

IN THE SWARM
DIGITAL PROSPECTS
BYUNG-CHUL HAN

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NO RESPECT

Literally, *respect* means “to look back.” It stands for consideration and caution [*Rücksicht*]. Respectful interaction with others involves refraining from curious *staring*. Respect presupposes a distanced look—the *pathos of distance*. Today, it is yielding to the obtrusive staring of *spectacle*. The Latin verb *spectare*, from which *spectacle* derives, is voyeuristic gazing that lacks deferential consideration—that is, respect (*respectare*). Distance is what makes *respectare* different from *spectare*. A society without respect, without the pathos of distance, paves the way for the society of scandal.

Respect forms the foundation for the public, or civil, sphere. When the former weakens, the latter collapses. The decline of civil society and a mounting lack of respect are mutually conditioning. Among other things, civil society requires respectfully looking away from what is private. Taking distance is what constitutes the public sphere. Today, however, a complete lack of distance and deference prevails: intimate matters are put on display, and the private is made public. Let’s call it a matter of stance: Without distance, it is impossible to be in good standing. Understanding also requires a distanced perspective. Across the board, digital communication is abolishing distance and distances. The corollary of dwindling spatial distance is the erosion of

mental distance. Digital mediality works to the detriment of respect. In contrast, isolating and setting apart—as in the *adyton* of ancient Greek temples—generates admiration and reverence.

When distance proves lacking, the public and the private become confused. Digital communication is fostering this pornographic display of intimacy and the private sphere. Social networks wind up being exhibition rooms for highly personal matters. As such, the digital medium *privatizes* communication by shifting the site where information is produced. Roland Barthes defined the private sphere as “that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object.”¹ But if this the case, we no longer have any private sphere at all: no zone exists where *I am not an image*, where no camera is in operation. Google Glass even transforms the human eye into a camera. *The eye itself generates images*. In consequence, the private sphere cannot hold. Compulsive icono-pornography is abolishing it entirely.

Respect is tied to names. Anonymity and respect rule each other out. The anonymous communication promoted by digital media is dismantling respect on a massive scale. It is also responsible for the expanding culture of indiscretion and disrespect. Social media shitstorms are anonymous, too. That is the source of their power. Names and respect are linked. A name provides the basis for recognition, which always occurs *by name*. Practices that involve responsibility, trustworthiness, and reliability are also tied to *being named*. Trust may be defined as *faith in the name*. Giving

answers and promising are also acts of the name. The digital medium—which separates messages from messengers, news from its source—is destroying names.

Shitstorms occur for many reasons. They arise in a culture where respect is lacking and indiscretion prevails. The shitstorm represents an authentic phenomenon of digital communication. As such, it differs fundamentally from yesterday's angry letters to the editor. Inasmuch as letters are tied to the analog medium of writing, they are *named* events. Anonymous letters are readily discarded. Moreover, letters possess a different temporality. As the writer laboriously composes a missive by hand or on a typewriter, immediate agitation and excitement pass. In contrast, digital communication enables affective discharge *right away*. On the basis of its temporality alone, it conveys impulsive reactions more than analog communication does. In this respect, the digital medium is a *medium of affect*.

Digital networking favors symmetrical communication. Today, participants in communication do not just consume information passively: they generate it actively. No univocal hierarchy separates the sender from the receiver. Everyone is sender and receiver—consumer and producer—in one. However, such symmetry exists to the detriment of power. The communication of power passes in one direction—from top to bottom. Now, *communicative reflux* is destroying the existing regimes of power. Shitstorms amount to kind of *reflux*, with all the destructive effects that this entails.

The shitstorm is emblematic of displacements within the economy of power governing political communication. It

swells in spaces where power and authority have weakened. In particular, shitstorms flourish where hierarchies have flattened out. As a medium, power ensures that communication flows speedily in one direction. The choices effected by the intendant of power are followed *silently*, as it were, by the subjects of power. Sound, or noise, provides an *acoustic* cue that power is faltering. The shitstorm is communicative noise, too. The best shield against shitstorms would be *charisma*—that is, an auratic expression of power. Charisma prevents shitstorms from brewing up in the first place.

The presence of power increases the likelihood that my decisions will be accepted by others. As a medium of communication, power increases the probability of yes, given the possibility of no. Yes is significantly *quieter* than no. No is always *loud*. Powerful communication reduces sound and noise—that is, it reduces communicative entropy. An authoritative pronouncement eliminates burgeoning noise in one fell swoop. It generates *silence*, which represents *room for action*.

As a medium of communication, respect operates in a manner that is similar to power. The person granted respect holds views or makes decisions that are commonly accepted and taken on without contradiction or objection. Often, the respected individual provides an example to be followed. Such emulation corresponds to the ready, indeed the anticipatory, obedience of power. Shitstorms, which are noisy, start precisely when and where respect diminishes. A person granted respect does not stand subject to shitstorms.

Respect is constituted by ascriptions of personal and moral value. A general decline in values is making the culture of respect crumble. Today's role models demonstrate no inner values. External qualities distinguish them, above all.

Power is a state of asymmetry. It founds a hierarchical relationship. The communication of power does not occur dialogically. Unlike power, respect does not necessarily imply asymmetrical conditions. Respect is often felt for role models or superiors, yet mutual respect is possible based on symmetrical recognition. Accordingly, a ruler may even have respect for those he rules. Today, the shitstorms that are bubbling up everywhere point to the fact that we are living in a society without mutual respect. Respect commands distance. Both power and respect make space; they are distance-creating communicative media.

Sovereignty needs to be redefined in light of shitstorms. According to Carl Schmitt, sovereignty is a matter of deciding when a state of exception holds. This doctrine may be translated into acoustic terms. Sovereignty means being able to produce *absolute quiet*—eliminating all noise and making all others *fall silent* in a single stroke. Schmitt's life did not coincide with the era of digital networks. It would surely have plunged him into a state of utter crisis. Schmitt's biography reveals a fear of waves that he experienced throughout his life. Shitstorms are also a kind of wave, which escape all control. In old age, Schmitt is said to have had the radio and television removed from his house. In light of electromagnetic waves, he even found it necessary to reformulate his famous thesis on sovereignty: "After the

First World War, I said: 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.' After the Second World War, in view of my own death, I now say: 'Sovereign is he who commands the waves of space.'"² Following the digital revolution, we need to reformulate Schmitt's words on sovereignty yet again: *Sovereign is he who commands the shitstorms of the Net.*

OUTRAGE SOCIETY

Waves of outrage mobilize and bundle attention very efficiently. However, their fluidity and volatility make them unsuited to shaping public discourse or public space. They are too uncontrollable, incalculable, inconstant, ephemeral, and amorphous for that. They well up abruptly—and they dissipate just as soon. They are like *smart mobs*. They lack the stability, constancy, and continuity that are indispensable for civil exchange. Accordingly, they defy integration into a stable discursive context. Waves of outrage often occur in response to events of only meager social or political relevance.

Outrage society is scandal society. It lacks *bearing*—reserve and posture. The fractiousness, hysteria, and intractability that characterize waves of outrage do not admit tactful or matter-of-fact communication; they bar *dialogue* and *discourse*. Yet *bearing*, a measured stance, is what constitutes the civil sphere. By the same token, distance is necessary for this sphere to emerge. More still, waves of outrage evince little identification with the community as it stands. The outraged do not form a stable *we* who are displaying *concern for society as a whole*. Enraged citizens, even though they are citizens, do not demonstrate concern for the whole of the social body so much as *for themselves*. For this reason, outrage quickly dissipates.

The first word of *The Iliad* is *menin* which means “rage” or “wrath.” “Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles.”¹ So begins the first act of narration in Western culture. Here, rage can be sung because it carries the story of the poem as a whole: it structures, inspires, animates, and gives rhythm. Simply put, it is the *heroic medium of action*. *The Iliad* is a *song of rage*. This rage is narrative—epic—because it tells of certain actions. On this score, rage is fundamentally different from anger, the affect of waves of outrage. Digital outrage cannot be *sung*. It admits neither action nor narration. Instead, it is an affective *condition*, devoid of the power to act. The general distraction and dissipation characterizing society today prevent the epic energy of rage from arising. Rage, in the strong sense, is more than an affective state. It means the capacity, or power, to interrupt existing conditions and bring about new ones. In this way, it produces the future. Today’s fits of outrage are extremely fleeting and scattered. Outrage lacks the *mass*—the gravitation—that is necessary for action. It generates no future.

IN THE SWARM

In *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), Gustave Le Bon defined modernity as the “age of crowds.” He identified it as a critical point in time when human thinking was in the course of changing. It was a “period of transition and anarchy.”¹ In taking form, the society of the future would have to reckon with a new power—the power of masses. Thus, Le Bon laconically observes: “The age we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS.”²

Le Bon saw that the received power structures were falling apart. Now the “voice of the masses” prevailed. The masses, he observed, have founded “syndicates before which the authorities capitulate one after the other; they are also founding labour unions, which in spite of all economic laws tend to regulate the conditions of labour and wages.”³ Parliamentary representatives are only their stooges. For Le Bon, the phenomenon of crowds expresses a new balance of power. The “divine right of the masses,” he predicts, “is about to replace the divine right of kings.”⁴ The ascent of the masses entails the crisis of sovereignty and heralds cultural decline. It means the “thoroughgoing destruction of ... civilization,” for “civilization involves ... conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realising.”⁵

Clearly, we are facing a crisis again today—a period of critical transition that another upheaval, the digital revolution, has occasioned. Yet again, a formation comprising “the many” is beleaguering the standing balance of power and government. The new mass is the *digital swarm*. Its features distinguish it radically from the *crowd*—the classical form that the many assumed.

The digital swarm does not constitute a mass because no *soul*—no *spirit*—dwells within it. The soul gathers and unites. In contrast, the digital swarm comprises isolated individuals. The mass is structured along different lines: its features cannot be traced back to individuals. But now, individuals are melting into a new unit; its members no longer have a *profile of their own*. For a crowd to emerge, a chance gathering of human beings is not enough. It takes a soul, a common spirit, to fuse people into a crowd. The digital swarm lacks the soul or spirit of the masses. Individuals who come together as a swarm do not develop a *we*. No harmony prevails—which is what welds the crowd together into an active entity. Unlike the crowd, the swarm demonstrates no internal coherence. It does not speak with a *voice*. The shitstorm lacks a *voice*, too. Accordingly, it is perceived as *noise*.

McLuhan deemed *Homo electronicus* to be a man of the masses:

“Mass man” is the electronic occupant of the globe, simultaneously involved in all other people as if he were a spectator in a global ball park. Even as a man at a ballgame he is a nobody, so the electronic citizen is a

man whose private identity has been psychically erased by over-involvement.⁶

In contrast, today's *Homo digitalis* is anything but "nobody." He retains his private identity, even when forming part of the swarm. Although he expresses himself anonymously, as a rule he has a *profile*—and he works ceaselessly at optimizing it. Instead of being "nobody," he is insistently *somebody* exhibiting himself and vying for attention. The mass-mediated nobody, on the other hand, does not claim attention for himself. His private identity is extinguished. He has vanished into the mass. This also represents his good fortune: after all, if he is *nobody*, he cannot be *anonymous*. On the other hand, *Homo digitalis* often takes the stage anonymously. He is not a *nobody* but a somebody—an *anonymous somebody*.

What is more, the world of *Homo digitalis* evinces an entirely different topology. Spaces such as sports arenas and amphitheaters—that is, sites where masses meet—are foreign to this world. The digital inhabitants of the Net do not assemble. They lack the *interiority of assembly* that would bring forth a *we*. They form a *gathering without assembly—a crowd without interiority*, without a soul or spirit. Above all, they are isolated, scattered *hikikomori* sitting alone in front of a screen. Electronic media such as radio *assemble* human beings. In contrast, digital media *isolate* them.

Occasionally, digital individuals come together in gatherings—in smart mobs, for instance. However, their *collective patterns of movement* are like the swarms that animals

form—fleeting and unstable. Their hallmark is volatility. Furthermore, these groupings commonly seem carnivalesque—ludic and nonbinding. Herein lies the difference between the digital swarm and the classic crowd, which—as in the case of workers assembled in a mass—is not volatile but voluntative. Organized labor is not a matter of *fleeting* patterns; it consists of enduring *formations*. With a single spirit, unified by an ideology, it *marches in one direction*. On the basis of will and resolve, it has capacity for *collective action* and takes standing relations of domination head on. Only when a crowd is resolute about shared action does power arise. *The mass is power*. In contrast, digital swarms lack such resolve. They do not *march*. Because of their fleeting nature, no political energy wells up. By the same token, online shitstorms prove unable to call dominant *power relations* into question. Instead, they strike individual persons, whom they unmask or make an item of scandal.

According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, globalization has brought forth two opposing forces. On the one hand, it has erected a decentered, deterritorialized, and capitalist order of domination—“empire.” On the other hand, it has produced “multitude”—an aggregate of singularities communicating with each other over networks and acting collectively. Within empire, it resists empire.

Hardt and Negri base their theory on historically antiquated categories such as class and class struggle. Accordingly, they define *multitude* as being capable of communal action: “One initial approach is to conceive the multitude

as all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially as the class of those who refuse the rule of capital.”⁷ Hereby, they interpret the power exercised by empire as the violence of *allo-exploitation*:

The multitude is the real productive force of our social world, whereas Empire is a mere apparatus of capture that lives only off the vitality of the multitude—as Marx would say, a vampire regime of accumulated dead labor that survives only by sucking off the blood of the living.⁸

It is meaningful to speak of class only when a plurality of classes exists. “Multitude,” however, signifies the *sole* class. *All* who participate in the capitalist system belong to it. In fact, “empire” does not refer to a ruling class that exploits the “multitude”: everyone now thinks him- or herself free, even while working to death. The contemporary achievement subject is perpetrator and victim in one. Negri and Hardt do not recognize this logic of *self-exploitation*, which is much more efficient than *allo-exploitation*. *No one* rules the empire. It is the capitalist system itself, which encompasses *everyone*. Today, exploitation is possible without any domination at all.

Those subject to the neoliberal economy do not constitute a *we* that is capable of collective action. The mounting egoization and atomization of society is making the space for collective action shrink. As such, it blocks the formation of a counterpower that might be able to put the capitalist order in question. *Socius* has yielded to *solus*.

Contemporary society is not shaped by multitude so much as *solitude*. The general collapse of the collective and the communal has engulfed it. Solidarity is vanishing. Privatization now reaches into the depths of the soul itself. The erosion of the communal is making all collective efforts more and more unlikely. Hardt and Negri fail to notice this social development. Instead, they invoke a communist revolution to be achieved by the multitude. Their book concludes with a romantic apotheosis of communism:

Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in [Saint Francis of Assisi's] situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being. This is a revolution that no power will control—because biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist.⁹

NOTES

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