

The Psychopolitics of Social Media: A Brief Investigation

In his 1978-79 series of lectures titled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the French philosopher Michel Foucault attempts to trace out a trajectory of the development of neoliberalism, which he identifies as the then-nascent economic, political, and social structure of contemporaneity. Foucault spends many of the lectures articulating this broader relationship between the economic and political structures under neoliberalism in finer detail; however, I am particularly interested in his discussions concerning the ways in which social relations are constructed and changed under neoliberalism. I aim, hereinafter, to examine one such phenomenon of social relations, namely social media, to determine the relationship of social media to ideas developed in Foucault's works. In particular, I will be discussing Foucault's writings in relation to the German philosopher Byung-Chul Han's 2017 text *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*.

To begin, one means by which Foucault articulates the development of neoliberalism in his *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures is through reference to the bodies of thought of German and American economic thinkers of the early-mid 20th century; and examining the ways in which these thinkers diverged from the traditional precepts of classical liberal economic thought during the late 18th to late 19th century. What Foucault finds as a critical diversion for these 20th century economic thinkers is a reframing of the relationship between the market and the state. The classical liberal understanding of the relationship between the state and the market was fundamentally one of non-intervention of the state in the market: "In the eighteenth century the market was called upon to say to the state: Beyond such and such a limit, regarding such and

such a question, and starting at the borders of such and such a domain, you will no longer intervene.”¹ However, as Foucault argues, the neoliberal shift is not a resurrection of this classical liberal ideal of minimal state intervention; rather, the theorists of neoliberalism posited that the market should instead serve as the guiding principle for the construction of the state itself. The distinction between the neoliberal relationship of market and state and the classical liberal relationship of market and state is thus articulated by Foucault as “a state under the supervision of the market rather than a market supervised by the state.”² Moreover, neoliberal theories and theorists engage in an “application of the economic grid to a field which...was [historically] defined in opposition to the economy,” namely “the social.”³ Herein, social relations become understood as economic relations. Family relations, for example, become understood as relations involving the transfer of human capital unto the child(ren) from the parent(s).⁴

Importantly, the character of these social relations exists as a generalizable fact across a population, with reliably observable variations among different demographics therein; to return to the family, we observe an inverse relationship between the wealth of an individual and their number of children, with neoliberal theorists explaining that fewer children are reared by wealthier families so that they may individually receive greater human capital from their parents (and vice versa).⁵ For Foucault, this concern for the function of human bodies in the aggregate is a concern of what he identifies as “biopower”, with biopower having as its material of interest neither an individual subject, nor a collection of individuals, but a population. This concern for an aggregate of bodies rather than for individual bodies is what distinguishes biopower from

¹ Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 116.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 240.

⁴ Ibid., 244-245.

⁵ Ibid., 244-245.

earlier forms of power, such as disciplinary power, for Foucault.⁶ Biopower is additionally understood as the mode of power that is exercised within a neoliberal context as *biopolitics*. Critically, although neoliberalism does invoke individuals at the level of rhetoric, in actuality it has as its subject a population. Insurance, for example, exists under neoliberalism not as a protection of the individuals of a society against risk, but as the provision of an environment wherein individuals are possibly able to protect only themselves from risk.⁷ This then means that certain population demographics (those who cannot purchase insurance, in this case) are sacrificed so that the population as such is able to survive and persist: “The scarcity-scourge disappears [preserving the population], but scarcity that causes the death of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear.”⁸

Byung-Chul Han diverges from Foucault somewhat. For Han, Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, as the politics which has as its subject a population of human bodies, is ultimately insufficient to describe the current neoliberal practice. Han understands the politics of neoliberalism not as a biopolitics but rather as what he labels as “psychopolitics”. He understands the shift from biopolitics to psychopolitics as a reflection of a productive shift: “Now, immaterial and non-physical forms of production are what determine the course of capitalism. What gets produced are not material objects, but immaterial ones—for instance, information and programs.”⁹ Moreover, for Han, the production of information under neoliberalism (specifically as it is generated through means of communication between individuals) has, as a necessary function, the de-individualizing of individuals into a single unit:

⁶ Michel Foucault, Mauro Bertani, and Alessandro Fontana, “Society Must Be Defended”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (New York, NY: Picador, 2003), 242-243.

⁷ Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 144.

⁸ Michel Foucault et al., *Security, Territory, Population Lectures at the College de France, 1977-78* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 42.

⁹ Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017).

Communication goes faster when it is smoothed out...this also means stripping people of interiority, which blocks and slows down communication...[thus] the negativity of otherness or foreignness is deinteriorized and transformed into the positivity of communicable and consumable difference: 'diversity.'¹⁰

An important piece of clarification for the above point is that Han uses "negativity" and "positivity" here in terms of the presence or absence of a *difference*. "Otherness" is negative in that it is the presence of a difference: the "positivity of communicable and consumable difference" paradoxically comes from the *sameness* of individuals, the absence of differences between them, once they have been converted into mere information.

It is important to recognize that the process of generating information from individuals is not undertaken through means of coercion. Instead, individuals are made to monitor and correct their own behavior through completely voluntary means; indeed, insofar as there is a crisis of freedom under neoliberalism, Han identifies it as freedom infringing upon itself. When I publish a post on a social media site, for example, the act is experienced as completely voluntary, lacking any external normative force motivating it.¹¹ It indeed must function that way, for it is only through a voluntary process that a maximal amount of information pertaining to the individual be obtained.

This experience of social media use as a "free" phenomenon is corroborated by Schmidt in his analysis of Twitter users. Schmidt observes that "for many users, Twitter is 'personal media', in that they have a large degree of control over what and how they communicate."¹² For most Twitter users, no professional guidelines exist regarding what does and does not constitute

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jan-Hinrik Schmidt, Twitter and the rise of personal publics - Schmidt mit Dete, n.d., http://schmidtmitdete.de/pdf/01_Schmidt_Twitter%20and%20the%20Rise%20of%20Personal%20Publics.pdf, 8.

a “worthwhile” tweet, nor do any rigid guidelines concerning etiquette exist beyond the terms of service of the website itself. This allows for individual users to tailor their experience of the website according to personal preference. This personalization of the Twitter experience operates in conjunction with integration; other websites are accessible from Twitter, such as YouTube, Instagram, or news publications such as the *New York Times*.¹³ The effect is that the average Twitter user experiences the platform as “a personal hub for sharing a mediated everyday life.”¹⁴

Han would probably argue that this personalization of the Twitter experience is highly amenable to psychopolitics. Consider, for example, the feature of infinite scroll, common to many social media sites, where new content appears at the bottom of the webpage for the user to interact with rather than having the bottom of the page constitute a proper termination of content. This feature allows for users to extend the amount of time they spend on social media sites considerably, which, in conjunction with a more personalized webpage, allows for the generation of large amounts of very particular data about an individual. For the user subjected to infinite scroll, “everything has become additive...all narrative tension—any vertical tautness—has gone missing, [and] total acceleration sets in.”¹⁵

In addition, however, Han would also likely diverge from Schmidt’s claim that the experience of the average Twitter user is one of a “mediated everyday life” if it is assumed that “mediation” exists as the balancing or consideration of information that one is *consciously aware of*. Indeed, Han understands social media (as well as what he more nebulously refers to as “Big Data”) as functioning precisely to demonstrate and access what he terms a “digital unconscious”.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017), emphasis in original.

This is because “Big Data can even read desires we do not know we harbour...[and] is making *the id into an ego* to be exploited psychopolitically.”¹⁶

Continuous publication is further encouraged through the proliferation of likes, shares, retweets, upvotes, etc.; these communicative tools are supremely effective at exploiting individuals’ “emotionality,” which Han identifies as a profuse tendency structurally encouraged by neoliberal psychopolitics. In comparison to the methodical slowness of rationality, emotionality “*has no speed*, as it were”; this makes emotionality highly amenable to a neoliberal market focused on the maximization of efficiency, as, between “things” and “emotions,” “the former cannot be consumed without end—but the latter can.”¹⁷ Thus, we are encouraged to post, and to post again, and again, as much as we are able, the end result being that “when we click *Like*, we are bowing down to the order of domination” imposed by neoliberal psychopolitics.¹⁸

One writer who can help us further clarify and concretize this relationship of social media and Big Data to the digital unconscious, and the importance of the aforementioned communicative tools in facilitating this relationship, is Roisin Kiberd. In the introduction to her 2021 book *The Disconnect: A Personal Journey Through the Internet*, the Irish author recounts the time she spent employed as a “social media specialist” for a London-based advertising agency. Kiberd notes that the brand she managed on Twitter and Facebook often received high rates of engagement through means of suggestion and promotion: “If you ask your followers to do something – ‘Like’, ‘share’ and ‘subscribe’ – there’s a very good chance they’ll do it. Followers respond well to competitions, giveaways and jokes, and are grateful if you take the time to reply to them.”¹⁹ Here, social media users are not coerced into sharing and liking what

¹⁶ Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017), emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Ibid., emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Ibid., emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Roisin Kiberd, *The Disconnect: a Personal Journey through the Internet* (London: Profile Books, 2022).

gets posted, but rather are encouraged to do so through a perceived sense of and desire for proximity to the brand (this was further bolstered on Twitter in particular, where the brand page managed by Kiberd was followed by musician Harry Styles, whose association and celebrity status further boosted engagement with the page²⁰). Through these engagements on social media, Kiberd was able to generate reliable ad revenue for the company, revenue which in turn allowed for the company to access user data compiled by Twitter and Facebook to refine their advertising. The outcome of such a relationship was ultimately one in which the company “charmed the public into doing our work for us, harvesting their data while pretending to be their friend.”²¹ What Kiberd demonstrates through her experience relates to Han’s claim regarding the positive character of information under neoliberal psychopolitics; that “information represents a positive value; inasmuch as it lacks interiority, it *can circulate independently, free from any and all context.*” The particular identities of any individual who engaged with Kiberd’s posts was not a pertinent or significant concern: the aggregate of these interactions, and these interactions converted into information, was what was of import to the advertising company.

This outline that Han provides of the relationship between the individual and the information they generate through social media can appear similar to another notion developed within the work of Foucault, that of the panopticon, however there is a crucial distinction. Foucault originally formulated the notion of the panopticon as being the general organizing principle for institutions that operated primarily on a model of disciplinary power, such as prisons, schools, hospitals, factories, and so on. Institutions which are designed panoptically, so to speak, are those institutions which provide power with the ability to easily and readily observe and monitor individuals that are of interest; this is to say that individuals subject to panoptic

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

design principles are made to be “constantly visible” to disciplinary power.²² Whereas the panopticon of Foucault involved an external supervision of confined individuals that was only later internalized, what we can refer to as the digital panopticon, as Han understands it, occurs in a space of freedom where individuals supervise themselves at the outset. Even if Foucault is right in saying that “full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness,”²³ Han is still correct in highlighting that the old disciplinary panopticon “has *no access to inner thoughts or needs*” unlike this new digital form.²⁴ This makes the digital panopticon of neoliberal psychopolitics all the more absolute, although Han does try to speculate possible methods with which we can extricate ourselves from it successfully.

In the last section of his *Psychopolitics*, titled ‘Idiotism’, Han argues in favor of idiocy, which he understands as characteristic of the philosophical approach. Idiocy is ultimately a negative force inasmuch as the idiosyncratic character of the idiot “stands in the way of unbounded communicative exchange” because “it amounts to an immunological defence against the Other.”²⁵ This negativity of the idiot gives them a certain marginality in an environment characterized by the imposition of positivity and its sameness. This is a potentially liberatory fact given that the phenomenon where “*persons* are being positivized into *things*” that is enforced by the psychopolitical apparatus of Big Data necessarily results in “the end of the *person* who possesses free will.”²⁶ The idiot is not free in a sense that is amenable to psychopolitics—that is, they are not free to wholly give themselves over to their emotionality—and instead, they are free in that they escape this positivity that is imposed by psychopolitics. Han asserts that “the idiot

²² Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” essay, in *Discipline and Punish*, n.d, 5.

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017), emphasis in original.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

veils himself [sic] in silence,”²⁷ which is what gives them this idiosyncrasy that is not conducive to communication.

Is it possible that, in addition to what Han lays out, there are other ways of being an idiot? Is it necessarily the case that all communication is generative of positive information and that consequently the only possible means of interrupting communication is through idiotic silence? I mentioned prior that Han understands what he refers to as the interiority of subjects to be an impediment to communication because the presence of interiority is indicative of a difference or a negativity. Interiority is inversely understood to be protected by privacy since, with an increase in the quantity of data provided by users, and consequently with greater-than-ever quantities of information circulating under neoliberalism, “the very idea of protecting privacy is becoming obsolete.”²⁸ Should we then aim to establish conditions where individuals can feasibly maintain their privacy while still granting them the possibility for communication? Can one still engage in communication while also frustrating its tendency under neoliberal psychopolitics towards absolute positivity? In other words, can one communicate as an idiot? I believe it might be possible.

One of the final claims about the idiot that Han provides is that “the idiot is not defined by individuality or subjectivity, but by singularity. As such, the idiot is similar in nature to the child, who is not yet an individual, not yet a person.”²⁹ The idiot is unique with respect to what they are capable of doing or experiencing, rather than with respect to what they are. The particularities of their identity are not known to others, but they instead exist in association with other things.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

We can conclude with reference to a figure that I would consider to be a potentially exemplary case of the idiot within the digital life of social media.

One of the most infamous Twitter profiles belongs to a user known as *dril* (also identified as *@dril* or *wint*). Very little is known about the individual who runs the profile apart from their name and year of birth (these details were revealed in an incident of doxxing, or revealing personal information about an individual, in 2017), and notwithstanding this information the privacy of the account holder has largely been upheld. This is to say that there is little that identifies *dril* in particular as anything beyond the Twitter profile they maintain. This relative privacy exists in stark contrast to the size of their profile, commanding a substantial 1.8 million follower count as of October 2023. *dril* is recognized on Twitter for their distinctive writing style and humor, which *New Yorker* writer Colin Marshall describes as “that roundly condemned but seemingly irreplaceable platform’s grandstanding, compulsive, solecism-prone, invincibly ignorant id.”³⁰ Similarly, *AV Club* writer Clayton Purdom notes that the profile of *dril* is often compared to that of former US President Donald Trump: “Both are aging, endlessly aggrieved white men who seemingly do not understand core components of the internet, yet they perfectly embody its anonymous rage, its ability to turn people into lunatics being swarmed and eaten alive by enemies and trolls.”³¹

I would argue that *dril* is at least a possible example of an individual who has the capacity to engage in communication while also occupying the status of “idiot”. They communicate without revealing or stating any positive (or rather, positivizable, or convertible into information) biographical facts about themselves, and yet they are capable of being understood as an indexical

³⁰ Colin Marshall, “The Cracked Wisdom of Dril,” *The New Yorker*, June 17, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/the-cracked-wisdom-of-dril>.

³¹ Clayton Purdom, “Following Dril, the Twitter Account at the End of the World,” *The A.V. Club*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.avclub.com/following-dril-the-twitter-account-at-the-end-of-the-w-1819327846>.

of numerous other things: whiteness, a tenuous relationship with internet culture, a tendency towards self-aggrandizement, and so on. They represent a possibility for communication that simultaneously does not make the individual purely positive, the same as everyone else, and convertible into mere information. dril themselves ultimately articulates the problem in a similar way (albeit with a humorous tone): “in a world where big data threatens to commodify our lives,, telling online surveys that i ‘Dont know’ what pringles are constitutes Heroism”³²

³² wint (@dril), “in a world where big data threatens to commodify our lives,, telling online surveys that i "Dont know" what pringles are constitutes Heroism” Twitter, November 9, 2018, 10:01 PM, <https://twitter.com/dril/status/1061091401251745792>

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