THE■SQUARE

THE CONCEPT OF "POWER" IN BYUNG-CHUL HAN'S THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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1. The *ipse*-component

The theoretical intention of the South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han is to think of a «flexible concept of power» that sets itself above the interpretations that traditionally see it collapsing on violence (*Gewalt*), freeing it from the usual violent and coercive meaning. Indeed, he writes in *What is Power?* that «for power (*Macht*) is usually meant the following causal relationship: the power of *Ego* gives rise to a certain behavior of *Alter* against the latter's will»[1] and, clarifying his attempt to decouple the concept of "power" from that of coercion and violence, shortly afterwards he continues by stating that «the coercive model is not up to the complexity of power. Power as constraint is expressed in the imposition of one's own decisions *against* those of the *Alter*»[2], but such a constraint (*Zwang*) cannot be taken as an exemplary model

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[1] B. HAN, *What is power?*, Polity Pr, London 2018, p. 9.
[2] *Ivi*, p 10.

of the *Macht*. Power for Han is much more sophisticated. *Gewalt* is indeed one manifestation of the *Macht,* but just as the *Macht* is not exhausted in its simple and pure political component, in the same way it does not only include the *Gewalt*. On the contrary, according to Han, a *self*-asserting power can be so, that is to say, a *Macht* expressed by *Ego* over *Alter* that responds to the Nietzschean character of the *Übermensch* without necessarily collapsing into the *Gewalt* or the *Zwang*. The question is: in what way does this happen?

In *What is Power?* (2018) Han writes that «all forms of power are oriented towards the creation of a *continuum* and presuppose a *self*»[3]. According to Han, power (*Macht*) possesses a subjective component and is founded on the presupposed presence of a subject, an *ipse*: for this reason, power is always made explicit in the singular and expresses itself in the creation of new and different possibilities through expression and concretization. It is not possible to think of power without an *ipse* that expresses and concretizes it; in fact, how could power exist without a singularity that actualizes it and makes it possible?

Consequently, power necessarily presupposes the presence of an *Ego*: not only the nature of power necessarily presupposes an *Ego* that expresses it, vivifies it, actualizes it, but its nature is also for itself precisely *ipse*-centric, revolving around an *ipse* thematized in the singular as an *Ego* that expresses *itself*, expands *itself*, manifests *itself*. There can be no power without *ipse* which makes it possible: power is therefore *ipse*-centric.

The singular word "*ipse*" (*self*) defines in Han the "being-*ipse*-centric" of power: it concentrates *itself* in an *ipse* that enables its positive realization, its affirmation. However, the word "*self*" does not only identify an *Ego*, a human being or more generally a living being, but also a place (*Ort*, position). Han writes:

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[3] *Ivi*, 30.

> The place "brings together by drawing to itself". By attracting and bringing everything together, it forms an *ipse*-centric continuum. Drawing to itself and forming a continuum makes location a phenomenon of power. […] Each power structure is therefore *ipse*-centric[4].

Power requires either a person or a place in order to be exercised. In particular, the place in which power is concentrated, while possibly synthesizing in itself a plurality of elements or agents that in turn allow its subsistence, reaffirms its singular nature, its being ineluctably linked to a *self* expressed in the singular: this applies to *Ego* and to all those institutionalized structures that concentrate power in them, in themselves (*self*, *ipse*) and exercise it in different forms.

Now, how does the exercise of this *ipse*-centered power take place? If the power is *ipse*-centered, how could it express itself outside itself? Han answers:

> Going beyond oneself is the fundamental trait of power. But the subject of power does not rely on it, does not get lost in it. Pushing beyond oneself is the gait of power and at the same time the act of rejoining oneself. This unity of pushing beyond self and rejoining self enlarges the space of the self. […] The power of the living consists in continuing beyond the self, in occupying more space with the self[5].

The exercise of *ipse*-centric power takes place by enlargement and continuation, exit and re-entry, by a twofold (dialectical) movement comprising first of all a push outward from within oneself and then a return inward from outside oneself. Who is the subject that performs this dual movement? Always *Ego*, whose movement of thrusting beyond itself takes place without loss of self: to paraphrase the language of Karl Marx, to eternize in loss would mean to alienate oneself and to bring something out of oneself without this process of externalization involving an addition, an enrichment, a realization on the part of the self that carries out this movement of externalization. This alienation entails a loss because

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[4] *Ivi*, pp. 114-115.
[5] *Ivi*, pp. 62-63.

what is alienated is diversified and made totally other than itself with respect to itself, thus excluding the possibility of a return to the self. However, for Han there is no alienation insofar as the exit outside the self is immediately accompanied by a return to the self which defines a personal enrichment, an addition, an expansion of the «space of the self». Through the continuation of the self and the return to the self, *Ego* expands its own space of the self: what is externalized by the self returns to it, enriching it and not dispersing it, completing it and not dismembering it.

Expansion and enlargement are about the presence of something or someone outside oneself. Who? The *Alter*. How? For Han, *Ego* is able to form what he calls a "*ipse*-centric continuum", whereby a bridge, an inter-medial space, a link, a relation, a dynamic bond would be created between the self in question and *Alter*. Trough the bridge, the continuum, *Ego* would be able to realize itself through *Alter* without negative loss and without alienation, while at the same time *Alter* would voluntarily and spontaneously support *Ego*'s expansion as an expression of its freedom. In this, the exercise of the power is expressed.

The expansion of *Ego*'s *Macht* is for Han an expansion towards *Alter* and then back to *Alter* in himself. Conversely, *Alter*'s free response to this expansion consists in willingly letting *Ego* find space in it. The philosopher's reasoning continues in this regard: «the power *makes Ego comfortable in the Other*. It produces a continuity of the self [...]. It enables the power-holder *to return to himself* in the Other»[6], rendering the *ipse*-centric power relation capable of also encompassing the binomial relation created between *Ego* and *Alter*: together, the *Macht* finds actualization and realization in a dialectical circle that begins in *Ego*, expresses itself through *Alter* and then returns to *Ego*. The exercise of the *Macht* for Han is dialectically circular: it comprises the expansion of the self into *Alter* and the subsequent return to the self.

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6 *Ivi*, p. 14.

It is thus possible to note Han's attempt to semanticise a relationship with *Alter* while remaining within a *ipse*-centric perspective: in fact, saying that power tends towards mediation with *Alter* and not towards its violent subjugation or annihilation, his theory of power would seem to already have within it the attempt at an *inter*-subjective conciliation with *Alter*. But if this were the case, would this mean the disappearance of the purely *ipse*-centric character of power? This aspect of Han's theory needs to be clarified: the theoretical ambiguity revolves around the type of relationship that *Ego*, extruding the *Macht*, creates with *Alter*.

2. The *Vermittlung*

Ego expands itself: doing so, it exercises the *Macht*. The exercise of the *Macht* occurs according to a dialectic of expansion of the personal and singular space of the self and return passing through *Alter*. In this sense, the structure of *Ego*'s exercise of the *Macht* is circular according to a dual wave-like movement of exit and return. But how is the relationship thus created between *Alter* and *Ego*? This dialectical movement is made possible by *Vermittlung*: according to the philosopher, thanks to this ability *Ego* implements *Macht* by expanding into *Alter*. In English, the German word is translated as "*inter*-mediation": it consists in *Ego*'s ability to extend itself into *Alter* without coercion, constraint, violence of one over the other. Here then emerges the type of relationship that, according to Han, characterizes the positive exercise of *Macht*. The philosopher writes:

> Power as constraint and power as freedom are not fundamentally different, they only differ in the level of mediation. They are different manifestations of a *single* power. All forms of power are oriented towards the creation of a *continuum* and presuppose a self. The lack of mediation produces constraint. When mediation is at its highest, power and freedom match. […] When mediation is severely lacking, human violence returns to characterize relations[7].

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[7] *Ivi*, p. 30.

The *Macht* synthesizes inside itself both relationship that coincides with freedom and that which would be identified with submission. These components represent the two opposite poles of the same scale: on the one hand freedom, on the other submission, but both freedom and submission fall within the same power, only according to different degrees of *inter*-mediation. Thus, if a high degree of *Vermittlung* is present, *Alter* would allow *Ego* to expand into it, voluntarily choosing to submit to this process of *ipse*-centered extension. In this case, for Han, submission would coincide with the free choice to submit: given the free choice, then submission would not present violent or coercive characters. On the contrary, in the case of a deficient or absent capacity for mediation, the *Macht* would instead be exercised in coercion, in violence, in the assertion of *Ego*'s power over *Alter*: in such a case, the "continuum" that *Ego* would establish when it showed itself capable of a high level of *inter*-mediation would be lost. Here, the *Macht* would collapse on violence and *Alter*'s submission would become a coercive act of *Ego*'s force.

Thus, the possibility of a positive relationship between *Ego* and *Alter* within the exercise of the *Macht* is theoretically present in Han's theory: one that is capable of a high degree of *Vermittlung*. However, while speaking of *inter*-mediation, for the South Korean philosopher the focal point of the theoretical circle, its perspective focus, is still *Ego* and its *Macht*. The *Macht* always needs an *ipse*-component that extrinsicises it. For this reason, his theory departs profoundly from a relational theory of power (such as that present in Hannah Arendt's theoretical perspective). It is true that he semantisises the possibility of a positive relation between *Ego* and *Alter* in the exercise of power but, at the same time, he rejects the theoretical possibility of a relational and communicative power. Power is for Han always to be considered primarily as *ipse*-centric. Only at a later stage does it become extrinsic in the relationship between subject and subject, and in a collectivity – which for Han is in any case united around a singular *Ort* that allows for the existence and mutual recognition of the collectivity. The *ipse*-

component is always present, also and above all when *Ego* communicates with an *Alter*: although it includes in itself the possibility of an exit outside itself through *Vermittlung*, i.e., although it takes into account the categories of a relational and plural power, first and foremost the power is *ipse*-centric. The possibility of *Alter*'s response is traced and refunded within the *ipse* (organic or geographical) as the condition of possibility of the *Macht*. Without this presupposition, there would simply be no power.

The philosopher's position is clear: the *Macht* is always the *Macht* of an *ipse*, of a self, of an *Ego* and is always possess a singular, subjective, *ipse*-centric meaning. Through *Vermittlung*, the relation of submission is not necessarily an expression of *Gewalt*: there is in fact a *voluntary* submission that happens when *Ego*, by extrinsicising itself, i.e., affirming its *Macht*, is capable of a high level of *Vermittlung*. On the other hand, if this does not happen, i.e., *Ego* attempts to continue itself in *Alter* through a low level of *Vermittlung*, then «human violence returns to characterize relations». Consequently, for Han, submission *can* coincide with freedom: if it is voluntary, it is free.

Synthesize the philosopher:

> Power is the capacity of what is alive to lose itself in the Other through multiple involvement, to continue itself through negative tensions. […] Self-determination does not have to go hand in hand with oppression or denial of the Other. It depends on the mediating structure. In the case of intense mediation, it is not negative or exclusive, but integrative[8].

If capable of *Vermittlung*, the *Macht* reconciles within itself possible conflicts by standing as a single gravitational pole capable of synthesising freedom and submission, *Gewalt* and *Εἰρήνη*. Agreement and submission, freedom and service would be considered as expressions of the same *Macht* according to different levels of *Vermittlung*.

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[8] *Ivi*, p. 74.

But then what is violence? Expression of the *Macht* according to a low level of *Vermittlung* or radical opposition to power? Han's answer: the mere use of violence is neither synonymous with power nor part of its exercise. On the contrary, it is synonymous with powerlessness: violence is opposed to power and occurs where the level of *Vermittlung* is practically zero. It is used to implement constraint. According to the philosopher, the *Macht* could possibly express itself in the medium of *Gewalt* and in the form of *Zwang*, but it is never based on them: «it follows that power can have a repressive effect, however it is not based on repression»[9].

According to this way of thinking, the *Macht* would have no need to assert itself through violence, i.e. it would not immediately collapse into the *Gewalt*: the *Macht* would be that relationship of continuum that *Ego* would be able to realize in *Alter*, thus realizing itself, and that *Alter* would be able to establish with *Ego*, thus structuring itself. A mutual recognition without loss and alienation would be implemented between the two. The *inter*-mediation in turn would take place in *Ego*'s practical ability to expand into *Alter*, creating the situation in which *Alter*, voluntarily submitting to *Ego*, desires what it desires and wants what it wants.

By the way, while not giving specific examples within Han's work, a practical case could be that of the pair of lovers: in a pair of lovers, if there really is a love affair, there would be no will to affirm one over the other because, if there were, it would not be a love affair but a mutual struggle for dominance of one over the other. In such a case, there would be little *Vermittlung* for Han. If, on the other hand, there were a real love affair, both would contribute to the same will precisely because of the high level of inter-mediation that exists within the couple. Conversely, if the relationship were to begin to deteriorate and degenerate, *Vermittlung* would again fail. The moment the relationship deteriorates further, the will for

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[9] *Ivi*, p. 42.

violent assertion finally reappears, which would easily collapse on *Gewalt*.

3. The "Zarathustrian" power

Through the different levels of *Vermittlung*, Han's *Macht* takes up, extends and completes Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of (*Wille zur*) *Macht*. However, Han's view of the philosopher from Basel must be reported. For Han, in fact, Nietzsche «is obsessed with a form of power that is poor in mediation»,[10] i.e., with a *Macht* understood exclusively as an "affirmation-of-self" (*Selbstbehauptung*) that expresses itself in the form of the *Πόλεμος*, in a form that is poor in *Vermittlung* and essentially structured according to a polemology.

If, for Han, Nietzsche's merit in shedding light on the essential characteristics of power at a pre-philosophical level is undeniable, at the same time it is also evident to him how the Basel philosopher encloses himself within a polemological theory incapable of considering the possibility of different *inter*-relationships other than the *Selbstbehauptung* of the strong over the weak. Thus, Han partly assumes its essential characteristics, but also attempts to show its positive and constructive relational implications: *Alter* and Ego find themselves through that continuum that the power relationship is able to create between the two. In this sense, speculatively speaking, there is no longer a strong that expresses the *Macht* and a weak that suffers its activity passively because in their place is conceptualized a unity of strong and weak that finds realization through the high level of inter-mediation.

Han thus posits a reconciliation of Nietzschean polemology: through *Vermittlung* this theoretical danger would be averted. What are the ultimate consequences of this philosophical move? The arrival, at the end of his work on power, at a so-called "Zarathustrian" and aristocratic conception of power. Indeed, the

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[10] *Ivi*, p. 65.

philosopher concludes: «the powerful love to give themselves as an expression of their power. [...] In the act of giving, he enjoys himself»[11]. The powerful person who expresses power loves to give himself by *expansion*: the extreme giving in the singular of the powerful person already expresses his power. The aristocratic act of giving oneself coincides with the image of a chalice that, overfilled, begins to overflow and, overflowing because of its excessive fullness, pours out on others the noble effects of its own aristocratic qualities. Likewise, from the superabundance of (*Wille zur*) *Macht* spring those virtuous qualities capable of defining the superior, noble and aristocratic man from the ignoble, low and miserable one. The powerful person gives because he has to give for the necessity of his true nature. Here there is no violence, no coercion, no submission, but only gift (*Wille zur Liebe*).

Given that in Han's theory the description of Zarathustra's *Übermensch* and his (*Wille zur*) *Liebe* is encapsulated, it is inevitable to conclude that Han, although he initially distanced himself from Nietzschean polemology, remains deeply indebted to it. Indeed, once deprived of its most problematic component, namely that coercive dimension basically justified by Nietzsche's anthropology, the *Macht* would thus be the violent – and coercive – free power of the superior man whose virtue, nobility, loftiness, aristocratism is impossible to resist.

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[11] Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 127-135.