

BOOK REVIEW

The Hermeneutics of Pain

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Byung-Chul Han, *The Palliative Society: Pain Today, Polity* 2021, 76 pgs, \$14.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781509547241.

In a letter to Martin Heidegger, an indignant Ernst Jünger emphatically proclaimed, "Tell me your relation to pain, and I will tell you who you are" [1]. In the early thirties, Jünger published a controversial essay on pain that was dismissed by many of his contemporaries for covertly endorsing the ideology of Nazi Germany. Nearly eight decades later, Byung-Chul Han, the South Korean born German philosopher, is convinced that Jünger stumbled upon a great discovery — our relation to pain does indeed reveal what kind of society we are. Accordingly, Han believes that every social critique must therefore proceed by way of a "hermeneutics of pain" [p 8].

Like Zizek, and more recently, Badiou, Byung-Chul Han is one of the few writers in the continental tradition who has succeeded in gaining a readership outside the corridors of humanities departments. His recent monograph, *The Palliative Society: Pain Today*, draws from our experience of the pandemic to explore modern society's troubled relationship with pain. For the most part, *The Palliative Society* extends the arguments proposed by Han in his first and most celebrated work, *The Burnout Society* [2]. Both works are based on the premise that this late modern society of ours is no longer bound to the disciplinary structures of the post-industrial age. The paradigm of disciplinary society, which Foucault meticulously described in his works, has now given way to a new image of society that places the onus of discipline upon the individual. Discipline, which was once coupled with obedience, is now linked to achievement and becomes a matter of self-regulation. If disciplinary society was determined by its injunctions, "achievement society" is defined instead by its affirmations. In Han's view, the slogan

"yes, we can" has replaced "we should" as the guiding tenet of our times [2]. One of the consequences of this paradigmatic transformation is that we find ourselves trapped in a performance society where subjection to disciplinary institutions has been replaced by subjection to oneself. This transformation does not signal a break or discontinuity; on the contrary, it appears perfectly rational if we accept the principle that capitalist society is shaped by a collective "drive to maximize production". The paradigm of achievement is a more efficient framework to increase productivity than one based on "discipline" from above [2]. In one way or another, nearly all of Han's published monographs in English explore the psychosocial consequences of living in a society where the "achievement-subject" has replaced the "obedience-subject" as the dominant mode of *being*.

Contemporary society relentlessly promulgates the maxim that nothing is beyond our grasp. According to Han, "the neoliberal dispositif" has stretched the discourse of achievement to the point where it has become one's *duty* to succeed [p 19]. Success in the achievement society is conceived as a measurable function of production, as a contribution to the free market economy. He insists that this attitude has unwittingly resulted in the institutional elimination of pain from public discourse, as the market equates pain with a loss of productivity. By situating pain solely within the purview of medicine and medical practices, Han believes that we have "[neglected] its character as a sign". If pain does indeed have a semiotic function in the achievement society, it is as a "*sign of weakness*". Suffering, in its passivity, "has no place in an active society dominated by ability" [p 10]. In Han's view, society as a whole is now reeling from *algophobia*, or the fear of pain, and this is complemented by the emergence of a 'cult of positivity' that promises to free the individual from pain and disappointment.

For Han, excessive positivity is a poisoned chalice that promises deliverance yet gives rise to new forms of pain. In *The Burnout Society*, Han follows the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg in locating the origin of depression, burnout and other "neuronal illnesses" in the transition from disciplinary society to achievement society. In his view, "depression spreads when the commandments and prohibitions of disciplinary society yield to self-responsibility and initiative"; however, he insists that "it is not the excess of responsibility and initiative that makes one sick, but the imperative to achieve" [2]. *The Palliative Society* expands this argument by

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linking these illnesses to changing social attitudes towards the body. In the post-industrial society, the human body has become the site of an altogether slavish devotion. According to the classical, "heroic" view of the world, the body is conceived simply "as a distant outpost that can be deployed and sacrificed in battle," the implication being that "life must be arranged in such a way that it is 'armed' against pain." In contrast, the post-industrial subject is a "hedonistic ... bourgeois subject" who worships the body "without any relation to a higher purpose." In his view, the late modern subject's "sensitive body ... has lost the horizon of meaning" that was traditionally provided by pain [p 18]. When pain becomes "strictly medical and pharmacological," it ceases to be "eloquent [and] even critical" [p 20]. As a consequence, disciplinary spaces are replaced by palliative zones of well-being whose only purpose is to prolong human life for as long as possible. Perhaps appropriately, Han asserts that the dominant logic of "the palliative society" is *survival* (in contrast to *living* or *flourishing*), which makes its aspirations no different to those of a virus [p 25].

As such, for Han, the pandemic was a jolt out of nowhere that disrupted the unchecked positivity of achievement societies. It laid bare the hollow ethics of capitalism that is woefully "[lacking] a narrative of the good life." Nonetheless, although the pandemic succeeded in administering "a shock to capitalism ... it hasn't suspended it" [p 27]. It may have exposed society's shaky edifices, but ultimately, it means nothing if capitalism is not supplied with a paradigm that orients life and gives it meaning. In Han's view, contemporary society has severed pain of its traditional ties to the notion of "the good life": "passion binds pain and happiness together ... [but] the palliative society does not permit pain to be enlivened into a passion, to be given a language" [p 10]. Classical ideas of the good life often involve a constructive engagement with pain. The moral life, in these accounts, is defined by the strategies by which one copes with and transcends pain in a manner that not only brings meaning and joy to oneself but also to humankind as a whole. Han appears to argue that a moral life is impossible without presuming some kind of pain because to act morally might also entail going against one's desires or instincts. Furthermore, the depoliticisation of pain is also calamitous to social change, as "the catalyst for revolution ... is shared pain": in his view, we become conscious of invisible networks of domination and injustice only when we actively engage with

pain as the source of higher meaning [p 22]. Interestingly, Han links the rise and fall of third way politics (neither left nor right) and consensus centrism in the Western world to be reflective of society's inability to confront pain. It is not a surprise then that he endorses a kind of agonistic politics that seeks to dispute, disagree, and at times, offend [p 8].

Despite the persuasiveness of its arguments, Han's monograph runs the occasional risk of being naively reductive. The ideas discussed in the text are inevitably embedded in a continental worldview that is unable to account for hybrid societies where the ideology of achievement is co-opted or subsumed by disciplinary structures. Furthermore, it is difficult to agree unreservedly with the correspondence he establishes between mental illness and contemporary social structures. Perhaps the articulation, visibility and the sheer pervasiveness of these "neuronal illnesses" may be a recent phenomenon, but we find rich discussions on the subject in the classical tradition spanning from the Stoics to Robert Burton, which Han evidently glosses over. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the monograph offers little to no engagement with clinical literature on mental illness. Nonetheless, what he lacks in rigor he makes up for in readability. As a reflective piece, *The Palliative Society* is pleasingly quaint, but it may not be the work of critical theory that the pandemic demanded.

Like Jünger, Han risks valorising certain forms of pain over others. Jünger was, of course, one of the leading ideologues of the German Conservative Revolution that shunned Enlightenment individualism in favour of a "heroic realism" [1]. Unlike traditional conservatives, Jünger and his compatriots did not yearn for a return to an idealised past; on the contrary, they attempted to trace the contours of a new kind of heroism that is commensurate with the demands of "the technological society." One may discern a comparable strain of conservatism in Han's monograph, but in its attempt to problematise pain as a necessary condition for genuine contentment, it is closer in spirit to Badiou's *Happiness*, which, in a similar vein, extols the importance of risk and adventure in our pursuit of the good life [3].

References

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2. Han B. *The Burnout Society*. California: Stanford University Press; 2015.
3. Badiou A. *Happiness*. London: Bloomsbury Academic; 2019.