

Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy

Byung-Chal Han

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Byung-Chal Han has three fundamental things in his work that makes him a 'daring philosopher' of the contemporary world:

- The fierce critique of the modern world
- Great precision in writing
- Transforming the big idea into small bits with their recent relevance

A flow of prose and poetic style in his writings makes it charming. He writes extensively on the modern subject, especially its placement in the neo-liberal order, on the aesthetics of the contemporary world on the condition of modern Society. In his book, *Burnout Society* – the bestselling book in Germany – he took a Simmelian perspective to deconstruct the various aspects of social life and present the immunological disorder that has endangered the pillars of Western society. Hyper-culture elaborated globalization discourse in multiple dimensions. His books address the structure of modern Society with the thoughts of decay in Society, capitalist overlapping of the natural process of Society with its psychological dimension, and deterioration of aesthetics of contemporary subjects concerning the crisis of modern cinema.

The book 'Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy' was initially published in German and titled 'Infokratie. Digitalisierung und die Krise der Demokratie' in the 2021. The English translation was published in 2022. The publisher of the book is the Polity Press, Cambridge. It is divided into five essays, mainly arguing about the factors contributing to the crisis of democracy in the modern world, primarily considering digitalization.

Power is the fundamental pillar in the formation of a regime; the power of different categories like coercive power, disciplinary power, and bio-power. The power changes with time, with the transitional epoch of time, and with variation in the operationalization of structures in Society. So, it changed in recent times. This is what Byung-Chal argued. In contemporary times, information is power and vice versa. Exploiting information, data, predicting the next movement of the subject, and controlling the desire of individual leads to a new kind of power different from Foucault's matrix of power – Knowledge/Power. It has some similar strings to the conceptual framework of Deleuze, the way he predicted the subjugation of agency in the modern structures which eventually shaped the 'controlled societies'. The similarity can be seen in the political writings of Orwell, the way he talked about the concept of 'Big Brother.' The political writings of Orwell, a collection of his articles mainly from the newspapers, imply the horrors of the coming age and atrocities, as he argued in the article 'Atrocity Picture' – which is taken from his book *Political Writings* - that looking into the abyss of dragons turned into a gaze while mentioning the modern world. Eventually, the dragon's gaze moved toward the one looking into it.

Moving on to the relationship between information and democracy. The age, which we refer to as the age of democratization, is passing through a challenging phase because a crisis of democracy appears to have happened. In *The Structural Transformation of the public sphere*, Habermas argued the production of distortion in the modern world is just a consequence of discourse of enlightenment. Nowadays, many factors contribute to the distortion, i.e., the media causing trouble producing and directing the correct information. Marshall McLuhan argued, in a very similar way, while describing the function of media. He shaped the idea that new technologies obsolete the older ones and that media is obsoleting the very concept of human communication (McLuhan, 2001). Fundamentally, if the sphere is becoming distorted either by the structural elements or agency orientation, it appears that it is affecting the shape of democracy. In Han's account, dataism, excessive information, and the digital world are replacing the identity of democracy and altering it into infocracy. The ones who possess the information use it, instrumentalize it and, harshly speaking, weaponize it can easily exploit the orientation of power, as some blamed Trump for it – particularly in the case of Cambridge Analytics.

The process of conventional democracy was straightforward, and everything was very interactive. It included voter interaction with the political leaders, the decision-making, and, more importantly, the distribution of power was directly influenced by the public. The case of digital democracy is unique; there is a change in mode of direction and the distance between the parliamentarian and the public has enlarged its limitations. Anthony Giddens also viewed the effect of media on democracy. He argued that democracy is pondering in the crisis because it lost its essence when a parliamentarian tried to convince the monopolized media house toward a specific direction. The involvement, which was the core of traditional democracy, is slightly moving toward nothingness. The identities of the subjects – in the case of political acts – in the digital world are overlapping and mixing up, which leads to the conflict and crisis of identities.

The enlightenment discourse believes in rationality. When Habermas argued that communicative action is only possible when the public sphere is obvious, i.e., the prospect of distortion is minimum. Rationality occurs with the production of meaning. In modern times, digitization has distorted the public sphere, and now rationality is not what it was in conventional terms (Habermas, 2015). Man makes mistakes, but artificial intelligence doesn't. It computes. It is an optimist about the way it makes a decision. Computation is bigger than rationality because rationality demands reason. Modern world, for Han, has lost its reason.

On the other hand, AI computes the data, processes the data, and makes decisions. Extending the argument Han puts the idea of Hubert Dreyfus; the phenomenological paradigm explains the consciousness of mind taking the signs and language into account for the very purpose of explaining what we comprehend as common sense, but the computer can't do this. It can't think. The interpretation, for example, 'I am a lion', is an assertion that the computer or Artificial Intelligence cannot comprehend. Even beyond all these, artificial intelligence is lagging behind the quality of emotions, which can be dangerous.

The critical Theory and a philosophical inquiry of truth are two parallel lines that perpetuate side by side—taking the case of Nietzsche, who believed that the crisis of truth leads to nihilism. The 'God is dead' thesis is based on this straightforward process. As time passed and Society transitioned, we moved toward a new kind of nihilism. Nihilism was replaced by dandyism. For Han, society's behavioral mechanism, was altered in a particular way; modesty had been lost somewhere in the curtains, and today's Society is a consumer society.

Moreover, the hyper-reality created by the media has changed the perceptions of realities. Now the reality is manufactured in the structures of media. Byung-Chal Han moved even to the next phase. The misinformation, disinformation, false news, and misconceptions crawling into Society ensure that no one believes. When no one believes, it creates a crisis of truth, leading to a new kind of nihilism.

One question that needs to be asked is about the gap of Han. The methodology of Foucault is based on the historical analysis of the subject under the operation of institutions, and the conceptual framework of Deleuze referred to the structural subjugation of agency with the vehement development of modern institutions (Foucault, 1976). However, Byung-Chal Han needed to catch up in the operationalization of methodology and only relied on the popular conceptualization of ideas.

The problem with the critique, in general, and critical Theory, in particular, is that they often try to identify the problem, and when it comes to the solution, they stray from the path. Byung-Chal, notwithstanding, all the preciseness and critique often undermine the rudimentary perception of the solution. We may admit that technology is the world's ontology, the phone is the source of control, a gaze in the outermost rim of Society, and the non-coercive power of seduction of capitalism, but what can be done, and what is the solution to these problems? Can awareness only be enough? Furthermore, in an interview in the book *Capitalism and the death drive*, he accepted the identity of a sceptical academic. Sometimes, he generates popular content that only creates ephemeral fluctuating streams of sudden feeling, and then everything passes by.