



ANALYTICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON BYUNG-CHUL HAN'S THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONCEPT OF "POWER" BASED ON THE INFLUENCE OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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The description of the theoretical perspective of Byung-Chul Han's thought (concerning the concept of *ipse-centric* power) and its divergence from Friedrich Nietzsche's thought has already been described. Here, the analytical problematics of the concept of "power" in Han's thought and the points of contact with Friedrich Nietzsche's perspective will be briefly outlined.



1. Analytical problems

The South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han uses the German word *Macht* to speak of “power” in the noun sense. In Italian, this word is translated as “*potere*”. However, “*potere*” in Italian can also ambiguously refer either to a power of a processual nature, which as such does not define an entity in the specific sense of “potency” (*potenza*) but a process and a movement of power itself, or to a “power” in the sense of a hypostatized entity (“power” in English, *potenza* in Italian, i. e. the noun meaning of the word), or to possibility as a capacity to be hypothetically implemented (expressed by the modal verbs “to can” in English, *Können* in German and *potere* in Italian). It would seem that for the South Korean philosopher there is no difference or distinction between the different concepts: thus, power *would be* potency and *Ego* would express *Macht* that would immediately be understood as power in the noun meaning.

Now, it is legitimate to ask whether there are theoretical differences between “to can” and “potency”. For example, the view of relational power as proposed by the political thinker Hannah Arendt moves analytical reflection in the direction of a clear separation between “to can” (as power) and “potency”, because she understands *Macht* in its immediately processual and non-substantive meaning and traces the meaning of this word back to the verb *Mögen* in order to define its “potential” character: potency would thus be phenomenologically close to individual force and would define something in the singular¹, whereas power would instead arise from “acting in concert”².

Should one therefore maintain the identification between “power” (to can) and “potency” or attempt to understand the difference between the two concepts? For either power *is* potency or power *is not* potency. The German language does not help the analytical

¹ Cfr. H. ARENDT, *On violence*, p. 49.

² Cfr. Id., *The Human Condition*, pp. 217-218.



attempt at separation or identification since the term used to express “potency” is still *Macht*, which in English is translated as “power” and in Italian as “*potere*” in its substantive meaning, i.e. the capacity and possibility to do (*Machen* in German) something, i.e. “potency”.

How to break out of this *impasse*? Since we are currently pursuing Han’s *ipse*-centric perspective of power in which these concepts coincide within the single word *Macht*, reflection will continue in the direction of a close identification between “power” and “potency” (to can = power = potency = *Macht*): power is the possibility of “to can” and conversely “not can” means impotence (*Ohnmacht*). The logical nature of the *ipse*-centric concept of power lies in the identification of the binomial “power-potency”: expressing *itself* in its simple exercise, in what Han calls the “expansion of the space of the self”³, from this binomial derives the possibility of “to can” and “not can”, the creation of ever new and different possibilities, that is, it derives action: to have power means to exercise potency, to perform actions that find expression, purpose and realization in their simple expression and wanting. Power thus consists in the human capacity to act; this conclusion coincides with Byung-Chul Han’s *ipse*-centric view of power.

2. The *Wille zur Macht*

The identification between power and potency leads to the question of “to want” (*Wollen*) and the will (*Wille*). In fact, if “to can is power”, increasing one’s potency would mean increasing one’s power and vice versa. But where does this increase come from? This empowerment would have to be willed to be realized; it could not be otherwise. There is a close semantic correlation in the German language between *Können* and *Wollen*, power and will, *volere* and *potere*, in one of the most influential philosophers of the 19th century: Friedrich Nietzsche.

³ Cfr. B. HAN, *What is power?*, pp. 62-63.



It is interesting to note that Nietzsche's concept of *Wille zur Macht* has been translated in Italian language as *volontà di potenza* (potency) and not as *volontà di potere* (power according to the meaning of "to can") whereas in English the concept has instead been rendered as "will of power", using the term "power" to define what in Italian can be defined as both "power" and "potency" from the same word *Macht*.

In any case, to clarify the concept of *Wille zur Macht* Martin Heidegger writes in his *Nietzsche*: «[...] will is will to power, and power is nothing other than the essence of will. The will to power is then will to will, that is, to will is to will oneself»⁴. Willing, insofar as it is to will oneself «beyond oneself, is power [potency, n.d.A.] that gives itself power»⁵. Willing, therefore, is potency that immediately gives itself power and still desires power: the *Wille zur Macht* defines the exercise of power that wants to increase power. To will is to will power, potency is power, therefore to will is to will power. Not only that: to will *is* power. There is a close identification in Nietzsche between will and power: this will become *Wille zur Macht*, i.e. the will to power that, subjectively, individually moves every living organism.

According to Nietzsche's thought, power is poietic: it is expressed in something, in the generation of something. The *Wille zur Macht* is to be understood as a Dionysian affirmation. For Nietzsche, Dionysus is the divinity that «says Yes»: the Greek divinity represents the affirmation capable of creating and positing new values, thus opposing the negation and weakness of a Christianity historically theologized by the early Christians. This Christianity, according to Nietzsche, imprisons the human being in moral precepts that cause his disempowerment, i.e. impotence (*Ohnmacht*): Paul's Christianity represses the *Macht* and prevents its direct expression, thus weakening the human being; on the

⁴ M. HEIDEGGER, *Nietzsche*, p. 49.

⁵ *Ibidem*.



contrary, superior, aristocratic human beings, strong in their strength express the *Macht* asymptotically, directly and without mediation. Nihilism is then the logical consequence of the annihilation of human drives (*Trieb*) caused by theological Christianity.

The drives are thus *Wille zur Macht*: to repress the former is to annihilate the latter. The *Wille zur Macht* is to be considered at once as the will to power of a living being that asserts itself (*Selbstbehauptung*) and attempts to surpass itself, i.e. as a being of the living being that expands itself, surpasses itself and, in so doing, creates poetically, Dionysianically, artistically new values, new symbolic forms through the increase of this will of power. To express the *Macht* for Nietzsche means to affirm the world of the primordial and intrinsic drives of the human being: the actualization of the Dionysian spirit is the act of power of life that simply wants itself and, in wanting it, express itself and, in expressing itself, at the same time destroys and creates. Heidegger writes: «The will is, in itself, creative and destructive at the same time. [...] power [potency, n.d.A.] means nothing other than the reality of will»⁶. For this reason, the *Übermensch semper adveniens* announced by Zarathustra can only «say Yes» in the same way as a child («I-am»). He cannot deny in the same way that the idiot (in Dostoevsky's terms) Jesus, the only one in history who has come close to the *Übermensch semper adveniens*: the positive act of denying would in fact mean immediately placing a discriminating "Yes" and "No", a form of rejection of something that exists. But this is not the view of force that Nietzsche wants to arrive at: the *Übermensch semper adveniens* cannot «say No» because he always accepts aristocratically. He affirms, «says Yes» and that is all. Negation, on the other hand, is an expression of weakness: the Christian denies, the tragedian affirms; the Christian is not aristocratic, Zarathustra can speak about the *Übermensch*; the Christian is weak, the tragedian is strong, powerful.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 73.



Nietzsche makes a clear identification not only between power, potency and will, but also between potency and force. The *Wille zur Macht* is an affirmation of the power of the powerful person, it is an action of force. The powerful person is strong because he wants; on the contrary, the weak possesses little capacity to express the *Macht* and to will and, therefore, must resort to cryptic subterfuges to bring down the position of the powerful.

3. Analogies between Byung-Chul Han and Friedrich Nietzsche

It is thus possible to show the analogies with the concept of the *ipse*-centric *Macht* developed by Byung-Chul Han: for the South Korean philosopher too reflecting on power means thematizing a *Macht* that revolves around a *ipse*-foundation declined in the singular, identifying potency with power (even though Han's vision is free of Nietzschean polemology thanks to the concept of *Vermittlung*). For him too, *Macht* is the will of power, a will of power that is also expressed in the singular in the affirmation of *self* over its surroundings.

Since the description of Nietzsche's thought, it is therefore clear how Han's *ipse*-centric conception of power also revolves not only around the identification of "power" and "potency" within the single word *Macht*, but also on the identification of *Macht* and force, whereby the *Wille zur Macht* is given as an expression of the superior man. For Nietzsche, the powerful is the strong and therefore he expresses potency. This *Macht* is directed *Selbstbehauptung*: power is the ability of a strong subject to exercise power, which is expressed through *Selbstbehauptung*. The powerful is the strong because the strong is able (can) to exercise power directly over the weak. Even without the character of self-assertion by a violent act, for Han too «the powerful likes to give himself as an expression of his power. [...] In the act of giving,



he enjoys himself»⁷. The powerful expresses power and potency from himself through his own power and strength: the *Macht* is expressed by his own noble, elevated, aristocratic, superior self-giving. Overflowing with this excessive fullness, he pours out on others the noble effects of his aristocratic qualities. The affability of the powerful (based on justice understood according to Nietzsche's meaning: «function of a power of vast horizon»⁸) has an exquisitely aristocratic connotation: it is the strong, the noble, the proud who exercise it, not the poor, the derelict, the insect, the last one. From this derives the "unconditional hospitality" that «opposes that friendship which sees in the friend a "second self"»⁹.

Now, how this self-assertion takes place? For Nietzsche, the power of strong and noble human beings is expressed poetically in their ability to give names. Power relates to imposing "with a word the definitive seal on everything and every event and thereby, as it were, appropriating it". There is a close connection between word and power: word *is* power, word is affirmation. This also applies to Han, for whom «to give name is at the same time to give meaning. Power creates meaning. [...] Each word is a word of power»¹⁰. He writes:

Meaning is thus a phenomenon of relation and relating: something becomes meaningful or sensible when it is placed in a network of relations [...]. Power will therefore either fit into a horizon of meaning or must construct one of its own in order to effectively guide the process of understanding and action. It only acquires stability when it reveals meaning or appears *meaningful*. [...] The powerful people determine meaning, its horizon, i.e. the "to where and why" of things. They create a *continuum of meaning* from which they are interpreted. For those in power, this *continuum* of meaning would be at the same time a *continuum of the self* in which they see *themselves*¹¹.

⁷ Cfr. HAN, *What is power?*, pp. 127-135.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 129.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 39.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.



For both Nietzsche and Han, the powerful person (*Ego*, according to Han's language) expresses the *Macht* primarily through speech. Imposing names is an expression of the *Macht* of the powerful. In doing so, it affirms itself. The two philosophers make speech a phenomenon of the meaning made possible by the expression of the *Wille zur Macht* of the powerful.

Thus, the concept of power in Byung-Chul Han's perspective is further clarified: it is a *ipse-centric Macht* that finds expression through the act of *Selbstbehauptung* of *Ego* with *Alter* by means of direct speech and action (non-violent thanks to the *Vermittlung*). In this vision there are all the attributes of the *Übermensch* announced by Zarathustra and his will to love (*Wille zur Liebe*) made possible by the extreme expression of the *Wille zur Macht* - which coincides with the vision of the powerful person that Han proposes at the end of his work on power: the *Macht* is ultimately the power/potency of the superior man whose virtue, nobility, loftiness, aristocracy he expresses is impossible to resist.