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Byung-Chul Han

A Critical Introduction

Steven Knepper, Ethan Stoneman,
and Robert Wyllie

polity

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1 Burnout: Against Achievement Culture	8
2 World-Friendliness: Moods for Deep Cosmopolitanism	35
3 Digital Bias: The Positivity of the Transparency Society	64
4 Digital Psychopolitics: Towards the Total Control Society	94
5 Duration: Finding Time	123
6 Eros: Finding the Other	148
Coda	171
<i>Notes</i>	173
<i>Works by Han</i>	182
<i>References</i>	184
<i>Index</i>	198

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Abbreviations

A	<i>Absence</i>
AE	<i>The Agony of Eros</i>
ARI	<i>ArtReview</i> interview with Gesine Borchardt
BS	<i>The Burnout Society</i>
CDD	<i>Capitalism and the Death Drive</i>
DR	<i>The Disappearance of Rituals</i>
DRE	<i>Digitale Rationalität und das Ende des kommunikativen Handelns</i>
EO	<i>The Expulsion of the Other</i>
EPI	<i>El País</i> interview with Sergio C. Fanjul
GE	<i>Good Entertainment</i>
H	<i>Hyperculture</i>
HH	<i>Heideggers Herz</i>
HM	<i>Hegel und die Macht</i>
I	<i>Infocracy</i>
IS	<i>In the Swarm</i>
LE	<i>Lob der Erde</i>
M	<i>Müdigkeitsgesellschaft: Byung-Chul Han in Seoul/Berlin</i> (documentary film)
MCS	Commencement speech at MOME Budapest
MH	<i>Martin Heidegger</i>
N	<i>Non-Things</i>
NI	<i>Noēma</i> interview with Nathan Gardels
NTV	"The Tiredness Virus" (essay in <i>The Nation</i>)
P	<i>Psychopolitics</i>
PS	<i>The Palliative Society</i>

PZB	<i>The Philosophy of Zen Buddhism</i>
S	<i>Shanzhai</i>
SB	<i>Saving Beauty</i>
ST	<i>The Scent of Time</i>
T	<i>Todesarten</i>
TA	<i>Tod und Alterität</i>
TS	<i>The Transparency Society</i>
TV	<i>Topology of Violence</i>
VC	<i>Vita Contemplativa</i>
WP	<i>What Is Power?</i>

Introduction

Finding the sky “too beautiful” to study metallurgy, Byung-Chul Han left his native Seoul to study philosophy in Germany in the 1980s (CDD 65). He has gone on to write some thirty books on topics as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Zen Buddhism, power, globalization, beauty, pain, digital communication, Big Data, gardening, and the contemporary mental health crisis. Han’s persistent concern is that late-modern individuals exhaust themselves in their life projects because they are losing the attitudes, practices, and even conceptual vocabulary to encounter what is “Other” to them. *The Burnout Society*, published in Germany in 2010, earned him an international reputation for this critique. In this book and elsewhere, Han explores why the information age is so poor in otherness. His works also explore what calls us out of ourselves: the challenge of beauty, encounters with persons who will always remain somewhat mysterious to us, even the uncanny aura of physical things. Han studied literature as well as philosophy, and he has spent much of his career teaching art students. He finds that artists are often more attuned to burnout society’s problems than philosophers. Across his works, then, Han frequently engages composers, visual artists, filmmakers, and writers.

Han’s ranging work resonates with our undergraduate students in the seminars we teach – respectively – in aesthetics, media studies, and political philosophy. Han is a scathing critic of the culture of achievement and language of positive reinforcement that is so prevalent in the educational system. Yet as he shows, this achievement culture and positivity pervade society beyond the

institutions of meritocracy, especially via digital communication. It is part of a far-reaching global culture of neoliberalism. Han fascinates many of our students. They want to understand the philosophical perspective underlying the brief interventions they read, or how far Han's theoretical implications extend. They discuss analogs and parallels in English-language culture and media to the German essays, films, novels, and stories that fund Han's customary stock of examples. We aim to answer some of these questions.

Han's growing international audience likely has similar questions. All of his books are written in German, but his manifesto-like 2010 book *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* [*The Burnout Society*] was quickly translated into his native Korean (2011), Italian (2011), Danish (2012), Dutch (2012), Spanish (2012), Swedish (2013), French (2014), Portuguese (2014), Brazilian Portuguese (2015), Chinese (2015), English (2015), Greek (2015), and many other languages. His ideas have strong traction already in Spanish- and Portuguese-language scholarship and now regularly appear in major magazines and newspapers around the world. Han's critique of burnout is aimed at global trends but is informed by his observations of fatigue, screen-addiction, and suicide in his regular visits to his hometown, Seoul, which he describes as a "tiredness society in its final stage" [*Müdigkeitsgesellschaft im Endstadium*] (M 13:29). Yet Seoul also appears in Han's works in reflections on childhood play and his Catholic upbringing (LE 138), in his general appreciation for East Asian philosophies, and in his interest in the hybridities of our global hyperculture (H). Han recognizes himself, of course, as being shaped by both East and West (CDD 65). He moved to Germany in the early 1980s on the pretext of continuing to study metallurgy (to satisfy his parents) but soon entered the University of Freiburg to study philosophy (M 2:45–3:47). Yet he has not completely left metallurgy behind. It shines through his passion for material design (MCS) and his concerns with how digital technology de-materializes the world and replaces things with "non-things" (N).

Readers interested in Han's biography should start with Isabella Gresser's black-and-white film documentary *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft: Byung-Chul Han in Seoul and Berlin* (2015), which situates the author between his two beloved cities. Han's voiceover describes his life and ideas. The Berlin sequence makes frequent allusions, in narration and imagery, to one of his favorite films, Wim Wenders's 1987 *Wings of Desire* [*Der Himmel über Berlin*], which is also shot in black and white. That film, about invisible angels who keep a lonely vigil over divided Berlin and console its harried inhabitants,

underscores Han's evident concern for people. Perhaps it is in homage to Wenders's angels that Han wears a ponytail and leather jacket.

This is the first book-length introduction to Han to appear in English and the first comprehensive introduction to his philosophy, political theory, media theory, and aesthetics in any language. It has three main purposes. The first is to offer an overview of his primary overarching themes. We trace interpretive through-lines from his first book, *Heideggers Herz* [*Heidegger's Heart*], published in 1996, to his most recent book, *Vita Contemplativa*, published in English in 2024. These connect Han's philosophical interests in boredom, death, freedom, friendliness, and otherness to the main theoretical category in *The Burnout Society*: the "positive" violence of self-exploitation. Han argues that neoliberalism encourages relentless achievement to the point of burnout. He makes the startling claim that our notions of freedom, and even our experiences of freedom, are vulnerable to exploitation. Han writes, "the system exploits freedom itself" (CDD 89). We then explore how his interventions since 2010 deepen, extend, and at times revise his critical stance. Many of these later books focus on how digital media are biased towards capital accumulation, social control, and surveillance. And many offer responses to the violence of positivity, including practical ways to recover receptivity to others and reclaim space for contemplative freedom. Our book offers an orientation to Han for general readers, undergraduates, and scholars. We thoroughly define his key concepts and illustrate them with examples.

A second purpose of the book is to put Han in conversation with a wider range of interlocutors. He already engages a diverse range of thinkers, scholars, and artists, among them Hannah Arendt, Alain Badiou, Jean Baudrillard, Bashō, Walter Benjamin, Elias Canetti, Dōgen, Vilém Flusser, Michel Foucault, Peter Handke, G. W. F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Plato, Rainer Maria Rilke, Elaine Scarry, Carl Schmitt, and Yunmen. Some of these require more introduction than others. Occasionally we propose artists, filmmakers, novelists, and poets working in English who seem to be similar to Han's continental touchstones. We also introduce many new interlocutors by situating Han's work within or alongside the English-language scholarly literatures in our respective fields.

A third purpose of this book is to deepen the scholarly discussion of Han. His brief, clearly written books are more approachable than those of many other contemporary continental thinkers. In praise of

his accessible style, Adrian Nathan West (2017) explains that Han has “little proclivity for the dialectical *fourberie* that has led many empirically minded readers to dismiss critical theory outright.” Han prides himself on concision, writing so that the reader will want to underline each sentence (MCS 4:00–4:50). He also clearly wishes to speak to non-specialists who suffer the malaises of the burnout society. “Philosophy is a tool for better understanding the world,” Han tells a Korean journalist, “but it is losing ground because philosophers tend to publish such difficult books that nobody dares to read” (Bae, 2013). Fresh ideas, a broad audience, and a teaching career spent in art institutes – he now writes full time – mark Han as something of an academic outsider. His emphasis on accessibility leads some critics to dismiss his writings as pop philosophy. Han’s penchant for overstatement, sweeping assessments, and stark oppositions can feed into this critique. While we register criticisms of Han, some from others and some of our own, we seek responses in his body of work. Many of these come from his close readings of Hegel, Heidegger, and Zen sages in his early (and sometimes still untranslated) studies that might be overlooked by his widening global audience. Surveying Han’s works as a whole reveals more nuance, seriousness, and depth than his critics credit. They reveal a serious effort to fundamentally rethink what it means to be free in response to the digital age.

The Burnout Society is a first introduction to Han for many readers. This intervention differentiates a new “positive” violence of self-exploitation from the old “negative” oppression that comes from disciplinary institutions, enemies, state actors, etc. Han makes a controversial pronouncement that adversity and repression are everywhere disappearing. Chapter 1 (authored by Wyllie) argues that this strict dichotomy between positive and negative violence, as well as Han’s manifesto-like hyperbole about a paradigm shift to positive violence, are meant to make the problem of self-harm in achievement society visible at all costs (AE 49). The main point in *The Burnout Society*, which Han clarifies in later interviews, is to show that freedom itself is in crisis. This theoretical contribution prepares the ground for a broadly interventionist turn and for Han’s more nuanced and targeted arguments about beauty (*Saving Beauty*), digital communication (*In the Swarm*), love (*The Agony of Eros*), and neoliberalism (*Psychopolitics*).

As scholarly engagement with Han increases, so will criticism. Broad lines of criticism, some more inchoate than others, have begun to appear in reviews and articles. Han overstates the shift

away from disciplinary society and is inattentive to how powerful actors and institutions structure the self. He is too focused on first-world problems, as opposed to those in the poor and developing world. Han is a spiritual elitist who harbors illusions about how popular a more contemplative life could ever be. His assessments of digital technology are too bleak. Han offers self-help instead of political remedies to the problems he raises. Some of these criticisms hit the mark more than others. Many of these find responses in his broader body of work that critics may overlook.

Han is certainly not nostalgic for a bygone world of adversity, discipline, and grand narratives. Nor is he trying to turn the clock back to less efficient power structures, as if this were possible. Instead, he searches for freedom in *friendliness* beyond the ego, in a broad openness to others and the world. This friendliness is an aspect of moods such as boredom and tiredness when they relinquish power over people, places, and things. Chapter 2 (authored by Wyllie) returns to Han's early philosophical writings, several of which remain untranslated into English. He argues that Heidegger's phenomenology of boredom is contaminated by anxiety about death. In his 2002 book *Tod und Alterität* [*Death and Otherness*], Han contrasts the serene acceptance of finitude he finds in Zen Buddhism to the heroic encounter with death that he finds in Heidegger and even in implacable critics of Heidegger such as Levinas. For Han, Zen is characterized by a friendliness that allows the apparent world to be what it is. Similar attunements can be found in certain Western artists such as Paul Cézanne and writers such as Handke. Friendly tiredness and friendly boredom, which we might say are not in the mood for power, bestow a contemplative freedom from self-exploitation. These moods inform Han's politics of inactivity and what we call his deep cosmopolitanism.

Han becomes more closely attentive to how communication technology enables self-exploitation in works such as *In the Swarm*, first published in 2013. Chapter 3 (authored by Stoneman) explores Han's media ecology as an analysis of "digital bias." The lens of bias, borrowed from Harold Innis (2007), refers to how the physical properties of a medium tend to inform social experience. Han's critical media theory argues that digital formations are characterized by positivity bias and transparency bias. He is most interested in how these technologies interact with emotions to shape identity. Positivity bias refers to how the digital revolution has led to what Han calls, in a nod to Jean Baudrillard, the "hell of the same" (CDD 34). Social media algorithms, for example,

survey preferences to curate options, so that users see content that elicits an immediate emotional reaction. Transparency bias refers to how digital media encourage users to make everything about themselves available as information. Digital practices bias us towards thoughtless self-exploitation. Otherness disappears, and, with it, the hopes for an internet of dialogue and sympathetic understanding. In its place, Han finds intense alienation and its byproduct: amorphous emotional engagement in online swarms that can be instantly summoned by algorithms and dissipate just as quickly.

Digital society is anything but ephemeral for Han, however. It has quickly massified into a control society. Han calls the regime that exploits freedom “psychopolitics.” Chapter 4 (authored by Stoneman) shows how digital positivity and transparency offer new freedoms of self-expression that are simultaneously means of social control. Han is one of many cultural critics who notice how self-expression and self-improvement are insinuated into our economic relations. Consumption patterns such as fitness goals, meals, travel destinations, and work projects are instantly shared. We argue that psychopolitics is the definitive feature of Han’s description of neoliberalism. He points out that we live in a digital panopticon of our own making. And, while all of this is the sum of “positive” bias and self-exploitation, Han nuances the bold theoretical shift announced in *The Burnout Society*. He starts to suggest how corporations and governments can steer our desires and exploit us much more shrewdly sometimes than we exploit ourselves.

Today’s digitalized alienation involves the loss of meaningful time because relevant history for achievement subjects is as ephemeral as their ever-changing projects. In *The Scent of Time*, originally published in 2009, Han writes that time “whizzes by.” Chapter 5 (authored by Knepper) returns to this book for strategies of resistance to burnout and digital control. Han does not offer a grand narrative that promises to return modern people collectively to a myth or history that will make time meaningful. Instead, he uses the metaphor of “scent” to recall us to a sense – smell – that entails duration. Han explores Eastern and Western practices of contemplative lingering.

Han does not merely offer therapeutics for burned-out achievement subjects adrift in a meaningless world of their own making. Friendliness promises a receptivity to other people, things, and places. Chapter 6 (authored by Knepper) focuses on a loose

trilogy about recovering otherness originally published in 2012, 2015, and 2016, respectively: *The Agony of Eros*, *Saving Beauty*, and *The Expulsion of the Other*. For Han, eros draws us towards the Other, who must always remain beyond our possession and even beyond our understanding. The promise of eros motivates Han, contra modern aesthetics, to champion beauty that can wound the ego and stir eros in us. Profound boredom, profound tiredness, and the severe askesis of the Zen contemplative or the artist are not the only sources of friendliness. Han can also draw upon beauty and eros to call us to friendly greeting and the deep cosmopolitan politics of being with others.

1

Burnout: Against Achievement Culture

Robert Wyllie

... it's not enough to just connect people; we have to make sure that those connections are positive.

Mark Zuckerberg, Senate Hearing 115-683, April 10, 2018

Life Hacks and Listlessness

"Live your best life." "Be the best version of you." In Melania Trump's laconism: "Be best." Schoolchildren who grew up with "Follow Your Dreams" posters on their classroom walls still trade positive reinforcement as adults. Their self-help advice gets only slightly more specific: visualize your life five years from now; set attainable goals; practice self-acceptance; avoid toxic and negative people. New clichés such as "life hack" imply that the brain is a poorly functioning computer that can be reprogrammed. Coffee is fetishized. All this exhortation to self-improvement is open-ended. None of it tells you what to be or what to do. "You do you." None of it tells you when you are at your best or when your best is good enough. The ambient motivational speech all around us is without direction and without limit.

These are some familiar slogans of what Byung-Chul Han calls "achievement society." He suggests the lexicon is indeterminate by design. Such slogans are meant to encourage people to become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (BS 8). The "self-made man" was ingrained in the political and later business culture of the United States long ago (Wyllie, 1954, p. 210).¹ But there has been a subtle

shift away from the older idiom of making *something* of yourself. Self-making becomes infinitive. There is no finally *made* it. Now we are always in the *making*. We are “learning and growing every day.” Han hears this in the standard commencement-address injunction to be a “lifelong learner” (MCS 7:30–8:33). Everywhere achievement society enjoins us to a “growth mindset,” to the “grindset.” Han describes modern people as “projects,” “always refashioning and reinventing” themselves (P 1). Achievement subjects are served with an open-ended injunction to infinite self-optimization (IS 45–50). This sentimentalized self-description may be scraped away to reveal hard facts about economic reality underneath. Nowadays young people must be agile amidst a rapidly changing labor market, prepared to change careers, constantly networking and looking out for emerging opportunities.

Achievement society’s proverbial wisdom is relentlessly positive. Han focuses on a popular slogan in Korean schools (M 41:16). Americans will associate it with Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. “Yes, we can,” Han proposes, “epitomizes achievement society’s positive orientation”; therefore, “Unlimited *Can* is the positive modal verb of achievement society,” replacing a disciplinary “*Should*” (BS 8).² The US Army’s long-running recruiting slogan, “Be all you can be,” so successful from 1980 to 2001, was redeployed in 2023. Even armies, the proudest of all mission-driven disciplinary institutions, speak the language of open-ended achievement.

The Burnout Society, originally published in Germany in 2010, is Han’s breakthrough manifesto against achievement society. It was quickly translated into many different languages. Recent critical studies (e.g., Robitaille, 2023) suggest Han was ahead of the curve in taking aim at pervasive positivity: Samuel W. Franklin’s *The Cult of Creativity: A Surprisingly Recent History* (2023), Renyi Hong’s *Passionate Work* (2022), Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill’s *Confidence Culture* (2022). So does Susan Cain’s bestselling broadside against “toxic positivity” *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole* (2022). Han analyzes positivity from a broad theoretical perspective. Achievement subjects’ myriad projects, from working out to working late, are part of open-ended projects of self-development. But there is an unacknowledged harm, probably unacknowledged because it is self-harm. We burn ourselves out. No other taskmaster demands, or could demand, the exhaustive effort that we put into our projects. The initial taste of freedom that stimulates our projects soon turns into its opposite – compulsive

behavior that leaves us feeling drained, powerless, and full of self-reproach (BS 11, 47; TV 44).

Employers, vendors of lifestyle products, service industries, and data-harvesting tech companies are third-party beneficiaries of our self-exploitation. As we shall see in chapter 4, the lines blur when these profiteers become co-exploiters, encouraging our self-destructive strivings with performance bonuses, advertisements, and positive-reinforcement algorithms. When Mark Zuckerberg tells the Senate, "It is not enough to just connect people; we have to make sure that those connections are positive," he may be thinking of Facebook's bottom line (Senate Hearing 115-683). Ultimately, however, when achievement subjects eventually burn out, Han argues, we blame ourselves. Han describes a kind of bipolar disorder of anxious hyperactivity and depressive self-hatred as the signature affliction of our times.

Han's insistence that there is no structural negativity in achievement society is unique within critical theory. While power players – employers, the pharmaceutical industry, tech companies – benefit from and encourage achievement society, they tend to empower us. They allow us to self-inflict psychic violence upon ourselves. Han calls this "positive violence" (TV 116). For him, positive is not an antonym of normative in the way that Foucault discusses "positive knowledge" of punishment or the "positive economy" of discipline (1995, pp. 74 and 154). Han engages Foucault at length but does not adopt Foucauldian terminology in this case. For Han, positive violence means self-inflicted harm. Positive violence is synonymous with the "violence of positivity" (TV 90). Although positive is a technical term for Han, its meaning is consistent with the ordinary-language sense of a "positive attitude" [*positive Einstellung*] shared by German and English.

Unmasking puppet masters is beside the point for Han's critique of positive violence. Achievement society is *transparently* about empowerment, growth, opportunity, productivity, and wealth-creation. When a business firm encourages its employees' mental health awareness, for example, the profit motive is not ulterior or hidden. Everyone understands that healthy workers improve services, make production more efficient, and create value for shareholders. Employees are even called "human resources." Yet, even in this transparent logic, there is an unacknowledged problem. Endless self-improvement exhausts us.

By denying that achievement society must be imposed from without, Han departs from the usual internalization stories that

social theorists have long provided. He does not retrace the Protestant work ethic of Max Weber (1958). Nor does Han seek the roots of contemporary “tyranny of opinion” in imitation or conformism, as John Stuart Mill did (2015, p. 166). His account does not follow Alexis de Tocqueville in blaming “democratic despotism” upon a proliferation of bureaucratic minutiae that induce us to conform (2010, p. 410). Han insists that *we* turn our own hamster wheels by our own volition (TV 47). Achievement society is millions of people who are intermittently *anxious* to be all they can be and *tired* of being all they can be.

Han opens *The Burnout Society* with a grandiose claim that a “paradigm shift” began around the end of the Cold War, bringing an “immunological” age defined against foreign enemies and pathogens to an end (BS 2). As a result, Han continues, we no longer live in a “disciplinary society” of negativity and repression (BS 8). The achievement subject is convicted by the famous cliché in the last panel of Stan Lee’s first Spider-Man comic in 1962: “with great power comes great responsibility.” We feel as if we *ought* to do something with our new (perhaps hard-won) freedom. Thus, we live in a neurotic age of excess positivity. Han counts the sudden prevalence of new psychological disorders as evidence of a societal malaise: “Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (BS 1).

Achievement society is the free society turned against itself. Revisiting his argument in a 2021 essay in *The Nation*, Han explains how burnout is “a crisis of freedom”:

Psychological disorders such as depression or burnout are symptoms of a deep crisis of freedom. They are a pathological signal, indicating that freedom today often turns into compulsion. We think we are free. But we actually exploit ourselves passionately until we collapse. We realize ourselves, optimize ourselves unto death. The insidious logic of achievement permanently forces us to get ahead of ourselves. Once we have achieved something, we want to achieve more, that is, we want to get ahead of ourselves yet again. But, of course, it is impossible to get ahead of oneself. This absurd logic ultimately leads to a breakdown. (NTV)

Achievement society exploits both our *ideas* about freedom and the *feelings* of freedom that our projects at least initially involve. They offer no rest or lasting satisfaction, though. We move from

one project to the next. We wear ourselves out overachieving, overworking, and generally overdoing it – whatever “it” is. For all our new freedoms, we do not feel free in any lasting way.

Old-fashioned work ethic does not lead to burnout. If bounded and directed, Han notes, hard work can offer a sense of accomplishment and a satisfying tiredness. However, when unlimited *can* becomes an imperative of self-optimization, we become what Jenny Odell calls “DIY bosses propelled from within,” and time is money: “You have twenty-four hours a day and must spend them in a better – and better, and better, and *better way!*” (2023, pp. 67–8). The new jobs in the information economy have few or no satisfyingly tangible results. Matthew Crawford’s counterexample is an electrician wiring a light switch – click, yes, the job is done (2009, p. 14). Yet more people are moving into jobs where boundless information replaces a relationship to things. Achievement becomes vague and, as Odell suggests, a matter of individual goal-setting with no ends in sight. The achievement subject becomes the *product* of her or his work. Everyone, from entrepreneurs, to gamers, to children trying to fit in at school, must make themselves better “information hunters” (N ix). This phrase encouraging Koreans to hone their information-technology skills can be seen on an electronic billboard in Seoul in the 2015 documentary *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft: Byung-Chul Han in Seoul/Berlin* (M 14:55). As we shall see in chapter 3, the digital world facilitates our self-improvement projects smoothly. All of this may feel initially liberating, but then anxiety and guilt intrude: is *this* the best we can be?

Artists and writers during the 1980s were more sensitive to this shift to achievement society and its attendant malaises, Han suggests, than were philosophers and social theorists. A fixture in Han’s books is the Austrian novelist and playwright Peter Handke, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2019. *The Burnout Society* supplements the descriptions of “malignant tiredness” in the opening pages of Handke’s “Essay on Tiredness” (1994). Then Han makes an explicit turn to Handke’s redemptive alternative: an “eloquent, seeing, reconciliatory tiredness” that is free of the pressures of achievement (BS 31). The book’s original German title is *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*, literally “tiredness society,” which makes the nod to Handke more emphatic. Another frequent touchstone for Han is the billboard that Jenny Holzer installed amidst the flashing advertisements of Times Square in 1982 reading “Protect Me from What I Want” – a conceptual artist’s pithy summation of the paradox of positive violence (P i; EO 39; CDD 129).

We begin with *The Burnout Society* because this book is an entry point for so many readers of Han. It is a stark theoretical statement. The author understands the task of theory as “highly selective *narration*” that “cuts a clearing of differentiation through untrodden terrain” (AE 49). *The Burnout Society* draws from Han’s earlier philosophical studies of boredom, friendliness, otherness, and power, but the book makes new clear-cut distinctions between “allo-exploitation” and “auto-” or “self-exploitation,” as well as between negative violence and positive violence (BS 47). Critical theorists trained to scan for internalized violence, or otherwise subtle negative operations of power, will miss the violence of positivity. And since our achievement projects are genuinely experienced as *free*, at least initially, the self-compulsive element is invisible as well. (Han has the tall order of breaking critical theory’s habits of deconstructing, demystifying, and unmasking hidden structures of negativity.) Han’s insistence on the absoluteness of positive violence, while it often seems exaggerated to dystopian levels, renders self-inflicted violence visible. He elaborates his theory of positive violence and the paradigm shift underway at greater length in *Topology of Violence*, originally published in 2011. This theoretical statement, certainly a clearing of differentiation, marks an interventionist turn in Han’s body of work. Many of his subsequent books refine and nuance the account of how positive violence operates in specific domains such as art, digital media, markets, and so forth.

Even Han’s sympathetic readers tend to agree that he exaggerates the extent to which we have undergone a clear paradigm shift to a post-disciplinary world (West, 2017; Bartles, 2021). After all, slavery, human trafficking, internment camps, and mass incarceration remain problems of global concern. Cronies have not absented themselves from crony capitalism. Legacies of injustice continue to shape racial and class divides. COVID-19, viral videos of police brutality in the United States, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 so thoroughly belie the claim that pathogens, the disciplinary apparatus, and foreign enemies are no longer of great concern that some readers may struggle to make it through the first two chapters of *The Burnout Society*. With the benefit of some of this hindsight, we have criticized Han for overlooking how discipline and self-exploitation interact in complex ways (Knepper and Wyllie, 2020, pp. 44–5). Positive and negative violence may form a continuum. For example, self-exploitation in the wealthy global “core” (e.g., self-expression through fast fashion) may *intensify* repression in the