Psychopolitics

During a commercial break in the 1984 Super Bowl, Apple broadcast an ad directed by Ridley Scott. Glum, grey workers sat in a vast grey hall listening to Big Brother's declamations on a huge screen. Then a maverick athlete-cum-Steve-Jobs-lackey hurled a sledgehammer at the screen, shattering it and bathing workers in healing light. "On January 24th," the voiceover announced, "Apple Computer will introduce the Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like [Orwell's] Nineteen Eighty-Four."

The ad's idea, writes Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, was that the Apple Mac would liberate downtrodden masses from the totalitarian surveillance state. And indeed, the subsequent rise of Apple, the internet, Twitter, Facebook, Amazon and Google Glass means that today we live in nothing like the nightmare Orwell imagined. After all, Big Brother needed electroshock, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, drugs and hectoring propaganda broadcasts to keep power, while his Ministry of Plenty ensured that consumer goods were lacking to make sure subjects were in an artificial state of need.

The new surveillance society that has arisen since 1984, argues Han, works differently yet is more elegantly totalitarian and oppressive than anything described by Orwell or Jeremy Bentham. "Confession obtained by force has been replaced by voluntary disclosure," he writes. "Smartphones have been substituted for torture chambers." Well, not quite. Torture chambers still exist, it's just that we in the neoliberal west have outsourced them (thanks, rendition flights) so that that obscenity called polite society can pretend they don't exist.

Nonetheless, what capitalism realised in the neoliberal era, Han argues, is that it didn't need to be tough, but seductive. This is what he calls smartpolitics. Instead of saying no, it says yes: instead of denying us with commandments, discipline and shortages, it seems to allow us to buy what we want when we want, become what we want and realise our dream of freedom. "Instead of forbidding and depriving it works through pleasing and fulfilling. Instead of making people compliant, it seeks to make them dependent."

Your smartphone, for Han, is crucial in this respect, the multifunctional tool of our auto-exploitation. We are all Big Brother now. It is in part Catholicism with better technology, a modern rosary that is handheld confessional and effective surveillance apparatus in one. "Both the rosary and the smartphone serve the purpose of self-monitoring and control," he explains. "Power operates more effectively when it delegates surveillance to discrete individuals." And we queue overnight to get the latest model: we desire our own domination. No wonder the motto for Han's book is US video artist Jenny Holzer's slogan: "Protect me from what I want."

Han considers that the old form of oppressive capitalism that found its personification in Big Brother has found its most resonant expression in Bentham's notion of a panopticon, whereby all inmates of an institution could be observed by a single watchman without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they were being watched. Bentham's invention in turn catalysed French theorist Michel Foucault's reflections on the

disciplinary, punishing power that arose with industrial capitalism, leading him to coin the term biopolitics. Because the body was the central force in industrial production, Han argues, then a politics of disciplining, punishing and perfecting the body was understandably central to Foucault's notion of how power worked.

But in the west's deindustrialised, neoliberal era, such biopolitics is obsolete. Instead, by means of deploying "big data", neoliberalism has tapped into the psychic realm and exploited it, with the result that, as Han colourfully puts it, "individuals degrade into the genital organs of capital". Consider that the next time you're reviewing your Argos purchase, streaming porn or retweeting Paul Mason. Instead of watching over human behaviour, big data's digital panopticon subjects it to psychopolitical steering.

But what is big data, you might well be asking? "Big data is a vast, commercial enterprise," explains Han. "Here, personal data are unceasingly monetised and commercialised. Now, people are treated and traded as packages of data for economic use. That is, human beings have become a commodity." In Hegelian terms we've escaped the master-slave dialectic by becoming both master and slave in one.

And, while not Orwellian, we net-worked moderns have our own Newspeak. Freedom, for instance, means coercion. Microsoft's early ad slogan was "Where do you want to go today?", evoking a world of boundless possibility. That boundlessness was a lie, Han argues: "Today, unbounded freedom and communication are switching over into total control and surveillance … We had just freed ourselves from the disciplinary panopticon – then threw ourselves into a new and even more efficient panopticon." And one, it might be added, that needs no watchman, since even the diabolical geniuses of neoliberalism – Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos – don't have to play Big Brother. They are diabolical precisely because they got us to play that role ourselves.

At least in Nineteen Eighty-Four, nobody felt free. In 2017, for Han, everybody feels free, which is the problem. "Of our own free will, we put any and all conceivable information about ourselves on the internet, without having the slightest idea who knows what, when or in what occasion. This lack of control represents a crisis of freedom to be taken seriously."

Politics too has been transformed in the era of psychopolitics. We're incapable of conceiving politics as a communal activity because we have become habituated to being consumers rather than citizens. Politicians treat us as consumers to whom they must deliver; we grumble about politics as consumers do about a disappointing product or service. Shock and buyers' remorse are the only fitting attitudes towards politics conceived as an extension of shopping.

The world of psychopolitics Han excoriates will be familiar to fans of our leading satirists, Charlie Brooker and Dave Eggers. In the former's last Black Mirror series and the latter's novel The Circle, Proudhon's slogan "property is theft" has been replaced by another: "privacy is theft".
Anyone who refuses to confess in public is anathematised. You tweet therefore you are; like and you too shall be liked; confess every last boring detail about yourself and you too shall be saved. "Neoliberalism is the capitalism of Like," says Han.

There's a little hiatus in this bracing jeremiad that I especially loved. "Did we really want to be free?" asks Han. Perhaps, he muses, true freedom is an intolerable burden and so we invented God in order to be guilty and in debt to something. That's why, having killed God, we invented capitalism. Like God, only more efficiently, capitalism makes us feel guilty for our failings and, you may well have noticed, encourages us to be deep in immobilising debt.Han, though, weakens his case by exaggerating it. In a chapter on Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine, he tackles Milton Friedman's idea that self-created economic catastrophe offers capitalism opportunity to to shock us into submission. That, to me, sounds pretty much like what has happened since 2008, after which we've been working harder for less money, though Han demurs: "Neoliberal politics is SmartPolitics: it seeks to please and fulfil, not repress." But surely the truth is that torture chambers, the gig economy and the precariat as much as smartpolitics are our political reality: the pleasing and fulfulling of Han's psychopolitics, paradoxically, exist alongside Klein's repressive shock doctrine to keep us docile. Such a conjunction seems beyond Han's philosophy.
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No matter. How might we resist psychopolitics? In this respect, Han cuts an intriguing figure. He rarely makes public appearances or gives interviews (and when he does he requires journalists turn off their recorders), his Facebook page seems to have been set up by Spanish admirers, and only recently did he set up an email address which he scarcely uses. He isn't ungooglable nor yet off the grid, but rather professor at Berlin's University of the Arts and has written 16 mostly lovely, slender volumes of elegant cultural critique (I particularly recommend The Burnout Society, The Scent of Time, Saving Beauty and The Expulsion of the Other – all available in English) and is often heralded, along with Markus Gabriel and Richard David Precht, as a wunderkind of a newly resurgent and unprecedentedly readable German philosophy.

For all that, and I mean this as a compliment, Byung-Chul Han is an idiot. He writes: "Thoroughgoing digital networking and communication have massively amplified the compulsion to conform. The attendant violence of consensus is suppressing idiotisms."

Indeed, the book's last chapter is called "Idiotism", and traces philosophy's rich history of counter-cultural idiocy. Socrates knew only one thing, namely that he knew nothing. Descartes doubted everything in his "I think therefore I am". Han seeks to reclaim this idiotic tradition. In an age of compulsory self-expression, he cultivates the twin heresies of secrets and silence.

Perhaps similarly, for our own well being, in our age of overspeak and underthink, we should learn the virtue of shutting up.