



Journal of Philosophical Investigations

Journal of Philosophical Investigations

Print ISSN: 2251-7960 Online ISSN: 2423-4419

Homepage: <https://philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir>



University of Tabriz

Democracy and Information in the Age of Digitalization*

Fabio Tononi 

Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for the Humanities (CHAM) in the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences (FCSH) of NOVA University of Lisbon, Portugal. Email: fabiotononi@fcsb.unl.pt

Article Info

Article type:
Book Review

Article history:
Received 07 July 2024
Received in revised form
15 July 2024
Accepted 25 July 2024
Published online 07
September 2024

Keywords:
Byung-Chul Han,
democracy, digitalization,
infocracy, information,
truth

ABSTRACT

What is the state of democracy today? In the Western world, people often take the meaning of this term for granted, but do they genuinely know what democracy is? In this sense, how can we define democracy in today's digitalized world? What is the relationship between democracy and information? Furthermore, do we really live in a democratic world? In *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy—the 2022 translation of the original German book Infokratie. Digitalisierung und die Krise der Demokratie*, published in 2021 by MSB Matthes & Seitz Berlin Verlagsgesellschaft mbH—Byung-Chul Han reflects on these and other related issues. Han's analysis of the current political, social, and technological situation indicates that a profound democratic crisis is emerging. The loss of interest in truth, the end of grand narratives, the replacement of reason with data analysis (even in philosophy), the fragmentation of the population due to digitalization, and the predominant role of information in everyday life are all symptoms of a radical transformation underway in Western society, with severe consequences for democratic stability. In these terms, Han's vision, at times excessively pessimistic, orients us on the crucial issues of our time.

Cite this article: Tononi, F. (2024). Democracy and Information in the Age of Digitalization. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 18(48), 117-132. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2024.18253>



© The Author(s).
<https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2024.18253>

Publisher: University of Tabriz.

* This essay is a review of *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy*. By Byung-Chul Han. Translated by Daniel Steuer. Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022. 66 pp. This article had the support of CHAM (NOVA FCSH / UA), through the strategic project sponsored by FCT (UIDB/04666/2020). <https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04666/2020>.

I.

Han's book is structured into five short chapters. In the first, "The Information Regime," Han describes the present epoch as a form of domination rather than a democracy. In this form of domination, digital information plays an important role with negative repercussions on culture, economy, politics, and society.¹ Han regards artificial intelligence as a threat to democratic stability. Then, he draws parallels between the information regime and the disciplinary regime. Whereas the former exploits *information* and *data*, the latter exploits *bodies* and *energies*.

In the age of digitalization, power consists of having access to information that can control and predict people's behavior. This resource becomes useful for political and economic reasons: "Information regimes are tied to information capitalism, which develops into surveillance capitalism and reduces human beings to *consumer cattle that provide data*" (1). Information capitalism, resulting from digitalization, is a new form of capitalism, different from industrial capitalism, which resulted from mechanization.²

Han compares and contrasts the notion of the information regime with Michel Foucault's description of the disciplinary (or biopolitical) regime. Whereas the former is based on surveillance (via data) because it is characterized by communication, the latter is based on isolation, and it is exemplified by the panopticon.³ Another difference between the two regimes is that while the disciplinary regime "inserts the body into a production and surveillance machinery" (2),⁴ the information regime is not interested in the body in a biological sense, but it "seizes *the psyche* by way of a *psychopolitics*" (3).

Another interesting point that Han addresses is the association, in Western society, of the body with aesthetic appearance and fitness. Notably, Günther Anders and Zygmunt Bauman previously detected the tendency of people to submit their bodies to the beauty industry, though Han does not mention the insights of these two scholars. In *The Outdatedness of Human Beings* (1956), Anders (2016: 29–95 (36)) discusses women's use of make-up "as a reification of the self," arguing that the true naked body is the unmodified one, not the unclothed one. In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman (2000: 76–80) addresses the consumer's body, referencing the distinction between health and fitness. According to Bauman (2000: 77), far from being synonymous, the terms belong to two different discourses: "If health is a 'no more and no less' type of condition, fitness stays permanently open on the side of 'more.'" That is why fitness belongs to a capitalist conception of the body—it is a surplus state of health supporting the business of gyms. Whereas we may know

¹ On the information age and the rise of the network society, see Castells (1996–98).

² On information capitalism and industrial capitalism, see Han (2021), Boltanski & Arnaud (2020), Stiegler (2019), and Boltanski & Chiapello (2018).

³ On the panopticon, see Foucault (2020a: 195–228).

⁴ On capitalism and the corporeal, see Foucault (2020b).

when we are healthy, we cannot know when we are fit enough. Like the capitalist attitude toward desire (commodities), fitness has no end.

In this context, visibility and spectacle assume an overriding importance.¹ As Han states, whereas in the pre-modern sovereign regime, both visibility and spectacle were the prerogative of those who dominated, in the information regime, visibility and spectacle mainly involve those who are dominated. This shift is particularly evident on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which are based on (private) image sharing. In this sense, the information regime reflects a surveillance-based society (via data).

Han also compares and contrasts the notion of the information regime with George Orwell's notion of the surveillance state, outlined in his 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In Orwell's book (2000), it is "Big Brother," not the panopticon (as in Foucault), that maintains permanent visibility. This omnipresence is indicated by the frequently reported sentence, in capital letters, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU." However, as Han suggests, Orwell's description of the surveillance state still refers to the disciplinary regime, where "spatial measures such as confinement and isolation guarantee the visibility of the subjugated" (4).

On the contrary, in an information society, openness replaces confinement, and isolation gives way to communicative networks. Visibility and surveillance are still rooted in the information society, though in a different way. Whereas visibility is guaranteed by interconnection, "[d]igital information technology turns communication into surveillance" (4). The more intensely people communicate through digital technology, the more effective surveillance becomes. For example, social media tools are clearly surveillance technologies—the danger is that surveillance is masked by communication and the supposed freedom that social networks also purportedly offer. Therefore, contrary to the disciplinary regime, people feel free despite their submissive status in the information regime, which thus does not need to impose the same level of disciplinary pressure. However, this is not necessarily a positive outcome since, as Han states, "[w]hen freedom and surveillance coincide, domination becomes complete" (5). In other words, in this situation, people are dominated without knowing it.

In the information regime, people feel the need to expose themselves, and they desire visibility. The notion of transparency is crucial here.² As Han states, "[t]he information regime pursues its policies in the name of *transparency*" (5). According to Han, "[t]ransparency is the *systemic compulsion of the information regime*. The imperative of transparency is: *everything has to be available as information*" (5). In this sense, transparency becomes synonymous with information, with Han stating that "[t]he information society is a transparency society" (5). However, there is a

¹ On the role of spectacle in society, see Debord (1995).

² On the notion of transparency, see Han (2015).

paradox: “*people are imprisoned by information*. By communicating and producing information, they shackle themselves” (5). Therefore, the digital becomes a transparent prison.

Nonetheless, domination is never transparent, even in an information-sharing society: “Transparency is merely the front of a process that is itself invisible” (6). According to Han,

The rule of the information regime is hidden because it is fully incorporated into everyday life. It hides behind the friendliness of social media, the convenience of search engines, the soothing voices of the virtual assistants and the courteous servility of smart apps. The smartphone is in fact an efficient *informant* that exposes us to 24/7 surveillance. (6)

Thus, surveillance emerges from the comfort of everyday life, and the information society does not resist the dominant regime. It is clear that no revolution can emerge from this situation. This situation defines neoliberalism: it offers freedom and “positive incentives” (7), allowing neoliberal regimes to control people’s will at an unconscious level. In this way, “[r]epressive disciplinary power gives way to smart power, a power that does not give orders but *whispers*, that does not command but *nudges*” (7). The influencers on YouTube and Instagram play a significant role in this context. They embody the neoliberal imperative of freedom and desire through their travels, beauty, dress, and fitness.¹ Influencers exercise such a fascination that “[w]hereas people use ad-blockers to remove conventional advertisements on YouTube, they intentionally seek out the influencers’ ads” (7). Followers purchase the products influencers display on their channels, using scenes from their daily lives. As Han points out, “influencers present consumer products as means of self-realization” (8). In this way, consumption and identity merge.

According to Han, the neoliberal information regime “is a *totalitarianism without ideology*” (9). Whereas ideologies inspire the masses,² the information regime tends to isolate people, who, instead of following a leader, follow influencers and form a digital swarm.³ In the age of digital media, there is no mass man without identity. Instead, the inhabitant of the digital globe has a (behavioral) profile. In this sense, referring to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconscious” (Benjamin 2003), Han coins the expression “digital unconscious,” noting that “[b]ig data and artificial intelligence enable the information regime to influence our behavior at a level that lies below the threshold of consciousness” (10). In this respect, power today means possessing and controlling information.

¹ On the role of influencers in society, see Tononi (2023a; 2022).

² On totalitarianism and the role of ideologies for the masses, see Arendt (1986).

³ Han has already dealt with the notion of digital swarm in Han (2017a).

II.

In the second chapter, “Infocracy,” Han explains the titular concept, a combination of information and democracy. According to Han, digitalization has not only changed people’s lives and how they relate to each other but has also transformed the essence of information and democracy. The consequence of this transformation is that “[d]emocracy is degenerating into *infocracy*” (12). For example, the political and rational discourse of modernism, which was based on a book-centric culture, was much more complex than that of postmodernism and hypermodernism, which have formed an information culture devoid of reason and reasoning.

Democratic (and political) discourse mediated by the mass media results in *mediacracy*, which means that people forgo rational discourse and voters become passive recipients. Mass media caused the decay of the democratic public sphere because politics must submit to their logic (Habermas 1992). However, the principal aim of mass media is to entertain and amuse the public, which then transforms into a priority in the political agenda (Han 2019; Postman 2006). In this context, the distinction between fiction and reality disappears, undermining rationality. As Han states, “[w]hat counts in televised debates is not the quality of the argument but the *performance*” (15). In this sense, it is not by chance that people belonging to the world of cinema and mass media become successful politicians—from Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Michael Bloomberg in the United States to Silvio Berlusconi and Beppe Grillo in Italy, from Eva Perón in Argentina to Volodymyr Zelens’kyj in Ukraine. Usually, the candidate who masters communication and self-presentation wins elections. In this way, the political discourse degenerates into a series of slogans.

In a neoliberal, infocratic society, people are at the mercy of amusement, consumption, entertainment, and spectacle. However, in the information regime, people are no longer passive spectators—with smartphones and touchscreens, they become producers, transmitters, and consumers of information. In this respect, Han states that “[c]ommunication has become a form of addiction and compulsion, and the frenzy of communication ensures that people remain in a new state of immaturity” (17). The prolongation of immaturity is indeed a new issue today (Badiou 2017), resulting from the overlap of the public and private spheres; people’s attention “is dispersed rather than directed towards issues relevant to all of society” (17).

According to Han, to understand the crisis of democracy in Western society, it is necessary to analyze the phenomenology of information. Information is ephemeral and differs from narration, which is based on temporal continuity. Characterized by the “appeal of surprise,” information fragments people’s perceptions, condemning them to live in an eternal present. It follows that “time-intensive cognitive practices such as *knowledge*, *experience* and *insight* are pushed aside” (18). Thus, democracy is in crisis because the information society has a short-term nature, whereas democratic discourse is “characterized by a temporality that is incompatible with accelerated,

fragmented communication” (18). Therefore, temporal expansion is missing in the information regime, but it is crucial for the democratic discourse, which is based on rational decision-making and action.

In the communication that characterizes the information society, what prevails is not the most articulated and rational argument but the most captivating information. As Han states, “[f]ake news is more interesting than fact. A single tweet containing fake news or a fragment of decontextualized information may be more effective than a reasoned argument” (19). This view is exemplified by the (sometimes successful) political attitude of Donald Trump, the first Twitter president, who reduced his political platform to simple tweets. His politics has no vision, but it is sustained by viral information.

Another aspect that distinguishes the information society is that most social network profiles contain enough information to know a person much more than what (s)he believes (s)he knows about him- or herself. In this sense, a smartphone becomes a “psychometric recording device,” as Han calls it, that people feed daily with personal data. Thus, it is possible to calculate its user’s personality with high precision. In this respect, Han contrasts biopolitics with psychopolitics.¹ Whereas the former describes a regime that had at its disposal *demographic* information, the latter describes a society that constantly generates *psychographic* information.

As Han points out, psychometrics is the essence of marketing, both in consumption and politics. Consumer behavior and voter behavior are subject to unconscious influences, and people receive personalized advertisements based on their social media profiles. In this way, the regime of information undermines democracy, which is based on freedom of thought and action. Instead of informing, so-called micro-targeting manipulates voters through calculated and personalized electoral advertisements and fake news, which result in *dark ads* that are invisible to the public and fragment the population, poisoning the democratic process. Consequently, citizens no longer pay attention to matters concerning the betterment of society. In this way, society’s self-observation, a fundamental aspect of a democracy, disappears.

III.

In the third chapter, “The End of Communicative Action,” Han argues against the idea put forward by the media theorist Pierre Lévy (1997) that representative democracy can be replaced by real-time digital democracy. Digital democracy is characterized by constant communication and feedback. However, this kind of digital swarm, as Han calls it, cannot form a proper collective that can act politically because, in this context, voters become isolated followers trained by influencers. As Han states, “[a]lgorithm-controlled communication on social media is neither free nor democratic” (26). Under these conditions, social media brings people to a new state of immaturity.

¹ Han has already discussed psychopolitics in Han (2017b).

As Han asserts, smartphones “are much more likely to produce consumption and communication zombies than mature citizens” (26). Social media tools also function as windows where private matters are constantly presented to the public, leading Han to argue that smartphones are responsible for the disintegration of the public sphere. Therefore, the internet is not and cannot be a public space because information is generated and received in private spaces.

Han detects a decline in today’s social communication, inasmuch as the new dichotomy of influencers–followers has substituted the community of the public sphere, leading to the end of the discursive practice in the sense put forward by Hannah Arendt (1969). Displays of commodities, propaganda, and publicity have replaced social interaction. Through thousands of selfies, influencers indoctrinate their followers on how to dress, what to eat, and where to go on holiday; in other words, they become models of life. This indoctrination produces self-referential information bubbles, which hinder communication (Pariser 2011). Han states, “[w]ith the development of the auto-propagandistic compulsion, discursive spaces are increasingly replaced by echo chambers in which the only voice one hears is one’s own” (28). Since it involves listening, discourse is at the base of democracy. Therefore, the crisis of discourse also becomes a crisis of democracy:

The longer I surf the internet, the more my filter bubble becomes filled with information that I like and that reinforces my convictions. I am shown only those views of the world that conform to my own. All other information is kept outside the bubble. (29)

All this destroys the public sphere. However, according to Han, this process of disintegration begins *offline* in a globalized, atomized, and narcissistic society. There is, in fact, an “inability to listen” to the other; thus, Han talks about the “disappearance of the other” (30).¹ Globalization and the hyperculturalization of society that follows destroy the traditional cultural contexts that characterize a shared lifeworld.² This process may lead to some positive outcomes, such as freedom and cultural enrichment, but it also leads to the dissolution of communicative action (Habermas 1986). In this sense, Han does not seem to offer the upbeat description of globalization and hyperculture that distinguished his 2005 book *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalization*; now, he seems to have a more critical view of hypermodernity.

IV.

In the fourth chapter, “Digital Rationality,” Han criticizes the so-called dataists, who—following Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1968)—argue that the disintegration of the public sphere, the enormous quantity of information available, and the growing complexity of the information society make

¹ Han has already discussed the concept of the disappearance of the other in Han (2018). See also Habermas (1993).

² On globalization and hyperculture, see Tononi (2023b) and Han (2022). See also Bauman (1998).

communication obsolete (Azuma 2014; Skinner 1973). As they maintain, discourse is replaced by data.

Han distinguishes between communicative rationality and digital rationality. Whereas the former guides discourse and involves reasoning and learning, the latter lacks both communicative and discursive qualities. Instead, in artificial intelligence, reasoning has been replaced by algorithms. As Han states, “[i]n the course of the discursive process, arguments can be *improved*. In the course of the computing process, algorithms are constantly *optimized*. They thereby independently correct the mistakes they make. Digital rationality replaces discursive learning with *machine learning*” (36). Dataists contrast Habermas’s theory of communicative action with a behaviorist theory of information that rejects discourse (Pentland 2015; 2014). From a dataist point of view, digital rationality is superior to communicative rationality.

Han disagrees with dataists, particularly when they propose a society without politics: “They would argue that, if a social system is sufficiently stable, that is, if the system enjoys far-reaching consent at all social levels, then genuinely political action, action that aims to create new social conditions, is superfluous” (38). In fact, according to dataists, political parties and ideologies emerge in societies dominated by inequality. For this reason, dataists believe that party-based democracy will soon come to an end, and, according to Han, it will be replaced by *infocracy—a digital post-democracy*.

In this scenario, politicians “will be replaced with experts and computer scientists who will *administer* society without relying on ideological assumptions or advancing particular interests” (39). Similarly, politics “will be replaced by *data-driven systems management*, with decisions taken on the basis of big data and artificial intelligence” (39). Therefore, if this apocalyptic scenario occurs, data and algorithms—instead of discourse and communication—will regulate and optimize the social system. In this way, human freedom will be outmoded. As Han states, “[t]he only thing that matters is an *efficient exchange of information* between functional units in order to increase performance. Politics and governments are replaced with planning, control and conditioning” (42). It follows that there are compatibility problems between democracy and a society ruled by artificial intelligence.

Elsewhere, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) rejects the dataist vision of the human being, calling for a more active role for people in society and public spaces. In a dataist universe, what matters is the exchange of information and the analysis of data with the help of artificial intelligence. These processes lead to the end of the discursive public sphere, democracy, and humanity as we know it.¹

¹ See also Žižek (2023).

V.

In the fifth chapter, “The Crisis of Truth,” Han argues that the present epoch is marked by a new nihilism, different from the one expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche (1999: 72f). The emergence of this new nihilism coincides with the loss of interest in truth. Indeed, the information age is characterized by fake news. It is an epoch in which disinformation and conspiracy theories make people lose their sense of reality and its factual truths. As Han states, “[t]he circulation of information is completely decoupled from reality; it takes place in a hyperreal space” (44). In this sense, the idea of *facticity* is lost, leading Han to argue that we live in a *defacticized* world.

Truth is an important convention that serves to maintain societal cohesion: it gives a sense of the binding signification of things and regulates social life. The disappearance of the need for truth and the disintegration of society reinforces each other. With the new nihilism, the distinction between truth and lie is blurred.¹ At the base, there is a preponderance of information. As Han put it, “[t]he new nihilism is a symptom of the information society” (46). In fact, information itself destroys social cohesion: “The new nihilism emerges within the same destructive process that leads to the *crisis of democracy: the disintegration of discourse into information*” (46). Information alone does not and cannot explain the world. Information can even obscure the understanding of the world because it gives rise to a basic distrust.

As Han explains, whereas information is *additive* and *cumulative*, truth is *narrative* and *exclusive*. Thus, Han opposes information with truth. Truth “eliminates contingency and ambivalence. When elevated to the form of a narrative, it provides meaning and orientation. The information society, by contrast, is devoid of meaning” (52). In fact, people—who have never been so informed—have never been as disoriented (Badiou 2022; Bauman 2006) because information cannot yield orientation.

According to Han, the new fake news phenomenon is not reducible to a series of lies, but rather it is “an attack on the facts themselves. It defacticizes reality” (46). If the public discourse loses its connection to facts and factual truth, it degenerates into a farce. As Han states, “[e]ven the most diligent fact-check cannot produce truth, because truth is more than the rightness or correctness of information” (52). Moreover, flaunting freedom of expression to justify fake news is a petty game. As Han states, “[s]omeone who is blind to fact and reality poses a greater threat to truth than does a liar” (46). The pinnacle of this phenomenon was reached by Donald Trump’s 2020 political campaign: “Trump’s politics of fake news is possible only under the conditions of a *de-ideologized information regime*” (51). In fact, the present epoch is characterized by the end of both ideologies and grand narratives. These events underline how important truth is as a social convention.

¹ In this sense, Harry G. Frankfurt (2005) discusses the notion of bullshit, which Han deems insufficient to explain the current crisis of truth.

In 2005, *The New York Times* detected a new neologism: “truthiness.” Contrary to what the term might suggest, according to Han, truthiness is a symptom of the crisis of truth. It signifies a “truth” that lacks any factual basis. As Han argues, truthiness is a phenomenon of digitalization that expresses a nihilistic attitude towards reality: “*The digital is directly opposed to factuality*” (51). In fact, due to its manipulative nature, digitalization undermines the sense of reality.

Truth works in a precise way: statements must be tested by counter-arguments until consensus is reached among all participants in the discourse, guaranteeing social cohesion. Understood Socratically, truth is a discursive process to achieve understanding and consensus (Foucault 2011; 2010). Therefore, the crisis of truth is also a societal crisis. Moreover, “[t]he temporality of truth is completely different from that of information. While information is relevant only very briefly, truth is characterized by *duration*” (58). Therefore, truth gives stability to life.

Emptied of truth, society disintegrates, and economic relations become the only binding agent that holds society together. The end of grand narratives, which is at the origin of postmodernity, culminates in the information society.¹ Information has replaced narratives. However, information and big data do not *narrate* anything, meaning that the current era is not only facing a *narrative* crisis but, as a consequence, political, economic, environmental, and health crises (Chomsky & Polychroniou 2021; Žižek 2020a; 2020b).

Narration offers meaning and identity. Thus, a narrative crisis leads to a void of meaning and a loss of identity. The result is a disorientation with the world. In this context, conspiracy theories flourish, functioning as *micro-narratives*, which are a sort of remedy for the lack of identity and meaning. As Han states,

Conspiracy theories resist attempts at fact-checking because they are narratives that, despite their fictional character, provide a basic framework through which their adherents perceive reality. In this way, they are factual narrations. In a conspiracy theory, fictionality turns into factuality. What matters is not factuality in the sense of the facticity of truth but the narrative coherence that makes the theory credible. (54)

It is precisely here that democracy collapses into infocracy, and politics switches from reason to emotion. In recent years, politics has appealed to people’s emotions and, therefore, aims at the heart rather than reason. However, as Han points out, “[t]he heart is not an organ of democracy. When emotions and affects dominate political discourse, democracy itself is in danger” (48). Therefore, truth and reason are at the core of democracy.

Discussing the crisis of democracy, Han refers to Plato (2013: II, 257), who, in *Republic*, states that democracy ultimately produces a state abundant “in freedom and freedom of speech” and in

¹ On postmodernity, see Jameson (1991).

which there are “the means to do whatever one wishes” (Book VIII, 557b). According to Han, democracy today has reached this point, which means a chaotic age in which everyone can say whatever is advantageous to them: “This threatens the very unity of society” (56). Plato contrasts a parrhesia understood as the arbitrary assertion of opinions with a parrhesia understood as good and courageous. As Han states, “[t]he true parrhesiast differs from the populist or politician who seeks to flatter the people” (56–7). Therefore, it is essential to abandon the populist attitude to re-establish democracy.

As Han states, “Plato embodies the *regime of truth*” (58). Plato’s remarkable example of the process that leads to truth is expressed by his allegory of the cave, contained in his work *Republic* (2013: II, 106–25 / Book VII, 514a–520a). Plato imagines a group of people who have lived their entire lives as prisoners, chained to the wall of a subterranean cave, unable to see the outside world. A flame illuminates various moving objects, which are silhouetted on the wall in front of the prisoners. Since the prisoners do not have other experiences of reality, they believe these shadows to be real. Plato goes on to explain that the philosopher is like a prisoner who is freed from the cave. The philosopher then sees the fire and the moving objects and understands the source of the shadows inside the cave. (S)he understands that the objects in the cave are just copies of real objects. Therefore, the philosopher is able to see the real world—the world of truth, which is above that of appearances. At the end of the cave allegory, Plato asserts that it is the philosopher’s duty to reenter the cave to explain reality to others. According to Plato, since only the philosopher knows the truth, only (s)he can rule society. However, the prisoners do not trust the philosopher and try to kill him or her.

According to Han, people living in the information regime are, like the prisoners of Plato’s cave, chained in a *digital cave*: “The digital cave [...] holds us *captive in information*” (58). However, Han is more pessimistic than Plato: “The *light of truth* has died down completely. The cave of information has no *outside*” (58). The immersion of people in the digital screen represents for Han the end of truth and democracy.

What is worse, even “[p]hilosophy has now bade farewell to speaking the truth, to the *care for truth*” (57). This situation, I argue, results from the present phenomenon where today, philosophy is mainly done by academicians¹ who emulate natural or so-called exact sciences in the illusion of presenting a more rigorous argumentation. This idea of philosophy contrasts with the Western philosophical tradition, which centers reason as the source of philosophy and truth as its aim (Gentile 2023; Kant 1996; Hegel 1995: 1–116; Aristotle 1933–35). According to Martin Heidegger (2011a; 2011b; 2003; 1968), philosophy is thinking, and science is knowledge.² Science does not

¹ Here it is important to distinguish between academics who deal with philosophy and philosophers. While the former are many, the latter are few.

² See also Žižek (2022: 263–70; 2021) and Barad (2007: 3–38).

and cannot think because it is empirical, and since it is subjected to revolutions, it cannot establish the truth. Following this reasoning, it is clear that grounding philosophy in science produces neither a philosophical thought nor the truth.

This conundrum is particularly evident in analytic philosophy, which is the philosophy pursued in the departments of philosophy at universities in the United Kingdom and the United States of America (Rorty 2020: 195–202), although recently, it has spread in Europe, too. As Richard Rorty (2020: 195) correctly observes, analytic philosophy “declared its independence from the philosophical tradition and from the humanities. It insisted that philosophy should cease to think of itself as a neighbor of history and literature and should do its best to become a science.” If fully pursued, this idea can lead to the death of philosophy.

Most of the time, analytic philosophy produces academic writings on very narrow subjects, preventing scholars from having a broad vision of the topic they address. However, philosophy must deal with the universal, whereas science focuses on the particular. For this reason, philosophers cannot be short-sighted—they must understand the functioning of a given system. As Rorty (2020: 200) put it, “[t]heir rhetoric remains one of pure, quasi-scientific, disinterested search for truth.” On the other hand, continental philosophy, and more specifically that pursued in the philosophy departments of European universities, mostly produces dull manuals on the history of philosophy or studies on single philosophers. Only rarely are there, in both philosophical schools, true philosophers who ground their (original) philosophy on thinking, reason, truth, and freedom.¹

In another passage, Han states: “Today’s philosophy lacks any relation to the truth. It turns away from the present. It is therefore also *without future*” (57). Thus, according to Han, philosophy has no future. However, this seems to be too pessimistic a statement. Precisely because philosophy is going through a profound crisis, both in analytic and continental philosophy, it will be the task of future philosophers to rethink its essence and aim and find new ground. In the near future, rather than disappearing—as Han and, for other reasons, Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow (2010) claim—philosophy will be essential to overcome the great challenges of the time. What is needed is a comparative philosophy that would put in dialogue not only analytic philosophy and continental philosophy but also the philosophy of the West with that of the East.

VI.

In sum, in *Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy*, Han offers a compelling analysis of the state of democracy in the age of digitalization. According to Han, Western civilization is giving up its democratic tradition in favor of ever-increasing technological control over humanity. Han’s position contrasts with the general assumption that the West represents the democratic part of the world. What emerges from Han’s analysis is that technological capitalism is not more

¹ See, for example, Žižek (2021) and Brandom (2009). But I would also include Han’s output here.

democratic than a military regime. Today's Western democracy is an illusion. The Western political and social system is heavily based on digital technology and information, threatening democracy. Capitalism, consumerism, artificial intelligence, and digital information discourage the need for reason, freedom, and truth, which are essential for the democratic discourse.

Han asks for a major return of the human being in politics and society. In fact, politics and society seem to be ruled by big data and digital information, and humanity seems to be controlled by artificial intelligence rather than controlling it. What we need is a disturbance of the status quo, a change of direction, which can only come from reason, freedom, and truth. In this sense, Heidegger's (1981) statement, "only a god can save us," is more pertinent than ever. Although, in the current situation, one might say: "only humanity can save us."

References

- Anders, G. (2016). On Promethean Shame, in id., *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence*, pp. 29–95. Translated and edited by C. Müller, Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Arendt, H. (1969). Truth and Politics, in id., *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, pp. 227–64. Viking Press.
- Arendt, H. (1986). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, André Deutsch.
- Aristotle (1933–35). *Metaphysics*, translated by H. Tredennick, 2 vols, Harvard University Press.
- Azuma, H. (2014). *General Will 2.0: Rousseau, Freud, Google*, translated by J. Person & N. Matsuyama, Vertical.
- Badiou, A. (2017). *The True Life*, translated by S. Spitzer, Polity Press.
- Badiou, A. (2022). *Remarques sur la désorientation du monde*, Gallimard.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1998). *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Columbia University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2006). *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2003). The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, translated by H. Zohn & E. Jephcott, in id., *Selected Writings: 1938–1940*, IV, pp. 251–283. Edited by H. Eiland & M. W. Jennings, 4 vols, Harvard University Press.
- Boltanski, L. & È. Chiapello (2018). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by G. Elliott, Verso.
- Boltanski, L. & A. Esquerre (2020). *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*, translated by C. Porter, Polity Press.
- Brandom, R. (2009). *Reason in Philosophy*, Harvard University Press.
- Castells, M. (1996–98). *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 3 vols, Blackwell.
- Chomsky, N. & C. J. Polychroniou (2021). *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Radical Change*, Haymarket Books.

- Debord, G. (1995). *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books.
- Foucault, M. (2010). *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*, translated by G. Burchell, edited by F. Gros, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2011). *The Courage of the Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*, translated by G. Burchell, edited by F. Gros, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2020a). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A. Sheridan, Penguin Classics.
- Foucault, M. (2020b). The Birth of Social Medicine, in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984. Volume Three*, pp. 134–156. Translated by R. Hurley et al., edited by J. D. Faubion, Penguin Books.
- Frankfurt, H. G. (2005). *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press.
- Gentile, G. (2023). *L'attualismo: Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro; Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere; Filosofia dell'arte; Genesi e struttura della società*, edited by V. Cicero, with an introduction by E. Severino, Bompiani.
- Habermas, J. (1986). *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Volume One*, translated by T. McCarthy, Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (1992). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by T. Burger with the assistance of F. Lawrence, Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. (1993). *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, translated by F. Lawrence, MIT Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2015). *The Transparency Society*, translated by E. Butler, Stanford Briefs.
- Han, B.-C. (2017a). *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, translated by E. Butler, MIT Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2017b). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, translated by E. Butler, Verso Books.
- Han, B.-C. (2018). *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*, translated by W. Hoban, Polity Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2019). *Good Entertainment: A Deconstruction of the Western Passion Narrative*, translated by A. N. West, MIT Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2021). *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, translated by D. Steuer, Polity Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2022). *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalization*, translated by D. Steuer, Polity Press.
- Hawking, S. & L. Mlodinow (2010). *The Grand Design*, Bantam Books.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1995). *Lectures on the History of Philosophy. Volume 1 Greek Philosophy to Plato*, translated by E.S. Haldane, University of Nebraska Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1968). *What is Called Thinking?* translated by F. D. Wieck & J. G. Gray, Harper & Row.
- Heidegger, M. (1981). 'Only a God Can Save Us': The *Spiegel* Interview, translated by W. J. Richardson, in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, pp. 45–67. Edited by T. Sheehan, Precedent Publishing.
- Heidegger, M. (2003). *What is Philosophy?* translated by J. T. Wilde & W. Kluback, Rowman & Littlefield.

- Heidegger, M. (2011a). *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, in id., *Basic Writings*, pp. 307–25, Routledge Classics.
- Heidegger, M. (2011b). *Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics*, in id., *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, pp. 183–212. Edited by D. F. Krell, Routledge Classics.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press.
- Kant, I. (1996). What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking? in id., *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 1–18. Translated and edited by A. W. Wood & G. di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press.
- Lévy, P. (1997). *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, translated by R. Bononno, Perseus.
- Nietzsche, F. (1999). *Unpublished Writings from the Period of Unfashionable Observations*, translated by R. T. Gray, Stanford University Press.
- Orwell, G. (2000). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*, Penguin.
- Pentland, A. (2014). The Death of Individuality: What Really Governs your Actions? *New Scientist*, 222(2963), 1-30.
- Pentland, A. (2015). *Social Physics: How Social Networks Can Make Us Smarter*, Penguin.
- Plato (2013). *Republic*, translated and edited by C. Emlyn-Jones & W. Preddy, 2 vols, Harvard University Press.
- Postman, N. (2006). *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Penguin.
- Rorty, R. (2020). *On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished Papers, 1960–2000*, edited by C. Voparil & W. P. Małecki, Cambridge University Press.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1968). *The Social Contract*, translated by M. Cranston, Penguin.
- Skinner, B. F. (1973). *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Penguin.
- Stiegler, B. (2019). *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, Polity Press.
- Tononi, F. (2022). The Transformation of Images in the Age of Modernism, Postmodernism, and Digital Reproducibility, in *On Portraiture: Theory, Practice and Fiction. From Francisco de Holanda to Susan Sontag*, pp. 517–43. Edited by A. J. Gschwend, F. A. Baptista Pereira & M. J. Gamito, Faculdade de Belas-Artes, Universidade de Lisboa.
- Tononi, F. (2023a). Images in the Age of social media: Capitalism, Consumerism, and Liberalism, in *Regimes of Capital in the Post-Digital Age*, pp. 179–202. Edited by S. Wróbel & K. Skonieczny, Routledge.
- Tononi, F. (2023b). *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalization*. By Byung-Chul Han. Translated by Daniel Steuer. Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022. 98 pp., *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 46 (2), 145–51.
- Žižek, S. (2020a). *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, Polity Press.
- Žižek, S. (2020b). *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost*, Polity Press.
- Žižek, S. (2021). Philosophy, Science, Capitalism and Truth, *Philosophical Investigations*, 15 (35), 36–52.

Žižek, S. (2022). *Surplus-Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed*, Bloomsbury Academic.

Žižek, S. (2023). The Post-Human Desert, *Project Syndicate*, April 7, <<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ai-post-human-future-by-slavoj-zizek-2023-04>> [accessed December 21, 2023].

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Profile Books.

