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THE SOCIETY OF MIRRORS: CRITICAL DIALOGUES WITH THE ESSAY "THE EXPULSION OF THE OTHER: SOCIETY, PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION TODAY", BY BYUNG-CHUL HAN (2024)

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript establishes critical dialogues with one of the most prestigious essays by South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han, entitled 'The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today' - first published in 2016 by Matthes & Seitz Berlin Verlagsgeselischaft mnH., under the title 'Die Austreibung des Anderen - Gesellschaft, Wahrnehmung un Kommunikation heute'. Based in Germany, where he teaches and does scientific research at the Berlin University of the Arts, in this essay the author continues his reflections on the dynamics between man and society, with an emphasis on the relationships between subjects and the association of enslavement that the subject maintains in the face of the capitalist system. It is through this lens that Han discusses the reproducibility of equals in a society that no longer makes room for differences, strangeness and authenticity. Perhaps, in 'The Expulsion of the Other', Han manages to complement his elucidations in 'The Burnout Society' and 'Palliative Society: Pain Today' - masterpieces of his career - by asking: where will we end up in a world where the existence of the genuine 'I' is impossible?

Keywords: The Expulsion of the Other. Society of Equals. Capitalism.

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BACKGROUND: HAN, THE ESSAYIST

"The noisy society of weariness is deaf. The society of the future could, on the other hand, be a society of listeners and listeners" (Han, 2024, p.134 – translated by the author). This is how one of the most important philosophers of the 21st century ends one of his most recent essays on the ruin of human singularities. In his meticulous and provocative work “The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today”, Han invites us to enter his particular universe.

This universe presents itself as a space of inseparability between Han and the multiple paths of his most precious and priceless object of investigation: society – specifically, the dynamics of *homo sapiens sapiens* in society. Byung-Chul Han, a master essayist who has been decorated worldwide, has been writing philosophical manuscripts about the human experience of the Other and the Environment ever since he left the metallurgy industry and graduated in philosophy from the University of Freiburg, as well as German literature and Theology from the University of Munich. However, this turning point began slowly when he immigrated to Germany at the age of 26, and he admits that at the time he had no idea what philosophical studies were all about:

> I wanted to study German literature. I didn't know anything about philosophy. I knew who Husserl and Heidegger were when I arrived in Heidelberg. Being a romantic, I wanted to study literature, but as I read very slowly, I couldn't do it. I switched to philosophy. To study Hegel, speed isn't important. It's enough to be able to read one page a day (Han, 2014, s/p - interview given to Francesc Arroyo, from the newspaper ‘El País’ –, translated by the author).

However, by lying to his parents and abandoning the metallurgy trade in South Korea, he turned to the essayistic, investigative and philosophical career that so entangled him and gave him meaning in life (Arroyo, 2014). And so he did. He became a Hegelian by nature, as he defended his doctoral thesis in 1994 on the thoughts and premises of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who embodied his own strand of elucidations within philosophy – providing immaterial contributions to phenomenological and existentialist studies. Having considered a small part of the trajectory of the author of the manuscript on which this critical dialogue and (why not?) review is based, let's return to the work under analysis in this text. In “The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication

Today", Han (2024) will bring even more disturbing provocations than those we have already covered paragraphs above, since his *modus operandi*, as a subject, surrounds a profound critique of the culture of the performance society and the process of homogenization of human singularities, both forged by capital[-ism] (Voltas, 2025).

DEMOLITION: THE TERROR OF THE SAME

Can you imagine living in a society full of people who are all the same as you? Without any differences and without any modulations that reveal a change? A world filled only with reflections of you. This is how Han begins his essay, provoking us to think about how we have become so completely intolerant of the 'Other' that we unconsciously only want to deal with reflections of ourselves in time and space. The problem is so worrying, for the philosopher, that we end up inclined to relate - affectively, socially, lovingly (etc.) – to copies of ourselves.

According to the South Korean, we don't realize that we are heading towards the precipice that will make us lose the last spark of authenticity that belongs to us: the idea of 'I'. At this very moment, our perceptions of the world are being fed back by the "new-equal", as Han puts it (2024, p.8 – translated by the author). We have reached a level of such criticality towards the human condition that we may not be able to go back. The condition that makes us human is in the plural, according to the author, who also mentions it in other of his books (Han, 2015, 2020), and is defined by our ability to skillfully and complexly establish dynamics such as communication and perception (through the use of language) and have the ability to perform certain actions and tasks, which require us to have sophisticated intelligibility.

We no longer expose ourselves to apparently vulnerable situations, where the unknown can give us an almost instant glimpse of a future action full of negativity. We have become accustomed to the palpable positives that are just like us, which guarantee us the security that any strangeness would never guarantee us. *Sine dubio*, the relationship between capital and human beings (Barbosa, 2004), which transforms them into *animal laborans* [Han, 2020 – in a clear analogy to Hannah Arendt's (2016) criticism of the system of exploitation of human labor, which ruled out any possibility of contemplating life, making it just an open field for production: a life of activity; a life frantically articulated with the process of deciding-producing-consuming].

It is on this threshold that Han, in his approach to society in the contemporary now and then, addresses the expulsion of the Other, defining it as a counter-body, something that perhaps might not even be one of the human characteristics of this 'I' that seeks equals. Han (2024), in chapter seven of the work, places the lexicon 'against' (present in 'counterbody') in

a position of confrontation in relation to this 'I'. There is a relationship of threat, danger and intimidation between the two parties – an 'I' and an 'Other'. In this sense, says the philosopher, "[...] something opposes [...], turns around [...], contradicts [...], repels [an 'I' - author's increments]" (p.71 – translated by the author). Automatically, there is no way of seeing any positivity in this confrontation through the lens of rationality – or even through the lens of sentimentality.

Accustomed, then, to the positive, the positivity and the superpositivity resulting from contemporary society, also known as the consumer society, the hyper-consumer society, the productivity society, the hyper-productivity society and so many others, the subject finds themselves in a highly conflicted position, since the system itself creates problems for which there are no solutions (Han, 2024). On the contrary, it creates an ecosystem of "unfamiliar and unknown" anxieties (p.49) that lead people to develop neural pathologies linked specifically to the emotional, affective and mental systems. Now, if this being [co]exists in a certain society that is the culprit of an unattainable positivity and a craftsman in the manufacture of human copies that are subservient to capitalist production, so that the others-just-like-me can perform the same function of frantically manufacturing objects for consumption, how can we avoid the desperate collapses of the self and the unbalanced anguish of the self?

Sick of itself, this body doesn't just expel the 'Other' that it initially found strange because of the characteristics it perceived to be different from its 'Self'. This body, in turn, is likewise other-equal, transiting through spaces filled with copies of itself, which speak as its body speaks, which perceive space as its body perceives it, which act as its body acts and which is, in society, what its body is, already of itself, no longer recognizing itself (Han, 2024). He finds himself 'derealized' (derealization) and depersonalized: depressed, prone to self-destruction and highly contaminated by an unnamed virus that breaks down all the barriers of his immune system. He then becomes a subject expelled from himself (Han, 2024).

GLOBAL VIOLENCE: THE ANNULMENT OF THE 'I'

"In the future, there will possibly be a profession called listener" (Han, 2024, p.123 – translated by the author). The South Korean is not wrong to say this, in a kind of endorsement of this period at the opening of the last chapter of his essay. However, we can say that, for decades, there have been professions similar to those that the philosopher raises as "listeners": psychologists, psychoanalysts, occupational therapists, social workers and many others can largely be framed as professionals who depend especially on listening and hearing to establish the exercise of their profession - considering only the areas of health. However,

what the scientist establishes with this phrase and the developments he attributes to it, following the last chapter's mention of the imminent profession of “listener”, is the excavation of a path that opens up space for, first of all, leaving aside the replication of ‘I's and extermination of the 'Others; the 'Strangers’. This means "[...] first, welcoming the other; that is, affirming the other in their otherness. Then I present him with a gift of listening" (Han, 2024, p.123 – translated by the author).

If we were to enter the still foggy field of studies and investigations into the future [alternatively known as ‘futurology’, ‘futurism’, ‘investigations into the future’ or ‘prognoses’ (Wescott, 1972) (translated by the author)], we could hypothesize some implications of Byung-Chul Han's ruminations on the dynamics of the *animal laborans* in its [“new”] *habitat*. However, we don't need to go that far to realize that capital[-ism] is living in great seclusion in the face of its countless contradictions and controversies, which won't keep it alive for much longer (Dudda, 2020). In view of this, there are unfavorable prognoses for a society of equals that no longer has individual identities. The strength of the action of listening in the face of the power of the production movement is weak per se and has little adherence from the subjects. Gradually, the hope of a scenario in which authenticities reappear and the cannibalization of identity diversity grows disappears in futurology.

When we talk about society, communication and perception in Byung-Chul Han's now and today, an uncertainty will emerge that is scientifically based on the diagnoses of slavery in the relationship between subject and work (on a global scale), which have never disappeared, but have only taken on new guises over the centuries and in different places (Dowlah, 2021). And these symptomatological clues that point to a future horizon that is not at all favorable to the subject who tries to no longer alienate themselves from a society filled with “new-equals-to-me” (Han, 2024, pp. 65-76 – translated by the author) are even more significant when we look at Flechtheim (1966) and Sardar (2010) elucidations on what the future holds when we tend to get stuck and repeat actions from the past.

Considering the act of giving the power of voice to the other (Han, 2024, pp.87-101), realizing that there is power and importance in validating the other's view of life (Han, 2024, pp.77-86), making oneself vulnerable and adapting to the language that this other possesses (Han, 2024, pp.103-113) and respecting the other's thoughts (Han, 2024, pp.115-121) are, for Han, imperative steps in order to reach the act of listening to the other; so that this other can be expelled from the ‘I’ in the way that it really should be: by legitimizing it in its particularity, weirdness, strangeness and rarity. Let's just hope that futurology, “[...] already studied for more than half a century” (Sardar, 2010, p. 178 – translated by the author), makes some huge mistakes and the ‘I’ can free itself from the capital ties of production that chain it

to the reproduction of the same and to the slave modus operandi of the *vita activa* defined by Arendt (2016) – cyclically moved between work, work and action.

Alternatively, the subject would eventually exist free and in the face of diversity (and not just subsist in the face of a tide of copies of themselves), being able to achieve the presuppositions of a *vita contemplativa* (Arendt, 2016; Han, 2023). Only with this possibility - not being exploited by the system of hyper-productivity, which nurtures an incessant chain of exacerbated product consumption - would the subject be neuronally more capable and able to see the other from the perspective that is their own and pertinent. In the words of the South Korean, it is only in the occurrence of this necessary chance that we can "[...] give the other an ethical priority, listen and respond to the other [...]; as opposed to the time of the self, which isolates and separates us, the time of the other promotes a community. It is therefore a good time (Han, 2024, pp. 121-135 – excerpts –, translated by the author).

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To my parents, who always believed in me, even when I never believed in myself.

To science. To philosophy. To critical thinking. To kindness. To gentleness. To self-care. To love.

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