

Book Review

Three Cultural Influences on Leadership: The Compulsion, the Shock and the Dataism Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and the New Techniques of Power

by Byung-Chul Han, S. Fischer V. 5th edition of 2004

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In this brief review I summarize what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, a student of Sloterdijk, presents in his book “Psychopolitics”. I would like to recommend Byung-Chul Han’s books to everyone! Especially the three volumes “Fatigue Society”, “The Expulsion of the Other” and “Psychopolitics”.

I hope to be helpful to leaders by pointing out particular cultural issues he raises. A tip right up front: “*Folks, You ought to be in more talk!*”. Influences on leadership.

In today’s global environment, we humans are threatened by three things: Compulsion, shock and dataism. I want to highlight Han’s ideas about where “traps for living” can be found, how important our countless as well as innumerable stories are for our leader, and for living together as humans, and the “shock” to which we are perhaps all exposed?

FREEDOM TURNS INTO COMPELSION

Han posits, “*We believe today that we are not a subjugated subject, but a free project, always redesigning, reinventing itself.*”

But this freedom turns into compulsion! He writes, “*The ego as a project, which believes it has freed itself from external constraints and external compulsions, now submits to internal constraints and self-compulsions in the form of compulsions to perform and optimise.*” Moreover, Han adds, “*We live in a special historical phase in which freedom itself gives rise to constraints*”.

This quote from our everyday business life illustrates the point: “*Fall in love with the process of becoming the very best version of yourself*”.

The above formula could be seen as a guide to gradual suicide. Such tips can backfire, even when helpful and leading!

SHOCK SPECIALISTS

Han refers to the book by Naomi Klein on the subject of “neoliberalism” published in 2007 titled, “*The Shock Strategy*”. One protagonist in it is Doctor Schock, actually Doctor Ewen Cameron, a psychiatrist and torturer. Doctor Cameron’s “*shock-torture research*” was funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Doctor dreamed of being able to erase people’s psyche first by electric shocks and then to reprogram them.

Another protagonist is Milton Friedman, “*the theologian of the neoliberal market*”. Han says, “*For Milton Friedman, the social state of shock after disasters is the opportunity, indeed the supreme moment, for the neoliberal reprogramming of society!*” Such “*shock deprives and empties the soul. It renders it defenceless, so that it willingly submits to radical reprogramming.*”

DATAISM AND DATAISTS. COUNTING IS NOT TELLING!

The medium of the first Enlightenment was reason. Numbers were opposed to myths. Reason “displaced” imagination, desire or corporeality. The dialectics of the Enlightenment then let this turn into (number) barbarism, which kills life. Ultimately, it is the barbarism of the Cartesian “split” of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

Today, Big Data is supposed to liberate knowledge from subjective arbitrariness in the course of a second enlightenment. If the second enlightenment relies on numbers, information and transparency, its inherent dialectic will turn into a barbarism of data.

Han points to Oscar Wilde, who said, “*the passions of most men are but quotations.*” He notes that we live “In stories”. Try not telling a story(s) for a day. The assured prognosis is your failure; probably after minutes!

Data and numbers are additive, not narrative. But meaning must be told, it cannot be counted. Counting is not narration. Wilhelm Salber says in his book “*Konstruktion Psychologischer Behandlung*” (“*Architecture of psychological handling/treatment*”),¹ “*The mental construction system formulates its developmental possibilities*” in “stories”, “*meaning figures or symbols*”. Han notes in the same context: “*Data fills the emptiness of meaning*”. Numbers and data are sexualised and elevated to a fetish!

Han suggests that “*quantified optimised self*” takes on pornographic features. Dataists copulate with data, think data is sexy. One speaks of “*relentless digital datosexuals*”. “*The digitus approaches the phallus*”.

Attention! Undead!

Time gnaws at us. We never see it. We only notice its effects, like the wilting of flowers or our skin, the colour change of

the clouds, the obese beer belly, etc. We tell and retell our “*being in the world*”.

Stored data are countable but do not replace stories we should tell.

RESUMEE

In the Zeit Magazine interview of 2014, Byung-Chul Han is presented with great justification as a philosopher who “*with a few sentences can bring down thought structures that support our everyday life*”.

If, like Peter F. Drucker, one regards the management business as a >humanities discipline<, then B-C. Han certainly belongs in the first row of business-relevant phenomenologists, i.e. the philosophers from everyday life who bring light into the darkness of shadow organisations with precisely non-everyday insights. This puts him in a line with N. N. Taleb, W. Salber or P. Verhaeghe.

REFERENCE

1. Salber W. *Konstruktion Psychologischer Behandlung* [In: German]. Berlin, Germany: Bouvier Publishers; 1980.