

## HAN, B.-C. (2014). *A SOCIEDADE DO CANSAÇO*. LISBOA: RELÓGIO D'ÁGUA

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*The Burnout Society* is a translation by Gilda Lopes Encarnação of the German book *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* by Byung-Chul Han. The monograph is covered by the disparity, inspired by Hegel, between negativity and positivity, that is, the opposition between a relation based on otherness and a relation based on the permissiveness of the identical. By means of this distinction, Han criticizes the implications of the cultural and communicational transformations of our time, namely the new configurations of labor, attention and mental illness. The hypercommunication, which is addressed by Han as a modality of violence of positive society (in opposition to the negative society), is linked to several excesses, particularly to an overload of productivity and media stimuli. Today's experience takes place in a space covered by overflowing egos, in a space of permissiveness of the identical, the antagonistic figure of otherness. For the first time presented in Portuguese through the translation of this book, Han's work involves a critical view of the sociability of the century, allowing to think the cultural, existential and social consequences of hyperactivity and current hypermobility.

We are dealing with a very short text, which nevertheless does a very elaborated use of the few words that compose it. Although Korean, Han is a philosopher of German orientation, a walker on the routes of fundamental ontology. Han was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1959. He began to study metallurgy and in the 1980s he headed to Germany in order to study literature. He studied German Literature and Theology at the University of Munich but, given the language difficulties, Philosophy was the field in which he received his doctorate in 1994 with a thesis on Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg. Since 2012, Han is professor of Philosophy and Cultural Studies at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Berlin, where he heads a General Studies program.

It is from the very first chapter of *The Burnout Society* that Han poses the possibility of periodization through pathologies. This practice of analysis will be named "pathological reading" in the sixth chapter (p. 45). By means of such practice, Han distinguishes the succession of several periods: a bacterial, a viral, an immunological and, finally, a neuronal one. The contrast is mostly done through the transition between the immunological period and the neuronal one. For Han, the twentieth century was an immunological epoch, whose terminology was dominated by the idea of attack and defense of the Cold War. The fundamental principle of negativity is its dialectical character. It is in the fact that the immunological other is a negative denying the self after introducing therein. The immunological way of subject has an interiority that defends him from the exclusion of the other. The object of the immunological defense is, thus, the otherness.

The rejection, in the immunological case, corresponds to a reaction to this negativity of the other. This eliminates all the otherness via a clear differentiation between what is interior and exterior, friend and enemy, self and strange. The negativity of the other creates infections, and the immunological prophylaxis eliminates the other by subjecting the self to the violence of the vaccination technique. The affirmation of the self takes place in another person, so for denial of its negativity. Thereby the immunological world develops limits which difficult the universal exchange. According to Han, the immunological categories are particularly associated with the philosophical discourse of existentialism.

For Han, the early twenty-first century is characterized by a neuronal principle. The end of the Cold War occurs following the change from the immunological paradigm to the neuronal one. A non-immunological rejection arises. It is connected to an excess of positivity in biological and social models. In biological terms, Han refers to the replacement, conducted by the American immunologist Polly Matzinger, of otherness by destructive behavior as the object of immunological defense. In the social framework, the otherness is suppressed in favor of the difference and the exotic: the other is transformed into the identical and, concomitantly, the world becomes low in negativity and opulent in positivity. The identical, says Han criticizing Jean Baudrillard, does not lead to the strengthening of defenses, for it does not support negativity. The non-immunological rejection does not imply exclusion because to exclude, asserts Han, presupposes the existence of a negative interiority. The increasing of positivity gives shape to new modalities of violence, such as overproduction and hypercommunication. This violence does not arise from otherness, but from the identical: it derives from the system in itself and it is developed in permissiveness, satisfaction and completeness. The manifestation of this violence through symptoms that Han called “heart attacks”, as would be exhaustion, fatigue or a feeling of suffocation, provides an account of its neuronal character (p. 16). Therefore, the pathological reading of the twentieth-first century highlights neuronal disorders, such as depression, attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, but also personality disorders, such as borderline personality disorder and burnout syndrome.

In the second chapter, Han tries to show that today's society is not disciplinary. The latter kind of society would be negative because the concept that defines the discipline is determined by prohibition. Discipline, and even control, is expressed through the verb “cannot”, forming subjects who cannot, “subjects of obedience” (p. 19). What breaks this obedience is the completion of productivity, which implies permission, not prohibition. Thus currently society is characterized by the limitlessness of the verb “can”, by the formation of “subjects of production”, “entrepreneurs of themselves” (p. 19). Han diagnoses an institutional, a regulatory and an individual transformation: hospitals, asylums, prisons, barracks and factories were replaced by gymnasiums, office towers, banks, airports, shopping centers and genetic labs; bans, organizations, orders and laws were replaced by projects, initiatives and motivations; madmen and criminals were replaced by the depressed and frustrated. In this context, Han presents Alain Ehrenberg's thesis that depression is found in the transition between the disciplinary model and the model of personal initiative. But Han goes further than the author he quotes. For Han, depression

is not only the pathological expression of the imperative for the individual to be himself, but the expression of the individual to achieve a higher yield being himself.

Han is dedicated, in the third chapter, to show how the excess of positivity, manifested, on the other hand, in excess of stimuli, information and impulses, transforms the structure and the economy of attention. On account of the fragmentation and dispersion of perception and the associated technique of multitasking, the deep and contemplative attention of cultural life has been supplanted by a “hyperattention” (p. 26). For Han, this is analogous to the multiple attention of the wild animal. That’s why Han can say that multitasking “does not represent a civilizational progress” but rather “a regression” (p. 25). The hyperattention is characterized by the frenzy in changing the focus of attention: as the wild animal, the survival of the current individual depends on a multifocal attention. This hyperattention is intolerant to a relaxation which enables contemplation, profound tedium.

This concern for contemplation brings Han, in the next chapter, the fourth, to distinguish between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. For this, he returns to Hannah Arendt. In Arendt as in Heidegger, following Han’s reading, *vita activa* is associated with the primacy of action. The binding of men to action arises from birth, through birth every person is able to restart humanity. Also in Arendt, the possibility of action is destroyed by the reduction of men to a passive *animal laborans*. This reduction condenses, in turn, *vita activa* forms to labor. Humanity, in this context, is no more than a mere phenomenon or biological process. The future of humanity, tells us Arendt through Han, depends on the power of the working man, whose most effective function is the one of thought. Han makes three critiques of Arendt. The first is that, contrary to what the author argues, the Christian tradition requires a compromise between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, for, considers Han quoting St. Gregory, this tradition cogitated *vita activa* leading to *vita contemplativa* and the latter leading back to the former. The second criticism is that the examination by Arendt of the triumph of labor cannot resist to the current context, because the current *animal laborans* is not passive, but hyperactive. In this sense, Han compares contemporary hysteria of productivity, responsible for depression and personality disorders, with the insensitivity of the Muselmänner of the concentration camps, whom were so weak that didn’t distinguish between the sense of cold and the chill of an order. The third critique of Arendt is targeted specifically at the end of her book on the human condition, which ends with a quote from Cato – *Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum agere, nunquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset*. For Han, these words are contextually lagged since they were originally cited by Cicero praising *vita contemplativa* and Arendt uses them complementing *vita activa*. The problem is that Arendt involuntarily refers to *vita contemplativa* without accomplishing that the correspondence between the loss of contemplative capacity and the absolutization of active life leads to the current hysteria and nervousness.

From *vita contemplativa* Han starts to focus on the pedagogy of vision required by contemplation. In the fifth chapter we find a description of this pedagogy and of its collapse in our days. Han returns to Nietzsche, who considered necessary a teaching of

seeing based on the familiarization of the eye to serenity and patience. This would mean, in Han's opinion, a teaching of the eye to pay attention deeply and contemplatively, to learn how not to react immediately to an impulse. The immediate reaction and the reaction to any impulse are symptoms of pathology. *Vita contemplativa* is not a passive opening, but a resistance to external drives through the guidance of vision. It is necessary to deny, to say no. The same is true for receiving the otherness: there needs to be a negativity of pause, of interruption; it is essential to have a stop. It is essential, it seems, ultimately, to set limits, (re)cognize them and respect them. Only this negativity allows the action of contemplation. However, negativity slows the process of acceleration required to produce, due to the breaks it forces. So the subject of production suppresses negativity to maximize production. Thus, the current world suffers from a poverty of interruptions, intermediates and gaps. The acceleration suppresses these stops, and the action becomes a prolongation of the existent, it disperses and becomes a pure activity or hyperactivity. The general increasing of positivity turns men into "autistic production machines" (p. 42).

In the sixth chapter, Han conducts a pathological reading of the short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street", by Herman Melville. This reading is contrasted with the ontotheological interpretations that Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben made of the same text. For Han, the tale is a story of a world that reduced the human to an *animal laborans*. Bartleby's society is disciplinary as evidenced by prohibitive architectural symbols, such as walls and the frequent use, as its title suggests, of the term 'Wall'. However, all clerks of the law firm where Bartleby works suffer from neurotic disorders. The general agitation is opposed to Bartleby's apathy and inertia. According to Han, Bartleby *doesn't present yet* symptoms of depression, such as lack of self-confidence, sense of inferiority, self-recrimination or self-harm. Bartleby *doesn't have to live yet* with the imperative to be himself, because he is still a "subject of obedience". The formula many times repeated by Bartleby of "I would prefer not to" expresses the inertia of this subjection. Against Deleuze's "new Christ" and Agamben's "pure potency", Han argues for a Bartleby as "Being negative towards death" (p. 49). What characterizes this Bartleby is the refuse. His path ends with the discovery that he was the employee of the dead archive of the post office, of the mails which were not delivered. The symbolic of grass and sky in the episode of prison, which Agamben identified as messianic, is to Han a contrast to death. According to Han, these signs of life constitute a failure of the illusion, for only through the negativity of rejection one can achieve the possibility of the opposite – in this case, of life.

In the last chapter, with homonymous title to the book, Han describes the evolution from a society of production to a society of doping and he explains how this evolution is manifested at the level of burnout. The doping, as the positively so-called 'neuroenhancement', induces the conversion of the human body into a "production machine": doping allows the yield without interruptions or faults with the objective of the maximization of production. This development produces an "alienating fatigue". Han uses the distinction drawn by the writer Peter Handke between an "alienating fatigue" and an "eloquent and conciliatory fatigue" or "fatigue confident in the world" or "fundamental

fatigue” or even in other words “clairvoyant fatigue” or “profound fatigue” (pp. 53-54). The first type describes a burnout of positive potency: it is individual and insulator, excessive, destructive of the common because the self is the only horizon of vision, destroyer of the slowness of forms; it is a burnout *of* the other. The second type of burnout is on the order of negative potency: it reduces identity and blurs the outlines of things, it lets see and to be seen, it lets touch and to be touched, it enables attention to the length of forms, it restores the duality, it establishes a sympathy – the latter enables, establishes and unites a community of things and people; it is a burnout *with* each other. Han shows that Islamic and Christian religious communities follow traditions establishing societies of burnout, but a burnout *with* each other. On the contrary, the positive society is a society of burnout *of* the other.

As concluding remarks, one should understand that Han’s defense of otherness doesn’t seem to set up any sort of auspice to negative schemes historically constituted. In other words, it is not that he wants to defend the disciplinary political regimes of the twentieth century. Han’s book doesn’t resend its reader to another time. Indeed, the author recalls the relation which once settled so lividly through a critique of the disruption of that relation. Therefore, Han does not make an apology of immunity, although he identifies it with negativity. The constant historicist emphasis and pathological concern are the driving-force of a periodization of regimes within which is the immunological one. Ultimately, the contrast between the “immunological period” and the “neuronal period” stresses the immunological scheme because within it the otherness was highlighted by negation. Anyway, this Han’s book deserves the attention of those interested in communication, media and sociability in the today’s society. In the book there is a route of reflection which brings the researcher’s gaze to the importance of otherness and to the impact of the hypercommunication, the hypermediatization and also the hypermobilization in human condition. //

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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