianic leader in time of despair. Of course, his controversial victory underlines the Americans' massive dissatisfaction with the USA's present socio-economic status, policies on border security, and the future of the country. Dramatically, Trump successfully packaged himself as a performative persona capable of manipulating the people's collective emotions, i.e., as a political device that articulates their disenchantment and revenge. Such an affective political strategy, which Massumi calls *fascism*, confirms Han's distinction between affective communication and rational discourse. According to the latter, the algorithmic-laden and positivized infrastructures of the digital regime are incompatible with rational discourse or politics in general. Simultaneously, the former prevails over the latter in the digital society:

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<sup>59</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> See Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>61</sup> Bailey Richards, "Donald Trump Is the Second President in History Elected to 2 Non-Consecutive Terms — Here's the Other," in *People* (20 January 2025), <<https://people.com/donald-trump-second-president-nonconsecutive-terms-after-grover-cleveland-8735726>>.

Rational decisions require a long-term perspective. They are based on reflections that extend beyond the present moment into both past and future.... In information society, we simply do not have the time for rational action. The compulsion of accelerated communication deprives us of rationality. Under temporal pressure, we instead opt for intelligence.... Intelligent action aims at short-term solutions and successes.<sup>62</sup>

Affective or digital-driven communication, on the other hand, is shaped by emotionally driven and trivialized stories and decontextualized information (fake news)—farewell to complex, deliberated, and pragmatic principles and narrations that previously constituted politics. Appallingly, the dominance of affective politics and fabricated truths should be perceived as a symptom of a wider crisis of democracy.<sup>63</sup> Thanks to neoliberal capitalism's assimilation of the digital regime, contemporary society metamorphoses into an ecosystem composed of isolated selves, regulated by affective spectacles, and manipulated by data-analytics.

A society repugnant to complex political deliberations is a society devoid of criticality and courage. Moreover, it is a society equipped with a warped understanding of history, which establishes no intricate relation to the past and the future. Without these attributes, contemporary society transforms into a smooth highway of capital. Concurrently, it produces individuals constitutive of amorphous political identities, like a politician who always maintains neutrality related to different issues just to appease all the consumer citizens, even at the expense of betraying previous promises and the values of his/her political organizations.

The pathologization of political consciousness converts the subject into a positivity machine whose life despises exuberance and the impetus for socio-political transformation. When society is occupied by depoliticized subjects, it avoids challenging the existing political-economic system and instead merely focuses on reinforcing the status quo. What governs the achievement subject is 'digital outrage'<sup>64</sup>—governed by affective and ephemeral emotion depicted in 'politically correct' social media posts. These posts usually lack profundity, real-life concretization, and the potency to

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<sup>62</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> For a more nuanced discussion of the decline of democracy at present through Han, see John Piccione, Byung-Chul Han: Digital Technologies, Social Exhaustion, and the Decline of Democracy," in *New Explorations: Studies in Culture & Communication*, 3:2 (Fall 2023), <<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/nex>>.

<sup>64</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. by Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 8.

transform oppressive societal conditions. Swiftly flooding individuals with various trivialized information prevents them from conducting an in-depth and holistic analysis of their societal situatedness and forming a community marked by solidarity and negativity. Aside from rapid information bombardment, accelerated time thwarts information's cultivation to become knowledge. In this regard, information becomes deformative, communication becomes cumulative, and social awareness and critique are stifled.

An infocracy-bred concept which contributes to the crippling of the political is *dataism*.<sup>65</sup> Through this concept, people stop their critical evaluation of societal issues or predicaments the moment they are presented with data. For example, when people are provided with some unverified statistics about the decrease of poverty and unemployment in a particular country, they will no longer question the legitimacy of such evidence. Whereas some of this information is weaponized as optics, some is just fake news proliferated to manipulate people's perception and further promote passivity.

Dataism, moreover, decays time into fragmented presences. For this reason, it debilitates people from recognizing the links between past occurrences and the present, previous advocacies of leaders and their present platforms, and the systemic problems or objective violence, which perpetually condition multifaceted instances of subjective violence. In the dataist domain, people do not care if current apologists of authoritarian leaders are former human rights advocates, if present legislators are ex-convicts, and if famous life-coaches are mere social media influencers.

Dataism, likewise, prides itself on the idea that society may still work without politics. For example, party- or class-based democracy will soon achieve extinction to give way to a post-democratic politics—infocracy. In this regime, "Politicians will be replaced by experts and computer scientists who will *administer* society without relying on ideological assumptions or advancing particular interests. Politics will be replaced by *data-driven systems of management*, with decisions taken on the basis of big data and artificial intelligence."<sup>66</sup>

### Negative Politics: From Deactivation to Contestation

Against positive politics—the politics grounded in transparency, affective communication, and self-optimization, among others—negative politics may be described as a counterforce that privileges individuals'

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<sup>65</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 22-24.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

deactivation from hyperproductivity and hyperconnectivity, and as the committed practice of slow and reclusive living.<sup>67</sup> Correspondingly, Žižek reminds us that there are situations when the most practical thing to do, in his case against left liberal communism or global capitalism, “is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to ‘wait and see’ by means of a patient, critical analysis.”<sup>68</sup> These practices are essentially fueled by the *vita contemplativa*—the heart of Han’s negative politics. In *The Scent of Time*, he underscores the role of contemplative thinking as a new form of resistance.<sup>69</sup> In opposition to Arendt’s notion of action,<sup>70</sup> he states that contemplation is the very principle that gives meaning to action.<sup>71</sup> Contemplation is neither the cessation nor the suspension of action, but a rest-in-itself which grants freedom to its agent. Such immanent freedom diverts the individual from being an *animal laborans*, and more importantly, ruptures the monotony of work and everyday living. This interruptive characteristic transforms the *vita contemplativa* into a revolutionary stance. However, he underlines that this revolution is a hybridity of contemplation and action: “A *vita contemplativa* without acting is blind, a *vita activa* without contemplation is empty.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, negative politics presupposes the immanent relation between contemplation and action. The revitalization of the *vita contemplativa*, hence, should not only include the practice slowness or inoperativity, but also the unfeigned re-invention of rituals—the “symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world.”<sup>73</sup> Through rituals, the amorphous and narcissistic identities of individuals can be surmounted or neutralized through symbolic depth, communal belonging, and critical memory.

The institution of the family, for instance, can serve as a fecund habitat for these aforesaid values. According to the article, “Nostalgia shields psychological wellbeing from limited time Horizons,” nostalgia, as a form of emotional anchoring, helps individuals to stabilize their lives by establishing a perpetual link between their past and present:

A rich store of meaningful memories that can evoke nostalgia and remind them of their value, ability, and belonging. The human capacity to experience nostalgia

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<sup>67</sup> Some authors believe that Han distances himself relatively from politics. See, for example, Jeremy Bell, “Against Surfing: On Lingering with Byung-Chul Han,” in *Cultural Politics*, 13 (Spring, 2017), 131.

<sup>68</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 85–114.

<sup>70</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.

<sup>71</sup> Han, *The Scent of Time*, 94.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>73</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 2.

may buffer the threat of limited time horizons and provide one strategy in people's psychological toolkit to facilitate successful aging.<sup>74</sup>

In this vein, parents should cultivate vibrant and critical memories with their children, constitutive of quality time, creative love, and strong play. In the future, these memories can serve not only as the children's psychological, but also existential sanctuary, especially during times of exhaustion, depression, and oppression. Scaled up, the cross-pollination between these interventions and pre-existing practices, as well as embedded memories within the community, can help reconfigure the understanding and practice of rituals, thereby engendering significance beyond the self and temporality. When radicalized, they can engender people to actively (or negatively) participate in redefining political relations, to relate past anomalies to the present, and to question current political monsters.

However, the disquisition on the *vita contemplativa*, in conjunction with the recalibration of rituals, is not the only feature of his theorization of negative politics. Another feature worth exploring is how negative politics serves as the antithesis to the society of positivity's psychopolitical domination and infocracy's algorithmic data-manipulation. As a counter-principle, negative politics is characterized by eroticism, gaps, and silence. It is also shaped by play, agonism, and interruptions. These attributes intersect rhizomically across his writings and assume numerous forms, such as rage, *parrhēsia*, *idiotism*, *eros*, and *listening*, to name a few.

Just a caveat, explaining and concretizing these principles does not automatically liberate people from the dictatorship of neoliberal capitalism. Going against the grain of the present is a Herculean task. Realistically speaking, elucidating and territorializing these principles could either radicalize some bastardized practices and amorphous identities, or the system could smoothly totalize them, thereby aggravating people's self-exploitation and the community's degeneration. Hence, these principles necessitate a valiant and sustained struggle against the unseen enemy (us)—the locus of the neoliberal capitalist exploitation, and other agents of oppression. Instead of crafting a world without positive violence, negative politics transfigures contemporary society into a contestable field marked by fluidity and undecidability. From my perspective, it is a more practicable objective than imagining a grand antidote to all these predicaments.

In *The Burnout Society*, Han describes *rage* as a principle of negativity—a power to say *No* to the society of the *Yes*. Rage:

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<sup>74</sup> Erica G. Hepper, Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Samantha Robertson, and Clay D. Routledge, "Time Capsule: Nostalgia Shields Psychological Wellbeing from Limited Time Horizons," in *Emotion* 21: 3 (April 2021), 644–664, <<https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000728>>.

[P]uts the present as a whole into question. It presupposes an interrupting pause in the present. This is what distinguishes it from anger [Ärger]. The general distraction afflicting contemporary society does not allow the emphasis and energy of rage to arise. Rage is the capacity to interrupt a given state and make a new state begin. Today it is yielding more ... to offense or annoyance ... Annoyance relates to rage as fear relates to dread [Angst]. In contrast to fear, which concerns a determinate object, dread applies to Being-as-such. It grips and shakes the whole of existence. Nor does rage concern a discrete state of affairs. It negates the whole.<sup>75</sup>

In *The Agony of Eros*, Han further opines that rage “radically breaks with convention and inaugurates a new state of affairs.”<sup>76</sup> Given its disruptive power, rage is neutralized by neoliberal capitalism by converting it into guilt, exhaustion, and, as mentioned earlier, digital outrage. Accordingly, the subject turns against itself, rather against the neoliberal capitalist society or the society of positivity: “People ... see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system .... [P]eople are turning their aggression *against themselves*.”<sup>77</sup> More importantly, such impoverishment disables people from creating new things and values, which could potentially radicalize the present towards the future.

Furthermore, the crisis of truth, the principal feature defining the information regime, depicts a crisis of society and of politics. Without truth (discursive, radical, and communal), social cohesion among community members becomes a lost cause. Han emphasizes that the crisis of truth “disintegrates *from within*, and this means it comes to be held together only by external, instrumental, economic relations.”<sup>78</sup> The commodification of human values and intersubjective practices prevalent in the society of positivity or information regime annihilates the individual and the community. Amid this perilous period, a society grounded in certain discursive truths and people operating as a collective, related to external authorities, is significantly lacking. Although the whole *Infocracy* book observes a critical attitude against infocracy, and its political consequences, Han interestingly cites Foucault’s notion of *parrhēsia*—the act of valiantly speaking the truth. In the context of the information regime, this act

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<sup>75</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 22-23.

<sup>76</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, trans. by Erik Butler (London, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 43.

<sup>77</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 50.

indispensably requires superlative courage, especially in a world dominated by algorithm-manipulated information and fake news and inhabited by a politically amorphous populace. *Parrhēsia* enables individuals to express their thoughts and opinions openly.<sup>79</sup> It necessitates “individuals who act politically to tell the truth, to care for the community by making ‘use of discourse, but of rational discourse, the discourse of Truth.’”<sup>80</sup> Such an act establishes a community, and consequently, assumes genuine political importance. True democracy requires individuals who can question the status quo, engage genuinely and patiently, and heroically dare to speak the truth. Against the detrimental odds of authoritarian organizations or states, some individuals remain ready to sacrifice a normal life to practice *parrhēsia*.<sup>81</sup>

One foremost example is Maria Ressa, the founder and CEO of the Philippine-based online news site *Rappler*. Under her watch, the news channel critically investigated former President Duterte’s controversial drug war, in conjunction with state-sponsored and infocratic disinformation campaigns. As a result, she was repeatedly harassed by the administration through cyber-libel and tax evasion charges and was even arrested.<sup>82</sup> Despite pressures and threats, she became one of the symbols of global anti-authoritarian initiatives. Regrettably, despite receiving a Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 and inspiring many nations repressed by authoritarianism, Ressa was converted by the neoliberal capitalist ideology as a “brand,” i.e., “as a conflation of an individual human subject with the logics of marketing, individual libertarianism, and ‘social responsibility.’”<sup>83</sup> Although this allegation may partially erode Ressa’s integrity, it must also be seen as opposing a more complex adversary: the infocratic system engineered by the U.S.-Philippine elite centrism and/or U.S. geopolitical interests, which effectively totalizes media personalities, regardless of how revolutionary-minded they may be.<sup>84</sup>

A corollary concept to rage and *parrhēsia* is idiotism. In a world governed by a tsunami of information, becoming a philosopher necessitates

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 46; See Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*, ed. by Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 136.

<sup>80</sup> Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 158, as cited in Han, *Infocracy*, 53.

<sup>81</sup> In various domains, some notable figures include Daphne Caruana Galizia (Malta), Christopher Wylie (Canada/The UK), Greta Thunberg (Sweden), Citizen Lab Researchers (Canada), and Maria Ressa (The Philippines).

<sup>82</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Maria Ressa: editor of Rappler news website arrested on ‘cyber-libel’ charges,” in *The Guardian* (13 February 2019), <[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/13/philippines-journalists-decry-intimidation-as-website-editor-arrested?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/13/philippines-journalists-decry-intimidation-as-website-editor-arrested?utm_source=chatgpt.com)>.

<sup>83</sup> Ma. Diosa Labiste, and Tom Sykes, “The Great Woman Theory of Media History: Maria Ressa, the neoliberal influencer brand and US-Philippine elite centrism,” in *Media Asia* (October 2025), 1–22 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2025.2571676>>.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

becoming an idiot. In Han's words, "Idiotism discloses a field of immanence of events and singularities that eludes subjectivation and psychologization."<sup>85</sup> Idiotism appears as a symbol of resistance against the hypertransparent, achievement-obsessed, and narcissistic contemporary society. The idiot, he continues, "is unallied, un-networked, and uninformed. The idiot inhabits an immemorial outside, which escapes communication and networking."<sup>86</sup> Embodying the figure of the outsider, the idiot's mode of communication is silence.<sup>87</sup> Silence as a form of resistance resonates with Deleuze's politics of silence in *Negotiations*. In his words, "It's not a problem of getting people to express themselves, but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say."<sup>88</sup> Despite idiotism's politics of silence, it remains a radical act, in reclaiming the self, and opening the individual to the community.

Idiotism, as a radical politics of silence, opens us to the other. Such an encounter captures Han's notion of *eros*, which is "a relationship to the Other situated beyond achievement, performance, and ability."<sup>89</sup> The future that rage imagines acts the Other's locale. With *eros*, political actions are defined by a mutual desire for the future, i.e., for another way of living. Unfortunately, since the present is bereft of eroticism, political action merely translates into the quest for self-optimization, trivialized, polarizing, and ephemeral causes. The revitalization of *eros* significantly engenders a society of non-calculation, opacity, and listening.

*Listening* exhibits *eros* in affirming the Other as alterity. For Han, it assumes a political dimension, because it involves "active participation in the existence of Others, in their suffering too. It is what joins and connects people to form a community."<sup>90</sup> After freeing individuals from the labyrinth of narcissism, the act of listening likewise serves as a gift and sacrifice for the *time of the Other* as "the hospitable listeners empties themselves to become the resonance chamber of the Other."<sup>91</sup> Neoliberalized politics of time abhors the Other's time mainly because of its unproductivity and unquantifiability. In doing so, it also prevents itself from experiencing time as celebration with the Other, "the time of joyful bloom, which evades the logic of production ...

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<sup>85</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 81.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>87</sup> See the chapter, "Capitalism dislikes Silence," in Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, 104–117.

<sup>88</sup> Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 129. See *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>89</sup> Han, *The Agony of Eros*, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, 77. See Han, *Topology of Violence*, 47 and Hartmut Rosa, "The Idea of Resonance as a Sociological Concept," in *Global Dialogue* (9 July 2018), <<https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/the-idea-of-resonance-as-a-sociological-concept>>.

<sup>91</sup> Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, 72.

Unlike the time of the self, which isolates and separates people, the time of the Other creates a community."<sup>92</sup> Listening as a gift and a sacrifice is not only a time of celebration, but also a time of healing, both individually and collectively.

The act of rage, the radical task of speaking the truth, idiotism, and the politics of eros and listening would become fruitless principles if isolated from other initiatives and causes. Revisiting some of Han's negative philosophical concepts, locating fragmented revolutionary geographies, and fashioning pockets of resistance, do not guarantee a light at the end of the tunnel. Given the confluence of psychopolitical violence and other statist and molecular oppressions, it is undoubtedly disheartening to launch protests on different fronts and even through innovative means. Indisputably, they can be commodified by neoliberal capitalism or the information regime for incessant surveillance and control. Solidarity initiatives aimed at eradicating social injustice or gender inequality, for example, can be easily utilized by left-liberal communists to call people to act immediately to address certain crises, thereby preventing them from exacerbating the root causes of these problems.<sup>93</sup> Such pseudo-urgency, Žižek asserts,

was exploited by Starbucks ... when, at store entrances, posters greeting customers pointed out that a portion of the chain's profits went into health-care for the children of Guatemala, the source of their coffee, the inference being that with every cup you drink, you save a child's life.<sup>94</sup>

Via Han, any revolutionary projects can be used by individuals to boost their egos in pursuit of an illusory notion of freedom, and miserably, towards exhaustion and societal atomization. He further argues that revolution can never be founded on consumption, nor can consumption be the end of revolution.<sup>95</sup> Fingers, the organ used in buying or clicking, "by themselves, are not capable of genuine action. They are only an *organ for making consumer choices*. Consumption and revolution exclude each other."<sup>96</sup> Sadly, consumption disrupts the symbiotic relationship between people and the community. In this vein, politics metamorphoses into a degenerate milieu for an impossible revolution for "there is no cooperative, networked

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>93</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, 16.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Han, *Infocracy*, 22.

multitude that could serve as a global protest movement and revolutionary body."<sup>97</sup>

In the context of Han's scathing critique of neoliberal capitalism and infocracy, it is inevitable not to be pessimistic or hopeless. As Han confesses in *Capitalism and the Death Drive*: "I wanted to work towards some solutions, but I only described further problems."<sup>98</sup> However, his criticisms overlap with his belief that some rituals and practices remain capable of eroticizing exhausted selves and reconfiguring atomized communities and debased political structures of the present. These concepts, oftentimes implicitly and unsystematically elucidated in his writings, hope to transform people from being pessimistic or triumphalist to being more cautious and critically hopeful. Hope, Han lucidly writes in *The Spirit of Hope*:

... is a searching movement. It is an attempt to find a firm footing and a sense of direction. By going beyond the events of the past, beyond what already exists, it also enters into the unknown, goes down untrodden paths, and ventures into the open, into what-is-not-yet. It is headed for what is still unborn. It sets off towards the new, the altogether other, the unprecedented.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I wove together Han's fragmented remarks on the degeneration of contemporary society, in conjunction with his philosophical jargon, towards a theory of negative politics. To achieve this goal, I explained first his critical analysis of neoliberal capitalism and problematized his theory of violence. Particularly, I elucidated his notion of positive, psychopolitical, and infocratic domination against the backdrop of some pressing issues in the globalized world. After establishing these theoretical pillars, I utilized some revolutionary principles or concepts embedded in Han's writings to inform my theorization of negative politics.

Fundamentally, negative politics is fueled by the *vita contemplativa*, rage, parrhēsia, idiotism, eroticism, and listening. For the sake of clarity, Han's negative politics is not only fueled by the act of contemplation, but also by communal rituals and radical actions. In other words, this novel theory of politics is based on the symbiotic connection between deactivation and

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<sup>97</sup> Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, 18.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>99</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Spirit of Hope*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), 10–11.

contestation, or to put it radically, a continuous and valiant act of deactivation and contestation.

In broad strokes, this paper aimed to demystify the accusation that Han's philosophy is anti-political or offers nothing to address the problems plaguing contemporary society. In the conventional or immunological sense, Han's philosophy is described as devoid of any explicit political relevance. However, from the post-immunological domain, he provides humanity with ethical and symbolic frameworks, which will allow them to creatively and critically navigate the positive, psychopolitical, and infocratic burdened contemporary society.

Negative politics is not simply a polarized brand of politics capable of antagonizing the positivized politics undergirding the neoliberal capitalist society. Moreover, its negativity is not defined by its capacity to launch a direct, grand, and statist confrontation against neoliberal capitalism. On the one hand, it critically diagnoses the adversary's protean configuration and violence, albeit in a more cautious, prudent, and nuanced manner. On the other hand, it circumvents neoliberal capitalism by focusing on how to rethink society's rituals to de-psychologize and free the individual from the narcissistic hamster wheel, territorialize their existence within the community, and recover life's scent and vibrance. Of course, the latter may not immediately translate into something directly political, but recalibrating the community and life may contribute to the rehabilitation of the political landscape. In a similar fashion, revisiting communal practices may not directly address the various political problems besetting contemporary society. However, they can help redefine the people's intersubjective relations and revive their capacity to question the present and imagine a negative future.

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