

---



# Topology of Violence

**Bedir Sala\***

---

Byung - Chul Han, 2018, *Topology of Violence* (Translated by Amanda DeMarco), Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, pp. 168, ISBN: 9780262534956

---

Byung-Chul Han is a South Korean philosopher, living in Germany; he wrote his books in German but they have been translated into several languages, mainly English, in the last 10 years. Han, who discusses various issues that cannot be included in an academic discipline, in a unique style, seems to affect social sciences indirectly with his texts. It is possible to say that he has started to attract attention in academicians although some of his books have been translated in recent years and have not yet been discussed seriously and comprehensively. Probably, all of his books will be translated soon. Because, albeit on a small scale, a readership has been formed in various countries.

While evaluating Han, it is too difficult to place him in a tradition. In fact, he discusses many of the topics he handles in his texts in connection with the contemporary German philosophical tradition. However, it would be a superficial approach to include him in this tradition with reference to his established contact. Because he argues especially contemporary French thought as well as contemporary German philosophy with iconic Western thinkers of the 20th century. We use the concept of “discuss” here especially because he both explains the propositions and concepts borrowed beyond mere reference in his texts and also questions the possibility of its practical counterpart while

---

\* Asst. Prof., Afyon Kocatepe University, Faculty of Science and Literature, Department of Sociology, bedirsala@hotmail.com, ORC ID: 0000-0002-6892-2664.

making the current adaptation of these concepts. Although his books examine different problematics, the main issue he problematizes is to interpret the running mechanism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century society. This interpretation includes both powerful descriptions of today's society and conceptualizations that crystallize these depictions.

When we consider his books translated into Turkish, although they seem like texts in which different themes are discussed, Han basically mentions about how the 21<sup>st</sup> century people lost the authentic and how this loss transformed people into a "masterless slave". *Psychopolitics*, in which he examines the operation of power techniques in the neoliberal period; *The Transparency Society*, where he deconstructed the concept of transparency, which seems innocent and praised, and investigated how this innocent concept transformed into a power technique and made society controllable; *The Scent of Time*, which presents to our attention in a simple way how the miracle of life, that is the miracle of experiencing the moment, which is the greatest miracle given to man with speed, is lost; *The Agony of Eros*, emphasizing that the vitality of life can only be possible with eros, otherwise it is not possible to talk about either real life or a living thought; *Saving Beauty* praised the smoothness against roughness, precisely how the smoothness, which is the sign of our age, deprives us of the beautiful; *The Burnout Society*, which is the philosophical narrative of the deep distress dragged by today's people who think that it is necessary to stay on the top with extreme motivation and live performance-oriented, and *Topology of Violence*, which describes a radical transformation of violence.

"Topology of Violence" is a text that should be evaluated separately. Han who approaches to the violence issue with a different perspective thanks to his assertive propositions traces how the new state of violence is invisible and continues itself together with all its majesty. It is quite easy to make a rough definition of violence, and this rough definition of violence makes it easier to talk about violence and to describe many acts as violence. We often conceptualize this definition as physical violence. Apart from physical violence, we should also mention a more refined type of violence. Although this refined violence that perpetuates violence, which makes violence more refined, institutionalizes and normalizes violence is described as psychological violence, in fact, it can be found in other forms of violence, especially in the background of physical violence. Violence is often described as an irrational act as a state of insanity, but violence is not a state of insanity, but rather a planned, step-by-step action. It is described as a state of insanity only because of the fear of the moment of violence. However, the process up to the realizing moment of violence and the social context causing that process are often neglected. On

the other hand, there is not a single type of violence, and the dosage of violence can vary from low-intensity violence to extreme violence. Han emphasize on the source and motivation of violence that continues to exist in various situations and dosages in his work, *Topology of Violence*. He also emphasizes that the late modern orientation of violence has moved to a very different point, paving the way for a more sophisticated discussion of violence in different contexts.

While topological transformation of violence is discussed in the book, the violence and its manifestations in traditional society, the transformation of violence with modernity, and the new state and dynamics of violence in the late modern period draw attention. Han emphasizes that violence is now withdrawn from the show spaces with modernity, the proud staging of violence has left its place to conceal with shame, and it has undergone a topological transformation by moving away from attention, also he states that the most radical topological transformation of violence takes place from the physical to the psychic. However, this transformation in the late modernity period emerges as a state of violence that gnaws the spirit and has more damage on the individual. In the transition from a modern society, which is a disciplinary society, to a performance society, the “self” re-designs itself through the “Ideal-Self” instead of obedience. However, this project always feels incomplete itself in front of the Ideal-Self and begins to fight with it. The “Self” thinking that s/he is free from external pressure, begins to commit violence against to himself/herself this time. This violence of the individual against himself /herself is a self-destructive violence. The source of the dominant diseases of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as burnout and depression is precisely from this “self-violence” of the individual. Han defines this kind of violence as the violence of positivity. Anyway, he considers violence mainly in two categories as *the violence of negativity* and *the violence of positivity*. Positivity society is a society in which the individual rescues free himself from any external pressure, feels free and in which the performance is decisive. The violence against the individual does not come from outside, institutions and the enemy in a positive society. On the contrary, there is a violence produced by the individual by exploiting himself, in other words, the violence of positivity occurs.

It can quite sound fantastic that Han emphasizes a type of violence committed by the individual to him/herself and directs attention to this violence in this age where the crude violence from outside reigns with all its horror and we witness its manifestations even in our daily life. Especially in a geography where all kinds of violence continue in a highly organized and institutional way, destructive violence without a specific goal in archaic culture is com-

mon, talking and discussing the violence of the individual against him/herself sounds luxury. Han is aware that we have already accustomed to this type of violence, that we label it as “violence” and, accordingly, we are trying to protect ourselves, as a stimulus to draw our attention to a new type of violence that is coming in a situation where all the protection mechanisms and the immune system have collapsed. The individual’s turning towards himself and being caught in a vortex of violence by blaming him/herself also causes him to surrender to violence from outside more easily. Therefore, today’s society is slowly losing its resistance to resist violence against the individuals from outside. The reason why the individual of late modernity lost this strength is the characteristic features of this age, such as excessive performance, overproduction and excessive communication.

This book of Han is noteworthy in name of showing that one of the things that does not change in an age where everything changes rapidly is the phenomenon of violence, but that the topological change of violence produces an illusion that violence has also begun to disappear. The only changing for violence is only disguising of violence. The Topology of Violence describes the manifestations of violence from negativity disguise into positivity disguise.